



The Wilderness

Group Study

Introduction

In the Bible, the wilderness is a place of both hardship and hope, where divine testing and provision shape humanity's faith. Gather a group and explore the Bible's wilderness theme by reading Scripture passages, collecting insights, and discussing key takeaways. We recommend printing this PDF to share with each participant for reference and note-taking.

Each of the seven 45-minute sessions in this study follows the same basic steps.

- **Step 1: Consider a key question.** This question will be the primary focus of the session, but the goal is not to answer the question immediately. Instead, have it in the back of your mind as your group works through the session. By the end of the session, you will likely feel more equipped to respond to the question.
- **Step 2: Read Scripture together.** These passages will relate to the key question, though you might not see the connections right away. That's okay. Reading ancient literature can be disorienting, but reading together will help your group navigate each week's passages.
- **Step 3: Make space for asking questions.** The point of this study is not to answer your questions right away, or even make clear observations right away. The goal is to give space for curiosity and reflection. Encourage people to record questions so that they can come back to them later.

- **Step 4: Collect insights from the Scripture readings.** These insights come from the BibleProject Scholarship team. They include historical and narrative context, word definitions, observations of literary design, and hyperlink summaries.
- **Step 5: Re-read the Scripture passages.** After engaging with the insights, you'll hopefully see the Scriptures from new perspectives and notice more connections.
- **Step 6: Discuss as a group.** Wrap up with a conversation about the passages and insights, guided by the discussion questions at the end of each session. For those who want to go further, check out the related resources.

Here are the sessions in this study:

- Session 1: From the Wilderness to the Garden and Back Again
- Session 2: Exile Encounters With God in the Wilderness
- Session 3: Wilderness Humbling and Grumbling
- Session 4: Singing in the Wilderness
- Session 5: Jesus' Wilderness Tests (or Traps)
- Session 6: Bread in the Wilderness
- Session 7: Faithfulness in the Wilderness Leads to Rest

Share Your Feedback

We'd love to hear how you found this resource helpful or how you think it could be improved. Please email us at info@bibleproject.com.

SESSION 1

From the Wilderness to the Garden and Back Again

God creates order from chaos, a garden from a wilderness wasteland, and he invites humans to be in that garden space with him. But when humans choose to do what is right in their own eyes, they are exiled from God's good garden and sent back into the wilderness, where life returns to dust.

Step 1: Consider Key Question

How do the first chapters of the biblical story introduce the cycle of wilderness to garden and back to wilderness?

Step 2: Read Scripture

Start by exploring how the first pages of the Bible describe God creating a garden from a wilderness wasteland and humans returning to the wilderness as a result of their choices.

- Genesis 1:1-2
- Genesis 2:4-15
- Genesis 3:22-24

Step 3: Ask Questions

Make space for everyone to ask questions about the passages you just read. The point is not to answer the questions but to give space for curiosity. To the best of your ability, focus your questions on how these passages connect to the wilderness theme. Write your questions down so you can reference them later.

Step 4: Collect Insights

Explore some key insights from these passages.

Word Definition: *Tohu Vavohu*

The biblical story begins in a watery wasteland. Genesis 1:2 describes the world's initial state with the Hebrew phrase *tohu vavohu*, meaning "wild and waste" (BibleProject Translation).

Although none of the Hebrew words for “wilderness” appear in this passage, biblical authors use the phrase *tohu vavohu* elsewhere to describe a lifeless desert (see Jer. 4:23-26; Deut. 32:10). This language links the formless world at the beginning of the story to the image of a wilderness landscape. God creates order and life from a chaotic wilderness expanse.

Story Context

The cycle of chaos to order—wilderness to garden and back again—is a thread that runs through the whole biblical story. Both Genesis 1 and 2 follow the pattern of God creating order out of chaos. While Genesis 1 begins with a watery wasteland, Genesis 2 starts with a dry and dusty wilderness landscape (Gen. 2:5). Just as God creates life from the watery expanse in Genesis 1, so in Genesis 2 God waters the thirsty ground and plants a lush garden there.

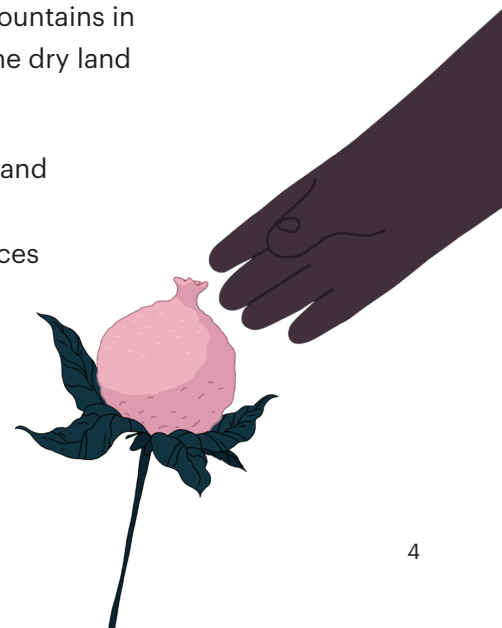
God gives humans the task of cultivating and caring for the garden, but they refuse to live by God’s wisdom. Instead, they choose to define good and bad for themselves (Gen. 3:1-6), reintroducing chaos into God’s good creation. Weeds choke the flourishing landscape (Gen. 3:17-18), and humans are exiled from the garden into the wilderness, where they will eventually return to the same dust from which God created the abundant world (Gen. 3:19, 23-24).

So the cycle begins. God designed humans for life in the garden. But when they reject his instruction, they end up exiled in barren places. Once in the wilderness, humans must make another choice. They can choose to trust God, who’s able to make the desert an oasis of flowing water and abundant food, or they can live by their own wisdom.

Hyperlink Summary

Israel’s prophets draw on the image of water in the wilderness to express God’s restoration of order and abundance in times of scarcity. When Israel is suffering in Babylonian exile, Isaiah 41:17-18 portrays their desperate need as a thirst God promises to quench, saying, “I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water” (Isa. 41:18, NRSV).

Just as water in dry places becomes an expression of God’s care, thorns and thistles are a reminder of humanity’s loss of Eden in later biblical stories. The prophets often use imagery of choking weeds smothering fertile places to communicate the consequences of humanity rejecting God’s wisdom (see Isa. 5:1-7; Hos. 10:8; Isa. 32:12-15).



Step 5: Re-Read Scripture

- Genesis 1:1-2
- Genesis 2:4-15
- Genesis 3:22-24

Step 6: Discuss as a Group

- How does what we've learned so far shed light on any of your earlier questions?
- What did you notice as we read these passages? What observations about the wilderness stand out to you?
- What do you think these passages suggest about God or his desires for humanity? As a community, how are we invited to respond?
- Are you seeing connections to other parts of Scripture or life in general?

Want To Go Further?

Video

[The Wilderness](#)

[Genesis 1](#)

Podcast

[The Wilderness of the Sea](#)



SESSION 2

Exile Encounters With God in the Wilderness

God can transform the wilderness into a place of refuge, where people encounter him and receive both a new identity and divine provision.

Step 1: Consider Key Question

What do the stories of Hagar and Moses reveal about the wilderness as a place where people are seen by God and given a new identity?

Step 2: Read Scripture

Start by exploring the examples of Hagar and Moses, who both encounter God in the wilderness.

- Genesis 16:1-15
- Exodus 3:1-6

Step 3: Ask Questions

Make space for everyone to ask questions about the passages you just read. The point is not to answer the questions but to give space for curiosity. To the best of your ability, focus your questions on how these passages connect to the wilderness theme. Write your questions down so you can reference them later.

Step 4: Collect Insights

Explore some key insights from these passages.

Story Context

God promises Abram and Sarai (later Abraham and Sarah) a child, but after several years of waiting, Sarai still hasn't conceived. So she takes matters into her own hands, forcing the enslaved Egyptian Hagar to sleep with Abram and bear a child for her. But when Hagar becomes pregnant, Sarai oppresses her. Just like Adam and Eve before them, Abram and Sarai fail to trust God, choosing instead to carry out their own plan on their own terms.

In response to Sarai's mistreatment, Hagar flees into the wilderness. Exiled because of the harmful choices of others, she is alone, vulnerable, and pregnant in a desolate land filled with predators. But God sees and hears Hagar's distress when no one else does. He calls her to return to Abram's household, where she can safely bear her child, and promises to give her an expansive family through her son, Ishmael.

Hagar's identity is recast when God speaks hope and dignity to her in the wilderness. She becomes the only biblical character to give God a name, *El Roi*, which means "the God who sees me" (Gen. 16:13).

Unlike Hagar, Moses ends up in the wilderness because of his own bad decisions. When he witnesses an Egyptian beating a fellow Hebrew, Moses kills the Egyptian and flees to the desert to escape Pharaoh's wrath (Exod. 2:11-15). But God meets Moses on the desolate slopes of Mount Horeb, appearing to him in a burning bush.

Moses' identity is unclear at this point in the story. He's of Hebrew descent, but he was raised in Pharaoh's household and married into a Midianite clan. At the burning bush, God reaffirms Moses' identity as a Hebrew, an heir of his promises to Abraham (Exod. 3:6). And he gives Moses a new purpose, calling him to rescue the Hebrews from Pharaoh's oppressive enslavement (Exod. 3:7-10). Like Hagar, Moses finds a place of refuge and new identity in the wilderness.

Word Definition: *Midbar*

Both Hagar and Moses find themselves in the *midbar* (Gen. 16:7; Exod. 3:1), the word most frequently used for "wilderness" in the Hebrew Bible. *Midbar* refers to uncultivated land, which is often hostile and dangerous. Like many characters in the Bible, Hagar and Moses experience the wilderness as a place of exile. But they also encounter God there, and in that desolate wasteland, God breathes new hope and life into them.

Hyperlink Summary

When God speaks to Moses from the burning bush, he promises that one day Israel will worship God on that very mountain (Exod. 3:12). Sure enough, when Moses leads Israel out of slavery in Egypt, they encounter God at Mount Horeb (also called Mount Sinai, Exod. 19:2). And there in the wilderness, God reveals their new identity as his "treasured possession" (Exod. 19:5).



Step 5: Re-Read Scripture

- Genesis 16:1-15
- Exodus 3:1-6

Step 6: Discuss as a Group

- How does what we've learned so far shed light on any of your earlier questions?
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Want To Go Further?

Video

[Vocab Insight:
Midbar / Wilderness](#)

Podcast

[How Do People End Up in the Wilderness?](#)



SESSION 3

Wilderness Humbling and Grumbling

The wilderness can become a formative place for God's people, teaching them to trust God for provision and purpose.

Step 1: Consider Key Question

How are God's people invited to trust him in the wilderness?

Step 2: Read Scripture

Start by exploring God's invitation to Israel to trust him in the wilderness.

- Exodus 16:1-20

Step 3: Ask Questions

Make space for everyone to ask questions about the passage you just read.

The point is not to answer the questions but to give space for curiosity. To the best of your ability, focus your questions on how this passage connects to the wilderness theme. Write your questions down so you can reference them later.

Step 4: Collect Insights

Explore some key insights from this passage.

Story Context

After suffering for centuries as slaves in Egypt, Israel's freedom in the wilderness might seem like a breath of fresh air. But the desolate landscape introduces its own set of problems. There is no food or water, so the Israelites quickly become desperate with hunger and thirst. They even start wishing they'd died in Egypt (Exod. 16:3)! But the scarcity of the wilderness is an invitation for the people to trust God for their next meal and everything they need to survive.

The Israelites could have reached their new home in a couple of weeks if they had taken a direct route along the Mediterranean coast. But God said the shorter route would expose them to warfare too quickly, causing them to run back to Egypt. So God intentionally took the people the long way to the promised land, leading them through the wilderness to build courage and provide them with ample opportunity to learn to trust him and follow his instructions (Exod. 13:17-18).

Moses reminds the Israelites of this in a speech before he dies, saying that God led them through the wilderness for 40 years to “humble” and “test” them (Deut. 8:2). As they prepare to enter a plentiful land, which might tempt them to forget God’s provision and instruction, he challenges them to remember the lessons they learned in the desert (Deut. 8:3-18).

Literary Design

On their journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai, the Israelites face three tests in the wilderness, arranged in a symmetrical design.

A: Lack of water (Exod. 15:22-27)

B: Lack of food (Exod. 16:1-36)

A’: Lack of water (Exod. 17:1-7)

Each of these tests provides the people with an opportunity to trust God. But when they face the harsh limitations of the wilderness, they repeatedly respond by giving in to despair and grumbling against Moses (Exod. 15:24, 16:2-3, 17:2-3). Still, in each case, God abundantly provides for their needs. Amidst the scarcity of the wilderness, God shows his people that they can trust him with their very lives.

In the central story, God responds to the people’s cry for food by sending manna, a strange bread-like substance that appears with the morning dew and sustains Israel all the way to the promised land (see Josh. 5:12). The manna provides another test of the people’s willingness to follow God’s instruction. God tells the people to collect only as much manna as they need to feed their household for one day, except on the sixth day, when they are to gather enough for two days in preparation for the Sabbath (Exod. 16:19, 22-26).

But some of the people don’t listen to these instructions, storing up extra manna only to find that it turns into a mess of maggots the next day (Exod. 16:20). Others go out to collect manna on the Sabbath and discover that the ground is bare (Exod. 16:27).

Later, after God enters into a covenant relationship with the Israelites (see Exod. 19-24), the pattern continues with seven more wilderness tests (see Num. 11-21). As they journey through the desolate wasteland, God shapes the Israelites so that they are no longer fearful but free and secure in their God-given identity and future.



Step 5: Re-Read Scripture

- Exodus 16:1-20

Step 6: Discuss as a Group

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Want To Go Further?

Video

[The Test](#)

Podcast

[Why Does God Lead Israel Into the Wilderness?](#)

[Lessons From the Wilderness for the Garden Land](#)



SESSION 4

Singing in the Wilderness

Israel's prophets use the images of wilderness and garden to describe both the bleak consequences of rejecting God and God's ability to bring restoration.

Step 1: Consider Key Question

How do Israel's prophets use wilderness and garden imagery?

Step 2: Read Scripture

Start by exploring the description of Israel's coming exile as a garden turning into a desolate wilderness and God's promise to bring restoration in the wilderness.

- Jeremiah 4:23-26
- Hosea 2:14-20
- Isaiah 5:13

Step 3: Ask Questions

Make space for everyone to ask questions about the passages you just read. The point is not to answer the questions but to give space for curiosity. To the best of your ability, focus your questions on how these passages connect to the wilderness theme. Write your questions down so you can reference them later.

Step 4: Collect Insights

Explore some key insights from these passages.

Story Context

As we noted in the last session, just before the Israelites entered the promised land, Moses cautioned them not to forget God's provision in the wilderness when they grew comfortable and well fed (Deut. 8:1-18). Despite his warning, the people quickly turn away from God when no longer faced with the scarcity of the wilderness. Worse yet, the Israelites use their newfound power and security to oppress those in need.

God confronts his people through the prophets, warning that their garden-like home will turn into a dry wilderness if they continue to reject God's instruction. But the people do not listen to the prophets' warnings. So the cycle introduced in the first chapters of the Bible repeats, as the people are exiled from their land.

Yet the story doesn't end there. God promises, through the prophets, to bring Israel out into the wilderness in order to woo them back into a marriage-like relationship, leading them to trust in him once again. And though their enemies have laid their land waste, God promises to restore it to its Eden-like state once more.

Hyperlink Summary

When the prophet Jeremiah describes the consequences of Israel's choices, he uses language from the story of creation. In the first verses of the Bible, God creates the world from a watery expanse that is "wild and waste" (*tohu vavohu*, Gen. 1:2, BibleProject Translation). So in an act of reversal, Jeremiah says that God will turn Israel's Eden-like home back into a wilderness that is *tohu vavohu* (Jer. 4:23). Their destructive choices lead to de-creation, as the order of God's good garden dissolves into wilderness chaos once more.

But the prophet Hosea offers a positive reversal, promising that the Valley of Achor, which means "trouble," will become "a door of hope" (Hos. 2:15). The Valley of Achor was the setting for a terrible moment in Israel's history when a man named Achan disobeyed God's instruction and the whole Israelite community paid the price (Josh. 7). Achan and his family were buried in that valley, so it carries the memory of rebellion and tragedy. Now God declares that even the most dismal places will be filled with possibility and hope when he restores his people.



Step 5: Re-Read Scripture

- Jeremiah 4:23-26
- Hosea 2:14-20
- Isaiah 5:13

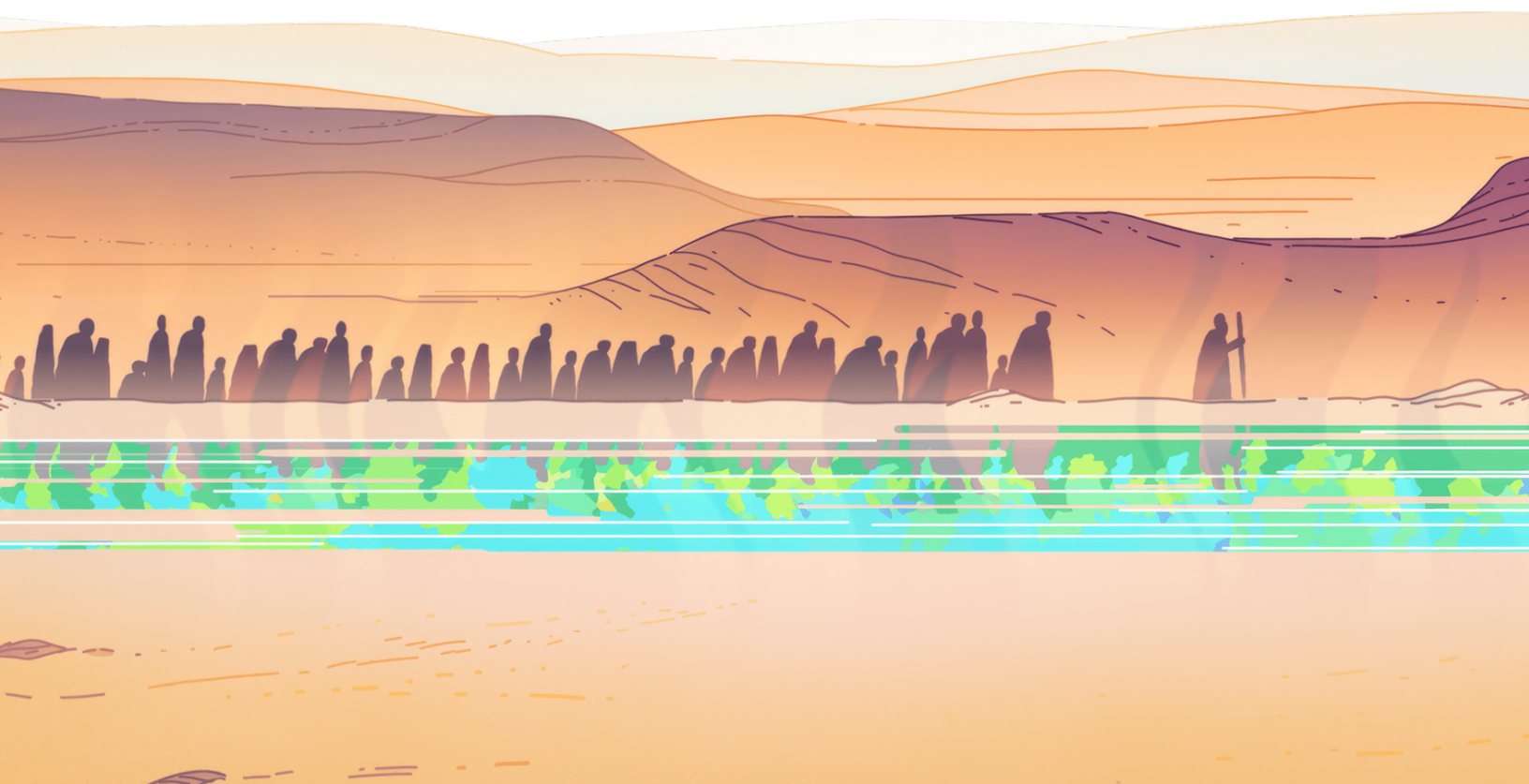
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Want To Go Further?

Podcast

[The Wilderness Remixed in Israel's Prophets](#)



SESSION 5

Jesus' Wilderness Tests (or Traps)

When Jesus faces wilderness tests, he demonstrates trust in the Father's provision and care.

Step 1: Consider Key Question

How does Jesus' experience in the wilderness recall Israel's 40 years of wandering in the desert?

Step 2: Read Scripture

Start by exploring Jesus' wilderness tests.

- Matthew 4:1-11

Step 3: Ask Questions

Make space for everyone to ask questions about the passage you just read.

The point is not to answer the questions but to give space for curiosity. To the best of your ability, focus your questions on how this passage connects to the wilderness theme. Write your questions down so you can reference them later.

Step 4: Collect Insights

Explore some key insights from this passage.

Hyperlink Summary

After being baptized in the Jordan River, Jesus enters the wilderness, where he experiences 40 days of testing. Similarly, the Israelites passed through the waters of the Red Sea before 40 years of testing in the wilderness. But where the Israelites repeatedly failed to trust God to meet their needs, Jesus demonstrates complete trust in his Father, showing that he can fulfill Israel's calling to bring God's blessing to the world (see Gen. 12:3; Exod. 19:4-6).

In the wildlands, Jesus meets a deceiver called “the devil” (Greek: *diabolos*, also called “the Satan” or “adversary”), who tries to trap Jesus with clever words. After Jesus fasts for 40 days, the Satan tempts him to turn stones into bread. Rather than grumbling like Israel or taking matters into his own hands, Jesus chooses to rely on the Father to provide for his needs. He responds by quoting Moses’ words that humans “shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4, NIV; see Deut. 8:3).

Next, the Satan twists God’s promise in Psalm 91:11-12, challenging Jesus to jump from a high place and see if God will save him. But Jesus again quotes Moses’ words: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Matt. 4:7, NIV; see Deut. 6:16).

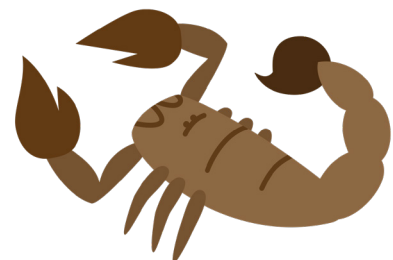
Finally, the Satan offers Jesus a powerful position if Jesus will bow down and worship him. But Jesus quotes Moses a third time: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only” (Matt. 4:10, NIV; see Deut. 6:13, 10:20). Unlike the Israelites in the wilderness, Jesus follows God’s instructions given through Moses.

Word Definition: *Peirazo*

The Greek word *peirazo*, which means “to test” or “tempt,” describes the Satan’s attempts to trap Jesus during his 40 days in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1). Jesus uses a different form from the same root (Greek: *ekpeirazo*) when he tells the Satan that you should not “test” God (Matt. 4:7).

In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), this root translates the Hebrew verb *nissah*, which is used both for God testing Israel to reveal what’s in their hearts (Exod. 16:4) and for the people testing God by not trusting in his provision (Exod. 17:2).

This word draws a connection between Jesus’ wilderness experience and Israel’s desert wanderings, inviting us to compare and contrast these related stories. But there is a key difference between the kinds of testing that Jesus and Israel experience in the wilderness. While God tests the Israelites to invite them to trust in him, the Satan tries to trap Jesus by tempting him to turn away from the Father. But Jesus passes the tests, demonstrating his faithfulness to the Father.



Step 5: Re-Read Scripture

- Matthew 4:1-11

Step 6: Discuss as a Group

- How does what we've learned so far shed light on any of your earlier questions?
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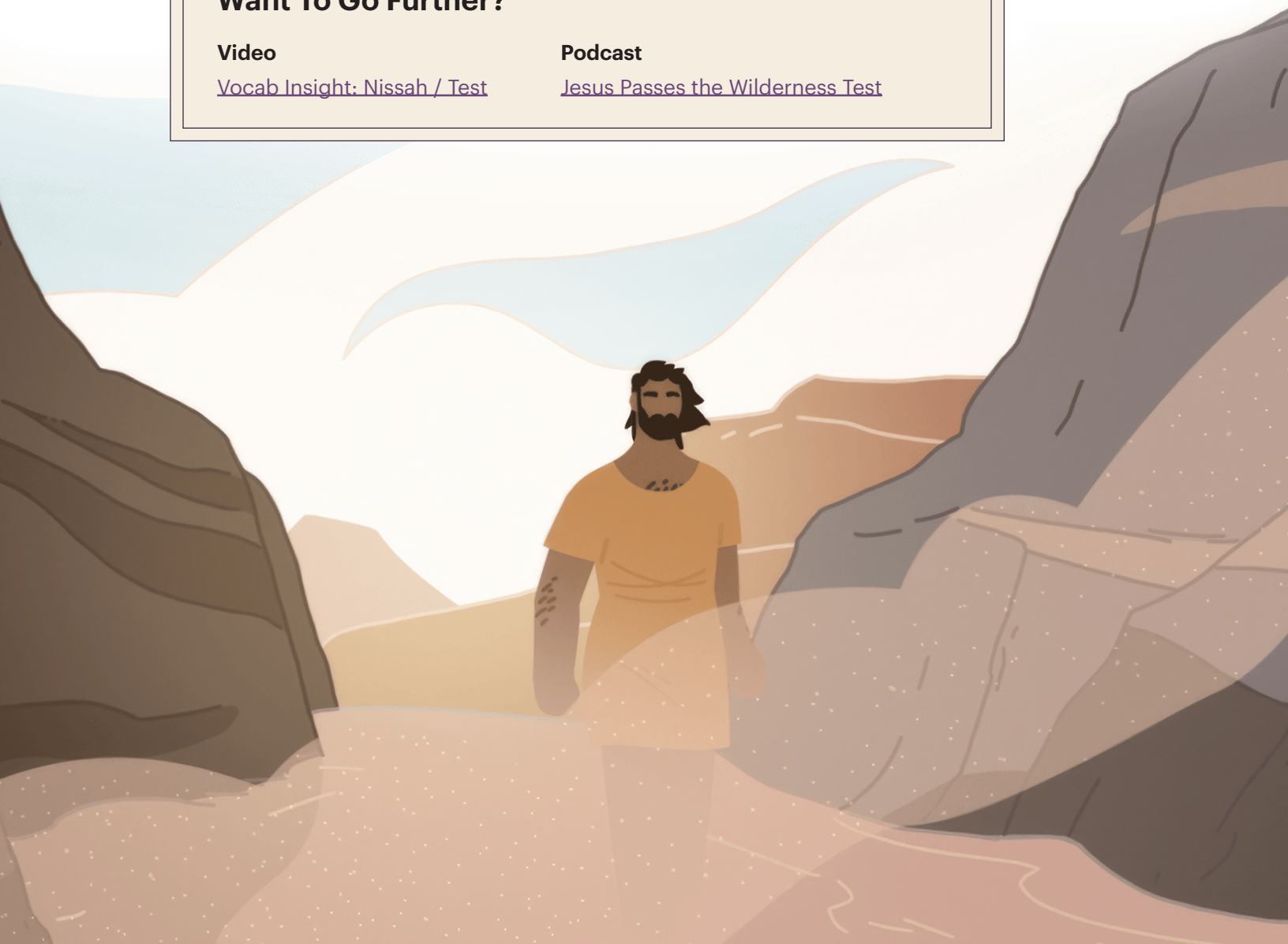
Want To Go Further?

Video

[Vocab Insight: Nissah / Test](#)

Podcast

[Jesus Passes the Wilderness Test](#)



SESSION 6

Bread in the Wilderness

When faced with the scarcity of the wilderness, Jesus looks to the Father and trusts that he can generously provide for a hungry multitude.

Step 1: Consider Key Question

How does the wilderness feast provided in this story echo God's provision for Israel in the desert?

Step 2: Read Scripture

Start by exploring Jesus' responses and actions in the wilderness.

- Mark 6:34-44
- John 6:30-31, 35, 41-42, 48-51

Step 3: Ask Questions

Make space for everyone to ask questions about the passages you just read.

The point is not to answer the questions but to give space for curiosity. To the best of your ability, focus your questions on how these passages connect to the wilderness theme. Write your questions down so you can reference them later.

Step 4: Collect Insights

Explore some key insights from these passages.

Story Context

When the disciples tell Jesus to send the crowd away to buy food, they're likely hoping for some rest and nourishment for themselves as well. They already tried retreating to a quiet place with Jesus, but the crowd followed them (Mark 6:31-33).

Instead of agreeing to the disciples' request, Jesus asks them to feed the crowd. Overwhelmed by the prospect of finding food for so many people in a deserted place, the disciples fail to recognize that Jesus is inviting them to trust God with the needs of the 5,000 men (plus women and children) gathered around them in the wilderness.

When they bring Jesus their meager supply of five loaves and two fish, he confidently looks to the Father to multiply it into enough food to satisfy everyone. And after everyone has eaten their fill, the disciples collect 12 baskets of leftovers, recalling God's abundant provision for the 12 tribes of Israel in the wilderness.

Hyperlink Summary

John's gospel reveals that even after Jesus' astonishing multiplication of bread (see John 6:1-14), the crowds continue to doubt, demanding another sign from Jesus, like the manna God provided for their ancestors (see Exod. 16). Jesus responds by saying, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35, 48). In other words, he is the true nourishment they're longing for. The manna God gave the Israelites in the wilderness sustained their bodies for a season, but those who are nourished by Jesus will live forever.

By multiplying bread in a desolate wasteland, Jesus reveals that he can abundantly provide for people's physical needs, while also pointing to the more profound truth that he is the source of true life for those willing to follow him. But the people "grumble" or "complain" at Jesus' words (John 6:41), just as the Israelites "grumbled" or "complained" in the wilderness (Exod. 16:2).



Step 5: Re-Read Scripture

- Mark 6:34-44
- John 6:30-31, 35, 41-42, 48-51

Step 6: Discuss as a Group

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Want To Go Further?

Podcast

[Jesus, the New Shepherd in the Wilderness](#)



SESSION 7

Faithfulness in the Wilderness Leads to Rest

True rest is available for those who learn to trust God enough to follow his instruction and embrace his way of life.

Step 1: Consider Key Question

How does the author of Hebrews invite us to learn from Israel's time in the wilderness?

Step 2: Read Scripture

Start by exploring the challenge to trust God as we look forward to the rest he has promised.

- Hebrews 3:12-4:11

Step 3: Ask Questions

Make space for everyone to ask questions about the passage you just read. The point is not to answer the questions but to give space for curiosity. To the best of your ability, focus your questions on how this passage connects to the wilderness theme. Write your questions down so you can reference them later.

Step 4: Collect Insights

Explore some key insights from this passage.

Word Definitions: Meribah and Massah

The line quoted in Hebrews 4:7 refers to Psalm 95:8: "Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness" (NIV).

This verse alludes to a story found in Exodus 17:1-7 when the Israelites had no water in the wilderness. The place-name Meribah comes from the Hebrew root *riv*, which means "quarrel," and Massah comes from *nissah*, which means "test." Moses gave the place these names because the people quarreled against him and tested God. Still, despite their lack of trust, God mercifully provided water from a rock.

The author of Hebrews points back to this moment in Israel's story as a reminder to turn to God with soft and receptive hearts.

Story Context

God rescued the Israelites from brutal slavery in Egypt in order to bring them to a place of rest in the promised land. But when they got to the edge of the land, they were afraid of the people in it and refused to enter. Instead of learning to trust God through their wilderness hardships, they had become calloused and hard-hearted. So the original Israelite generation that escaped Egypt, including Moses, wandered in the wilderness until they died, never entering God's rest in the land of promise (Num. 13-14).

The next generation of Israelites followed Joshua into the promised land and experienced rest from their enemies for a time (Josh. 21:44). But this was not the fullness of rest that God established on the seventh day of creation (Gen. 2:2-3). And when the people rejected God's instruction and oppressed the vulnerable, they corrupted even this incomplete rest.

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus opens up the way to the deep Sabbath rest that began when God created the world and will reach its fullness in the new creation. Jesus is a new Joshua (both names are *Iesous* in Greek), who leads people into God's ultimate Sabbath rest by teaching them to trust God for protection and provision.

The author of Hebrews challenges people to hold on to this hope, even when they're afraid or facing scarcity like Israel did in the wilderness, so they can turn to God and experience true rest.



Step 5: Re-Read Scripture

- Hebrews 3:12-4:11

Step 6: Discuss as a Group

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Want To Go Further?

Video

[Sabbath](#)

Podcast

[Living in the Wilderness Now](#)

[Hebrews: The Quest for Final Rest](#)

