

The ALIVE! Bible Study Series
STUDY AND REFLECTION GUIDE FOR SESSION 10
“LED BY THE SPIRIT INTO A WILDERNESS PLACE:
SACRIFICE AND REVELATION BRINGS STRENGTH BEYOND MEASURE”
Matthew 4:1-11 NIV

Objectives:

- To grasp that having faith in God to see you through tough times will give you strength for the journey.
- To understand that nothing worth having comes easy.
- To recall that you are worth the effort of the practices and disciplines toward abundant life.
- To recognize life-sapping people, places, attitudes, and things when they are tempting you into unhealthy and unsafe situations or circumstances.

INTRODUCTION:

The Lenten season will begin soon. It begins on Ash Wednesday (Feb. 18, 2015) and ends on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter – a total of forty days (minus the six Sundays). Rev. Dr. Alan V. Ragland, Sr. Pastor of Third Baptist Church of Chicago in the ALIVE! video 8b-1 on the topic of “**Abundant Living Through Lent,**” said that **the Lenten season “is a time to think deeply about life and faith.”** Part of this “thinking deeply” involves taking time to allow the Spirit to take you into a time of deep reflection, into a wilderness time – an alone time with God, to reflect on forgiveness (for yourself and others), self-discipline toward behaviors and spiritual practices that support inner peace and sense of well-being, and to hear more clearly in what life direction you will find meaning and purpose that you believe will be pleasing to God.

People have been known to go to wilderness areas of the country, not only during Lent, to be alone or with a small group as a retreat from the world and to get closer to God through nature for a time of prayer, meditation, and reflection. **On the earthly plain, the wilderness is full of the unexpected** in foliage, critters, beautiful mountain ranges and deep fertile valleys, clear fresh water streams and dry places, and sometimes vast changes in temperature between day and night. It can be a frightening place for people who are unfamiliar with nature. For others, it is a time of wonder as they look at the expanse of the sky at night and see wild plants, a different variety of birds, insects and mammals that they don’t see in their everyday experiences. **Spiritual wilderness experiences can be equally as daunting,** ranging from allowing overflowing tears to confronting and letting go of old life hurts and mistakes, to experiencing new revelations that they could not have imagined in their day-to-day experiences at home, work, school, or church.

You may not be able to go away or may have no interest in going away for forty days to a wilderness place to contemplate and reflect on your life behaviors, your inner places

where you need spiritual healing, and to discern new directions for your life. **You can, however, take this Lenten season to develop the discipline to take a certain amount of time each day to pray, meditate, and to recall for yourself those things you need to surrender to, to let go of, or to make the necessary changes to improve your life circumstances.** Some have taken this time to go deep – to clean out spiritual closets of anger, vengefulness, and to work through the difficult process of unresolved grief. Whatever you need to do, **take the time to seek the Heart of God and surrender to God’s good and perfect work to be done in you.**

Why did the Spirit send Jesus to the wilderness to spend 40 days and nights to fast and pray? **And what does the temptation of Jesus have to do with eating more vegetables?** Since you are involved in the ALIVE! Initiative for Congregational Health, this may be a good time to consider creating a wilderness place for yourself each day where you quiet yourself and consider what you must do to develop the discipline of healthy eating, of really putting into practice life-changing behaviors that will bring you into balance for good energy and the minimizing the impact of chronic illnesses on your health. Stop. Breathe. Be aware of yourself. Then, with God at your side, make a choice about what to do to make yourself more ALIVE. **It may be helpful to select a prayer partner within your small group or with someone who is also participating in the ALIVE! Initiative with whom you feel comfortable discussing the outcome of your reflections, trials, and celebrations around your Abundant Living goals.** This may be the cojourner you have already selected to support you in your journey or someone new. Such an arrangement will be helpful for you and for your prayer partner as you support each other to stay on target with your goals as did Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that you read and studied in the Session 9 Bible Study.

BACKGROUND FOR THE MATTHEW 4:1-11 SCRIPTURE:

Just before the Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness, he had been baptized by John the Baptist, his cousin and Elizabeth’s son. John had been preaching the baptism of all who repented of their sins and were ready to turn back to God. **Jesus did not need to be baptized, because he was without sin. Yet, Jesus commanded John to baptize him – because Jesus wanted to show his humanity and his solidarity with those who were seeking God.** In writing this part of the narrative of Jesus’ introduction within this gospel, Matthew is marking the beginning of the Jesus’ mission and ministry amongst the people.

When Jesus came up out of the water after his immersion for his baptism, he hears the voice of God saying, **“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”** Matthew is confirming for the reader **the prediction made in Isaiah 42:1-4a:**

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.”

It is important for you to remember that God also has big plans for you, too. God's desire for you is to be in good relationship with Him and to let Him walk with you uninhibited in Spirit and truth so that **you, too, can be empowered for whatever work and purpose God has for you. It starts with you being prepared in Spirit and truth. This requires surrender to God at whatever level of understanding and faith you have right now.** Your faith and understanding might be the size of a mustard seed, but if you surrender to God all that you are right now, even with any sin, imperfections, and trials, God can plant that seed – that flicker of faith you have right now – deep in your soul. Then **God will water it with teachings and experiences that will grow that seed into powerful faith and energy** that will provide nourishment and understanding for your journey as a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord.

Just think, for example: How many of your family members and friends could benefit from your testimony of how something as simple yet profound, as beautiful and energizing as God's natural vegetables could give you so much new energy, focus-ability, and balance in your body systems? Can you trust that since you are fearfully and wonderfully made, that **God will give you everything you need in inspiration and desire for better health behaviors if you will but ask for strength and discipline?** Try it! To God be the glory.

STUDY AND REFLECTION ON MATTHEW 4:1-11:

- **Matthew 4:1 – Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan.** Why would the Spirit of God allow Jesus to be tempted by Satan? In the Greek language of the New Testament, the word *peirazo* means “tempted” and it also means “tested.” There is no explanation for why the Spirit would do this – have Jesus tempted or tested. It is important to recall, however, that Jesus was both human and divine. **From the human perspective, Jesus was about to start a ministry that would turn the Jewish community upside down.** He would have to stay focused on his mission as his popularity grew and people wanted more and more of his teachings, his healing touch, and the inner peace he brought them. From a spiritual perspective, Jesus would have to withstand the temptation to become arrogant and self-centered and to think, “it’s all about me” because of the accolades given him by the people who were looking for a political and military savior who would have the strength to go against the religious leaders of the Jewish community and the Roman authorities.

Questions for Discussion (small group or plenary):

- What **outer struggles** do you have to battle in your quest to eat in ways that will support good health?
- What **inner struggles** do you have to overcome in your quest to eat in ways that will support good health?
- **Matthew 4:2-4 – After 40 days, Jesus was hungry and the devil came to tempt him for the first time.** Satan knew who Jesus was. But did Jesus have a clear understanding of who

he was to be to the people and was he clear on his purpose? Satan asking Jesus to turn the stones into bread was not just about Jesus feeding himself after a long fast, but was also about Jesus' ability to feed thousands – all of the hungry people of the region, and beyond.

Jesus understood Satan's ploy, and quotes to Satan from **Deuteronomy 8:3**. **Jesus let Satan know that to know God, God's word, and power were much more important and meaningful than a temporary fix for a hungry belly.** No, Jesus did not come for the quick fix for physical hunger but rather to feed the nations with spiritual food of love, care, compassion, healing, and new hope so that all might see a new way of being and set a tone of mutuality so that all people could share in kingdom goodness here on earth. *NOTE: Jesus did later multiply two fishes and five loaves of bread onto enough food to feed 5, 000 (Mark 6:30-44).* **Jesus used his spiritual power to honor God, not to give in to a ploy by Satan.**

Questions for Discussion (small group or plenary):

- How often have you delayed eating in order to make it on time for Bible Study or to do something important to support someone else? How did you feel afterwards – physically and spiritually?
 - Share a time when you did something helpful for someone in a quiet way so that no one knew what you had done. How did that feel? What was the blessing for you?
 - How might choosing not to be taken in by temptation help you and those around you?
- **Matthew 4: 5-6 – Satan tells Jesus to jump off of the highest point of the temple; then Satan has the audacity to quote from Psalm 91: 11-12.** Satan knew that Jesus was the Son of God and that his time of death was not yet near. Yet, he tested Jesus not only to see if Jesus would jump, but more importantly to see if God would intervene. **This time Satan wanted to test God as much as he wanted to test Jesus.**

Questions for Discussion (small group or plenary):

- How often have you heard someone use scripture to their own advantage?
 - Can't you just hear Satan or even one of your good friends saying to you: *"Since you are so sure of what you are doing in this ALIVE! Initiative, I just want to see if you can stay away from your favorite soda and eat three vegetables a day during this whole 40 days of Lent? Let's see if God can give you that much strength."* How would that make you feel? What retort would you have for that person, or for Satan?
- **Matthew 4:7 – Jesus quotes again from Deuteronomy – 6:16 and tells Satan not to try to tempt God!** Yet, how often do we try to maneuver God to our way of thinking? God, give me a parking space next to the entrance to the mall. God, make this person love me. God, I need You to give me an A on this test. God, make me enjoy eating eggplant. People ask God to do their work for them.

Question for Discussion (small group or plenary):

- What do you do when God gives you what you need to take better care of yourself – your temple of God’s Holy Spirit? Do you receive it and use it or do you take instead what your appetite craves?
 - Give an example of when you have chosen God’s provision for health and one when you have pushed aside that something healthy for what your appetite craved. How were those experiences different for you? How do you think either might have been different if you had been able to bring mindfulness to the situation – stopping to breathe, be, and take God with you as you made your choice?
- **Matthew 4:8-9 – Satan brings his third temptation to Jesus and promises Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will bow down and worship him.** You might think that this is some kind of arrogance for the devil to tell Jesus that he will give Jesus the kingdoms of the earth if Jesus will bow down and worship him. As good Christians, you may wonder how the devil could assume a posture of having authority over the earth when you know that it is God and God alone who created all that we can see, taste, feel, and hear. And yet, there are many who give their loyalty and their love to other gods – gods such as their titles, their money and power, their jewelry and status in the community, their cars and houses without any regard for those who are oppressed and suffering, and those who are loyal to cravings for whatever brings pleasure. You will experience many temptations toward sugary, salty, and greasy foods as you search for ways to hold to your commitment to eating more vegetables and being deliberate about putting more daily, healthy movement in your routines.

Questions for Discussion (small group or plenary):

- Think about this for a moment: How often have you seen people “sell their souls to the devil” for fortune and fame?
 - How often have you seen people forsake their morals and ethics for the sake of the bling, big cars and fancy houses, or even a juicy steak dinner? Has it brought them happiness? Or was it just momentary pleasure?
 - How many times have you eaten that huge (rather than a smaller) piece of cake or cobbler and given the excuse, “the devil made me do it”? All jokes aside, some people do not understand the difference between the simple statement and the often-time reality of what they have said. Once you realized that you that you were manipulated by old habits and flesh cravings into jumping off the wagon of revitalized health, what have you done in the past? What can do you in the future? What might you consider to prevent it?
- **Matthew 4:10-11 – Jesus has had enough of Satan’s foolishness. Jesus tells Satan to leave and then quotes a third from the Book of Deuteronomy – 6:13. The devil has been**

defeated and so leaves. Then the angels came and attended to him. In Matt. 6:31 and 33, Jesus recalls how he was cared for when he states: *“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ...but seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

By the third temptation, it seems that Jesus is very clear that nothing can come between him and his God, his Father, his Abba. Jesus begins his ministry and takes, his place in our hearts and souls, for he has shown you how to rebuke Satan and his attempts to lure you away from your focus on health and life. Evil will work hard and use any means to pull you away from your health goals. If Satan dared to tempt Jesus, just think of what he will try with you!

ALIVE! VIDEO 8b-1: ABUNDANT LIVING THROUGH LENT:

In the video mentioned in the Introduction to this session, Pastor Ragland mentions thinking deeply about life and faith. A very important part of your life – your health – is something worth spending some time on. In the video, he offered three options for Abundant Living objectives during the Lenten Season as your way of showing God that you are serious about your temple of God’s Spirit:

1. Increase your vegetable intake and use the vegetable log given to you to document your intake.
2. Keep a Reflection Journal of how the changes in your diet make you feel and of what these changes represent for you.
3. Add movement and motion along with the changes in your diet. Add activity to your daily routine.

Lent is a time of looking afresh at your relationship with God, and of finding ways to make that relationship grow deeper. Rev. Ragland has suggested a good, solid approach to helping this to happen.

Questions for Discussion (small group or plenary):

- Which, if any, of the options Rev. Ragland suggested are doable for you? Why are they doable or not? Could you do all three?
- What is the one pressing behavior or activity that is a “must” for you to get on the right track for your health?
- What support would you like to receive from your cojourner during Lent?
- What would you like to see changed in you by the time Easter Sunday comes?

The more honestly you answer these questions the more likely you are to fulfill the goal(s) you put in place for yourself.

PLENARY DISCUSSION REGARDING QUESTIONS FOR THE SMALL GROUPS

CLOSING THOUGHTS, ANNOUNCEMENTS, AND PRAYER