

Into the Wilderness

Imagine yourself in the first century and you are hearing Mark's Gospel account. Being Jewish, you would know all the Biblical stories - the creation account; Noah and the flood; Jacob and his twelve sons, including Joseph; the Exodus out of slavery in Egypt and the wandering in the wilderness for forty years; the stories of King David and Psalms he wrote; the stories of the prophets, especially the story of Elijah; the Babylonian exile and the return and rebuilding of Jerusalem; as well as all the other stories. Whenever you heard one story, other stories would come to mind and you would see connections throughout the Scriptures and see how God was at work. You would know the covenants that God made with the people and be confident that God will remain faithful to those covenants and fulfill them. You would be familiar with the expectations of the coming Messiah and would be able to see how those who claim such a title are not the true Messiah.

So, when you hear from Mark's account that Jesus was driven into the wilderness, you would make connections with similar Scriptural stories. You would think about the Exodus and the wandering of your ancestors for those 40 years in the wilderness. You might even think about the story of Adam and Eve and how they were tempted in the Garden of Eden. You might think of how Elijah wandered for 40 days until he came to the cave where God came to him in the sheer silence. You might remember the story of the 40 days of rain that Noah and his family endured. After making these connections, you might even start comparing them.

The first connection would probably be with the Exodus. You might think of the ways in which the people were tempted throughout their ordeal. The golden calf story would come to mind when the people felt that God was not with them

while Moses was up on Mount Sinai so long and Aaron gave them the idol to look at. The story of how God provided water from a rock for them and then Moses did the same thing later. The story of how the sacrificial lamb was sent out into the wilderness carrying the sins of the people may come to mind. You would also recall that because of the times when the people did not follow God and acted on their own that none of the adults who left Egypt were allowed to enter the Promised Land.

The connection with the temptation of Adam and Eve would lead you to make the comparisons that while Adam and Eve were in the garden, they were still tempted and gave into that temptation from Satan. You might even make a connection to a little later in this story where before Cain killed his brother Abel God cautioned Cain about giving in to sin and said that Cain could overcome that urge to sin. You would see how where Adam, Eve and Cain could not resist temptation and turned their backs to God, thus sinning; Jesus did not. This comparison would be even more stark considering that Adam and Eve were in the Garden that already provided for their every need while Jesus was in the wilderness where there were very little resources.

Comparing the story of Elijah and his wandering at the end of his ministry would show that throughout his time of wandering that angels ministered to him. You would then make the connection that the angels probably did the same thing for Jesus. There may also be other verses from the prophets that come to mind that give a hint of what the Messiah will be like. People may have connected Isaiah' verse that "the lamb will sleep with the lion" with Jesus when Mark said that Jesus was with the wild beasts.

By comparing all these Biblical stories with the few verses that Mark gives us of Jesus' time in the wilderness would show us that Jesus is indeed different

from anyone else. To get a hint of what those temptations that Jesus faced were, we would need to go to Matthew's and Luke's accounts. In those temptations, we see that Satan is trying to give Jesus an easy way to get what God promised Jesus for fulfilling His mission. In fact, you could make the case that Satan was promising to give Jesus what Jesus already had.

Remember that Mark starts out his account by telling us that Jesus is the Son of God. This would be part of the proof that Mark provides in the first part of his Gospel account to back up this claim in the first verse. But why wouldn't Mark give us more detail as to how Jesus was tempted in the wilderness? It could be that from the Jewish Scriptures, Mark recognized that Jesus went through the same kind of temptations that the people in those Scriptures went through. These are the same kind of temptations that we continue to face as well.

While Mark knew that the temptation of Jesus took place in the physical space of the wilderness, he understood the theological implications of what a wilderness is. Theologically speaking, on one level the wilderness can be when we are separated from God. On another level it may simply refer to our journey through life itself. Mark recognizes that life itself is an exodus through the wilderness where temptation is a part of life and surviving against the 'wild beasts' is necessary every day. Mark knows that besides the physical wildernesses of the world, people can experience spiritual and emotional wildernesses as well.

Mark also knew that Satan tempts us in our daily lives. By not listing what the temptations of Jesus were, Mark is not limiting what temptation can be. For Mark, temptation is anything that makes us stray from what we were meant to be. These temptations and 'wild beasts' that confront us today can take many forms. We can be tempted by the lure of power or wealth, focusing getting more for ourselves, regardless of the relationships that may suffer or others that may

suffer while we accumulate more stuff. The results of our giving into temptations have consequences - not only for ourselves but also for others. We may not intend for these consequences to happen, but when we act like Cain and do not resist the sin, the temptation that is at our door, others can be affected by those acts. Eventually, those who are oppressed by the ones who continually take will decide it is time to make a stand and claim a share in the wealth of their land. Maybe this is what God meant when He said in the book of Exodus that the iniquity of the parents will be visited upon the third and fourth generations. That is, the responsibility of the consequences of giving in to the temptations and wild beasts must be accepted by those who have sinned, whether it is immediate or in the future. By acknowledging that we are tempted by Satan, we are held accountable for the choices we make.

God knows that our life can sometimes seem like a journey in the wilderness. We are faced with temptation and wild beasts every day trying to get us to be something more or even something less than what God created us to be. God does not leave us to navigate this wilderness on our own. Just as angels waited on Jesus, we have been given the Holy Spirit to help us resist our temptations.

A person's first encounter with the Gospel of Mark can leave one thinking that all he was trying to do was to leave a record of what Jesus did and said. However, the deeper we look at this Gospel, the more we see that Mark has an important message to tell us. Namely, that the Kingdom of God has come and that we should repent of our sins and believe the Good News that Jesus is here with us even today.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/X30YhwljrpI>

Service: https://youtu.be/U8IQo_eq6HA