

The King is Tested

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Date: 03 May 2026

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[0 : 00] So, this morning I'm reading from Matthew chapter 4, verses 1 to 25. Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

! After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.

Jesus answered, It is written, Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him up on the highest point of the temple.

If you are the Son of God, he said, throw yourself down, for it is written, He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands.

So that you will not strike your foot against a stone. Jesus answered him, It is also written, Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

[1 : 08] Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. All this I will give you, he said, if you will bow down and worship me.

Jesus said to him, Away from me, Satan, for it is written, Worship the Lord your God and serve him only. Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee, leaving Nazareth. He went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali, to fulfil what was said through the prophet Isaiah.

Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way of the sea beyond the Jordan. Galilee of the Gentiles, the people living in darkness have seen a great light on those living in the land of the shadow of death.

A light has dawned. From that time on, Jesus began to preach, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. As Jesus was walking beside the sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, called Peter, and his brother Andrew.

[2 : 25] They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. Come, follow me, he said, and I will send you out to fish for people. And once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James, son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets.

Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and illness among the people.

News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and healed them.

Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and the region beyond the Jordan followed him. Amen. So morning, everyone.

[3 : 34] So we're continuing our series in Matthew's Gospel, and our topic is living in the kingdom. I'm not sure if you clocked that from some of the song choices.

And today we're looking at Matthew chapter 4, and our theme is the king is tested. We start with Jesus tempted by the devil in the wilderness, and then the passage moves rapidly through the launch of Jesus's ministry, his preaching, healing, and his calling of the disciples.

Matthew's big theme for his gospel is the kingdom of God. He writes the kingdom of heaven, as it's written for a Jewish audience, who would avoid using the name of God.

And in chapter 4, we're at the end of the beginning. Matthew is concluding his first kind of teaching block in his gospel, which introduces the theme of his coming kingdom, from chapter 1 up to

chapter 4.

And next week, we're going to go into the next block, which looks at Jesus's teaching, the Sermon on the Mount. And I wanted to look at three points that Matthew, I think, is making at the start of his gospel.

[4 : 51] Sorry, I'm not sure if this was working. You might need to move it on for me. Oh, great. So the first one is prophecy, prophetic fulfillment.

Jesus is the leader that the Jewish people have been waiting for. In this passage, Matthew draws out the links with King David and with Moses.

And the original Jewish audience would have picked these up, I think, straight away. Second is power. In the kingdom of God, power operates differently.

This is the upside-down kingdom, where power is an exercise for coercion, but given up in the service of others. And number three, presence.

This is the kingdom where the King is present. Jesus is our Emmanuel, God with us. He isn't removed from us or above us, but he undertakes the trials that we also face.

[5 : 53] So let's look at the first one, which is prophecy. Sorry, I'm very impatient with the clicker, and then it skips on ahead of me.

So as I said, Matthew's writing his gospel for a Jewish audience, and he uses both selected Old Testament scripture, but also the structure of his gospel, how he selects and puts the events together to show that the kingdom that Jesus will bring into being is the one foretold in the Old Testament.

And because chapter four is the end of that initial block, I thought I'd just have a quick summary of what Matthew has told us so far. So in Matthew one, we had the genealogy of Jesus.

He is the rightful messianic heir, the anointed king in the line of David. In chapter two, we saw how Jesus's birth fulfills Micah's prophecy that the awaited king will be born in Bethlehem, another reference to David.

And here he quotes the prophet Isaiah, the people living in darkness have seen a great light. Thank you.

[7 : 17] Perhaps less obvious is how Matthew uses the structure of his gospel, how he selects events that illustrate Jesus's connection with the Old Testament patriarch, prophet, and apostle Moses.

At the start of this chapter, in chapter four, Jesus is being tempted in the wilderness for 40 days. And actually, last time I spoke here, Elijah was in the wilderness for 40 days.

So I've taken the liberty of reusing my 40-day slide. Matthew's Jewish audience would have been reminded of Elijah in the wilderness, but also, of course, of Moses and his 40 days without food or drink upon Mount Sinai.

Move on to the next one, please. We also learnt in our series on Elijah about the importance of mountains, and they're just as important here in Matthew's gospel.

Matthew's represented a meeting of heaven and earth. They are places of encounter, revelation, and empowerment. And there are seven key mountain moments in Matthew, the first ones in today's passage, and some of them link to the mountains that Moses went up.

[8 : 43] So, sorry, there's a lot of information on this slide, but I thought some of you might like to look it up later. So the mounting of temptation, that's in today's passage, chapter four. The mounting of teaching, the Sermon on the Mount.

We're going to move on to that next week. The mounting of healing, feeding. Jesus feeds 4,000 people on Matthew's gospel on a mountain. The mountain of transfiguration.

The Mount of Olives. The Mount of Crucifixion. And the Great Commission Mountain, where Jesus commissions his disciples. And as I said, there's links to Moses here.

So Jesus' third temptation takes place on the mountain. It's the start of his ministry. Moses encountered the burning bush on a mountain, and it was the start of his ministry.

Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the law, the covenant. And Jesus' key teaching in Matthew's gospel takes place on the mountain, the Sermon on the Mount.

[9 : 46] And in Matthew 17, Jesus will go with Peter, James, and John to a high mountain, the Mount of Transfiguration, where Moses and Elijah will appear with him, just in case we've missed the mountain references up to that point.

Jesus prays on mountains. He feeds people on mountains. And he warns the disciples of his fate on a mountain. Mountains in the Torah was where the covenant was established. And in Matthew, mountains will be where the covenant promises are fulfilled. There are other links to Moses.

Moses was pursued by Pharaoh out of Egypt. Jesus was pursued by King Herod, another angry king, into Egypt. Jesus was baptized with water by John in chapter 3. And Moses led the Israelites through the waters of the Red Sea to freedom. Moses led the people out of slavery through the shedding of the Passover blood.

[10:55] But Jesus will be the great deliverer, whose blood shed on the cross is the once and for all sacrifice. So in summary, Jesus is the messianic king and prophet, who is coming after Moses, but will be greater than Moses.

And it's important that Matthew establishes this in the first four chapters to create legitimacy for Jesus' teaching, which is coming next. But I think Matthew is also concerned that we don't misunderstand what Jesus' links to David and Moses might mean.

Jesus is like them and yet not like them. He is not just another prophet. He is not going to conquer earthly nations. He is the son of God.

He has come to achieve victory over death itself. And what Jesus needs to do to achieve this will mean that he does something very different to what has come before.

And I think the key to this is in this idea of what we sometimes call, I don't know if you've heard of it before, the upside-down kingdom, how power is used. So let's look at more detail now at the passage that Michael read to us, chapter 4 and the three temptations of Jesus.

[12:27] So first of all, we're told that Jesus was led by the Spirit to the wilderness to be tempted. This is part of God's plan. Jesus isn't in trouble and God is still in charge.

And I think that's important when we go through wilderness experiences to know that it's not of our making, that God is in charge in the wilderness. And Jesus is tempted in three ways.

And I think they all say something about how power is used in God's kingdom and how different it is from how it is used in the world. And these three temptations will, I think, set the tone for Jesus' ministry.

When Jesus leaves the wilderness, we're not meant to go, phew, glad that's over, let's move on quickly. We're meant to remember these hallmarks of God's kingdom because I think we will see them as golden threads through the book of Matthew.

These themes will crop up again and again. So, oh, I've got it already. So these are the ones I've spotted.

[13:41] As we go through Matthew, you might spot more and I'd love to hear what some of those are. So firstly, stones into bread, that's the first temptation. The temptation to use power to meet your own needs first.

The temptation to provide for ourselves rather than to trust that God will provide for us as written in his word. And I think we will look out for this in Matthew 6 when Jesus describes how God feeds the sparrows and clothes the lilies of the fields.

I think we will spot it again in Matthew 15 when Jesus is moved by compassion to feed 4,000 people. He uses his power to feed other people before himself.

The second temptation, Jesus is taken to a high point, the top of the temple in Jerusalem and tempted to throw himself off it. I think of this as the temptation to test God's power, to show off your power, to make it into a spectacle.

When we look around us at world leaders, I think we can recognize this sort of power, the power to do what it wants without facing the consequences.

[15:02] Jesus never shows off his power. He's not interested in spectacle and he hates a display of power without sincerity. See his accusations to the Pharisees about hypocrisy.

later in Matthew's gospel. And Jesus will ultimately submit himself to death. Jesus takes responsibility for the consequences for all of us that were not even his own to bear.

And that involves giving his power up. The third temptation is worldly splendor, to take as much as you can in order that you can hold power over other people.

And we need to remember this when Jesus encounters those who have power and those who are powerless, those who try to wield power like the Pharisees and those who submit to Jesus.

One of my favorite examples is Matthew 8, the centurion soldier, a powerful man who lays down his power before King Jesus. I do not deserve to have you under my roof, says the soldier.

[16:13] The powerless woman who's been bleeding, barred from the temple and called unclean, touches Jesus' cloak in Matthew 9. And she's not only healed, but she's called a daughter.

She becomes part of Jesus' royal family. Also when Jesus meets the Canaanite woman, who says, can I just collect the crumbs that fall from the master's table?

And I think we also need to remember this temptation when the disciples argue about who is greatest in chapter 18, or when James or John's mother intervenes to get them a better place in heaven.

In chapter 20. I must say, I identify strongly with James and John's mother, a first century helicopter parent jostling for her children's advantage.

I think today she would be booking tuition, creating homework timetables, filling in UCAS forms. But she misses the point. We don't need to fight for our place in the kingdom.

[17:21] We gain our place in the kingdom through submission and through serving other people. And perhaps most of all, let's remember what Jesus says about power when he stands on top of the mountain and renounces world splendor.

And then in chapter 17 says that faith as small as a mustard seed can move a mountain. Kingdom power comes from God alone and is a power beyond any earthly power.

So in the kingdom of God, power is exercised for the least. It is given up sacrificially rather than used coercively. And it is beyond any other worldly power.

After Jesus comes out of the wilderness, he calls a bunch of fishermen to be his disciples in verse 18.

These are not all powerful, influential people with policy expertise or PR experience. They're ordinary people. But Corinthians 1 says, God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.

[18:33] God chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong. Matthew uses the phrase at once to record the disciples' response to Jesus' call on their lives.

The rich man trapped by his wealth couldn't follow Jesus, but the fishermen have little power to lay down, and perhaps that made it easier for them. Jesus chooses these men not to be his servants, but his companions.

Maybe he saw that they could withstand rough weather and sleepless nights. Maybe, and perhaps more challengingly, he just knew that they would say yes straight away. Jesus doesn't keep power for himself, and therefore he is able to have a real relationship with those he calls.

Jesus' relationship with the disciples is honest, open, and trusting, and it mirrors the relationship that through Christ we can have with God. I think it's hard, as modern readers in a culturally Christian country, to understand how radical Jesus' approach to power was.

First century kingdoms were protected by powerful armies. They were autocratic. They wielded power absolutely. I was trying to look for a more modern-day example of power given away.

[19:58] I only had to go back 300 years to George Washington, the Anglican church warden, who was a general in the Revolutionary War against the English.

And at the height of his power and his popularity, he resigned his commission, that's it, he resigned his commission in order that a democratic nation, the United States of America, could be born.

He then refused a third term of office as president, creating the two-term limit for presidents. I think I'll say no more about that, but maybe we're quite grateful for George Washington, and that is constitutional.

And actually, Nelson Mandela later followed his example, serving just one term of office before resigning. And I think George Washington, in this great quote, realizes something important.

Power is about how you create power, is you have to give it away, you have to share it, you have to let other people have their go. The historian Tom Holland, I don't know if any of you had read his books, has written in his book *Dominion*, that many modern ideas that we may consider humanist or secular, like ideas about morality, equality, and democracy, are in fact deeply rooted in Christian theology.

[21:31] Jesus' teachings, which overturned the Greek and Roman world order. That too is the legacy of the upside-down kingdom, power for the powerless.

And we must defend it and practice it, not just in this building, but in the world around us. So presence, final point.

Sometimes I wonder why Jesus had to undergo the trials at all. He's the son of man, so it feels obvious that he's going to pass the test.

But I think partly Jesus goes into the wilderness because we will sometimes go there too. Matthew is not a sugar-coated gospel. It contains some of the most challenging teachings of Jesus.

But we can meet the challenge because Jesus has gone before us. If you are in a wilderness right now, then Jesus knows what that is like because he has also been there.

[22 : 34] With Jesus' death on the cross, we see there is no place that you will go that Jesus hasn't gone before you because Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us.

Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, to become fishers of people. And Jesus' invitation to us is to do the same.

It is not an easy road. In one of the most challenging verses of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.

Jesus knows that we could never do this on our own, that we could never withstand the tests of the wilderness. But Jesus only requires that we follow.

We stay close to the one who has been in the wilderness, journeyed to the cross, the grave, and risen from the dead. And it is a journey with Jesus that is symbolized in our ritual of baptism.

[23 : 38] We had the baptism of Jesus as our passage last week. As Paul writes in Romans 6, verse 4, we were therefore buried with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

We find Jesus at the end of our passage in the synagogue, yes, but also with the people, with sick people, with demon-possessed people. Jesus models how to live a kingdom life.

He comes among us for that purpose, and all we have to do is stay close to him. Following Jesus, thank goodness, does not require leadership skills or theology degrees.

It requires a relationship with him. That is what God with us has given us. And I can see that it may feel harder 2,000 years after Jesus walked upon the earth, but that is why we had God's spirit.

I don't know, was it Sherwin? He prayed about Pentecost earlier. And in the final verse of Matthew's gospel, Jesus promised his continued presence with us.

[24 : 58] And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. So what about us? Do we have the courage to share power for the benefit of others?

Can we do it when we feel threatened? Can we do it when we think we are more deserving? Can we do it in our family structures, our social cliques, or work meetings?

Can we be the counter-cultural people of God who live in a way that the world sees as foolish? The good news is God is with us.

Paul writes in Galatians that we are heirs according to his promise. Kingdom living is about the relationship we have with the king as his sons and daughters.

I just wanted to finish with a prayer by Malcolm Duncan, which is from his excellent book, Flipped, The Upside-Down Kingdom. It was a Spring Harvest theme book, and it's very, helped me a lot today.

[26 : 03] I find this a very challenging prayer, so I just invite you to listen or to join in with it quietly in your hearts. Lord and King, we pause in this moment and open our hands before you.

We thank you for your reign and rule in our lives and in the world. We are grateful for your patience with us and your promises to us.

We know that you have lifted us when we have fallen, forgiven us when we have failed, and restored us when we have tarnished your name.

Thank you. In this moment and in the daily choices of our lives, we ask that you would help us to serve you as our king.

Help us bow before you. Help us listen to you. Help us to be obedient to you. Help us to live consistently for your kingdom.

[27 : 19] Forgive us when we put our priorities at the top of your agenda instead of letting your priorities shape our agendas. Forgive us when we make your kingship look like our politics and outlook.

Forgive us when we baptize our theologies and justify our prejudices in your name. Help us to rediscover the power of a surrendered life.

Do what you want with us. Send us where you want. Set us to what you want. Use us as you see fit. Write straight with the crooked lines of our lives, Lord. As voices around us declare that they are all king, help us to live for you, the true king.

As our wills tell us that we are in charge, help us to surrender to you, the true king. In a world that says you can be your own king, help us to live with you as our king.

[28 : 25] King Jesus, help our lives reflect your life. King Jesus, help our actions point to you. King Jesus, help us to live as citizens of your kingdom on earth now and every day.

Amen.