

## Choosing to Stay

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Matthew 4:1–11

Most of us think we want peace.

But if we are honest, what we often want is control—because control feels like peace.

I learned this early in a very ordinary way.

When I was a teenager and I started driving, my dad would sit in the passenger seat and grip the handhold above the door like his life depended on it. He wasn't a dramatic man. He wasn't trying to be funny. He just couldn't help himself. The closer he was to the steering wheel, the more he felt the need to reach for something stable.

Years later, I was sitting in the passenger seat while my own children were learning to drive—and I realized I was doing the same thing. Hand on the handle. Foot ready to brake on an invisible pedal. The exact same reflex.

It's a small thing. A funny thing.

But it tells the truth: control is contagious.

And if we're paying attention, we start to notice that the reflex goes far beyond driving.

As a pastor, I've sat with families in hospital rooms when the decisions are unbearable—when life support is being discussed, when the next step will change everything, when it feels like there is no good option and no clear path forward. In those moments, people often say some version of the same thing: "I don't know what to do." Or, "This is out of our hands." Or, "It feels like no one is in the driver's seat."

And underneath those words is something deeper: the quiet panic that rises when we cannot control what is happening.

So let me put the question plainly:

Does control actually equal peace?

Or does it only seem like peace—until the next thing we can't control shows up?

That question is one of the doorways into today's text, because Matthew 4 is not just a story about temptation. It is a story about what we do when life becomes wilderness—when we are in the in-between, when we can't speed it up, when we can't manage it, when we can't solve it on our timeline.

And here is the theme that runs through the entire passage:

When control fails, we are tempted to leave.  
The way of Jesus is choosing to stay.

Before we go any further, I want to help us feel this, not just think about it.

Think of a moment in your life when you felt like you had no control.

Maybe it was short-lived—a crisis that lasted an hour or a day. Maybe it was long and grinding—something that stretched across months or years. But you know the feeling: the tightening in your chest, the mind racing, the desire to fix it, escape it, numb it, force an outcome.

If you're willing, take just a moment right now.

Put your feet on the floor.  
Let your hands rest open in your lap.  
Take a slow breath.

Now, quietly, call to mind one moment when you felt like you had no control. Don't overthink it. Just let one come.

What emotions did you feel?  
Fear? Anger? Shame? Numbness? Grief?  
How intense were they?

I'll model what I mean.

Years ago, one of my children—my daughter—was about three years old when she got what's called a nursemaid's elbow. Her elbow slipped out of place. She was in pain, crying, unable to be comforted—and I could not stop it. We drove to the hospital. We waited. Time slowed down. I remember feeling helpless. I remember wanting to do something—anything—to take it away.

Then, eventually, a doctor came in, and with a simple motion, put her elbow back into place. The pain stopped. She was fine.

It was intense—but it was short-lived.

And then there are other experiences that are not an hour-and-a-half experience. They last months. They last years. Divorce is one example. Not because it is only legal paperwork, but because it can be an extended season where the ground keeps shifting, where emotions are layered, where control is elusive, where you can do all the right things and still not be able to control outcomes.

Different kinds of wilderness.

Different length and varying intensity.

But the same temptation shows up in both: I need relief. I need certainty. I need power. I need to regain control.

That's why the wilderness matters in scripture.

In the story of Israel, the wilderness is not just where they get lost. It is where they are formed.

Israel leaves Egypt physically, but Egypt doesn't leave them emotionally right away. The wilderness is where slave identity gets exposed, where trust is learned, where desire gets purified, where a people is slowly transformed into a covenant people.

And Matthew wants us to hear that same resonance in Jesus.

Matthew is written with a Jewish imagination. It presents Jesus not only as Savior, but as the true Israel, the new Moses, the lawgiver who will teach from the mountain. But before there is a sermon on the mount, there is the wilderness. Before there is public ministry, there is hidden formation.

Matthew tells us: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

Notice what that means.

Jesus doesn’t wander into the wilderness by accident. He is Spirit-led into it.

And that alone should challenge our assumptions.

Some of us think that if we are in a hard season, it must mean we did something wrong. Some of us think wilderness equals failure. Some of us assume wilderness means God is absent.

But the text says the opposite: the Spirit leads Jesus into wilderness.

Which tells us this: *wilderness can be a place of God’s work, not God’s abandonment.*

And in that place, three temptations come—three tests that reveal something about the human heart.

They are not random. They are not simply “bad things Jesus avoided.” They are three predictable ways human beings reach for control.

### **The First Temptation: Control through Immediate Relief**

Jesus is hungry. Forty days fasting.

And the devil says, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

It sounds almost reasonable. Bread is not evil. Hunger is real.

But the temptation is not merely to eat.

The temptation is to make Jesus use power to solve himself immediately—to treat his identity as something he must prove and protect by controlling outcomes.

In other words: If you are beloved, you shouldn’t have to feel this.

Fix it now.

Turn stones into bread.

Make the discomfort disappear.

This is the first control reflex: immediate relief.

We know it well. When we are anxious, we look for quick relief—something to make us feel better right now: distraction, numbing, spending, scrolling, eating, fixing, rescuing, rushing.

The urge is not always sinful in itself.

But it can become a false savior.

And Jesus replies: “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

He doesn't deny hunger. He refuses to make relief his lord.

*He chooses to stay.*

### **The Second Temptation: Control through Forced Certainty**

The devil takes Jesus to the holy city and sets him on the pinnacle of the temple and says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.”

And then the devil quotes scripture—because temptation is often religious.

“God will command his angels concerning you.”

In other words: Force God to prove himself.

Make it undeniable.

Get a guarantee.

Eliminate uncertainty.

This is the second control reflex: forced certainty.

How often do we want guarantees before we obey? How often do we say, “I'll trust God—if God shows me first. I'll stay faithful—if I know it will work. I'll take the step—if I can see the outcome.”

But faith is not control with religious language. Faith is trust when outcomes are not guaranteed.

Jesus replies: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

He refuses to manipulate God into certainty.

*He chooses to stay.*

### **The Third Temptation: Control through Power**

Finally, the devil takes Jesus to a very high mountain, shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and says, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

This is the most honest temptation: Take power. Run things. Be in charge. Get the results.

It's the inner fantasy so many of us carry: If I could just be the president for a day...

If I could just be the boss for a day...

If I could just be the one making the decisions...

We tell ourselves we would fix it.

This is the third control reflex: power—the belief that domination will save us.

Jesus replies: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

He refuses to build God’s kingdom with the devil’s tools.

*He chooses to stay.*

And if we step back, we can see the pattern.

When we don’t trust God, we reach for control through three strategies:

Immediate relief.  
Forced certainty.  
Power.

These are not only temptations Jesus faces.

They are a map of our own hearts.

So what is the key to resolution in this passage?

It is not simply that Jesus is strong and we are weak.

It is not simply “be more like Jesus.”

The deeper gospel is that Jesus shows us what it looks like to be formed in the wilderness—and he gives us a way to practice it.

Let me name three realities that hold the center of this story.

*First: Jesus is beloved.*

Just before the wilderness, Jesus is baptized. The heavens open. The voice speaks: “This is my beloved Son.”

Notice: belovedness comes before performance. Love is received before ministry begins.

That is the first anchor. If we miss it, we will try to earn what can only be received.

*Second: Jesus is Spirit-led.*

He is not self-directed. He is not controlling the storyline. He is led.

There is a kind of humility in that: the willingness to go where God leads, even when it is not comfortable, even when it is not efficient, even when it is not chosen.

*Third: Jesus is rooted in God.*

This is the heart of “choosing to stay.”

The wilderness is not primarily about a clever debate with Satan. It is about forty days of staying with God—staying long enough to be formed, staying long enough for trust to deepen, staying long enough for false saviors to lose their grip.

And here is a crucial truth for our lives:

*Tests are almost never passed on test day.*

They are passed in the hidden days beforehand.

As a math student—and later as a math educator—I learned that you don't pass an exam by cramming the night before. You pass by learning the process, asking questions, practicing, and understanding why something is true so you can handle the next hundred problems, even when they look a little different.

It's the same in athletics. It's the same in music. It's the same in leadership. It's the same in discipleship.

*The moment of pressure reveals what has been formed in the slow days.*

So when we talk about wilderness, we're not talking about heroic spiritual moments.

We're talking about a practiced faithfulness: *choosing to stay with God when we cannot control what is happening.*

And that is the invitation of this text.

Not that you will never feel the urge for relief, certainty, or power.

But that, over time, you can become less panicked—less driven by control—more rooted in trust.

*Because you have learned to stay.*

So let me close with three simple invitations for this week. They are not dramatic. They are small. But small practices form deep faith.

### **Invitation 1 — Stay One Minute Longer**

This week, notice one moment when you feel the urge to leave—to distract yourself, to fix the situation, or to move on.

Instead, stay one minute longer.

In prayer.

In silence.

In a conversation that feels unfinished.

Ask yourself:

What might God be giving me here, if I do not rush away?

### **Invitation 2 — Finish What You Usually Abandon**

Choose one small thing you often leave unfinished—a prayer, a scripture reading, a difficult conversation.

This week, practice staying with it to the end, without rushing toward relief or resolution.

Ask yourself:

What changes when I remain present, rather than escaping discomfort?

### **Invitation 3 — Resist the Shortcut Once**

Pay attention this week to one place where you are tempted to take the quickest way out.

Choose presence instead of relief.

Trust instead of control.

Ask yourself:

What might sustain me here, if I do not demand immediate results?

Friends, wilderness does not last forever.

But it does matter what we do while we are in it.

May the God who names you beloved, leads you by the Spirit, and roots you through the wilderness teach you the freedom of choosing to stay.

Amen.