

PREPARATION FOR VISION DAY: SOUL TESTS

Matthew 4:1-11

As we prepare our hearts for this incredibly wonderful time of the year, I believe the Holy Spirit has prompted me to speak on this idea of Soul Tests. The temptation of Jesus is truly profound, and, as our Lord and Savior, He is also our Discipler and Mentor. Soul tests occur when there is tension, or a prompting or warning that won't go away until you make a decision. The tension can be a spiritual or relational, or emotional, or a physical issue, decision or problem. The tension can be something you know that the Lord is asking of you, and you struggle with wanting to obey what He is asking you to do, or give up or to change how you're thinking about Him, yourself or someone else.

You see, this is what the SOUL TEST is all about. God is more concerned about your soul (our heart) than He is anything else. Your soul—your heart—is made up of your intellect, your emotions and your will. What you are presently thinking influences how you feel, which impacts your will and how you will act. So all of God's tests in our lives and all of Satan's temptations are meant to test the condition of our soul at the present moment. That is what a SOUL TEST is all about. Please follow along as I read this marvelous passage in Matthew chapter 4:1-11, **“Then Jesus was led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted there by the devil. ²For forty days and forty nights He ate nothing and became very hungry. ³Then the devil came and said to**

Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, change these stones into loaves of bread.’⁴ But Jesus told him, ‘No! The Scriptures say, “People need more than bread for their life; they must feed on every word of God.”’⁵ Then the devil took Him to Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple,⁶ and said, ‘If You are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, “He orders His angels to protect you. And they will hold you with their hands to keep you from striking your foot on a stone.”’ Jesus responded, ‘The Scriptures also say, “Do not test the Lord your God.”’⁸ Next the devil took Him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed Him the nations of the world and all their glory.⁹ ‘I will give it all to You,’ he said, ‘if You will only kneel down and worship me.’¹⁰ ‘Get out of here, satan,’ Jesus told him. ‘For the Scriptures say, “You must worship the Lord your God; serve only Him.”’¹¹ Then the devil went away, and angels came and cared for Jesus.”

I. Why God tests our souls

This comes from Matthew, Chapter 4:1: **“Then Jesus was led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted there by the devil.”** Notice that it was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the place of temptation.

I believe right now that every one of us is in a soul test situation. You might even be in several soul tests’ opportunities. What is God up to? Why is He allowing the things that are happening to us to happen?

A. God tests our souls to see if we love Him by our obedience

Just like Abraham in the O.T. and just like Israel, Jesus was tested to see if He would demonstrate His love for the Father through His obedience. Obedience to the Father is more important than we will ever know. If Jesus would have failed this test and temptation, the entire world's redemption would have been foiled.

It is our obedience to Jesus Christ and to His Word that develops our faith and moral strength and rectitude. Disobedience creates depression, fear, insecurity, and a sense of purposelessness. When we obey God's Word and Ways for our lives, it demonstrates that we love Him. This is why God allows tests and temptations in our lives.

B. God tests us to prove our faithfulness to Him by passing the test

God desires for us to demonstrate and prove that we are faithful to Him—that He can count on us to carry out His purpose and mission for our lives.

Faithfulness is one of the leading qualities we look for in our marriages, friendships and relationships—is it not? I bank on the fact that I can trust Kathe to be faithful to me relationally, emotionally, financially, and sexually, and she has the same trust in me. Once trust is broken, if it is not resolved, the relationship can begin to disintegrate.

God tests us so that we can prove to Him and to ourselves that we are faithful sons and daughters, and His tests are meant to strengthen us and give us confidence in His love and purposes for our lives. As we begin our Christmas season and series, CHRISTMAS CHEER, all of these tests are meant to infuse us with God's cheer—which is encouragement, and to infuse us with His courage. This is what happened with Abraham in Genesis chapter 22. God told Abraham to sacrifice his son that God had promised to him. Abraham went immediately to do what Father God told him to do. As his son laid on the altar tied down and Abraham had his knife in the ready position to kill his son, the Bible says in vv. 11-12, **“At that moment the angel of the Lord shouted to him from heaven, ‘Abraham! Abraham!’ ‘Yes,’ he answered. ‘I’m listening.’¹² ‘Lay down the knife,’ the angel said. ‘Do not hurt the boy in any way, for now I know that you truly fear God. You have not withheld even your beloved son from Me.’”**

In your notes, I have **the Greek word PEIRAZO. It can either mean test or tempt.**

Why does God test us? Look at your notes where it says:

Test defined: “To get a person to prove himself or herself faithful to God’s will, with the good intention that the person passes the test.”

It is through God's testing that we prove to ourselves and to God that we are faithful, obedient and that we love and cherish

our relationship with Father God. It is through the testing of our faith that our faith grows strong and mature. There is no other way. As we see in this passage, Satan takes God's testing of Jesus and turns it into a temptation for Jesus.

Temptation defined: “Is an enticement to get a person to go contrary to God’s will.”

Some of us just need to acknowledge the fact and come to grips that we feel hurt and angry or even fearful that God tests us. This is how God holds us accountable. It is our surrender and submitting to His accountability that causes us to grow strong and mature. There is no other way.

This morning, I want us to look at “How God tests our souls,” and, “What God is looking for through a soul test.”

II. How God tests our souls

As a Christian, Jesus Christ is your Lord, Savior and model. He is the mold, so to speak, that we are cut out of. This is what Matthew is teaching us throughout his entire 28 chapters. The Gospel of Matthew is all about teaching us: “What it means to follow Jesus.” So it is through watching and listening to Jesus and everything that happens to Him that we learn how to follow Him. Through the testing and temptation of Jesus Christ we see exactly how God tests our souls.

A. God will put us in situations that are difficult and trying

Notice in verses 1-3 it is the Holy Spirit who leads Jesus into the wilderness to fast for forty days. Fast means that Jesus went without any food. Jesus experienced what it was like to go without food and to be drained of His strength and vitality. He did it willingly because the Father was testing Him. This wilderness difficulty was a **SOUL TEST**.

You and I have two different responses we can give when we're in a soul test. You can complain, gripe, get angry, pout, withdraw, and become very self-centered, or you can do what the Bible says is the most appropriate response.

Please read out loud with me James 1:2-4, **“Dear brothers and sister, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. ³For when your faith is tested, your endurance had a chance to grow. ⁴So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything.”**

Wow. This is amazing. James says whenever your heart is being checked because you're in a difficult and trying circumstance or situation, you can choose to make it an opportunity to be joyful. Notice that the key to how I respond is how I choose to think about the situation. Loved ones, the Bible is very clear that it is how I think about a situation with my intellect (am I willing to agree that God is in control of this painful situation) that determines how my emotions will respond (will I experience joy, or will I get angry, sad, depressed, etc.), and then how I choose to act with my will

(will I let patience, endurance and stamina have its way in my life, or will I choose to respond selfishly and in rebellion).

In James, God says to us that if we will choose to see trouble, trials, turbulences—anything that is trying and difficult—as simply a chance for joy, then let your endurance grow and the outcome will be that, when your endurance is fully developed, you will become strong in character, and you're ready for anything. This is exactly why the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tested immediately after His affirming and validating experience with the Father in His water baptism.

In other words, Father God put Jesus through His soul test in the wilderness to prepare Him to fulfill His mission successfully, which meant being willing to go to the cross and die the most shameful death ever.

In 1 Peter 1:7 Peter writes, “These trials (soul tests) are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.”

Again, we see why and how God tests our souls. He allows fiery situations in our lives for the purpose of purifying and strengthening our faith. Notice what Peter says: The process only works if I cooperate. This is where my faithfulness and obedience come in. Peter says, “So if your faith remains

strong after being tried by fiery trials, there will be a reward for you when Jesus Christ comes back.” But only if I endure.

God tests our souls by putting us in situations that are difficult and trying. It was God that put Jesus in the wilderness for the test and temptation.

B. God allows the devil to tempt us

This is very clear in the Bible. R.T. France is right on in what he writes concerning this issue. **“Running through Jewish references to the devil is a tension between his total hostility to God and His people and his operation apparently within and subject to the ultimate sovereignty of God, a tension which Matthew here reflects in that the devil’s intention to ‘tempt’ Jesus to do wrong is subsumed under God’s good purpose to ‘Test’ His Son.”**

The Bible says that Satan is allowed by God to tempt and to harass us so that we can learn how to use our identity in Jesus Christ to withstand him. We will see in a moment how Jesus defeated satan’s temptations. How Jesus defeated satan is the same way we defeat him. Remember: the Book of Matthew is all about learning, **“What it means to follow Jesus.”**

James tells us how to respond to testing and temptation in James 1:12-16, **“God blesses the people who patiently endure testing. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him. ¹³And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, ‘God**

is tempting me,’ God is never tempted to do wrong, and He never tempts anyone else either. ¹⁴Temptation comes from the lure of our own evil desires. ¹⁵These evil desires lead to evil actions, and evil actions lead to death. ¹⁶So don’t be misled, my dear brothers and sisters.”

The Bible is very clear that God allows the devil to tempt us, but if satan is successful in getting us to fail, it is because we have given into our own sinful desires, which lead to sinful actions and sinful actions lead to death, which is disconnection in our relationship with God. A successful temptation reveals my own unfaithfulness.

Please read out loud with me 1 Corinthians 10:13, **“But remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will keep the temptations from becoming so strong that you can’t stand up against it. When you are tempted, He will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it.”**

III. What God is looking for through a soul test

Matthew 4:3-11

I submit to each one of you that **these three testings and temptations of Jesus are foundational for each one of us whose desire is to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ.** What God is looking for through a soul test...

A. God’s will takes priority over self-gratification

“Then the devil came and said to Him, ‘If you are the Son of God, change these stones into loaves of bread.’⁴ But Jesus told him, ‘No! The Scriptures say, “People need more than bread for their life; they must feed on every word of God.””” Matthew 4:3-4

The nature of satan’s temptations of Jesus is expressed in the tempter’s first words, “If you are the Son of God.” Wilkins argues that, **“This key phrase, repeated in the second temptation (4:6) and assumed in the third (4:9), reflects the tempter’s overall intent to manipulate Jesus: ‘If you are the Son of God, change these stones into bread.’”**

In chapter 3:17, the voice of the Father from heaven had just recently confirmed the identity of Jesus as His beloved Son in Whom He is well pleased. This is very important to understand, dear church family. Satan does not doubt Jesus’ identity as the Son of God, neither is he trying to get Jesus to doubt it, rather, he is trying to get Jesus to *misuse* His prerogatives as the Son of God. James 2:19 states, **“Do you still think it’s enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror!”**

The temptation by satan is really, “What type of Son will Jesus be? Will He use His divinity to provide for Himself? Or, will He, in His fasted state, obey the Father’s will?” In other words, the tempter—which means his task is to seduce, tempt and split relationships—is attempting to get Jesus to

disconnect in His relationship with the Father and use His supernatural powers to turn those stones into bread.

We know Jesus has this power, because in Matthew 14:13-21, Jesus fed over 5,000 men, plus women and children, with just five loaves of bread and two fishes, and in chapter 15:32-39, Jesus feeds at another time over 4,000 men, plus women and children, with seven loaves of bread and a few fish. The point is, Jesus could have turned the stone into bread to feed Himself, but He would have been gratifying His own needs against God's purposes and plans for the test He was undergoing.

I fully resonate with what Dr. Wilkins writes concerning Jesus' test and temptation. **“Temptations are one of the enemy's ways of trying to get a person to go contrary to God's specific will. Therefore, a temptation is not always trying to get a person to do something that is inherently sinful. It is not inherently wrong to turn stones into bread. But the Father's will for the Son at this time is to fast, not to eat. Therefore, turning stones into bread will lead Jesus astray. The question really is, what is the Father's will for the Son?”**

What is really fascinating here, loved friends, is that Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:2-3. This demonstrates the link between Jesus' temptations and Israel's experience in the desert. Please read out loud with me Deuteronomy 8:2-3, **“Remember how the Lord your God led you through the wilderness for forty years, humbling you and testing you to**

prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would really obey His commands. ³Yes, He humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people need more than bread for their life; real life comes by feeding on every word of the Lord.”

Israel should have learned from their time in the wilderness that their God would take care of them. If it was God’s will for them to be there, they needed to trust Him when He said that He would take care of them.

This is exactly what Jesus was being tested on. Could He trust the voice of His Father at His baptism Who said, “You are My loved Son, and I am greatly pleased with You,” that He would take care of Him now? Satan was trying to get Him to distrust His Father’s leading by putting His own self-gratification over His trust in God’s plans.

Do you see any application here at all for you personally and for us as a church family? God’s prophetic word for us to remember in 2020, that **God has graced CVCHURCH and has prepared us, and continues to prepare us, to be the kind of faith community that God is drawing people to us, who, because of His drawing them, are finding their way home to Father God from brokenness.**

What are you going through right now where you believe God has been leading you, but now the circumstances seem to

scream out to you, “You better do something to take care of yourself, because it looks like the Father doesn’t care?” Loved ones please hear me. You are being tempted by the devil to provide for yourself instead of believing God’s Word for every area of your life Spiritually, Emotionally, Relationally, Financially, Vocationally, Intellectually, and Physically. God is testing you so that you will continue to grow in His grace, faith, salvation, endurance, and maturity.

B. Trust in God’s plans, and do not put Him to the test
Matthew 4:5-7

This temptation has to do with inappropriately testing God’s loving plan for His life. The Bible says in verses 5-7 that the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, to the highest point of the temple, and quotes Psalm 91:11-12.

This is very important to understand. Satan quoted the actual words of this Psalm accurately, but he twists the meaning of the scripture to try to get Jesus to rebel against His Father’s plan for His life. Dr. Wilkins writes, “**The original Old Testament context does not imply that God will send protecting care for every harmful situation.**”

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:16, “**Do not test the Lord your God as you did when you complained at Massah.**” This is very powerful. When I complain about what God has allowed in my life, I am putting Him to the test.

In this temptation the devil is trying to get Jesus to test His Father in two ways: **1) By intentionally putting Himself in harm's way.** Jesus would be inappropriately testing His Father's love by trying to manipulate Him to send angels to save Him. This is similar to Gideon's fleece in Judges 6:36-40. True faith does not make such demands on God. **2) If Jesus was to jump off the highest point of the temple and angels catch Him, He would gain phenomenal notoriety as the word spread about town.** Here is the problem: This miraculous display of protection would attract a following, but not by the Father's plan for Jesus. Jesus was to obediently proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom and suffering.

Satan is challenging Jesus to confirm His relationship to His Father. "Jump off and prove to me and Yourself that Your Father really does love You and will take care of You. Prove that Psalm 91 is really true."

Jesus demonstrates that He trusts His Father's voice and the Scripture. This is the essence of biblical faith, church: True faith takes God at His Word and obeys it without needing any other confirmation.

C. Total allegiance through worship of Him only

"⁸Next the devil took Him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed Him the nations of the world and all their glory. ⁹'I will give it all to You,' he said, 'if You will only kneel down and worship me.' Matthew 4:8-9

The temptation and test here is that the devil is offering Jesus a shortcut. Jesus can bypass the humiliation, horror and suffering of the cross. But the shortcut requires a ghastly and dreadful cost. He must betray the will of His Father in heaven and worship and obey the devil on earth. There is no doubt about it; Jesus knows the Father's will for Him is the cross, as seen in Matthew 16:21-28. It is in this passage that Jesus tells His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and be put to death at the hands of the religious leaders. But in verse 22, Peter takes Him aside and says, **“Heaven forbid, Lord,’ he said. ‘This will never happen to You.’ And Jesus responds to him and says, ‘Get away from Me, satan! You are a dangerous trap to Me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, and not from God’s.’”**

Jesus' response to satan was powerful. Jesus says, “Get out of here, satan, for the Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the Lord your God; serve only Him.’”

This is what satan wants. He wants your worship, allegiance and loyalty. He wants you to serve yourself and turn away from committing yourself to Jesus Christ and His Word. It is true that satan has awesome influence over people, but his influence is limited.

Temptations always involve the twisting of reality, so the only antidote comes from knowing and honoring God's Word. Notice Jesus didn't get into a wrestling match with satan. He simply uses the truth of Scripture to guide his understanding of reality. That was enough. Satan had to leave Him when

Jesus commanded him to go. This is what the Bible means when it says in James 4:7, **“So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and He will flee from you.”**

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:13, **“You must fear the Lord your God and serve Him.”**

Where are you having your soul tested? We know why—God is testing us to see if we will be obedient and faithful to Him just like Jesus.

How are you being tested? What difficult situations are you going through? Where is the devil allowed to tempt you?

What is God looking for? Is God’s will for your life taking precedent over gratifying yourself by taking care of your needs yourself instead of looking to Him to take care of you?

Are you doing things or speaking in such a way that you are putting God’s love and care for you to the test? He wants you to trust Him without getting into trouble and not to test Him to then prove His love for you by having to rescue you. Is your total allegiance to Him? In your marriage, relationships, career etc.

Let’s pray.