

Matthew 4.1-11 - Jesus in the Wilderness

Have you ever been in a dry and barren wilderness? Hot, barren, inhospitable. What comes to mind if you think about being in one of these places alone for one hour? One day? One week? For 40 whole days?

Jesus's wilderness experience was a spiritual, physical, and mental test. It came directly after his baptism where the Spirit descended on him with the words spoken by the Father – *this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased*. At the outset of his public ministry Jesus identity as God's son and the longed-for Messiah is confirmed. Immediately after this incredible experience Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness and to a time of intense testing.

Maybe you've never experienced a natural wilderness, but not all wilderness experiences are out there. Sometimes we experience wilderness in other ways which test us. We are tested in all sorts of ways, big and small – ethical, health, finances, relationships, and of course spiritual testing. Testing can feel challenging, isolating, disorienting – indeed like being in the wilderness.

I want to explore this passage looking at three ways Jesus endured the test of the wilderness and the test of the Devil – the way of love, faithfulness, and God's presence.

Jesus motivated by love of the Father and love of us

When I was a teenager in Australia the youth from my church used to do an annual 40 hour fast to raise funds to help feed those in need. Just forty hours was a challenge. Can you imagine the challenge it must have been for Jesus to fast for forty days in a wilderness – hunger and exhaustion physically weakening him. When confronted with the choice to turn stone into bread Jesus was tested to see if he would use his divine power to serve his own needs. He refused to take the bait and showed us the type of Messiah he truly was.

What helped Jesus endure? A significant part of what helped Jesus endure the test was that he was secure in the Father's love for him, and that he was motivated by his love for the Father and for those he came to serve. At the beginning of his ministry, he was willing to be tested and endure the test of suffering for our sake. At the end of his earthly ministry there was another test that even more clearly demonstrated the extent Jesus was willing to go – his death on the cross. Secure in the Father's love, and motivated by his deep love of the Father, and his love for us he was willing to endure that we could be reconciled with God. That is an amazing love.

The power of love to motivate is strong – think of a parent in the middle of the night with a crying child, the care we give to our partner or a parent when they are sick. We endure because we love. In our own times of testing, we too can find ways to remind ourselves of that love Jesus has for us to encourage us – a prayer, a Scripture, a spiritual practice to rekindle God's love for us. We all experience testing times but grasping how wide and deep is God's love for us can motivate and help us endure when tested.

Jesus demonstrated faithfulness to the Father and his mission

In another of the tests the devil offered Jesus a short-cut to receive the honour of the kingdoms of the world - submit and worship the Devil and all was his. That shortcut was to on the glory and avoid the Cross. But by doing so Jesus would be unfaithful to the mission he came to walk the earth for.

Through his use of Scripture Jesus refuted the devil's ploys and in doing so remained faithful to the Father and to the mission he came for – to provide a way for us to reconcile with God. The pathway to that was not privilege and power but faithfulness, humility, and service. In that moment of testing Jesus remained focused on his mission – he refused the shortcut. Fixing his eyes on the mission helped Jesus in that moment stay on the path the Father set for him. Matthew writes later in his gospel - *For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Matt 20.28). That is what Jesus stayed true to.

Jesus modelled faithfulness to the Father and to his mission – that is what we are called to as well – to remain faithful to God and to our mission as followers of Jesus. Sometimes we can be tempted by the short-cuts that offer the illusion of power, privilege or influence and avoiding sacrifice? Or do we stay true to our calling? Our mission is to reflect the character of God to the world around us. We are to do this by living the Jesus shaped life. In times of testing, it is good to remind ourselves of the big picture - our mission is to reflect the character of God to the world, to represent Jesus to the world, and we do that best when we walk and live the Jesus-shaped life. Scripture provides a wealth of instruction, teaching and guidance on the very character and nature of Jesus that shapes us and strengthens us to pass these tests and avoid the illusion of shortcuts.

Jesus strengthened by the Spirit

Matthew tells us that the Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness. Maybe you imagine it like watching a parent take their child to school, drop them off, waving goodbye, and then coming back for them at the end of the day. Not quite the case here - the Holy Spirit remained with Jesus in the wilderness strengthening him to endure and resist.

Yes, Jesus faced these tests alone in one sense, but not in but I believe in the most important sense. His connection with the Father through the Holy Spirit meant he was never fully alone in those tests. The Spirit strengthened him to resist and endure the test.

We are often at our weakest when we feel isolated and lonely aren't we – sneaking that piece of chocolate when no one is looking – or is that just me? When we are tested, we need to remember that we too are not alone – our connection with God might feel weak, God might feel absent, yet we are not alone. It is good to have signposts around us reminding us of God's presence – like Jesus we may have a go to Bible verse that serves to remind us of God's presence and activity in our life.

Wilderness experiences and times of testing can sometimes isolate us from others, they separate us from community. God has gifted us with his presence through the Holy Spirit but also through the presence of loved ones and community. These gifts of Spirit and community are significant ways we can battle through our testing and wilderness experience – burden's shared make carrying the load easier. We too have Jesus with us, the Spirit strengthening us in our own wilderness – Jesus's promise to be with us to the end of the age (Matt 28.20) gives great comfort, strength and hope.

We are all fallible humans, and we will fail at times but thankfully we can receive forgiveness and live in God's grace because Jesus endured through the tests. Jesus's wilderness testing reveals that God's kingdom is not about the glory and riches that can be gained through taking short-cuts, it is about love, faithfulness, and walking humbly with God. The Gospel writers reveal Jesus' way to fulfil his calling, and mission, was through suffering and sacrifice, through service and humility, through obedience and faithfulness, abiding in God's love, and through his love for the Father and love for others, filled with the Spirit in service to God's mission. This is how we are called to live – to follow Jesus's example even in the midst of times of testing.

Finish with a prayer from Galatians 3.16-19

I pray that out of God's glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.