

## SESSION THREE

## INTO THE DESERT TO BE TESTED

God's story began when he demonstrated his power over chaos at creation. Merely by the power of his words, he set boundaries for chaos and created a beautiful, harmonious universe. No sooner had this great triumph been accomplished than chaos, in the form of the crafty serpent, reared its ugly head. With the simple question, "Did God really say . . .?" the evil one tempted the people God had created to rebel against his word. In so doing, the harmony (the Bible calls it *shalom*) of God's creation was destroyed and chaos returned.

This was not the end of God's story, however. God began the process of restoring *shalom* to his broken creation. The experiences of God's people during the exodus are not only the first chapter of this story, they are a paradigm for the ongoing story of restoration that continues to the present time. Whenever God demonstrates his power over chaos in a great and mighty way — whenever the *shalom* of his kingdom moves forward — temptation or testing will soon follow.

When God demonstrated his mighty power over chaos to deliver the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, he took them into the desert (chaos, to their way of thinking) to test what was in their hearts so that he would know whether or not they would keep his commands (Deuteronomy 8:2-3). In the land of chaos, God spoke his words and through difficult experiences began to mold and shape his people. As they practiced their fledgling faith during

the journey to Mount Sinai, they began to learn what it meant to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

At Sinai God spoke, giving his chosen people the greatest mission any people have ever received. As his treasured possession (Exodus 19:5-6), they were to be a holy nation — his kingdom of priests — who would display him to the world. They needed not only to profess him as Lord as they had on the shores of the Red Sea, they needed to enthrone him as their King by faithfully obeying his every word. Then God's kingdom would advance, and *shalom* would begin to be restored to his creation.

Although the Israelites often chose chaos over *shalom* during their ensuing forty years of testing in the desert, God continued to teach and shape them. They successfully prepared a new generation that emerged from the desert as a people who obeyed and trusted God with all their heart, soul, and strength. They were imperfect, to be sure, but they enthroned God as their King and embraced the mission he had given them to fulfill in the Promised Land.

When Jesus was baptized, God had demonstrated that his power was at work. The heavens separated, the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove, and the voice from heaven declared, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21-22). Temptation or testing would certainly follow, and the Bible says that the Spirit then led Jesus into the desert. There, the evil one sought every opportunity to sabotage God's plan by drawing the Messiah away from his intended purpose of restoring God's *shalom* to all things through his death and resurrection.

Jesus' desert experience "echoed" the testing of the Hebrews in the Sinai Desert. By using the exact Torah text that described the tests the Hebrews experienced in the desert more than a thousand years earlier, Jesus thwarted the evil one. His faithfulness during these temptations demonstrated that God was, indeed, enthroned in his life as Lord and King. His steadfast commitment to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God rather than to pursue his own purposes (or those of the evil one) affirmed that he embraced God's mission without reservation. After being tempted, Jesus emerged from the desert to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven (God) was at hand (Mark 1:12-15)

Jesus' temptations — and the lessons they provide — help us to understand the nature of God, Jesus his Son, and the evil one. They provide significant insights into temptations we face. Because the temptations occurred in a desert setting, they provide a link between the Hebrews, Jesus, and our calling to be a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9), to be God's witnesses to a broken world. All who follow Jesus will face testing, "desert" times, and attacks by the evil one who understands that the kingdom of God born in the desert will cause his demise. So let us "walk" with the Messiah into the desert to be molded and shaped as God's people.

## Opening Thoughts (3 minutes)

### The Very Words of God

*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin.*

Hebrews 4:14-15

### Think About It

It is exciting and inspiring to see God work in powerful ways. Think, for example, of the excitement the Hebrews felt when God delivered them at the Red Sea. Immediately afterward, they were "pumped" and felt ready to tackle anything! Their God reigned! But were they really who they thought they were at that moment? Did they have the knowledge, ability, and commitment to follow through and obediently accomplish the task God had given to them? How might a test or two help them to discover what they were lacking so that they could complete their "education" in God's ways?

In what ways might we need testing to reveal our flaws and weaknesses so that we can learn to walk in God's ways?

**DVD Notes (30 minutes)**

**Jesus and his relationship with the desert**

**Jesus is baptized; the testing begins**

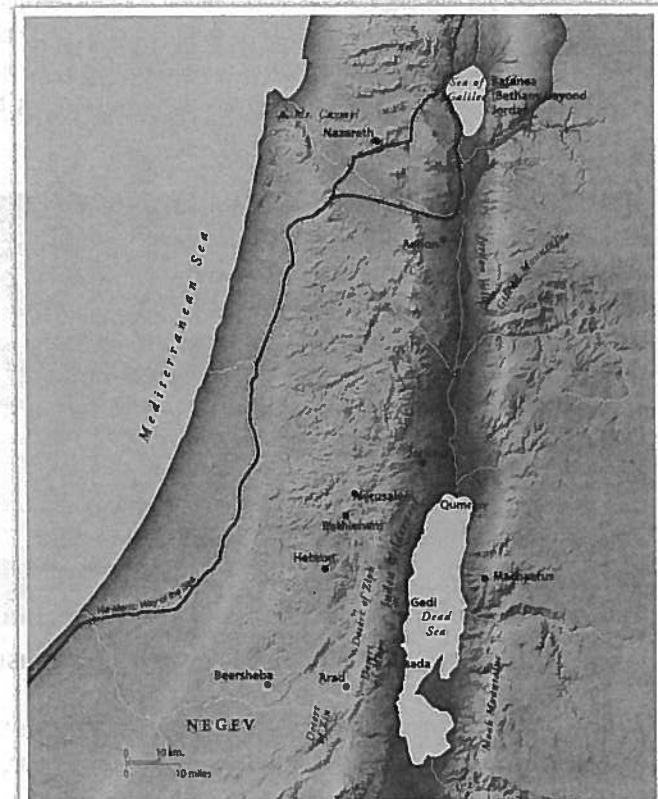
**Three testings of Israel, three temptations of Jesus**

**The testing continues—love the Lord your God with all your heart**

**DVD Discussion (6 minutes)**

1. Using the map below, find the Judea Wilderness, which is the desert region in which the evil one most likely tempted Jesus.

How far is this desert from Jerusalem? Bethlehem? The Jordan River?



Into which other desert regions mentioned in the Bible does the Judea Wilderness lead?

#### DATA FILE

##### Desert Lands In and Near Ancient Israel

In the Hebrew Bible, desert is “God’s land” in which he trained his people to live by every word that came from his mouth. Desert is also a metaphor of the difficult times in life during which God provides just enough to sustain us so that we learn to depend on him and trust him fully. Several desert regions in and near Israel played a key role in the lives of God’s people during biblical times.



THE VAST DESERT REGIONS OF THE SINAI PENINSULA

The *Sinai Desert*, where the Israelites wandered for forty years, is the “vast and dreadful” desert of the exodus. It is the most severe desert region, and only God’s miraculous provision enabled his people to survive there.

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The *Negev Desert*, barely forty miles south of Jerusalem, has rolling desert pasture country in the north, rugged canyons in its central region, and extremely barren land in the south.

The *Judea Wilderness* lies between the populated areas of Israel and the Dead Sea. This desert is only a short walk away from the people—literally within sight—who live in Israel’s central mountains. It is quite certain that Jesus was tempted in this desert.

- As the video revealed how Jesus’ testing in the desert paralleled that of the Israelites in the Sinai deserts during the exodus, what new understanding and appreciation did you gain for God’s ongoing story of redemption?

What new understanding do you have concerning the importance of God’s Word for his people of all times?

- For every temptation the evil one put before him, Jesus answered, “It is written . . .” What did you learn from Jesus’ knowledge of the Word of God and his example of commitment to live by every word that will help you to deal with the testing you face?

4. The video teaching showed how the Hebrews, Jesus, and Jesus' disciples faced similar tests related to their commitment to walk in God's ways. In what ways do you think people today are tested regarding:
  - a. Their commitment to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God?
  - b. Their willingness to trust God with all aspects of their lives?
  - c. Their faithfulness to "remember" God with all their heart, soul, and mind (strength, might)?

### Small Group Bible Discovery and Discussion (15 minutes)

#### *Baptized and Tested in the Desert*

Although people are not inclined to go into the desert willingly, it is God's testing ground. It is where he gains the attention of his people so that they can hear his voice, participate in his training, and learn the lessons that will enable them to fulfill the mission he gives to them. That is why God took the Israelites into the desert and kept them there until they had learned to love him with all their heart, *soul and strength.*

Before Jesus began his earthly ministry of proclaiming and demonstrating the kingdom of God to his world, he would have to go into the desert. He, too, would experience the lessons the Israelites learned there. The very words God gave to Israel in the desert became central in Jesus' confrontation with the devil, who intended to thwart God's plan to restore *shalom* to his broken creation.

1. What insight does 1 Corinthians 10:1 - 2 provide concerning the meaning of the crossing of the Red Sea to the Hebrew people?

After the crossing of the Red Sea, how did the Hebrews respond? (See Exodus 15:1 - 7.)

In what sense do you think these former slaves had been reborn as God's chosen people and caught their first glimpse of the hope of the kingdom of heaven? (See Exodus 15:11 - 18.)

Three days later, where were they and why? (See Exodus 15:22 - 27.)

2. After the Israelites' "Red Sea baptism," God tested them in the desert in order to prepare them for the great mission to which he had called them. How long did he test them? (See Deuteronomy 8:2.)

If God tested his chosen people for this long, how important do you think obedience and the advancement of his kingdom is to him?

How does this influence your perspective and attitude toward the time you have spent in the "desert" facing hardship?

### THINK ABOUT IT

#### Why Does God Test His People?

The Jewish sages recognized God's sovereign reign over all things, but not all people acknowledge that reign. In order for the kingdom of God to advance and accomplish its work in the world, however, God's people must acknowledge his reign and enthrone him as their king by obeying his commands. Christian belief encompasses the same thought: those who commit to God acknowledge him as Lord and Savior and accept his reign by walking as Jesus walked (which was by obeying God's commands).

How do God's people learn to obey? Through testing! The Hebrew word translated "test" does not imply enticing to do wrong. It implies proving the quality of someone by experience—that is, to know experientially rather

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than simply by mental assent. God knew what was in Israel's heart, but he wanted to see them live out his reign in their lives, so he tested them to see if they would obey his instructions and depend on his word. These tests gave his people opportunities to strengthen their faith by putting it into practice.

Followers of Jesus in the West seldom view "testing" in this way. We listen to or read the Scriptures and then are invited to "believe"—to assent to what we accept God's Word as true. Although God is certainly pleased with our belief, he also desires to see us practice our assent. Testing is his way of putting his people into situations where it becomes obvious whether or not their faith is genuine and shapes how they live.

Jesus' temptations (testing) pose difficult questions for people who believe that the Bible is the very Word of God. "How could Jesus as the Son of God be tempted?" "Can God sin?" (Obviously not.) "Could the sinless, fully human Jesus have sinned?" "Why did Jesus need to be tested?"

We know that Jesus was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). This perspective does not deny his divine nature nor his sinless human nature. The foundational issue for Jesus—as was true for Adam and Eve and the ancient Israelites, and now for us—focuses on acknowledging God as Lord and enthrone him by obedience to his Word. The temptations Jesus faced in his human nature were genuine. Like the temptation sinless Adam and Eve faced, Jesus' response to the desert temptations had the potential to undermine God's redemptive plan.

3. Jesus was the perfect candidate for John's baptism, which symbolized a person's purity and commitment to obedience. As Jesus came out of the water, what parted (or separated) him from the water, and what was present? (See Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22.)



In what way might this scene be an allusion to God bringing *shalom* out of chaos at creation? (See Genesis 1:1 - 2.)

Like Adam and Eve in the garden, Jesus had a God-given mission to fulfill. Like them, he began as God's sinless servant. What would someone who knew God's story expect to see happen after the symbolic "re-creation" at his baptism? (See Genesis 3:1 - 4; Mark 1:12 - 13.)

When the evil one tried to entice Jesus to abandon his commitment to walk in God's ways, how well did Jesus prove himself ready to fulfill his mission of proclaiming and demonstrating the kingdom of God? (See Matthew 4:1 - 11.)

### FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING

#### Patterns of Creation and Testing in God's Unfolding Story

When God created the universe, his Spirit brought order out of chaos by separating the waters of the formless deep (Genesis 1:1 - 9). In Hebrew, the word translated "Spirit" is *ruach*, which also means "breath" and "wind." After God completed his creation, the evil one tempted Adam and Eve to rebel against God's kingship.

Their sin destroyed the *shalom* of God's perfect created order, and chaos grew from generation to generation until God destroyed everything living on the earth in the great flood of Noah's day. For forty days, the floodwaters kept coming. After 150 additional days, the wind (God's *ruach*) began to

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cause the floodwaters to recede, which allowed life on earth to begin anew. After a time, however, Noah became drunk and fell into sin, and chaos was reintroduced (Genesis 9:20 - 27).

With great power, God freed the Hebrews from the chaos of slavery. When the "chaos" of the pursuing Egyptian army threatened to destroy them at the Red Sea, God used a "strong east wind" (*ruach*) to "divide" ("separate") the waters and give his people safe passage while destroying their enemies. The Hebrews, in a sense "baptized" by their passage through the sea, walked away as a new people. By enthroning God as their King and making a covenant to obey his commands, they embraced his mission of demonstrating the *shalom* of his kingdom to the world.

As the Israelites prepared to enter the Promised Land and live as the people God created them to be, they faced the chaos of the flooding Jordan River. Again, God "separated" water, and his people in a sense "passed through" water baptism (Joshua 3:14 - 4:7) to enter the land as a "re-created" people who were committed to obeying all the ways of God.

As Jesus was coming out of the water after his baptism, heaven was "torn open" (separated, parted), and God's Spirit descended on him like a dove (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:9 - 11). The Hebrew word used, *merachafet*, refers to the hovering motion of a dove that is reminiscent of the hovering Spirit of God at creation. After forty days of testing in the desert, Jesus began to teach about God's kingdom.

### Faith Lesson (5 minutes)

At various times, God has begun a new creation on earth. Each time he used his *ruach* to dispel chaos and bring a beautiful new reality into existence. But the world of chaos always seeks opportunities to destroy the *shalom* that God establishes. So desert times come:

- To test us and see if we do love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind (strength or might).
- To prepare us to live and proclaim the good news of the kingdom of heaven.

1. Those of us who are Christians today are often surprised when we find ourselves in the desert, especially when desert times come on the heels of spiritual triumph. Do you think Jesus, who knew and lived the Hebrew text, was surprised that the evil one tempted him immediately after his baptism? Why or why not?

In what ways does Jesus' confident, unshakable attitude and example of faithful commitment to obeying God's Word show you how to handle such challenges in your life?

With Jesus' example in mind, make a list of specific responses you can train yourself to follow when you face temptation and testing.

2. What has been your experience in dealing with personal "deserts" in your past?

Did you recognize them for what they were at the time, and how do you view them differently today?

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When you are in the "desert," to what extent are you able to confidently trust that God is who he says he is and can be depended upon to provide for you as you seek to obey him in every area of your life? And to what extent do you fail

What have you learned about your walk with God through testing and training in the "desert," and how have these experiences prepared you to be a stronger witness of his kingdom?

### Closing (1 minute)

Read aloud together Matthew 22:36–40: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind [strength]." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Then pray together, thanking God for his Law — his words given in the desert — to teach and train his people to love him by living by his every word. Ask him to help you follow the example of Jesus who showed us how to live the *shema* and love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (strength).

### Memorize

*"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind [strength]. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

Matthew 22:36–40