Matthew 4

The King Is Tested

Key Verse

“Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

Matthew 4:19

Big Idea

The Father's declaration in Chapter 3 is tested in Chapter 4. Yeshua is the faithful Son, the consummate Israel and the King who refuses every shortcut Satan offers Him. He trusts God's Word, follows God's way and then calls others to follow Him.

Introduction

At the Jordan River, the Father has declared Yeshua to be His beloved Son. The Spirit has descended upon Him. John has identified Him before the people. Everything seems ready for Yeshua's public ministry to begin. But Matthew takes us somewhere unexpected.

Before there are crowds, disciples, healings or public teaching, there is a wilderness. Yeshua will be hungry, alone and tested. Once again Matthew will take us deep into Israel's story: through the waters, into the wilderness, and back to the book of Deuteronomy. Israel had been tested there before. Now God's Son will walk that road.

By the end of the chapter, everything will have changed. The wilderness will give way to Galilee. The King will announce His Kingdom. Fishermen will leave their nets to follow Him. The sick will be healed, and crowds will begin gathering from across the region. But first, the King is tested.

Matthew 4 takes Yeshua from the wilderness to the beginning of His public ministry. In the wilderness, Satan tests Him three times, and each time Yeshua answers from the book of Deuteronomy. Matthew is showing us Yeshua as the consummate Israel, the faithful Son who succeeds where Israel had failed. After John's arrest, Yeshua settles up north in Galilee, fulfilling Isaiah's promise that light would dawn in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. He begins proclaiming the same message John announced: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17). Matthew introduces four of the apostles next. Yeshua calls Peter, Andrew, James and John. Their response is immediate. They leave their nets, boats and familiar lives and follow Him. The chapter concludes with Yeshua travelling throughout Galilee, teaching in synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and healing the sick. The King has been tested. Now the King is gathering people around Himself.

Opening Prayer

Father, You know how easily I want the destination without the journey and the answer without the waiting. As I consider this part of the story, with Yeshua in the wilderness, please teach me to trust what You have said rather than demanding that You prove Yourself again. Show me the shortcuts I am tempted to take and the compromises I am tempted to justify. And when Yeshua says, “Follow Me,” give me enough light and enough faith to take the next step. Amen.

Commentary

The King Is Tested (Matthew 4:1)

The Father has just spoken from heaven: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (3:17). We might expect Yeshua now to begin preaching, gathering disciples, healing the sick and announcing the Kingdom. Instead, He goes into the wilderness.

And He does not wander there accidentally. “Then Yeshua was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (4:1). The word “then” matters. Matthew connects this directly to what has just happened at the Jordan. The Spirit who descended upon Yeshua now leads Him into the wilderness. The Father's declaration that Yeshua is His beloved Son is immediately followed by the testing of that Son.

There is something here worth remembering. God's approval does not mean the absence of testing. Sometimes we imagine that if we are walking in God's will, the road should become easier. Matthew gives us precisely the opposite picture. Yeshua is exactly where the Spirit has led Him, and that place is the wilderness.

The temptation is real, but Satan has not hijacked God's plan. Yeshua has been led there by the Spirit. The wilderness itself is part of what God is doing. Before Yeshua begins His public ministry, Matthew is going to show us what kind of Son He is.

Forty Days in the Wilderness (Matthew 4:1–2)

Matthew tells us that Yeshua “fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward He became hungry” (4:2). Forty is one of those numbers that should immediately make a Bible reader pay attention. Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights (Exodus 24:18; 34:28). Elijah travelled forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God (1 Kings 19:8). And, most importantly for Matthew’s purpose here, Israel spent forty years in the wilderness (Numbers 14:33–34). Matthew is not merely giving us information about the length of Yeshua’s fast. He is placing Yeshua once again inside Israel’s story.

There is an important Jewish insight here. In the previous chapter Yeshua passed through the waters of the Jordan, and now He enters the wilderness. Israel passed through the waters of the Red Sea and then entered the wilderness. Israel was called God’s son (Exodus 4:22); at the Jordan the Father has just publicly declared Yeshua to be His beloved Son (3:17). Israel was

tested in the wilderness; now Yeshua is tested there. Matthew has been showing us that Yeshua is the consummate Israel. He represents our people and carries Israel's story forward. But there is going to be an important difference: where Israel repeatedly failed to trust God in the wilderness, Yeshua will remain faithful.

And notice where Yeshua goes for His answers. Each of His three responses to the tempter will come from Deuteronomy, the book in which Moses speaks to Israel about what they had learned—or should have learned—during those wilderness years. That is hardly accidental. Yeshua does not simply have three convenient Bible verses memorized for emergencies. He is standing in Israel's wilderness story, and He answers from Israel's wilderness book.

Then Matthew gives us one of the great understatements in the Bible. After fasting forty days and forty nights, "He then became hungry" (4:2). Of course He did. Matthew says nothing about Yeshua becoming thirsty. A forty-day fast would ordinarily have required water, and the text describes His need at the end of the fast specifically as hunger. Yeshua is not floating through this experience untouched by ordinary human weakness. He is hungry. He is physically depleted. The temptation that follows therefore addresses a genuine need. Bread is not sinful. Hunger is not sinful. Eating after a fast is certainly not sinful. The question is whether Yeshua will satisfy a legitimate need in a way that takes Him outside His Father's will.

Stones into Bread (Matthew 4:3–4)

The tempter begins, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread" (4:3). We should hear the echo from the previous chapter. The last recorded words from heaven were, "This is My beloved Son" (3:17). Now the first challenge in the wilderness is, "If You are the Son of God...." The Father has spoken; the tempter immediately challenges what God has said.

This is not really a debate about whether Yeshua has the power to turn stones into bread. The temptation is to use who He is for Himself. Why remain hungry? Why wait? If You really are God's Son, take care of Yourself.

But Yeshua answers from Deuteronomy: "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes out of the mouth of God'" (4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3). And the setting of that quotation matters. Moses was reminding Israel that God had allowed them to hunger in the wilderness and then fed them with manna so that they would learn that their lives depended ultimately upon Him. Israel had to learn to trust the One who provided the bread rather than merely demand the bread.

Yeshua does what Israel was called to do. He trusts His Father. Many temptations do not begin by offering us something obviously evil. They begin with something perfectly legitimate: food, security, recognition, companionship, success, relief from pain. The temptation comes when we decide that because the desire itself is legitimate, any way of satisfying it must also be legitimate. Yeshua shows us otherwise. A good desire does not give us permission to step outside God's will to satisfy it.

Testing God (Matthew 4:5–7)

The tempter is not finished. “Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the Temple” (4:5). The setting has changed dramatically. We have moved from the isolation of the wilderness to Jerusalem and the Temple, the very center of Jewish religious life. Matthew does not tell us exactly where on the Temple complex Yeshua stood, nor does he explain whether this happened physically or in some visionary experience. Those are interesting questions, but apparently they are not Matthew’s questions. He wants us to listen to what happens there.

Again the challenge begins with Yeshua’s identity: “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down.” But this time the tempter has learned something from the first exchange. Yeshua answered with Scripture, so Satan answers with Scripture too: “He will command His angels concerning You,” and “On their hands they will bear You up, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone” (4:6; Psalm 91:11–12). Knowing Bible verses is apparently not by itself evidence of spiritual maturity. The devil can quote the Bible.

And notice what has happened to Psalm 91. It is a beautiful psalm about living securely under God’s protection. Satan turns that promise of protection into an invitation to presumption. There is a considerable difference between trusting God when He leads us into danger and deliberately putting ourselves in danger so that God will have to rescue us. One is faith. The other is manipulation.

Yeshua again answers from Deuteronomy: “You shall not put the LORD your God to the test” (4:7; Deuteronomy 6:16). Once again, the wilderness story stands behind His answer. Moses was recalling what happened at Massah, when Israel demanded water and asked, “Is the LORD among us, or not?” (Exodus 17:7). Think about that question. These were people who had already seen the plagues in Egypt, walked through the sea and experienced God’s provision. Yet now they demanded another demonstration that God was really with them.

Yeshua will not do that to His Father. He does not need another spectacular demonstration that He is God's Son. The Father has spoken. That is enough.

Life Application

There is something here for those of us who sometimes want God to prove Himself on our terms. “God, if You really want me to do this, give me a sign.” “If You are really with me, make this happen.” “If You really love me, answer this prayer exactly as I have asked.” To be fair, there are times when we genuinely seek God's guidance, and Scripture certainly contains people asking God for confirmation. But there is a line between seeking guidance and setting God an examination He must pass before we will trust Him. Yeshua refuses to cross that line.

Faith does not say, “God, prove Yourself and then I will trust You.” Faith remembers what God has already said and done and chooses to trust Him.

There is another lesson here for Bible readers. Satan's quotation is accurate, but his interpretation is not. A Bible verse can be quoted correctly and still be used wrongly. We do not establish truth merely by finding a verse that seems to support what we already want to do. Scripture must be heard in its context and alongside the rest of Scripture. Yeshua answers Scripture with Scripture—not because one biblical text defeats another, but because Deuteronomy exposes the misuse of Psalm 91.

The Shortcut to a Kingdom (Matthew 4:8–10)

The third temptation moves to “a very high mountain” from which the devil shows Yeshua “all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” (4:8). Then comes the offer: “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me” (4:9).

This time there is no “If You are the Son of God.” The temptation has become direct. It is about worship.

And once again, the thing being offered is not entirely foreign to God's purposes. Messiah is King. There will be a day in the future when all nations come under God's rule. The temptation is the shortcut. Take the kingdom now. Avoid God's way of getting there. Compromise this one thing and receive everything immediately.

We know that temptation. Perhaps not with all the kingdoms of the world spread before us, but we know the attraction of the shortcut. We can even convince ourselves that because the destination is good, compromise along the way is justified. Ministry success can become an excuse for questionable methods. Financial security can excuse dishonesty. A good cause can become permission to mistreat people who stand in its way.

Yeshua will have none of it.

“Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God and serve Him only’” (4:10; Deuteronomy 6:13).

For the third time, Yeshua answers from Deuteronomy. Israel's wilderness temptations involved hunger, testing God and idolatry. Those same issues are now placed before Yeshua. Israel had failed. Yeshua remains faithful. He is the consummate Israel, the faithful Son who does what Israel was called to do.

The Wilderness Victory (Matthew 4:11)

“Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him” (4:11).

The verse is brief, but I don't want to hurry past it. Satan leaves. Yeshua has not turned stones into bread. He has not forced the Father to prove His care. He has not taken the shortcut to power. Three times He has been tested, and three times He has remained obedient to His Father. Only then do the angels come and minister to Him.

The Father had not abandoned Yeshua during those forty days. His absence from Matthew's description does not mean His absence from the wilderness. The Spirit led Yeshua there, and the Father remained sovereign over everything that happened there. But the provision comes in God's time rather than at the tempter's suggestion. Yeshua refused to seize bread for Himself; now heaven provides for Him.

Life Application

Sometimes the hardest part of trusting God is not believing that He can provide. It is waiting for Him to provide. We know what we need, we know what we want, and sometimes we can even see a way to get it. The question is whether we will wait for God's timing or take matters into our own hands. Yeshua waited.

And now He comes out of the wilderness having demonstrated what kind of Son He is. At the Jordan the Father declared it. In the wilderness Yeshua demonstrated it.

The Light Begins to Shine (Matthew 4:12–17)

Matthew changes scenes abruptly. “Now when Yeshua heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee” (4:12). We should remember who John is. He is the voice in the wilderness who prepared the way for the King. He immersed Yeshua. He saw the Spirit descend upon Him. And now, almost without explanation, Matthew tells us that John has been arrested. Matthew will tell us more about that later. For now, John disappears from the center of the story and Yeshua steps forward. The herald has announced the King. Now the King begins to speak for Himself.

Yeshua leaves Nazareth and settles in Capernaum, “by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali” (4:13). Those tribal names matter to Matthew because once again he sees the Tanach being lived out before him. He takes us to Isaiah:

“The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,

By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—

The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great Light,

And those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death,

Upon them a Light dawned” (Matthew 4:15–16; Isaiah 9:1–2).

There is history underneath those words. Zebulun and Naphtali were northern territories of Israel, and they were among the first areas devastated by Assyrian invasion centuries earlier. The region that had experienced darkness early would, Isaiah promised, also see light. Matthew says that light is Yeshua.

Jewish Insight

We should not rush past Isaiah 9 after verses 1 and 2. Matthew's readers who knew Isaiah would know where the passage was going. Only a few verses later Isaiah announces:

“For a Child will be born to us, a Son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders” (Isaiah 9:6).

Matthew has spent three chapters telling us about a Child and a Son. Now he deliberately takes us to the passage where Isaiah speaks of light dawning in Galilee and of the coming royal Son. And where does the light begin to shine? Not in Jerusalem. That is worth noticing. If I were planning the launch of Messiah's public ministry, Jerusalem would seem the obvious choice. The Temple is there. The religious leadership is there. It is the city where King David reigned. Surely that is where the King should announce Himself. God chooses Galilee.

We have already discovered that God has a habit of surprising us. The King was born in the village of Bethlehem rather than the capital city of Jerusalem. Now His public ministry begins not at the Temple but in Galilee, an area with significant Gentile influence—so much so that Isaiah calls it “Galilee of the Gentiles.”

Matthew is again widening our vision without abandoning Israel. The light promised to Israel begins shining from within Israel, but it is already shining in a place where Jews and Gentiles live alongside one another.

Then comes an extraordinary sentence: “From that time Yeshua began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (4:17). We've heard those words before. John said exactly the same thing: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (3:2). The herald's message has now become the King's message.

And we've already established what repentance means. It is more than feeling sorry. It is turning—teshuvah, returning to God. The King has arrived, and His arrival requires a change of direction. The kingdom is at hand because the King is at hand.

Following the King (Matthew 4:18–22)

“As Yeshua was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen” (Matthew 4:18).

Matthew gives us an ordinary scene. These men are at work. They are not sitting in a synagogue waiting for a religious experience. They are fishermen doing what fishermen do, casting their nets into the water. Then Yeshua says, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19).

We know that expression so well that we can miss how strange it must have sounded the first time. Peter and Andrew knew how to catch fish. It was their trade and their livelihood. Yeshua

takes the language of the life they already know and turns it toward something they could not yet understand. He does not explain the entire plan. He simply calls them to follow.

And notice the order: “Follow Me, and I will make you....” Their first responsibility is not to become something impressive for God. It is to follow Yeshua. The making belongs to Him.

Jewish Insight

There is something particularly interesting about the way Yeshua calls disciples. Jewish teachers had disciples, talmidim, who learned from them. A disciple did not merely collect information from a teacher. He attached himself to the teacher, listened to him, watched the way he lived and sought to learn his way of life. But Yeshua's invitation is strikingly personal: “Follow Me.”

He is not simply inviting these fishermen to enroll in a course on Torah. He calls them to Himself. They will learn His teaching, certainly, but they will also walk with Him, eat with Him, watch Him respond to people, observe how He prays, see what angers Him and what moves Him with compassion. Before long they will discover that following a rabbi involves considerably more than taking notes. Consider the modern word “apprentice.” That carries this imagery more closely.

Matthew then gives us one of his favourite words: “Immediately.” “Immediately they left their nets and followed Him” (4:20). Again, what they do tells us something about them. Joseph demonstrated his obedience repeatedly not by speeches but by getting up and doing what God told him to do. Now Peter and Andrew do the same. Yeshua calls. They leave their nets and follow.

Matthew does not tell us here everything Peter and Andrew may already have known about Yeshua. He is not trying to answer every biographical question. He wants us to see the response. The King calls, and they follow. A little farther along, Yeshua sees two more brothers, James and John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. He calls them too.

“Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed Him” (Matthew 4:22).

Now the cost becomes even more visible. Peter and Andrew leave their nets. James and John leave their boat and their father. Matthew is not establishing a rule that following Yeshua requires everyone to abandon employment or family. But he is showing us that when the King calls, no competing loyalty can automatically claim first place.

Life Application

We can make discipleship much more complicated than Matthew makes it here. We want to know where the journey will take us. What will it cost? What will God ask us to do? Will we be successful? What happens to everything we're leaving behind? In contrast, Yeshua gives these men remarkably little information. “Follow Me.” That is enough for the next step.

The Psalmist says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105). Lamps and lights in those days were not halogen or LED spotlights. They gave enough light for the next step, and then the next one, not for hundreds of meters ahead. There is something helpful in that picture. We often want God to illuminate the whole road before we start walking. More often, He gives us enough light to take the next step. Peter, Andrew, James and John could not see where following Yeshua would eventually take them. They had enough light for this: “Follow Me.”

And there is a lovely connection with repentance. Yeshua has just announced, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17). Then Matthew shows us what turning can look like. Four fishermen are heading in one direction with their lives. Yeshua calls them, and they begin going another way. Repentance is not merely changing our minds about something. Eventually our feet must move.

The King's Ministry Revealed (Matthew 4:23–25)

Matthew now pulls the camera back. “Yeshua was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people” (4:23).

Three activities appear together: teaching, proclaiming and healing. And I think we should pay attention to all three. Yeshua teaches in synagogues. That detail matters. He has not arrived announcing a new non-Jewish religion. He is moving through Jewish communities, entering their synagogues and teaching Jewish people from within their own world.

He also proclaims, “the gospel of the kingdom.” The word gospel simply means good news. And at this point in Matthew, we should allow Matthew himself to define what the good news is rather than importing a complete later Christian formula into the word. The good news being announced is that God's Kingdom is arriving because God's King has arrived.

And Yeshua heals. The healing is not a sideshow added to make the teaching more impressive. It shows us something about the Kingdom He is announcing. God's reign is not merely an idea. Where the King exercises His authority, broken things begin to be put right.

We've been using the word rightness for righteousness. There is a connection here. Disease is not the way creation is ultimately meant to be. Suffering is not the final word. Yeshua's healings are glimpses of God's rightness breaking into a world where much has gone wrong. Matthew describes people bringing to Yeshua those suffering from “various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them” (4:24).

I want to be a little careful here. Matthew lists different kinds of suffering; he does not say that every illness is caused by a demon. In fact, by listing demoniacs alongside people with diseases, epilepsy and paralysis, he distinguishes among them. We should do the same. And people begin coming from everywhere: “Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan” (4:25).

Look at the geography. The King begins in Galilee, but the news refuses to stay there. People come from Jewish areas and from regions with substantial Gentile populations. Matthew has been preparing us for this widening circle from the beginning.

Life Application

There is a useful pattern in verse 23 for anyone who represents Yeshua. Yeshua's ministry involves words and deeds. He teaches. He proclaims. He heals. Sometimes followers of Yeshua have acted as though we must choose between telling people what is true and demonstrating God's compassion. Yeshua apparently saw no such competition. He spoke about the Kingdom and showed people something of what the Kingdom looked like.

Our deeds without explanation may simply make people think we are nice people. Our words without love may make people wish we would stop talking. Yeshua brings the two together. And Matthew ends the chapter with crowds gathering around Him. The King has been tested. He has begun proclaiming the Kingdom. He has called His first disciples. People have seen His works. Now they are ready to hear His words.

Takeaways

God's approval does not mean the absence of testing.

A legitimate desire does not give us permission to step outside God's will to satisfy it.

Scripture must be heard in context; quoting a verse accurately does not guarantee that it is being used rightly.

Yeshua refuses the shortcut. He trusts God's Word, God's way and God's timing.

The light promised to Israel begins shining from within Israel, in Galilee, where Jews and Gentiles lived alongside one another.

Discipleship begins with Yeshua's invitation: “Follow Me.” The making belongs to Him.

Repentance eventually moves our feet; turning toward the King changes our direction.

Yeshua's ministry holds words and works together: teaching, proclaiming and healing belong together.

Memory Verse

“Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

Matthew 4:19

What's Next?

The crowds are gathering. They have heard Yeshua proclaim the Kingdom and have seen Him demonstrate its power through healing. His first disciples are beside Him. Now the King is going to tell them what life in His Kingdom looks like.

In Matthew 5, Yeshua goes up on a mountain, sits down and begins to teach. The opening words will overturn many ordinary ideas about who is blessed, what righteousness looks like and what God desires from His people. The King who has demonstrated His authority will now speak with authority.