

## FIRST TEST: TAKING WHAT YOU WANT OR GIVING WHAT IS NEEDED

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

*Matthew 4:1-11 (esp. 1-4)*

### I. THE TEST

Tests haunt our imaginations. Many of us know the feeling: you sit down, the test begins and suddenly you realize you're completely unprepared. Tests can feel terrifying because we think they determine whether we succeed or fail.

But the 'tests' we encounter in Scripture work differently. They are not about proving our worth or separating winners from losers. Instead, they are questions that reveal who we are becoming and which way we will choose.

In the Bible, testing often happens in the wilderness—a place between where we were and where God is leading us. Abraham was tested there. Israel was tested there. David was tested there. In Matthew 4:1-11, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil.

As we move toward Easter, we follow Jesus into the wilderness. In His temptations we learn the way through the wilderness—the way of the cross.

### II. THE QUESTION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GOD'S CHILD?

At the heart of Matthew 4 is a question about what it truly means to be God's child. Jesus' testing in the wilderness gives us two lenses to see this: first, as a battle of kingdoms, and second, as a paradigm for our own temptations.

### A. *The Test as a Battle of Kingdoms*

In the last temptation, Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offers them in exchange for worship (Matt. 4:9). This is not just about personal gain—every action we take casts a vote for the kingdom of light or the kingdom of darkness. Christianity teaches that evil, like good, is personal. When we act with love, truth and justice, we participate in God's kingdom. When we act selfishly, destructively or violently, we participate in darkness.

Jesus is the Second Adam. Like the first Adam, He is given delegated authority and dominion over creation,

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and immediately faces the question: Whose will He serve? By choosing the Kingdom of Light, He begins the work of binding the ‘strong man’ (Matt. 12:29). Jesus can take cast out demon forces because a decisive blow against the devil was won in the wilderness.

**B. The Test as a Paradigm for Our Temptations**

We only have the testing narrative because Jesus must have shared it with someone.<sup>1</sup> It is a rare instance where Jesus shares about His private prayer life—showing sometimes its ok if prayer feels like fighting the devil.

Jesus must have shared it because it is central not only to His mission, but to what it means to be a child of God.

Jesus’ temptations also model the pattern of our own tests. He is affirmed by God at His baptism: “*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased*” (Matt. 3:17). Immediately afterward, His identity is challenged: “*If you are the Son of God...*” (Matt. 4:3,6). Jesus as ‘Son of God’ is not just a statement of divine identity, it is picking up on the theme of Israel as God’s ‘firstborn son’ in the Exodus (Exod. 4:22).

Jesus, the firstborn from the dead (Col. 1:18), is the prototype for what it means to live as God’s child.

As our Big Brother Jesus was tested, we should expect similar tests. God affirms our identity. Satan challenges it.

Satan offers three perverted perspectives, he says being God’s child is about comfort, control, and power. In the Kingdom of Darkness, status, authority, and power exist for our own benefit.

Jesus counters, being God’s child is about dependence, trust, submission, and service. In the Kingdom of Light, status and power exist for the good of the world.

**III. THE FIRST TEST: TAKING WHAT WE WANT**

Jesus is hungry from a Spirit-empowered forty-day fast. While His spirit is willing, the flesh is weak. The tempter strikes:

*If you are the Son of God, tell these stones  
to become bread.*  
Matthew 4:3b

Stories of turning stones into other things go back to ancient Egypt, and later the Philosopher’s Stone—an ‘easy button’ for life, wealth or power.

Satan’s question is simple: why not hit the easy button,

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Jesus? If God loves You, surely You should get what You need, easily.

It's a reasonable thought. Jesus is hungry. Why not turn stones into bread? But Jesus responds:

*It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

Matthew 4:4

For the child of God, something sustains us deeper than food, water, or air. As Jesus tells His disciples during another fast:

*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.*

John 4:34

The first temptation is to prioritize our comfort over God's calling. Jesus shows the Son of God does not take what He wants, He gives what is needed.

In our own lives, doubt creeps in during hardship:

'If You loved me, God, wouldn't this be easier?'

Modern culture reinforces this: if something is hard, it is bad; if we suffer, we have failed. Personal pleasure is moralized; happiness is getting what we want when we want it.

But Jesus refuses the 'reasonable' path. The real temptation is to place comfort over calling. Even in mundane decisions—career, family, finances—Satan whispers:

'If you're God's child, turn these stones to bread. God wouldn't ask this of you. Choose comfort. Choose ease.

Choose yourself.'

Many of us think temptation is only about sex, substances or bad behavior. The greater temptation is to prioritize comfort over God's call. To hear the call of God and choose ease, security or personal pleasure instead.

**IV. THE WAY: GIVING WHAT IS NEEDED**

Each of Jesus' temptations shows us the way. He tells His disciples: pick up your cross and follow me (Matt. 16:24-26). The way through the test, the way through the wilderness, is the way of the cross.

In the way of the cross, we don't take what we want; we give what is needed. Jesus responds to Satan:

*It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

Matthew 4:4

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God is not a sadist. He does not enjoy our suffering. Like any good Father, He wants what is best for His children. But a Father balances competing desires: what is best long-term and what is comfortable now. Sometimes God lets blessings fall into our laps; other times His presence feels distant, and good things are dangled before us but remain out of reach.

Some suffering comes from sin or mystery; other suffering is chosen. Jesus' forty-day fast is an example. Suffering is never for its own sake. Spiritual practices should challenge, not harm. Carrying your cross does not mean tolerating abuse; Jesus tells us to correct harm and, if needed, walk away (Matt. 18:15-18).

Jesus' testing is training. Jesus' testing prepared Him for the garden.

*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.  
Yet not as I will, but as you will.*

Matthew 26:39

Jesus denied making the bread so He could drink the cup.

He denied Himself what His flesh wanted, so He could participate with the Spirit to save the world.

He did not turn stones to bread, so He could become the bread from Heaven.

He didn't take what He wanted, He gave what was needed.

Henri Nouwen reflects:

“When we are crushed like grapes, we cannot think of the wine we will become. The sorrow overwhelms us, makes us throw ourselves on the ground, face down, and sweat drops of blood. Then we need to be reminded that our cup of sorrow is also our cup of joy and that one day we will be able to taste the joy as fully as we now taste the sorrow.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus did make bread later. He fed the five thousand and the four thousand (Matt. 14:13-21, 15:32-39). He broke bread with His disciples (26:26-28). He becomes the bread from Heaven (John 6:35).

When tempted by Satan, Jesus was tempted to make bread for Himself. In these instances, His power, status and authority is used *for others*. It is His refusal to use His power for Himself which binds the strong man and makes way for the cross.

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It all started when He refused to turn stones into bread.

**V. BEING GOD’S CHILD: DEPENDENCE**

How could Jesus deny the bread in the desert and drink the cup of suffering? He didn’t make bread because He knew His Father would provide what He needed.

Being God’s Son is being dependent on the Father for daily bread.

Jesus points us to this dependence by quoting Israel’s story in Deuteronomy 8:3:

*[God] humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.*

In the wilderness, the Israelites complained, longing for the food of Egypt (Exodus 16:3), but God gave them daily manna. For forty years, their needs were met day by day (Deut. 8:1-5).

Being God’s children is being dependent on the Father for the bread we need.

The temptation to turn stones into bread is a paradox: the bread we receive comes already from God’s sustaining Word. For Jesus, taking what He wanted would have bypassed God’s provision. Instead, He models a life of trust and dependence, showing that God gives what we need, not always what we want.

Testimonies of God’s faithfulness abound. When people follow God, He provides their needs.

The choice for us is how we embody being God’s child: for ourselves or to join in His redemption of the cosmos?

Will I use my status for myself, or accept the life my Father has for me?

A life where God will give you what you need, not what you want, so you can give what is needed.

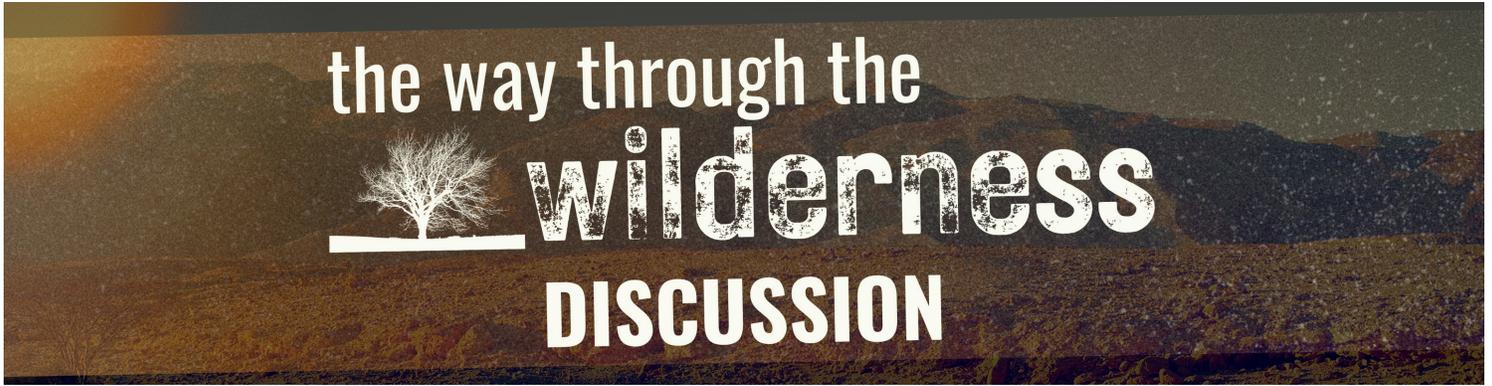
But, ultimately, God wants more than just our needs to be met. Paul reminds us:

*What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived—the things God has prepared for those who love him.*

1 Corinthians 2:9

Why turn stones to bread when I know my Father has so much more for me?





**Open Up**

What's the most you've ever been afraid of a test? What was at stake?

**Dig In:**

**Read Matthew 4:1-11; Deuteronomy 8:1-18**

- Thinking of the first temptation and Jesus' response, what do you notice reading these texts side by side?
- How have you interpreted, or been taught to interpret, the first temptation?

**Live It Out**

- When have you experienced a conflict between God's calling and your comfort? What did you do?
- How might the Spirit be calling you to embody childlike dependence on your Father?

**Prayer:**

**Spend time to pray through each others needs. Consider praying:**

- Against temptation from the enemy.
- For clarity on where we are called.
- For the strength to let go of comforts we cling to closely too.