

## **Meeting Jesus in the Wilderness**

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Renewing Your Spiritual Passion

Matthew 4:1-11

Before I begin I want to mention that every week at the end of the service I close our time together by encouraging you to give to the poor. A number of years ago the Lord spoke to me several times in the course of a night and I believe led me to close our services this way. That it is important for us as Christians to stay connected somehow with the poor in our community – people who have much less than us. So we have boxes in the back and I normally suggest that you drop a dollar in those boxes on your way out the door. Many of you do that. In an average week we collect something like \$2500 in those poor boxes and all that money goes out to the community for food, medicine, we do funerals for folks who have been victims of violent crime.

Last week at the end of our service I mentioned to you that we were just going to give the money that we normally give to the poor to the relief effort in New York. We normally collect about \$2500 in those boxes. Last week the church gave nearly \$33,000 for the relief efforts. This is a great church. Spur of the moment offering mentioned in the last five seconds of our weekend services results in a \$33,000 offering. We immediately donated all of the money to World Vision's relief efforts in New York and Washington DC. World Vision, I believe, is the largest Christian relief agency in the country. They are set up to assist in disaster relief and so on. So on behalf of the church's leadership, but also on behalf of the families who will receive assistance because of your generosity, I just want to say thank you. You have done really, really well, church.

I also want to underline the announcement for Fall Festival. This moment in history is really unique. It cannot be overstated how crucial a time this moment is as we are coming off the aftershocks of the terrorists' attacks and preparing our nation for war. There are spiritual questions being raised everywhere. You cannot turn on a news show without someone talking about God, talking about what God is up to in the world, about evil, about war, and about peace. The great questions are being debated. It is a time when many folks are considering where they stand with God. Fall Festival will give people an opportunity to give folks some clarity, some help in figuring out where they stand with God.

So, just as you have given generously, I want to encourage you to invite generously to one or more of the events. If you are a woman, go out to the lobby after the service and pick up a ticket or several tickets for your mother, for your friends at work, your sister and attend the women's breakfast. If you are a guy, go out to the lobby and buy a couple of tickets. They are so cheap. Buy a couple of tickets for you and a coworker to come out and hear me talk at the

men's luncheon on Thursday. If you are a family, be sure to come out on Thursday night for the Family Arts Night. And if you are a single person in the church, why not purchase a ticket to come to Friday night's singles event?

Next weekend our service is going to be geared toward reaching our community. In addition, we are going to have a tailgate party from 2-6:00 p.m. in the afternoon. This is a time for us to roll up our sleeves and get to work. So, do purchase a ticket on your way out and invite someone this week.

Now let me begin. There is an assumption that if you are doing everything right, basically you shouldn't have a very difficult time in life. That if you follow the rules, if you are following God, if you are doing what God wants you to do, then you should have a rather easy go of it. There is an old saying that many Christians repeat to each other. I think it's even on some bumper stickers. In fact, almost every drop of wisdom in America has been distilled down to bumper stickers. But there is an old saying that goes, "If you feel far from God, guess who moved?"

If you feel far from God, guess who moved? Well, there is some truth to this old saying. A lot of times you can feel far from God because you simply haven't paid any attention to him. It may be for you weeks or months or years since you've read the Bible or seriously prayed. You may be a person who hasn't really been involved in a church or in meaningful Christian fellowship for a very long time. You haven't sought God out or sought church out. Maybe you were disappointed by something that you wanted God to do but he didn't do. You've gotten caught up in whatever it is that you've gotten caught up in – raising your family, going to work. Maybe you fell into a really unhealthy relationship or an addictive habit. It is very possible that today you are in a spiritual condition in which you simply have not given yourself to any kind of focused attention on your relationship with God.

So there is some truth to the idea that if you feel far from God, it may be because you've moved. That your feeling of distance from God may be a self-caused problem.

A Bible scholar named Tom Wright said that we often blame God for a lot of our own self-caused problems. We can, friends, behave like children who run up to their rooms and lock the door and then get very upset, angry and cry because they feel lonely because their parents didn't run after them and knock the door down. It is possible that you are in a spiritual condition today in which you feel far from God, out of touch with him and with his presence. But it could simply be a self-caused problem. You've slammed and locked the door on your heart to God and withdrawn and then you are upset because God is not showing himself to you.

In the text that we are going to read today – Matthew 4:1, we read:

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.*

Here's the dilemma for us. Jesus, who was full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus who was walking in the deepest intimacy and fellowship possible with the Father, Jesus who drenched himself in the Holy Scriptures and studied them passionately, we read in Matthew 4:1 that Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert, into the wilderness.

And I think what we read in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew is meant to be a model for our own lives. I believe that every Christian at some point in their lives or on multiple occasions will be led by God into the desert, into the wilderness, into a place of dryness, emptiness and trials. Not all our problems are self-caused. Not even all our problems with God. Let's look at this for a moment.

In Jesus' case, the desert wasn't just a metaphor, a symbol, for something else. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into a literal desert. He walked from the Jordan River, from his baptism, out into the Judean wilderness that is there by the Dead Sea. The area there is very much like the badlands of South Dakota. There is very little vegetation. The air is exceedingly dry. You see stacks of boulders and rocks in different locations and rock formations coming up from the ground and dry hillsides. Israeli troops drink a pint of water an hour when they do training exercises in the desert.

So Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into a physically dry, desolate, empty, isolated place. Do you know the desert is not just a physical place; it is also a spiritual place? The desert, the wilderness, can be a period of time in your life when you are faithfully doing all the things that you were told as a Christian that you are supposed to do to be connected to God. You are praying, you are trying to worship, you are involved in a small group, you are reading your Bible, you are giving financially of your resources, you are opening your hand up, you are serving. You are not just living for your self. You are doing all the things you are supposed to be doing, but everything feels dried out like a dried piece of shoe leather.

Ever feel like that? That everything spiritually in your life has completely dried out? Everything is dead. Seems like forever since you've felt God's touch. Your devotions are as dry as yesterday's toast. Your prayers dribble down your mouth and run down your face. Fellowship with other Christians, attendance at a small group, seems like another obligation, another duty instead of the joy it used to be. You get more excitement out of watching television and sitting on the sofa than you do in relating to other believers.

A desert experience, a period of extreme dryness is common to every mature Christian.

There was interestingly, an article in Friday's Columbus Dispatch about Mother Teresa. The article discussed Mother Teresa's journals and how often in her journals she complained of this emptiness inside, this feeling of desolation, her inability to connect with God. She was praying and doing everything and yet she felt abandoned, so alone. At times her prayers were so dry that she found it almost impossible to pray.

A period of extreme dryness is common to every mature Christian. It is not necessarily the case that you have blown it big time, that you are somehow wildly off base, that you have worked yourself out into left field somewhere because no matter how hard you're trying, you are not experiencing God. You are not experiencing John 7:37 where Jesus says, *If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me as the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.*

You want to drink. You want to drink deeply. You don't want just a promise of a drink, the hope of a drink. You really want a drink. You are dry and you want to drink in the presence of God. You want to feel God, but instead of a stream of living water bubbling up from within, when you put your cup in the only thing that ends up in your mouth is a mouthful of dust.

It is possible, on the one hand, and for many of us likely that our distance from God is self-caused. That we've locked the door to our hearts on our side. And then we complain regarding why we have no contact with the Lord, why we don't feel him.

But then on the other hand, it is possible that you are following after God and he's led you into the desert. We'll talk about why he would do that in a moment.

But you know one of the peculiarities of the Judean desert where Jesus was led by the Spirit to a place of dryness, one of the features of the Judean desert is that it is so near to the most fertile and rain-soaked regions of Israel. The desert is literally right over the hills from the Mount of Olives, from this beautiful place where olive groves grow and a place of harvest and abundance. This is a picture, friends, this is all a picture.

Spiritually, what can be so confusing about a desert experience is that it can and often does follow right on the heels of an incredibly deep and rich spiritual experience. I mean, look at the experience of Jesus. Jesus is the paradigm, the model, the way that we think about mature spiritual experience. What does mature spiritual experience look like? What should it look like as it is fleshed out in the life of a mature believer?

Well, look at Jesus. You want to know what the Christian life is supposed to look like and what should happen when a man or woman enters a relationship with God, look at Jesus. He had just experienced this incredible love and affirmation

by the Father in his baptism. The Father affirms him in the most extraordinary way. There is a voice from heaven, we read in Matthew 3:17, *and the voice of the Father said, "This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased."*

Jesus not only hears the voice of the Father, but he receives the physical touch of the Father as the Holy Spirit sent from God descends upon Jesus like a dove lighting on him and he's called into this Messianic vocation and given a commission. He's to be God's true Son fulfilling the destiny that God had given in the past to the nation of Israel. God is now focusing all of the hopes of the world and all of his purposes on his true Son, Jesus.

And after all of this love and affirmation and filling by the Holy Spirit and commissioning and calling – the voice of God is so clear; Jesus is immediately pushed out into the desert.

I watched this spiritual principle over and over again in the lives of people in this church. I've seen this spiritual principle at work in my own life over the last 28 years. But here's the way spiritual dynamics work. There is a dynamic, a model, to the spiritual life. Often someone gives their life to Christ and they have a powerful spiritual experience. Everything for the first time in their life is alive. They feel what the Bible describes, they feel born again. They've moved from a place of spiritual death to spiritual life. They feel that. Everything is full of color for the first few months. Not everything is black and white. The world is suddenly bursting with color. Every prayer seems like it is answered. Every verse of scripture as they read the Bible comes alive. The Bible used to be this closed book of mumbo jumbo religious words. And now as they read it is alive. It is like God himself is shouting the words of scripture at you.

God feels so near. You go through every worship service crying. You are so in love with God. It seems so easy in the first few months of Christian life to get rid of bad habits. Oh sin? I just repent of it and it just disappears.

And then, little by little, the magic fades. Bible study is not quite as exciting. Certain bad habits begin to creep back in. Some of the relational stuff that you used to get involved in, you are hooked in again.

And hardships come. You get laid off. Something blows up in your family. Your car breaks down. It becomes harder and harder to feel God's presence.

And then, things get really, really dry. Worship is no longer the place where you're meeting with God. It feels like another religious duty.

The desert is spiritually very near the fertile valley. It's right over the next hill. It follows on the heels often for the Christian, of an incredible breakthrough with God. You've had an extraordinary experience at a conference, at a retreat, in

counseling. There's this breakthrough. And then we are led out into the wilderness, into the desert. This is the nature of the spiritual life.

And the burden is not going to be shouldered equally. Last week the burden of the attacks fell unequally. It fell on New York City and Washington, but not on Columbus or Los Angeles. It fell only on some in New York City and not on others. It fell in different ways. Some lost their boyfriends; others their spouses; others lost their parents; some were orphaned; some from this congregation have already received orders to ship out to some place in Asia. Some of you have sons and daughters who are being called up. It's not beyond the realm of possibility that this could expand and expand. We don't know how far this is going to go. It may result in a draft and many of us who have children who are young adults will be affected.

Next week we are going to start something. My wife, Marlene, suggested to me that we have a way to communicate prayer needs to the church. So next week we are going to put in an insert and if you have been called up for military service and would like to receive some prayer, or if you have someone in your immediate family – your son or daughter, husband or wife, a brother or sister who is being put in harm's way, we are going to collect those names and distribute them out to our congregation.

The world right now is experiencing what Jesus described in Matthew 24 as a birth pang. It seems the whole world is going through this painful contraction, this birth pang. Listen to me now. Don't drift off. Listen to me. These birth pangs have been going on for 2000 years. And I think it is the most nearsighted, utterly irresponsible and silly perspective to begin to suggest that the events that we are experiencing are a signal of the beginning of the very last days for us as a nation or the very last days of the world. We need some historical perspective in a time of crisis.

This terror may be the first for us, but it is not the first for humanity. What do you think it would have been like to live in the city of Rome at the beginning of the fifth century when the barbarians from the North, the Vandals, swept down through the Italian Peninsula and sacked the city of Rome, burned most of the buildings to the ground, looted and pillaged and raped? Talk about terrorism.

Or what would it have been like to live in Eastern Europe when the Mongol hordes swept across the Russian steppe and sacked, looted, and burned cities all across Asia and Eastern Europe.

What do you think it would have been like to live in Europe during the 1930's and 40's as the Nazis spread their reach everywhere? Or to live in Europe during the First World War? Or to live in Rwanda during the 80's? Or Cambodia during the 70's?

I'm sure for literally millions and millions of people throughout history what they were going through must have felt like the end of the world. But it wasn't. And I want you to listen to me now as your pastor.

God may be leading our nation out into the desert, out into the wilderness. There are inevitably going to be some folks who begin to whip up end times prophecy scenarios. Jesus predicted that. He said there is always going to be someone who says, "Lo, there he is. Messiah is just around the corner." I'm sure that the book publishers right now are kicking it into high gear. They are going to be working overtime. I will guarantee you that within a month there are going to be books out on the shelf connecting Bin Laden with the anti-Christ. And the radio and TV preachers will get more and more hysterical and they will whip Christians up until foam comes running out of our mouths and we rush out onto the streets like rabid dogs.

Brothers and sisters, I can't stop you from wasting your money on completely silly and utterly worthless books that attempt to link up what we are experiencing, what we will experience with some verse in Ezekiel or Revelation. And all of that is squeezed into some end times scenario. But please, please don't start circulating in our small groups or via the internet some hysterical prophecy from this or that prophet about some supposed disaster that someone is predicting. Or some link between some event and a one world government conspiracy.

The wilderness most of all is a time for sober thinking. For right judgment. For gifts of wisdom and knowledge and discernment. Brothers and sisters, we must, most of all of anyone in this country, we Christians must keep our wits about us. We have to stay level headed and clear minded. We have to be balanced. People in our country are already full of fear as the desert shadows grow longer.

Mothers feel fearful about their families. Parents are sending their children off to war. Young couples are wondering whether they should even have children. What kind of world will they bring their children up in? Workers are fearful about whether they will have a job or find a job or whether they will be laid off. Young people are fearful about being called to war. Young people feel incredibly vulnerable. The elderly are fearful that they may lose their retirements. That as the stock market goes down, they are watching their pensions go down.

Terrorism is designed to create fear and hysteria. We do not need in this environment of fear a bunch of Christian Chicken Littles running around telling everyone via the internet that the sky is falling. Let's all just as a church, churches everywhere, let us all take a collective deep breath and dial way down. And at least as one church, this Vineyard church, with its 6000 attenders, let's be a model for our community of sober-mindedness, of level headedness, of balanced judgment. Let's keep cool as our nation enters the desert.

I've called today's talk "Meeting Jesus in the Wilderness." Let's pray.

Matthew 4:1-11 *Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "if you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "it is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.' Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All of this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*

Why the desert? Why does the Holy Spirit lead Jesus out into the desert? And why does the Holy Spirit lead you and me and the entire people of God out into the desert?

Throughout biblical history the desert is the place where God prepares his children for the task that he has for them. You look back into the Old Testament at Abraham, Moses, King David and the children of Israel and over and over again God leads his children out into the desert for a period of preparation, for a time of readying, training for something great that God wants to do through them. What the desert does in our soul is that it strips us. The desert is a place of stripping where we are stripped of all the things that we look to to satisfy our souls, instead of the riches that we have in Christ and the wealth that we have in each other. The desert is a place of stripping away all of our secondary satisfactions. The desert is the place of leanness where God begins to expose the accumulated clutter in our lives. All the stupid entertainment and the unnecessary purchases and the trivial pursuits and home decorating and vacation plans. All the things that we say we generally believe are of ultimate importance, the desert strips all of that away.

The desert prunes off of us all the things we think we need, that we must have to live happy, satisfied lives. The desert brings these things to the surface and makes us aware of the lies and the idolatries that we live with and it strips it all away. It says that all you need is God and what you have in each other.

In the desert God exposes all the accumulated junk in your life. He takes you out into the desert, into the wilderness, into difficulties, into trials, into pain and all the junk you've accumulated over the years in your life – the junk thoughts, the habits of your mind, the junk practices, what you give yourself to – your time and your energy and your money that has nothing to do with anything significant or



meaningful; the junk that you buy. God takes it and he shows you how utterly meaningless it is. The desert is God's surgical operation of cutting away the fat. God can and he does reduce the comfort level of our lives. He cleans us out so that he can get us ready for something great, something that he wants to do to us and through us. The desert is a place of stripping.

The desert is a place of renewing. I started a series after my sabbatical at the beginning of September called renewing your spiritual passion. In the Bible the desert is the place where people come back to their first love. It's the place where passion for God is renewed. It was in the wilderness that the children of God first found God. It was in the wilderness that the children of Israel first felt the love of God and the provision of God. And when the people of God wander away from God, God brings them back into the wilderness, back into the desert so that they can renew their first love. Listen to the words of Hosea 2:14. God is talking to Israel as a man would talk to his wife and he says:

*Therefore, I am not going to allure her. I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. Then I will bring her back her vineyards and I will make the Valley of Achor (Achor means trouble) a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt.*

The desert is the place where you come back to your first love. That you say, "God, I've been away from you. I have all this accumulated garbage in my life, but now that you've stripped me, I see so clearly that all I want and all I need is you and what I have in your people." The other day I was praying and I had a picture in my mind's eye of streams of people flowing back through these gates. I felt like the Lord said these are the prodigals, those that used to be connected to the church, connected to Christ, but walked away. If you are a prodigal, when we finish tonight's talk, I 'm going to invite you to come forward back to the Lord.

You know, brothers and sisters, the desert, the wilderness, this can be the best of times for us. If we respond appropriately, listen to me now, pain is not our enemy. Trials, personal trials, family trials, relational trials, financial trials, national trials, international trials, pain is not your enemy. This stripping by God, this desert that we as a nation are entering could be the best of times for us. It could be a time of renewed dependence upon God. It could be a time of getting rid of our accumulated junk. It could be a time of renewed devotion, a time of renewed humility and brokenness before the Lord, a renewed love and appreciation for all that God is and all that God has.

The desert can be a time where we really find riches in our relationships with each other. When we are all fat and happy, we can live isolated lives. No one needs our help and we don't need their help. But you know, if we really are entering a wilderness period, we will find more and more that we need each other. You know, for me the most touching moment in President Bush's speech the other night was when he asked the British Prime Minister Tony Blair to stand

and he said: “we have no truer friend in the world than Great Britain.” In crisis, it is so wonderful not to be alone. In the wilderness, we are all going to discover that the church is not a luxury item that you can take or leave. In the wilderness we are going to discover more and more that we will need each other economically, we will need each other for protection, for prayer, and for comfort. In the wilderness we will discover that Christian relationships are indispensable. We are vital. Our relationships are the basic stuff of life.

In the desert we are going to find not only God and each other, but we are going to start feeling connected at a heart level to people who are in pain. Only when you personally experience pain do you have any empathy for those who are presently experiencing pain. When we are fat and happy and filled with consumer goods, comfortable, it is hard to connect with people who are in pain. But there is a fellowship of sufferers, a solidarity, a connection with people that can be so sweet.

The desert can be the best of times, if – and here’s the big if – the desert can be the best of times if you respond appropriately, if we as a nation respond appropriately to the wilderness that God is leading you or all of us into. See, the desert is not merely a place of stripping. It is not only a place for renewing our devotion. The desert here in Matthew 4 is a place of choosing. It is a time of wrestling and grappling with what you really believe and getting down to the bedrock of what the real issues are and what’s really at stake. And then choosing, based on what you really believe.

The desert is the time when you get off the fence and you make choices consistently with what you say you believe. When your life is stuffed with secondary things and it often feels like your choices don’t matter. The decision about where you go out for dinner – do you want Italian food tonight or do you want to try that new Thai place out in Hilliard? I mean, those choices don’t matter. Should we get the Camry or the Accord? Leather inside it? It really doesn’t matter that much whether you buy the Expedition or the Suburban or some other 4-ton monster. Those choices don’t matter. They aren’t significant.

But in the desert your choices are a million times more important. They become a matter of life and death. I think President Bush in his excellent speech the other night sharpened the choice for the world. He said, “You’re either with us or you’re with terrorists.” And in the desert what we would say is you either make a choice of radical loyalty to Christ, to his people, or you stand with Satan. That’s the choice. It becomes starker and starker when you are in the desert. The choice is life or death. God or Satan. Where do you stand?

Friends, today at the end of the message, I am going to call you off the fence. Some of you have been on the fence for years.

The temptations Jesus faced can be read on a lot of different levels. They can be read against the backdrop of the history of salvation. Biblical history against Jesus temptations can be read against the backdrop of Adam's failed choices and Israel's failed choices. As you read through these temptations, Jesus succeeds, he overcomes, and he triumphs where Adam and Israel failed. Jesus is the last Adam, the final Adam. He is the one who starts a new humanity of all who are connected to him by faith. Adam is the man who failed. Jesus is the man who is victorious.

Jesus is the new Israel. The faithful servant who replaces the unfaithful children of Israel. Jesus becomes the new Israel and therefore the heir and focal point of all the promises of God in the Old Testament. The bearer of salvation, the bearer of Good News.

These temptations can be read against the backdrop of the history of God's plan for saving men and women. The temptations can also be read as a particular test of Jesus. In the desert Jesus himself faced temptation. He was faced with a choice of what kind of Leader/Messiah would he be?

See, one of the questions that has come up in light of the terrorist attacks is this: Has God given people too much freedom? Why didn't God intervene? Why didn't God stop the terrorists in their tracks? Why didn't God stop the planes from hitting the World Trade Center? Has God given people too much freedom?

It's apparent that we human beings have the freedom to hijack planes, to crash them into buildings filled with mothers, fathers, wives and friends. We have the freedom to strap a bomb to our chest and walk into a crowded restaurant and blow ourselves up along with innocent people around us. We can divorce each other. We can have affairs. We can slander someone's reputation. We can stab each other in the back. We even have the freedom to defile God, to use his name. To kill people in the name of God. We have the freedom as human beings to even treat God as if he didn't exist. To make our plans for our lives without reference at all to God, to his word, to his will.

So, what was the temptation that Jesus faced? What's at the root of these three temptations? At the heart of the temptations, you could say that Jesus was being enticed to limit the freedom of men and women and to compel people's belief.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a Russian author named Dostoevsky, wrote one of the greatest novels ever written, The Brothers Karamazov. And in The Brothers Karamazov, this agnostic brother Ivan writes a story of the grand inquisitor. The grand inquisitor is set back in the sixteenth century during the Spanish Inquisition in the city of Seville in Spain. In the poem a disguised Jesus visits the city where daily people are being burned at the stake. And the grand inquisitor recognizes Jesus and has him thrown into prison. And there the two, the grand inquisitor and Jesus, meet in this scene that is right out of Matthew 4, Jesus' meeting in the

desert. The grand inquisitor says to him, "You turned down the three greatest powers at your disposal. You turned down miracle, turning loaves into bread. You turned down mystery, jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple and being caught in the air. You turned down authority, ruling with a rod of iron over the kingdoms of the world. Why did you not perform miracles on demand, Jesus? Why didn't you take up Satan's offer of authority and power? Don't you understand that what people want is irrefutable proof of the existence of God, something that is established beyond dispute?"

This is a line from *The Brothers Karamazov*, "Instead of taking possession of men's freedom, you increased it and burdened the spiritual kingdom of mankind with its sufferings forever. You desired man's free love that he should follow you freely, enticed and taken captive by you."

All the alternative systems in the history of the world work by compulsion (fascism, communism, totalitarianism, the taliban.) World religions, at their worst, will force people to follow or kill them.

In other words, what Satan was offering Jesus in the temptations in the desert was the power to compel people to believe. Give people a 100% knock-out punch. Give them something so evident, so solid, so plain, that the whole world would be forced to its knees. Why is everything so tinged with ambiguity?

The eyes of faith sees God's kingdom at work in the rescue of so many people at the World Trade Center. We say that there is God, working, rescuing people, pulling them out. There's the mercy of God that you didn't get on that plane, that you didn't go to the Center that morning, that you got a call that delayed you. There's the mercy of God.

Unbelief only sees chance and good fortune. We see God's love in a hundred stories. Unbelief only sees randomness.

The temptation facing Jesus his whole life, not just in the desert, but time and time again all the way to the cross when they mocked him and said, "Get down from the cross. Get down." The temptation facing Jesus continually was to forsake the way of lowliness, to forsake the way of hiddenness, to forsake the way of suffering, to be more evident, to bowl people over, to compel their faith, to grab folks by the scruff of their neck and force their faces to the ground and make them believe.

People still want that of God. People still ask that of God. Force their faces to the ground and make them believe. But Jesus rejected that life-long temptation. He refused to dazzle or manipulate or rule the nations with a rod of iron. Instead, up until this very moment, Jesus gives us freedom. He presents us with a choice, a stark choice in the desert, to freely, voluntarily throw our lot in with him, to stand

with him, to follow him, to love him with all of our being, to serve him, to worship him or to shut him out and stand with the devil.

You know, Jesus' temptation in the desert also serves as a model for the kind of temptations you and I face when we are led out into the wilderness. This is not just a story about Jesus. The temptations are a story about us.

This first temptation where it says, *After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'* Jesus answered, *"It is written, 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

In this first temptation, he calls into question God's provision and his care. The tempter will come to you and say, "Surely God knows what you need to lead a happy and secure life. We aren't talking about much, we're talking about the basic level of need in Maslow's hierarchy. We are talking about food. You're dying out here in the desert. God's not feeding you. You'd better take control and do something. You can't trust God. You better take control."

Here's the temptation – this whisper comes into your ear, "God knows what you need. You've told him over and over again, a thousand times, you've told him what you need to be happy. You need a healing. You need a husband. You need him to intervene in your marriage. You need him to save your son or your daughter or your spouse, or turn someone around in their tracks. You need a job. God, you know what I need. I can't go on. I can't live unless you give me this thing. And if you won't give it to me, I guess I will have to take back control and get it on my own terms."

Have any of you ever faced that? You thought, "I can't be happy unless x-event happens, unless God answers this prayer. I can't be happy, I can't go on."

Jesus says to the tempter, "Don't try to confuse me about what I need. The only thing I need to live a happy and satisfied, whole and peaceful life in this world is to do God's will and to serve him."

And you say the same thing, friend, when you face the temptation in the desert. When there is this big hole and emptiness in your life and you are begging God to fill that hole in a specific way, you can meet that temptation by saying the same thing that Jesus said. "Satan, don't try to confuse me with what I need. I need one thing to live a whole, sane, satisfied, peaceful life in this world. I need to do the will of God. To serve him and I'm going to have to trust God for the food, for the job, for the turnaround of a loved one, for the healing. But I need one thing. I need to do the will of God."

I'm going to skip down to the third temptation here where it says in verse 8, *Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the*

*kingdoms of the world in their splendor. "All of this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan, for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"*

In the desert there is always the temptation to compromise, to make a short-cut in achieving what you think God wants for you. Of course, Jesus is the rightful ruler of this world. God carved out a way for Jesus to gain authority over the world. The way that God carved out for his Son was the way of suffering, the way of self-denial, the way of the cross. Satan was saying, "Here's the short-cut. Here's the way around self-denial, around suffering, around the cross."

Satan is always going to offer you that deal, friend. "Well, you know what God wants for you. You've already decided that he wants you to get married. So, there's really no reason why you can't have sex right now." Some of you have taken that deal over and over again and have been led round and round the wilderness for years in the area of your sexuality. You have been broken for a long time. You know, we have two groups here at the church called integrity.men and integrity.women that can help you heal. There are tables in the lobby where you can get more information on them. Now at this time of national humbling – why not come out of hiding finally deal with these things? But the enemy will say "no – keep compromising, keep hiding, don't let your idol be taken."

Or maybe for you it is your career. "You know that God wants you to succeed in business. All you need to do is bow the knee to Satan...just a little. Just bow the knee just a little. Give the devil his due."

"You know where he wants you to work. Just fudge your resume a little bit." Just fudge a little in your sales pitch. Work the system. Tell employees what they want to hear. Don't tell them the truth about the upcoming layoffs – be smart!

"You know he wants you to get an A on the paper, plagiarize just a little bit."

"You know where God wants you to end up in the end, here's a short-cut away from suffering, away from self-denial, away from the cross."

Brothers and sisters, the desert is a time of choosing, a time where a line is drawn between light and darkness, between God and the devil, between our way and God's way. And so I ask you, "Will you tonight freely choose for Christ – to know your lot in with Him?"

## **Meeting Jesus in the Wilderness**

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Rich Nathan  
September 22 and 23, 2001  
Renewing Your Spiritual Passion  
Matthew 4:1-11

- I. The Wilderness and Our Experience
  
- II. The Wilderness and God's Purposes
  - A. A Place of Stripping
  
  - B. A Place of Renewing (Hosea 2:14, 15)
  
  - C. A Place of Choosing
  
- III. The Wilderness and Temptation
  - A. The Temptations Facing Adam and Israel
  
  - B. The Temptation Facing Christ
  
  - C. The Temptations Facing Us