

Mark 1:12-13

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Immediately after Jesus's temptation, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. By yielding to and obeying the Holy Spirit, Jesus sets the example for everyone on how they ought to live. His time in the wilderness also reveals that God allows testing in the lives of those living a life that pleases Him as preparation for great service.

The parallel gospel accounts for this passage are Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13.

Mark (transcribing Peter's remembrances) is consistently and characteristically short, sweet, and to the point. He does not provide a lot of details in this passage and focuses on main events or "the headlines"—like a news reporter.

Matthew and Luke describe the various ways Jesus was tempted and overcame temptation by relying on God's word and trusting His Father. These were His temptations:

- To Command God to turn Stone into Bread (Matthew 4:2-4; Luke 4:2-4)
- To Publicly Identify as the Messiah by Putting God to the Test (Matthew 4:5-7; Luke 4:9-13)
- To Worship Satan as the Ruler of this World and Instantly Gain Power (Matthew 4:8-11; Luke 4:5-8)

For a commentary about each temptation and how Jesus overcome it, we invite you to see our [commentary for Matthew 4](#).

Mark's first word after telling of Jesus's baptism is *Immediately*. This is the Greek word εὐθύς (G2117—pronounced "yoo-thoos"). It appears 41 times in the gospel of Mark and 55 times in the gospel of Matthew, expressing the suddenness or immediacy of an action. And the immediate action of Jesus was *the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness*.

The phrase translated as *impelled Him to go out* uses a form of the Greek word: ἐκβάλλω (g1544—pronounced: "ek-bal'-lo"). It means to "send out" or even "cast out." This Greek word is often the same word that is used when it says that Jesus cast out demons. In the parallel passage in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 4:1), the Greek word used is ἀνάγω (g321—pronounced: "an-ag'-o"). And in the Gospel of Luke, the Greek word used is ἄγω (g71—pronounced: "á-gō"). All three words convey the same basic meaning—Jesus was led by *the Spirit*. But here in Mark, it may be emphasizing how the Holy *Spirit* sent, led, *impelled*, or cast Jesus *out* from society *into the wilderness* for a time immediately after His baptism.

All three gospel writers are informing the reader that Jesus's path *into the wilderness* was an uphill journey from the Jordan River where He was baptized. We do not precisely know where

or which *wilderness* Jesus was led to by *the Spirit*, but tradition places it in the Judean *wilderness*, northwest of Jericho. Its rolling hills are scarred by deep canyons and jutting cliffs. It is a dry and rugged terrain. This *wilderness* is not a place anyone would choose to go without a specific purpose.

The distance between Jerusalem and one of the likely sites of Jesus' baptism is only about 20 miles. The space between the Jordan Valley to the east and Jerusalem to the west is filled by the Judean *Wilderness*. Jesus' ancestor King David spent substantial time in the Judean *wilderness* hiding from King Saul, who sought to murder David because Saul perceived him as a threat to his throne. The incident at the *Wilderness* of En Gedi where David spared Saul's life in a cave is roughly 50 miles south from where Jesus may have been baptized (1 Samuel 24).

Jesus follows the *Spirit's* leading *into the wilderness*. In John's Gospel, *Jesus* repeatedly confesses that His purpose is to do His Father's will; that *He* does nothing of His own volition; that *He* only speaks what His Father tells *Him*. In following *the Holy Spirit*, *Jesus* is repeating a similar pattern. *Jesus* probably did not choose of His own accord to go and spend time in *the wilderness*, but *He* obeyed the will of the Third Person of the Trinity. It is interesting to note that in one verse God the Father declares that He is *well pleased* with His Son to this point (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11), and in the very next verse the Father leads His Son to the wilderness to be tested (Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:12).

As we saw in verses 9-11, Jesus was commissioned by *the Spirit* and the Father to begin His ministry as Savior of the world. Jesus begins by demonstrating exactly how a person ought to live: surrendered, yielded, and obedient to the Holy *Spirit*.

This isn't the only example Jesus provides during His time on Earth:

“Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.’”
(John 5:19)

“Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.”
(Luke 22:42)

Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, emphasizes this yieldedness on several occasions:

“Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”
(Romans 12:1)

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”
(1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”
(Galatians 2:20)

Remember, Mark’s intended audience are the Gentiles ([see commentary on Mark 1:1](#)). Mark is showing his readers Jesus’s example of how to live—yielded and obedient to their Maker.

It is a consistent pattern throughout scripture that God leads *into the wilderness* those He prepares for service. A few examples include Moses, who spent many years as a shepherd in *the wilderness* before he was called to lead Israel out of Egypt. David also spent time in *the wilderness* hiding from Saul. The nation of Israel wandered *in the wilderness* for *forty* years prior to entering the Promised Land. The principle here is that times of testing can be a sign of God’s approval. They can rightly be viewed as preparation for a great work. Any activity is great, when done as unto the Lord (Colossians 3:23).

It is not without significance that Jesus’s fast lasted *forty days and forty nights*. In Jewish culture, *forty* is a number that symbolizes testing and discipline. Throughout the Old Testament a period of *forty days*, as well as *forty days and forty nights*, occurs repeatedly.

Some references to *forty days* or *forty days and forty nights* in the Old Testament (and possible Messianic parallels) are as follows:

- The Flood—*forty days and forty nights* was the exact length of time God caused it to rain upon the earth (Genesis 7:12). God judged the world for disobedience. Jesus is the ark upon which humanity is saved from judgement.
- The Spies—*forty days and forty nights* was the exact length of time the twelve spies searched out the Promised Land (Numbers 13:25). Ten of them saw the land was good but became fearful when they also saw the difficulties ahead, and refused to trust God’s promise. Satan will test Jesus by showing *Him* shortcuts around all the difficulties ahead for *Him*, trying to lead *Him* away from trusting God’s promises.
- Elijah’s Fasting—*forty days and forty nights* was the exact length of time Elijah fasted on his journey to “Horeb, the mountain of God” (Horeb is another name for Mt. Sinai, 1 Kings 19:8). Just as David was regarded by the Jews as Israel’s greatest king, so was Elijah regarded as Israel’s greatest prophet. Jesus’s miracles parallel and even surpass the miracles of Elijah in both quantity and might.
- Ezekiel’s Demonstration—*forty days and forty nights* was the exact length of time the prophet Ezekiel laid on his side to symbolically “bear the iniquity of the house of Judah” (Ezekiel 4:6). Jesus came to bear the sins of Judah (and the world) upon Himself.
- Jonah’s Preaching—*forty days and forty nights* was the exact length of time the prophet Jonah preached God’s warning to Nineveh (Jonah 3:4). Jesus also preached a gospel of repentance, in order to avoid destruction.
- *Forty* was the number of years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land (Exodus 16:35; Numbers 32:13; Deuteronomy 29:5). It was their time of preparation to enter the Promised Land. Jesus was *led up to be tempted* as a time of preparation.

- *Forty* was also the number of years that each of Israel's first three kings reigned: Saul (Acts 13:21), David (1 Kings 2:11), and Solomon (1 Kings 11:42). Jesus came as the King of the Jews.

Mark uses the Greek word *πειράζω* (G3985—pronounced: “pi-rad’-zo”) in this verse which is translated as *being tempted*. Its root is often translated “test,” “trial,” or “tempt.” Though translations vary according to the translator’s perspective, they mean the same thing. James uses the same root throughout the first chapter of his epistle where the NASB translates it in all of these senses. But the middle of James 1 provides important truth on the nature of what temptation actually is and how it unfolds:

“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.”
(James 1:13-14)

James’ passage makes clear that the primary difference between a temptation and a test is intent. A tutor, coach, teacher, or mentor provides tests to promote growth. Like an algebra teacher giving a test to ensure the student is learning the material. The tutor hopes you will pass, and has your best interest at heart. The goal is growth and benefit.

However, a tempter desires the opposite. The tempter desires destruction. James makes it clear that God never desires that we fail. In fact, the Bible promises that God always prevents us from any test we are not capable of enduring (1 Corinthians 10:13).

This passage raises some interesting questions about the temptation of *Jesus*.

If *Jesus* is God, how could He *be tempted*?

Jesus is a paradox. *He* is fully God. And *He* is fully human. A paradox occurs when two propositions exist in partnership, but their coexistence is irreconcilable. Every founding principle of a worldview is paradoxical. In a philosophical system based on human logic, a paradox must either be explained, or it is a contradiction. However, God transcends human logic. Human logic is a reflection of God, not a boundary within which He must operate. The Bible does not present itself based on a foundation of human logic. It opens with, “In the beginning God.”

Given this, we can explain how Jesus could be tempted by answering “because He was human.” We cannot explain how Jesus could be both God and human, just as we cannot explain existence. It just is.

The Bible’s founding paradox conflicts with that of other worldviews. The Bible presents God Himself as the founding paradox; a God that is one and many. A God that is fully divine and fully human. A God that is beyond explanation. All explanations stem from God, not the other way around. The famous Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. affirmed the paradox that Jesus is fully God and fully human.

[For a full discussion of this question, see the Tough Topics article on the Paradoxical Nature of God here.](#)

Hebrews 2:17-18 shares additional light on the reality that Jesus was truly tempted:

“Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.”

(Hebrews 2:17-18)

This passage expresses that among the reasons Jesus became a human was so that *He* could identify as a human and we could identify with *Him* as a human. In becoming human, Jesus is able to minister to men as a man. He who “has suffered” and was “tempted” can minister to other humans as a brother. He can minister as a fellow sufferer to those who likewise suffer and are tempted. Jesus’s wilderness experience demonstrates the frailty of His humanity. If Jesus relied on divine grace and God’s word to sustain *Him* during temptation, we ought also to expect to depend upon God and His word when temptations arise.

The text says that *He was... being tempted by Satan*. This statement squares with what James told us in James 1:13-14, that God does not tempt. *The Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness*, but it was *Satan* who *tempted* Him. God allowed *Satan* to tempt Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-7). God allows believers to be *tempted* but does not allow them to be *tempted* beyond what we are able to resist (1 Corinthians 10:13). There will come a time when the devil is prevented from tempting (Revelation 20:1-10). In the meantime, God allows him to tempt, but provides a way of escape if we are willing to choose it. Jesus experienced all we experience, so He can sympathize with us. Jesus gained amazing rewards for His faithfulness, and offers enormous rewards for those who follow His example and resist temptation (Philippians 2:8-11; Hebrews 2:5-12; Revelation 3:21).

God is the Sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all that is, but even so has created us entirely free to morally choose between good and evil. God does not tempt anyone. These paradoxes are rooted in the character and essence of God.

By submitting to God, and steadfastly obeying Him, Jesus is able to endure humility and suffering, and despise the shame of the cross for the joy set before Him (Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 12:2). The “joy set before him” was to sit down “at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). In realms with kings, it was a capital offense to sit in the presence of the king, unless you were also royalty. To sit down at the right hand of the throne of God is a symbol of reigning. Jesus waited to be installed as ruler of the world until God did it in His appointed time and manner. Therefore, Jesus will sit on the throne forever.

We are not told how Mark came to know of this episode. We might presume that Jesus told His disciples about it as a means of instruction. Mark’s inclusion of this experience *immediately* after God’s pronouncement that Jesus “is my beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased” (Mark 1:11)

indicates that Mark desired to instruct believers that God allows testing for those living a life that pleases *Him*. It is preparation for great service.

Finally, we see Jesus in *the wilderness with wild beasts and angels* (including *Satan*).

It is not entirely clear what is meant by the phrase *He was with wild beasts*. It could be that Mark was emphasizing how isolated Jesus was—*He was among wild beasts*, no humans. Mark might also be implying that Jesus was in some sort of physical danger, because *He* had little physical protection from *the wild beasts* should they attack him. Or Mark could be showing how during these forty days in the wilderness, Jesus interacted with all aspects of God's creation:

- *Wilderness* = the physical, non-living part of the created order
- *Wild Beasts* = the animals and earthly creatures
- *Angels* = the immaterial spiritual beings created by and separate from God

We know all of creation was negatively affected when Adam and Eve disobeyed God's command in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:13-18). This negative effect is often referred to as "the Fall." The harmony of God's perfect creation was broken at the Fall. Man was separated from God (Genesis 3:24). Creation itself became hostile to man (Genesis 3:17-18). Human relationships became self-centered competitions to manipulate and control (Genesis 3:16). And even the harmony within the individual souls of men and women became twisted and broken (Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 7:15-24). All creation groans for redemption (Romans 8:19-22)

And it is through Jesus Christ that creation will be redeemed (John 3:16; Revelation 21:1).

Jesus created all things (John 1:3, Colossians 1:16). He will restore all things (Revelation 21:5). And here at the beginning of His ministry we see *Him* interacting with all aspects of His creation; perhaps anticipating when all of it would be restored to its intended design (Colossians 1:19-20, Revelation 22:3).

This verse ends saying that *the angels were ministering to Him*. This is likely a reference to what it says in Matthew about how "angels came and began to minister to Him" after the Satan departed (Matthew 4:11).

The angels ministering to Him may refer to their strengthening Jesus physically after He fasted for *forty days* and *forty nights* in the extreme climate of *the wilderness* (Matthew 4:2). If so, that means Jesus was provided food miraculously, just as the Israelites were provided manna *in the wilderness*, but not through Jesus doing a miracle on behalf of Himself. *He* continues to live in dependence throughout His *wilderness* experience. This is one of the primary learning opportunities available in a *wilderness* experience, to learn to walk in complete dependence on God.

Biblical Text

¹² Immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness. ¹³ And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.