

# Lessons from Matthew 4

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Matthew 4 begins with Jesus' temptation in the wilderness for forty days. As in Mark and Luke, it occurs immediately after Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist and prior to His ministry in Galilee. The Gospel of John does not mention Jesus' temptation in the wilderness at all and Mark's description is very brief (Mark 1:12–13). But both Matthew and Luke describe in detail the devil's attempts to defeat Jesus. The main difference between them is in the order of the second and third temptations; Luke's geographical order culminates with the temptation for Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple, while Matthew's more chronological account concludes with Satan offering Jesus the kingdoms of the world in exchange for receiving His worship.

## Structure of the Chapter

Jesus, having been anointed as Messiah by the Holy Spirit and identified as God's beloved Son by the voice from heaven (Matt 3:16–17), begins His ministry with forty days of prayer. Matthew describes the early days of Jesus' ministry in four sections:

1. Jesus' temptation by the devil (Matt 4:1–11)
2. Significance of Jesus' Galilean ministry (Matt 4:12–17)
3. Calling the first disciples (Matt 4:18–22)
4. Jesus' teaching and healing (Matt 4:23–25)

Interestingly, there is an indication in Matthew, hinted at also in Mark 1:14, that Jesus' ministry did not begin in Galilee. Matthew says that when Jesus "*heard* that John had been arrested, he *withdrew* into Galilee" (Matt 4:12, ESV).<sup>1</sup> The italicized words in this verse are not found in the parallel passages (cf. Mark 1:14; Luke 4:14). According to John, it was at this time that Jesus shifted His focus from Judea to Galilee after a confrontation with the Sanhedrin (John 5:16–18). As a disciple of Jesus, Matthew would be well aware of the circumstances that led Jesus to end his ministry in Judea. This initial phase of His public ministry, which seems to have lasted more than a year, includes ministry in a city of Samaria (John 1:35–5:47). The last three sections of Matthew 4 show how Jesus prepared the ground in Galilee, resulting in large crowds flocking to Him and gathering to hear the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7). It is important to keep in mind that this sermon occurs midway through Christ's earthly ministry, after He has attracted many followers.

## Interpretation of the Chapter

### 1. Verses 1–11

- The Greek word translated "tempted" (*peirazō*) can also refer to being "tested." Jesus will be repeatedly tested by the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matt 16:1; 19:3; 22:18, 35). God allows His people to be tested (1 Cor 7:5). But He never tempts anyone (Jas 1:13); this is the devil's work.
- Matthew places special emphasis on the battle between God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom, a theme that becomes especially clear in the third temptation.

- The forty days in the wilderness and Jesus' successful resistance of Satan's temptations contrasts with Israel's forty years of wilderness wandering in doubt and unbelief. To each of the three temptations, Jesus replies with God's Word rather than His own. By quoting from Deuteronomy each time (Deut 8:3; 6:16; 6:13; 10:20), Jesus redeems Israel's failure.
- Satan's first two temptations invite doubt of God's Word that was spoken at Jesus' baptism affirming His Sonship (Matt 3:17); the first temptation also implies doubt of God's provision for Jesus' needs (cf. Matt 6:31–33), while the second temptation, although on the surface seeming to affirm faith in God's protection, actually invites doubt by requiring proof.
- In the second temptation, the devil even quotes Psalm 91:11–12. But not "every word" is quoted (cf. Matt 4:4) and, as a result, a promise of protection is twisted to give a license for presumption, which is faith's counterfeit.
- Satan's third temptation, offering the world to Jesus if He would "fall down and worship" him, exhibits the attitude that led to his fall from heaven (Isa 14:12–14). This apparent "bargain"—winning the world without going to the cross—as with all of the devil's moral and ethical shortcuts, would have ended badly. Jesus came to proclaim the advent of God's kingdom, which is ever at enmity with the principles Satan introduced into the world through sin.

## 2. Verses 12–17

- Capernaum, Jesus' "own city" (Matt 9:1), was located in a fertile area, on a busy trade route, with a sizeable synagogue. It provided access to many nearby towns and villages, and a boat facilitated Jesus' ministry on both sides of the lake.
- This widespread ministry, reaching to the eastern shore and the Decapolis region (Matt 4:25)—predominantly Gentile areas—could aptly be described in the words of Isaiah's prophecy as "the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles" (cf. Isa 9:1–2).
  - i. The Greek word translated "Gentiles" (*ethnē*, "nations") is used consistently in the plural in Matthew's gospel when referring to non-Jews.
  - ii. Its first use in the singular refers to God's kingdom being "taken away" from Israel's leadership and "given to a people [*ethnei*] producing its fruits" (Matt 21:43, ESV). After this, the plural form is always used in reference to "all the nations," showing that the mission committed to Jesus' followers includes Israel (Matt 24:9, 14; 25:32; 28:19).

## 3. Verses 18–22

- Peter, the first mentioned here, together with his brother Andrew, as specifically called by Jesus (cf. Mark 1:16; Luke 5:1–11), also appears first in all four lists of the twelve apostles (Matt 10:2–4; Mark 3:16–19; Luke 6:13–16; Acts 1:13).
- Normally, young men would ask permission from a rabbi to be their disciple but Jesus, rather than relying on volunteers, singles out specific ones to follow Him. Having been able to observe them for some time, He now calls them to make a more consequential, fulltime commitment as "fishers of men."
- All four disciples appear to have been commercial fishermen, working closely with Zebedee and his two sons (cf. Luke 5:7, 10). They worked at night when the nets were

more difficult for fish to see, and would sell their catch at market in the morning. In 1986 a boat like that used by these men was discovered, able to accommodate up to sixteen people. Such a boat, with the sizeable net mentioned here that was big enough to justify mending, would enable the catching of a very large quantity of fish. In other words, these men operated quite a successful business, and the call to leave their livelihood behind represented a significant sacrifice. But the blessings in following Jesus are even more significant (Matt 19:27–29; cf. 2 Cor 4:16–5:1).

#### 4. Verses 23–25

- Jesus’ ministry reached all classes of people. His teaching in the synagogue reached the religious leaders, His preaching in the countryside reached the common people, and His healing ministry reached the sick, including those on the margins of Jewish society. Matthew also describes Christ’s work as geographically extensive.
- Although Matthew portrays Jesus’ work as parallel in some ways to that of John the Baptist, it is also distinctive. The good news proclamation begins with Jesus, a work that is to be carried forward by His followers “as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matt 24:14).
- In the coming chapters, Matthew presents Jesus’ teaching (Matt 5–7) and healing activity (Matt 8–9), which continues to attract “great multitudes” (Matt 8:1; 12:15; 13:2; 14:14; 15:30, etc.).

#### **Application of the Chapter**

Important lessons that may be drawn from this chapter include:

1. Temptations often intensify following baptism. It seems that the devil works even harder to turn “forward-movers” into “backsliders.” But no one can be compelled to sin. Jesus, being tempted in all points as we are, shows us that by relying on Him and His Word we can likewise be victorious over temptation (Heb 4:15–16).
2. The three temptations of Christ cover the three main spheres of human temptation: “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16). Christ’s victory over each of these three temptations shows that:
  - what we eat and put into our bodies affects our spiritual health (1 Cor 10:31).
  - it matters whether we are willing to rely upon God completely and be satisfied with His approval or whether we desire human praise more.
  - idols cherished in the heart prevent us from putting God first in everything (cf. Matt 6:24), and hinder us in obeying and worshipping Him.
3. The fact that Satan could change the meaning of a Bible text by omitting just a few words shows that every word in Scripture is necessary in order to understand the inspired meaning of the whole. Changing or ignoring even one word may drastically change the message (cf. Matt 5:18–19). The warning about adding to or taking away from what has been revealed may also apply more broadly to the whole canon (Rev 22:18–19).

4. When considering one's occupation it is wise to consider not only how it may be helpful in this life, but also how it could enable us to advance God's kingdom and produce fruit for eternity (Matt 6:33).

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.

7/18

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