

EXPLORATION: BIBLE

By Chip Thompson

The Wilderness (of Judea) and Jesus

The Judean Wilderness is a barren wasteland. Ancient Hebrews called this region the 'mid-bar' – an uninhabited land, a place where no man dwells. This wilderness slopes from the high ridge where Jerusalem is located down to the Dead Sea. At the Dead Sea it is about 1,400 feet below sea level, the lowest place on earth, and it has an average rainfall of about two inches per year. The hottest months are May – October with daily temperatures rising to 100 °F and above. I can tell you from personal experience, this wilderness is a hot, dry, miserable place where little vegetation can survive.



A picture of the 'mid-bar' (The Wilderness of Judea). [Photo by Chip Thompson, 2008].

Many biblical stories connect with the Judean Wilderness. When someone needed to flee, they almost always fled into 'the wilderness' as an escape. The stories of David, as he fled from King Saul, took place in this remote region.

In this wilderness, John the Baptist baptized Jesus near where the Jordan river empties into the Dead Sea. Today Christian pilgrims visit this site where they are baptized as a public demonstration of their faith in Jesus. Their baptism proclaims their desire to follow Jesus and obey his commands.

Immediately following his baptism, the Bible says, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." (see: Matthew 3-4, Mark 1, and Luke 3-4). The story relates that Jesus fasted forty days in the wilderness. Then, at one of his weakest moments physically speaking, Jesus was

tempted three times by Satan himself. Jesus of course overcame Satan and did not yield to any of his temptations. Just imagine what it would have been like to fast for forty days in this hot and barren wasteland.



The place where John baptized Jesus was marked very early in Christian history. Beneath these wooden structures are the foundations of ancient churches that were built to commemorate this important event. [photo by Chip Thompson, 2023]

In the fourth century A.D., a group of monks did more than just imagine what the wilderness experience of Jesus would have been like. They founded the St. George Monastery in the heart of the Judean Wilderness. Monks who desired to relate personally with the sufferings of Jesus created a place where they could have a wilderness experience of their own. Today, some 1,600 years later, Greek Orthodox monks still live year round in this desert monastery.



For hundreds of years monks have lived in this remote wilderness monastery. [photo by Chip Thompson, 2019]

If you ever visit Israel, you are welcome to hike down the ancient path and visit the monastery.

The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness picture for us the cosmic battle between ultimate good and ultimate evil. They also help us understand that "we do not have a High Priest [Jesus] who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but he was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. We can, therefore, (in prayer) come boldly to the throne of grace to obtain mercy and find grace to help in times of need" (Hebrews 4:15-16).

The Apostle John put it this way, "My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2). I don't know about you, but I am so thankful that Jesus is our eternal High Priest who forgives our sins and ever lives to help us in our times of need.

This story raises another interesting question. Why was Jesus baptized by John the Baptist? Jesus never sinned, so his baptism was not for the remission of his own sins. Just as the temptations of Jesus were a picture of good vs evil, even so the baptism of Jesus was a picture. Jesus told his disciples that his death on the cross was the very purpose for his coming into this world (John 12:27-32). The baptism of Jesus pictured his death, burial, and resurrection. It was a clear picture of the biblical gospel.

Jesus died on the cross to be the propitiation for our sins. Propitiation means that Jesus took the punishment for our sins when he died on the cross. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "For He [God] made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." So, what must we do to receive the salvation Jesus offers?

Paul wrote, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation... For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:9-10). Is there any reason you would not want to do this today?