

Jesus in the Wild: Facing Down the IFs in Our Lives

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March 12, 2023

Sermon Audio file

What is the last “if” you heard or said in your heart? If you were loved by God, you wouldn’t have this problem. If you were close with God, this job would just appear before you. If God cared, these trials wouldn’t be happening to you. The enemy’s goal, according to the story of Jesus in the wild – in the untamed places where we feel most vulnerable – is simply to put question marks in our minds. And some of the most potent questions begin with one tiny, little, itty-bitty word that can set our world on fire: IF.

In our story of Jesus in the wild, Satan brings three “if” statements to Jesus. And, like Jesus, often we face our “if” moments alone. Who doesn’t like moral support when the heat is on? Who doesn’t need friends when the heart is most challenged, to affirm our calling, and to remind us who we are? Jesus doesn’t, that’s who. Not at this moment. He knows he must face the enemy in the solitary place – the wild – alone.

Sometimes we must face the enemy alone as well, though we all need the support of our community of faith to ultimately make it through our challenges. Jesus knew that much of his entire ministry would have to be self-motivated, Spirit-powered, and that the applause and encouragement of fickle disciples would get in his way. (Remember Peter and the “Get behind me, Satan” moment?)

Jesus must face his accuser alone. He knows it won’t be the last time. With Gethsemane ahead, and his baptism behind him, Jesus must leave the lush Jordan to enter the dry desert to face the one whose works he had come to destroy (1 John 3:8).

Today, let’s explore how we handle the “if” challenges to our own calling that come from the adversary. Your calling and mine will be contested. Thus, we must learn to identify the little, seemingly irrelevant words that call it into question. If is one of them.

First, however, let’s take a closer look at the word “if” and its importance in the Bible and in our relationship with God. Bill Craddock addresses the value of the word “if” in his writing, titled, “How important is the word ‘IF’ in man’s relationship with God?” Here’s what he says:

One of the first forms of logical reasoning we learn as children is the significance of the word, “IF.” It is tragic that we do not remember the meaning of this word as we reach adulthood, especially in the realm of religion.

Grammatically speaking, “if” is recognized as a conditional particle. It refers to conditions or circumstances upon which certain consequences follow.

“If” is a word that comes into play in so many areas of our lives. It might involve opportunities, punishments, blessings, etc. Always remember, if does not stand alone. If you use the word “if” it must be in conjunction with something else. “If” by itself stands for nothing and has no meaning. However, when mother says, “Johnny, ‘if’ you eat your green beans you may have some ice cream,” then “if” means something. Johnny knows that he will not get the ice cream without eating those terrible green beans. How much does the [yummy] ice cream mean to him? Is it worth eating the beans? “If” stands between Johnny and the ice cream.

As we get older the “ifs” begin to come fast and furious and we hear this word many times each day. “If

you finish your homework, you may go out and play.” “If you finish your work, you may use the car this evening.” “If you take your medicine, you will feel better.”

Why is it that “if” is so well understood except in religion? [For example,] there are those who teach the impossibility of falling from the grace of God. Jesus said, “If a man keeps my words, he shall never see death” (John 8:51). Does this text say that no one will ever be lost regardless of how he lives? Certainly not! It does affirm that no one who “keeps Christ’s word” will be lost. [So,] in this scripture the word “if” is critical for it states a condition.

Notice the word “if” in the following scriptures:

IF we hold fast the word, we will be saved (1 Cor. 15:2).

IF we faint not, we shall reap in due season (Gal. 6:9).

IF we endure, we shall reign with him (2 Tim 2:12).

IF we [confirm our call and election] we shall never stumble (2 Peter 1:10).

IF we walk in the light, Christ’s blood keeps us free from sin (1 John 1:7).

In each of the scriptures just cited, observe the leading conditional word, “IF”. Also note the action verbs that are connected to “if”. How can one, in the light of these texts, contend that the retention of one’s salvation is unconditional? How can one say that God will save us no matter how we live our lives? Eternal salvation cannot be considered without looking at the word “if”. The Bible is clear that our salvation is dependent upon our sincere and determined effort to pursue the will of the Son of God.

So, let’s never underestimate the importance of the word “if” in the Bible and to our relationship with God. One reason “if” is so important is because God repeatedly uses it to develop us and to strengthen our faith. Consider these verses:

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14).

“If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:11).

God uses “if” to stir faith, hope, and love in us! If you act in this way, God says, then I will bless you and we will do great things together. The word “if” is neutral in itself; the effect of “if” holds power according to the one speaking it and the motivation behind its use. God uses the word “if” for our benefit and ultimate prosperity; the enemy uses the word “if” for our confusion and ultimate extermination. If is a word of possibility, of new potential—of another way to live.

While “if” is a word God uses to build us, “if” is a word the accuser uses to break us. Like Jesus, when the enemy speaks an “if” word to you, and your internal answer leaves you feeling lost and without hope in the world, then you know it’s not an “if” from the Lord (and your response is wrong). For Jesus in the wild, the enemy uses the “if” word three times while seeking to unseat Jesus on the inside from his calling as a beloved Son of the Father.

In the same way, the enemy seeks to unseat us from our calling as a beloved son or daughter of our loving Father. If is a challenge to our identity, love, and purpose. If “shoulds” us into submission. Every day, we hear some version of that word dancing in our own heads, putting a question mark between us and our blessing as the beloved of God—often pressing us to inwardly decide once again if we really believe God is good, if we are precious, if we matter, and if we will find joy in this life.

And every “if” implies a “then,” even if it’s not explicit in the sentence. We compare ourselves to ourselves-as-we-dream-of-being, and to others. Typically, we despair. If we were really this, then that would

happen. If God is in us, then why am I struggling with anxiety and mental health issues? We struggle because we have not found our identity and vocation in the Father's blessing as Jesus did, so we listen to the if-then whispers of the enemy.

When you encounter those if-then temptations – and you will! – you need to heed this warning: Don't hang around in deep thought when the enemy is after you; like Jesus, address the taunt head on and quickly move on! The time of temptation is not a time to entertain all the possibilities—only truth.

Let's consider the word "if" from one more perspective—the perspective of kingdom possibility because "if" is a word we can use when we speak of God's coming Kingdom. Imagine yourself using the "if" word for kingdom purposes. If I did this, what could happen? If I live this way, what could change? If is a word that can lead us to follow Jesus with focus and faith into the world. Every transforming vision of the heart, home, church, or community is preceded by a holy if statement. Dreams begin with the idea that if we obey the voice of God right now, then God may move mountains that would otherwise not be moved.

Allow the Lord to give you dreams again, dreams of helping others in your community, dreams of responding to God's call to a new job, dreams of sharing your resources with your community of faith. Ask God what the next possibility is ahead—and you'll find yourself on the crest of a wave of ministry that is powered by the Holy Spirit.

So, as you face the "ifs" of life, always remember that when God comes to you with an "if," listen. When the enemy comes to you with an "if," challenge. When you carry your own "if" within you – the "if" that comes from faith and vision – look ... look to God to lead you into the unrealized, hope-filled future God offers you – no "ands," "ifs," or "buts" about it!

I close with this question and answer: Why does God allow us to go through trials and suffering? Here is a poem called, "And God Said If . . ." that helps explain this. It's anonymous, and was posted on the "Next Generation for Christ" website on 7/18/15 by Dr. James Nored of Fairfax Church of Christ in Fairfax, Virginia.

If you never felt pain, / Then how would you know that I'm a Healer?
If you never went through difficulty, / How would you know that I'm a Deliverer?
If you never had a trial, / How could you call yourself an over comer?
If you never felt sadness, / How would you know that I'm a Comforter?
If you never made a mistake, / How would you know that I'm forgiving?
If you never were in trouble, / How would you know that I will come to your rescue?
If you never were broken, / Then how would you know that I can make you whole?
If you never had a problem, / How would you know that I can solve them?
If you never had any suffering, / Then how would you know what I went through?
If you never went through the fire, / Then how would you become pure?
If I gave you all things, / How would you appreciate them?
If I never corrected you, / How would you know that I love you?
If you had all power, / Then how would you learn to depend on me?
If your life was perfect, / Then what would you need Me for?