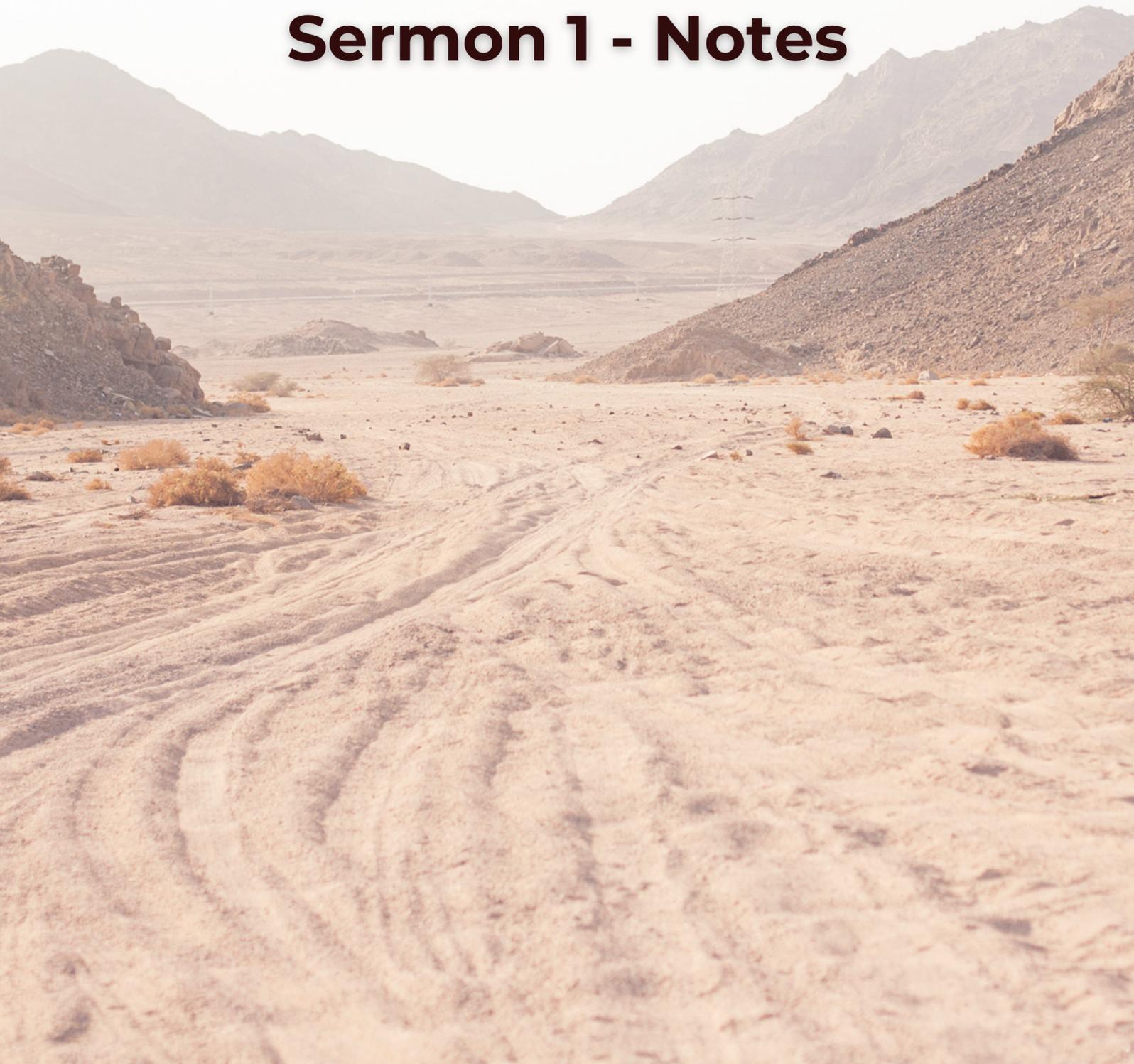


# **GENEROUS**

# **LENT**

## **Sermon 1 - Notes**



# WEEK ONE: SERMON NOTES GENEROUS LENT

## FIRST READING:

Deuteronomy 8:1-7a

## SECOND READING

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

## GOSPEL READING

Matthew 3:16-4:11

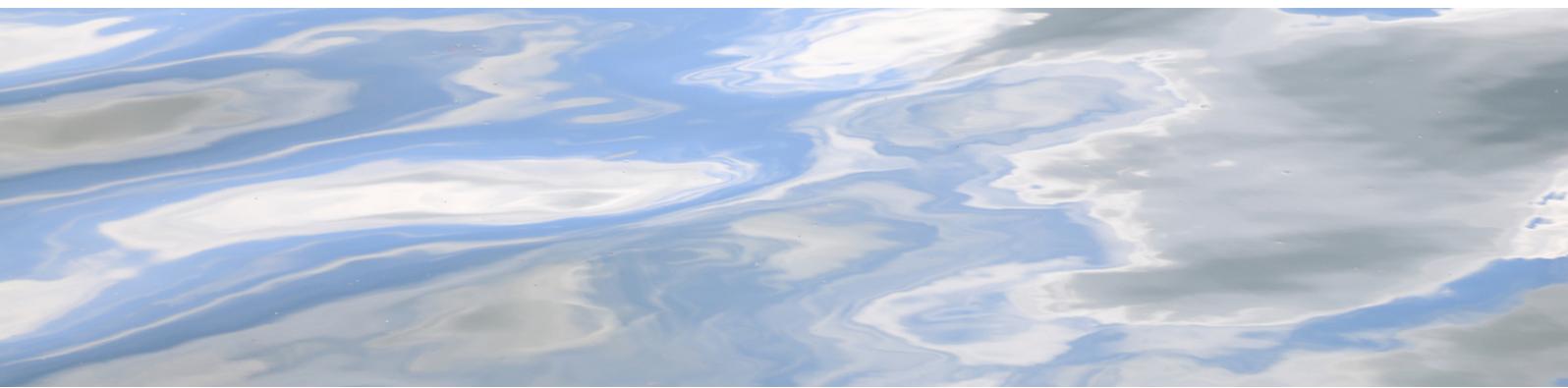
## BEGINNING WITH BAPTISM

The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness follows the account of Jesus' baptism. Matthew links the two stories with then (4:1), his favourite linking word, and the two stories have a theological unity. Both stories are located in the desert (*erēmos*), in both stories the Holy Spirit is active. Crucially, the affirmation of Jesus as the Son of God (*Mt 3:17*) is picked up verbally in two temptations and implicit in the third. Finally, the two stories precede the public ministry of Jesus. In desert solitude Jesus discerns his identity as God's Son and prepares for his public ministry.

Stewardship themes are found in both stories. Two of the three temptations overtly address stewardship themes: the physical need for food carries the spiritual challenge to trust and obedience whilst world's wealth is offered to Jesus, at the cost of his soul. It is a temptation resonant in our consumer culture. The third temptation, answered by Jesus with reference to the grumbling at the lack of water at Massah/Meribah (*Ex 17:1-17*) also turns on trust in God's provision.

In addition, the link with baptism also has stewardship significance. In a passage found only in Luke (*Lk 3:10-14*) those baptised by John ask about the life of the baptised. Reflecting his distinctive interest in stewardship Luke makes clear that the overflowing waters of baptism must result in an overflow of generosity:

*"What should we do then?"* the crowd asked. John answered, *"Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."* Even tax collectors came to be baptized. *"Teacher,"* they asked, *"what should we do?"* *"Don't collect any more than you are required to,"* he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, *"And what should we do?"* He replied, *"Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."*



## LED UP BY THE SPIRIT

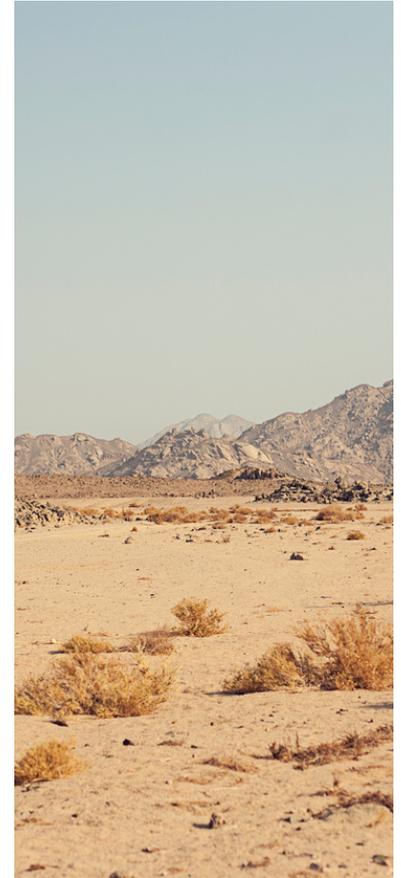
Matthew and Luke know and use Mark's brief account and timeline (Mk 1:9-13), adding additional material of the three temptations from a source known to them but lost to us. In this additional material the spiritual heart of the story is consistent but the writers will express their own emphases.

Characteristically, Mark's story is brief, brutal: immediately Jesus is thrown out into the wilderness. Luke amends this to was led by but in Matthew, 'Jesus was led up...'. The immediate reference is the wilderness above the low-lying Jordan river but Matthew's choice of verb (anagō) connects with Israel's forty desert years (Ex 33:12, 15; Lev 11:45; Num 16:13; Josh 24:17). It anticipates the framing of the three temptations by passages from Deuteronomy; see below.

In Mark it is the Spirit who throws Jesus into the desert (Mk1:12). Luke, for whom the Spirit is a key theme, Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit and led by the Spirit into the desert. For Matthew, Jesus is led up by the Spirit in order to be tempted by the devil. There are differences in emphasis but in each Gospel the movement from baptism to temptation is under the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew alone adds, 'and forty nights', echoing for his Jewish readers Elijah (1Kgs 19:6) and Moses (Ex 34:28). Again, at the close of his narrative, only Matthew notes that angels ministered to Jesus after the temptation; likely an allusion to the angels and Elijah (1 Kgs 19:5a-9). Again, Luke mentions that Jesus 'ate nothing' during the forty days (in those days) but in Matthew Jesus is explicitly fasting and the temptations comes after the time of fasting. Matthew doesn't exclude a longer period of temptation but for him the spiritual discipline of fasting culminates in temptation.

Baptism and temptation take place in the same wilderness and under the leading of the same Spirit of God. But the contrasts are important. The life giving, abundant water of the river Jordan contrasts with the harsh hunger and scarcity of the desert. The Spirit who affirms Jesus as Son of God leads him to desert testing. These contrasts sit side by side in Scripture as they do in our human experience. Desert scarcity is not where God calls us to settle but it is the place where God leads us in order to deepen our discipleship. In Christian spirituality the desert, fasting, praying and spiritual conflict are the crucible of mature faith.



## INSIGHTS FROM DEUTERONOMY

The traditional language of temptation has stuck but does not convey the whole meaning. The Greek verb (peirazō) can mean tempt or test, and testing is more appropriate given the roots of the temptation story in the Exodus traditions. Temptation implies an unsavoury invitation to do wrong. Testing is the invitation to choose well, to reveal what is in our hearts. Yet it remains true that the devil is 'the tempter' or 'the tester' (peirazōn) which carries a negative meaning.

To each temptation Jesus quotes from a part of Deuteronomy which references the forty years in the desert as a time of Israel being tested by God, and testing God himself by their mutinous grumbling. This is the key that unlocks the temptation stories and highlights the stewardship implications of the narrative. There are two things to note briefly.

First, the wilderness time was intentionally formative for Israel as the people of God. In desert places the presence and provision of God is learned to be as real as the experience of hunger, thirst, anxiety and fearfulness:

*... the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna ...to teach you that people do not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Dt 8:2-3)*



Second, the context of this quoted passage captures the ambiguity of money briefly explored in the Introduction document. A vivid picture is painted of abundance as God's gift and promise (Dt 8:6-9) but this gift is carefully framed:

- In Dt 8:1-9 the scarcity and learned trust in God's provision tested the heart and taught the obedience required to live well and faithfully in abundance.[1]
- In Dt 8:10-15 wealth has its own gravitational pull. Instead of receiving all we have as a gift we take pride of ownership in a well-earned reward and forget God, leaving a spiritual vacuum filled by other gods (Dt 8:19).

In our lifelong journey of faith the desert times probe and purify our hearts. Times of scarcity ask the hard questions about how we will live lives of generous discipleship.

*[1]Prof Avner Offer argues that the scarcity our grandparents knew created a prudence around money which is undermined and eroded by the affluence that prudence helped to create. (The Challenge of Affluence 2006)*

## IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD...

Drawing on their shared source Matthew and Luke order the final two temptations differently. Luke's final temptation is set in Jerusalem, likely reflecting the significance of Jerusalem in his Gospel.[1] The last temptation in Matthew is the offer of the world's kingdoms, likely a contrast with the ending of his Gospel: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mt 28:18).

The effect of Matthew's ordering is to cluster the two temptations that begin: if you are the Son of God. The phrase picks up the heart of the baptismal story in Mt 3:17 but also references Dt 8:5: now then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you. Just as the obedience of Israel was tested by God in the desert, so too Jesus' obedience as Son of God is tested, again in the desert.

Commentators note that in Mt 4:3 the opening word if is likely best translated as since. The text does not throw doubt on who Jesus is. The question is rather: so how then will Jesus live as the Son of God? It is possible that the question here concerns the nature of nature of Jesus' public ministry: will it be miracles of compassion (stones to bread) or miracles to impress (leaping from the Temple)? More likely the question is focused on Jesus himself, his hunger, his trust in God, his refusal to trade wealth for worship. The focus is less Jesus' public ministry, more Jesus' obedience as Son of God.

Preachers, however, will find the opening phrase, if you are the Son of God, pregnant with meaning for discipleship. The temptation injects a note of doubt: are you really the Son of God? Prove it to yourself. Prove it to others. Since Eden we've each heard the hissed untruth: a beloved child of God? Are you sure? Forgiven? Really?

Ultimately this is not a binary choice. Baptism names who we are in Christ and asks how we will live as the children of God. Temptation invites us to live outside the obedience of faith and in doing so unravels in us the assurance of who we are in Christ. The ambiguity of wealth (Dt 8:1-18), the call to generous discipleship (Lk 3:7-14) and the naked appeal to wealth in Matthew's final temptation indicates that our most significant and seductive temptations are close to our wealth and possessions. Material wealth carries risk of spiritual bankruptcy.

*[1]In Luke 9:51 Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem and Luke's 'travel narrative' follows the journey until Palm Sunday (Lk 19:28ff). It is 35% of Luke's Gospel. The similar events in Mark 10:1-52 and Mt 19:1-20:34 represent 8% and 6% of their Gospels respectively.*



## STONES INTO BREAD

In Mt 4:3 the devil invites Jesus to meet hunger by turning stones into bread. The word bread in v3 (artos) is a round cake enough for one person. Matthew used the plural form: 'turn these stones to breads'. The wording may imply more bread than was needed, referencing obliquely the manna story where collecting or storing too much was not possible. For preachers, the plural may hint at a question central to our consumer culture: just how much is enough? It is a question we ask in different ways in both scarcity and in abundance.

Jesus quotes Dt 8:3; we don't live by bread alone but by the word of God. There is in Jesus' reply an affirmation that we do need bread to live; that is how God has made us. But in this temptation Jesus is invited as Son of God **to provide for himself**. Thus Jesus is tempted not only to unravel long days of prayer and fasting but also to cut the umbilical cord of obedience to his Father.

## LAYING CLAIM TO THE GIFT

The devil's second temptation in 4:5-7 is set high on the Temple in Jerusalem. The meaning of pinnacle (pterygion) is unclear. The word is unusual, derived from the word meaning 'wings' and may be chosen because of the use of the 'wings' in Ps 91:4, the same Psalm from which the devil quotes in 4:6. One possibility is a corner of the south wall of the Temple, overlooking a deep ravine. The Jewish historian Josephus comments on its height.

The devil's test riffs on a promise in Psalm 91:11-12, a promise of help in adversity for those that dwell with the Most High. The emphasis is not the public spectacle such a leap would create but upon the Temple as a place of God's protection and Jesus' right, as Son of God, to lay claim to that protection. Having been tempted to provide for himself Jesus is now tempted **to presume for himself**. The devil invites Jesus as Son to compel, to manipulate God's saving action.

Jesus' response is to quote Dt 6:16: you shall not test the Lord your God. The context of this quote is important. Having once seen water made drinkable (Ex 15:22-27) and witnessed the miraculous provision of manna (Ex 16) the people are now thirsty. They grumble against Moses but in reality they are testing God, asking not for water but, Is the Lord among us or not? (Ex 17:2b, 7b). The testing of God was a demand for God to manifest his presence by a response to their needs instead of a place of trust built upon previous experiences of God's provision. This second temptation invites Jesus, in the words of PD Miller, not to hold life as a gift but to lay claim to the gift.



## ALL THE WORLD'S WEALTH

In Matthew's final temptation (Mt 4:8-10) the challenge of generous discipleship is front and centre. The 'high mountain' is symbolic, likely referencing Moses viewing the Promised Land from Pisgah (Dt 34:1-4). Jesus is offered the kingdoms of the world and their 'glory'. Here glory has the limited meaning of wealth.

The phrase, if you fall down and worship me (v9b) is identical to Mt 2:11 where the Magi bring their gifts to Jesus. What Jesus had already received as tribute gifts of worship is now promised falsely to Jesus by the devil. The phrase away from me Satan is unique to Matthew's account and is found also in Mt 16:23 after Peter's confession.

A stewardship reading is central because the temptation is a naked appeal to greed, money and power. Jesus' response is to quote Dt 6:13: worship the Lord your God and serve him only. The context of that quote (Dt 6:10-12) is significant because it speaks to the ambiguity of wealth explored above. All the blessings of the land are gifts from God but affluence can lead to amnesia by which we forget God - and open the door to idolatry (Dt 8:19).[1]

[1]The phrase 'affluence can lead to amnesia' is from Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions* p41



## THE MINISTRY OF ANGELS

Closing his story, the reference to angels in Mt 4:11 has a primary meaning of meeting Jesus' physical need for food. His testing is finished and, as for Israel (Ex 16), God provides food in the desert. But the angels probably also reference back to the true promise in Mt 4:6: the quotation of Ps 91:11-12 and the promise of angelic protection for those who make God their refuge and trust in him.

The verse serves, with 4:1, to bookend the story of Jesus' temptation as being under the protection of God for One who trusts and is obedient. It reminds us again that the work of the desert places is the work of God's Spirit in forming the discipleship of generous disciples.