

*Deut. 26:1–11*  
*Ps. 91:1–2, 9–16*  
*Rom. 10:8b–13*  
**Luke 4:1–13**

# Wilderness Testing

**Goal for the Session** *Heeding Jesus’ response to his testing in the wilderness, adults will commit to Lenten practices to strengthen their faith.*

## ■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

### Focus on Luke 4:1–13

#### WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Sharon H. Ringe

Jesus’ time in the wilderness is a time of “testing” (*peirasmos*). These are not “temptations” to do things that are desirable but not good for him (like our “temptation” to eat an extra piece of cake). Rather, these are tests to see whether even good things can lure Jesus from a focus on God’s will—or can lure believers into following a more comfortable messiah. In two of the three the devil’s hook to catch Jesus is the challenge “if you are the Son of God . . .” Does Jesus really believe what he has heard? Will God make good on the implied commitment? Let’s find out before you go charging off into dangerous places.

#### WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Lori Brandt Hale

The story is more about the responses Jesus gives to the temptations than to the temptations themselves. Jesus’ responses underscore his faithfulness to God, setting the stage for the whole of his ministry and, ultimately, his sacrifice. His responses come with the full knowledge that obedience to God will bring persecution, misunderstanding, and the cross. To say yes to the world would have required Jesus to say no to God, to the way of God, and to an idea of God’s kingdom that those followers simply did not understand. It would have required him to say no to the freedom and love for humanity that are the marks of his death and resurrection.

#### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Jeffery L. Tribble Sr.

By taking on “intentionality” and “receptivity to God’s grace” during Lent, new converts and members gain the spiritual depth to be faithful to “the mystery of God-with-us” even in our unexpected trials and temptations. Jesus did not ask for trials and temptations; he accepted that they could not be avoided if he would do God’s will. Jesus’ season of testing was not for a day or two; his season of forty days of temptation suggests to us that we may have faithfully to endure seasons of long and protracted difficulty. Jesus did not have just one encounter of diabolical testing; he overcame multiple temptations. His temptations were real and riveting.

#### NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Kimberly M. van Driel

The text tells a story about how evil works on the basis of distortions and lies. The devil presents wants as needs, falsehoods as truths, distrust as faith. The devil’s second pitch is false, as revealed by the demand for false worship. At stake is who will be trusted and worshiped. We ask: Where else do we hear lies that sound truthful? From politicians or the media, or the pulpit? How might clinging to God’s word unveil such lies as lies? Also, of the first and third temptations, we could ask: Where else do we see wants presented as needs? Where are we tempted to think of faith as something God must earn?

**FOCUS SCRIPTURE**

**Luke 4:1–13**

## Focus on Your Teaching

Many adults are familiar with the wilderness experiences of life. The hardships of lost jobs, damaged relationships, or life-threatening illnesses test the resolve or the faith of the strongest. Yet prosperity can prove to be a far greater temptation, turning us away from centering our lives on the Holy One. To be sure, prosperity itself is not a bad thing. The test comes when the good things money can buy take center stage. Lent offers the opportunity to shine the clear light of God on our lives, turning toward penitence and away from those things, albeit good, that may test our relationship with God.

*Eternal God, focus my attention and my intention on you as I prepare to lead. Amen.*

**YOU WILL NEED**

- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 13, 2022
- candle, matches

For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 2, pens
- option 2: Resource Sheet 1, newsprint or board and marker, writing paper, pens
- option 3: writing paper, pens

## LEADING THE SESSION

### GATHERING

*Before the session, for option 2 in Responding, print the following on newsprint or a board: In my daily routine, how might I become more intentional in my relationship to God? How might I become more receptive to God's grace?*

Welcome participants, reminding them that today is the first Sunday of Lent. If in the last session the group did a personal relationship inventory, invite those who are willing to tell about their discernment of ways to strengthen their relationship with God.

Ask adults to think about a time when they were tested through some difficult or challenging experience. Ask:

✠ Do you recall feeling God's presence in the midst of that experience?

Say that in this session, adults will encounter a time when Jesus himself was tested.

Light a candle. Invite the group to imagine themselves to have gone to a place of solitude, where they sit quietly, breathing in and out slowly. Ask them to consider what in their lives serves to distract them or turn them away from God. Encourage them to bring those things before God, offering them up and committing to move those things from the center of their lives.

Pray the following:

*Holy God, we give thanks for your enduring presence. Guide us now as we seek to discern more clearly your loving intent for the world. Amen.*

Throughout his Gospel, Luke continues to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit. While here the presence of the Holy Spirit does not mean the absence of testing, the Spirit is the power of God available for the contest.

Adults come with a variety of past experiences with Lent, from not observing it at all to giving up meat on Fridays. Encourage them to come to the season open to fresh expressions of attentiveness and penitence.

**EASY  
PREP**

## EXPLORING

Remind participants that five weeks ago, they explored Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism, where the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus. In today’s focus scripture, which immediately follows his baptism and genealogy (Luke 3:21–38), Jesus goes into the wilderness to be tested.

Before reading the focus scripture, distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Luke 4:1–13), and ask adults to silently read the “What?” excerpt. Ask adults to consider the following:

✧ What is the difference between a temptation and a test?

Form two groups. Ask one to listen closely to how the devil tests Jesus, while the other listens for Jesus’ responses. Then read the focus passage, Luke 4:1–13, aloud. Afterward, ask the group listening for the devil’s tests to describe them in turn, while the other group describes how Jesus responded.

Form small groups of three. In each group, ask one person to read Deuteronomy 8:1–3, one to read Deuteronomy 6:10–16 (the two passages from which Jesus quoted in his responses) and the third Psalm 91 (from which the devil quoted). Ask each person in a group to briefly summarize his or her passage for the other two. In the total group, discuss:

- ✧ What are the parallels between how Deuteronomy describes the experience of the Israelites and Jesus’ experience?
- ✧ Who accompanied the Israelites in their long years in the wilderness? Who accompanied Jesus in his testing?
- ✧ In the absence of witnesses to this key event in the life of Jesus, how might we ourselves serve as witnesses?
- ✧ The phrase translated “If you are the Son of God” can be translated “since you are the Son of God.” What difference, if any, does that make in understanding the passage?

To transition to Responding, ask volunteers to read aloud the “Where?” and the “So What?” excerpts. Ask them to reflect on the following:

- ✧ How does one say yes to God and no to the world?
- ✧ What spiritual tools do we have to remain intentional and receptive to God in seasons of protracted difficulty? In prosperous times when the good things of the world put us to the test?

Suggest that Lent is a time to further develop, or take on for the first time, practices that can increase intentionality and receptivity to God.

## RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

1. **Fasting to Strengthen Faith** By refraining from that which dilutes a focus on God and giving themselves to other practices, adults can strengthen their faith. Say that when Jesus went into the wilderness to be tested, he fasted and prayed. Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Slow Down—and Fast) and pens and invite someone to read aloud

the explanation of fasting. Invite adults to consider the expanded definition of fasting as abstinence and the suggested options for abstinence. Ask them to name other options from their own lives, as well as posing questions. Encourage adults to take the sheet home and commit to practicing fasting and prayer during Lent.

- 2. Commit to Intentionality and Receptivity** In exploring an understanding of intentionality and receptivity to God's grace, adults can commit to practices to strengthen their faith that fit the way they live. Refer the group to the "So What?" excerpt's focus from Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Luke 4:1–13) on intentionality and receptivity. For a variety of reasons, many adults do not set aside time for daily devotions.

Call attention to the posted questions and hand out writing paper and pens. Suggest that, rather than guilt tripping themselves for what they may not be doing, they examine their daily routine, identify ways to practice intentionality and receptivity in the midst of daily living, and write them down.

For example, if they take a commuter train to work, are in a video meeting, or are dropping children off at school, suggest that they notice people and situations around them and say a silent prayer for them. Encourage them to keep track of how often they are able to do this in the coming week.

- 3. Identify Forms of Prayer That Work** By identifying forms of prayer that fit their lives, adults can commit to practices that can strengthen their faith. Suggest that breath prayers—inhaling while praying one phrase, and exhaling while praying another—can be a powerful way of being more mindful of God throughout the day. Two other examples of prayers that fit the fabric of many people's lives are praying the newspaper—intentionally praying for the events and people in news stories one reads in the paper or online—and praying while walking, in which one prays for what one observes while on a walk.

Form small groups, distribute writing paper and pens, and invite adults to make a list of forms of prayer that they have used. Make a master list, or ask a volunteer to do so, and e-mail it to all members of the class.

## CLOSING

Pray the following:

*Gracious God, as your Spirit was with Jesus in his time of testing, be with us now as we seek to be more mindful of you, more intentional in discerning your presence and will, and more receptive to your abundant grace. Amen.*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 13, 2022, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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## Slow Down—and Fast

*Fasting is a form of interior “spring cleaning”*  
—Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 80.

When Jesus was faced with his tests in the wilderness, he combined prayer and fasting. This and other examples in the Gospels suggest that the combination of prayer and fasting invites a greater measure of God’s power to be released through us than by prayer alone.

Lent is the traditional season of prayer and fasting in preparation for the great “feast of feasts,” Easter, the great fast of the church year. What real significance can Easter have if we do not know the experience of Lent? As Protestants began to recover church seasons, many of us took on the tradition of “giving up” things—dessert, chocolate, popcorn, chewing gum, or other frivolities. What we have participated in and witnessed is the trivialization of a very profound discipline. The question we need to ask in any spiritual discipline is:

- What does God want to accomplish in me in this discipline?

While refraining from eating food is the original meaning and most basic expression of fasting, one might consider fasting in terms of its inner dynamic: *abstinence*. In a culture obsessed with consumption, we need to consider fasting in terms of the whole of our affluent and addictive lifestyle. The purpose of abstinence is to learn to enjoy rightly God’s good gifts. What would it mean to abstain from the following:

- constant media stimulation?
- overpackaged, processed foods?
- needless shopping sprees?
- personal recognition?
- judging others?
- overpacked schedules?

Prayerfully consider the question of what you are doing or consuming to excess, that may be serving to distance you from experiencing God more fully. If you choose to fast from a thing, practice, or habit, keep a prayer journal to record your thoughts and prayers for a time.

—Excerpted and adapted from “The Practice of Self Emptying: Rediscovering the Fast,” in *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life, Newly Revised Edition*, 2014, by Marjorie J. Thompson (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 81–94.

