

SESSION 2: LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session 2: Prepare Yourself for Temptation

Passage: Sirach 2:1-18

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that trial is not a sign that God has abandoned his servant but the normal furnace in which faith is proven, and that the pattern holds from Israel to Jesus himself.

Catholic Touchstone: Divine providence and the mystery of trial (CCC 2846-2849 on temptation; CCC 164 on faith tested).

What You Need to Know

Chapter 2 is the title chapter of our study and one of the most cherished chapters of Sirach in Catholic tradition: it is read at Mass, and its themes echo from the desert monks to The Imitation of Christ. Its opening line refuses to sugarcoat discipleship: if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation (2:1). The Greek word is *peirasmos*, which covers both testing and temptation, the same word family Jesus teaches us to pray about in the Our Father. Ben Sira is saying: the moment you volunteer for God's service, expect resistance.

The chapter's central image is metallurgy: gold is tested in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation (2:5). Fire does not destroy gold; it proves and purifies it. Ben Sira then gives the tested servant three anchors, each beginning you who fear the Lord: wait for mercy, trust him, hope for good things (2:7-9), and devastating rhetorical questions: who ever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame, or persevered in his fear and was forsaken? (2:10).

The session's live discovery is the payoff: the group will find that Jesus himself walks the Sirach 2:1 pattern. At his baptism he comes forward publicly to serve the Father, and the Spirit then leads him into the wilderness to be tempted (Matthew 3:16-4:1; Mark 1:12 says immediately). What Ben Sira taught as proverb, Christ lived as history. Keep this discovery for the group; do not preview it.

OT Roots and Fulfillment

The furnace of testing runs deep in Israel's memory: Abraham tested on Moriah (Genesis 22:1), Israel tested forty years in the wilderness to know what was in their heart (Deuteronomy 8:2), gold refined in Proverbs 17:3 and Wisdom 3:5-6. The New Testament receives the whole stream: count it all joy when you meet various trials (James 1:2-4), and the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold tested by fire (1 Peter 1:6-7). Peter and James write in imagery that strongly resonates with Sirach 2.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Anthony of the Desert

The father of monks, according to the sayings handed down from the Egyptian desert, taught that no one can enter the kingdom of heaven untested, and that we should expect temptation to our last breath. His sayings echo the realism of Sirach 2:1: temptation is the job description of anyone serious about God.

Traditional sayings of the Desert Fathers associated with St. Anthony (Apophthegmata Patrum tradition, paraphrased)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: St. Teresa of Ávila

Teresa, who endured decades of dryness and opposition, counseled her sisters that patience obtains everything, that God does not change, and that whoever has God lacks nothing. Her famous bookmark prayer is Sirach 2:6 (trust in him, and he will help you) lived out over a lifetime.

The bookmark prayer found in her breviary, traditionally attributed to St. Teresa (paraphrased)

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: Thomas à Kempis

The Imitation of Christ teaches that no one is so perfect as to be beyond temptation, and that trials are useful because they humble, purify, and instruct us. Fire tests iron, he writes, and temptation tests the just man. The thought is Sirach 2:5 handed on across some sixteen centuries.

The Imitation of Christ, Book I, ch. 13 (traditionally attributed to Thomas à Kempis, paraphrased)

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 2846-2849:** On the petition lead us not into temptation: God does not tempt anyone to evil; the Spirit helps us discern between trial, which is necessary for growth, and temptation, which leads to sin.
- **CCC 164-165:** Faith is often lived in darkness and can be put to the test; we turn to the witnesses of faith who endured.

Thread Watch

- **DEVELOP (Fear of the Lord):** 2:7-9 and 2:15-17 address you who fear the Lord three times each. Notice with the group that the fearers of the Lord are precisely the trusters and hoppers: fear and trust are friends, not rivals.
- **TEND (Who is Wisdom?):** No new data tonight, but if anyone tries to discuss their sealed guess, cheerfully shut it down. Guesses stay sealed until Session 8.

Session Goals

1. Establish from 2:1 that trial is the expected companion of anyone who steps forward to serve God.
2. Unpack the gold-in-the-furnace image of 2:5 and what it implies about what trials are for.
3. Find the three anchors given to the tested servant in 2:7-9 and the argument of 2:10-11.
4. Discover, live, that Jesus himself walks the Sirach 2:1 pattern at his baptism and temptation.
5. Send each person into the week with a concrete way to reframe one current trial.

Time Note

90 minutes. If running long, cut Build question 3 (the double woe of 2:12-14) and compress the second Win question; keep the Matthew 3-4 live discovery at full length.

SESSION 2: DISCUSSION GUIDE

Session 2: Prepare Yourself for Temptation

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you came forward to serve the Father and were led into the wilderness to be tempted. Walk with us tonight as we study the furnace of testing. Give us gold-making faith: the trust that waits, hopes, and does not depart from you. Amen.

Win: Opening Questions

Win 1. Think of a skill you are genuinely good at. What did it cost you to get good, and was there a moment you almost quit?

Win 2. When something painful happens to a believer, our first instinct is often what did I do wrong? Where do you think we learned that reflex?

Build: Into the Text

1. Read Sirach 2:1-2 aloud. What is the very first thing Ben Sira tells the person who comes forward to serve the Lord? Is this the recruiting pitch you would expect? Why would a teacher open this way?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Prepare yourself for temptation. Set your heart right, be steadfast, do not be hasty in time of calamity. It is shockingly honest recruiting: no prosperity promises, just a soldier's briefing. A teacher opens this way because disciples who expect ease will desert at the first ambush; disciples who expect the furnace will stand. Jesus recruits the same way: take up your cross (Matthew 16:24).

2. Read 2:4-5. What is the image in verse 5, and how does it answer the question what are trials for? What is the difference between fire that destroys and fire that refines?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Gold is tested in fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation. Fire applied to wood destroys; fire applied to gold reveals and purifies, burning off dross while the gold itself survives brighter. The image claims that trials, received in faith, do not destroy the servant but prove and purify him. Note what the furnace is called: humiliation. The dross the furnace most often exposes is pride.

3. Read 2:12-14. Between the comfort passages, Ben Sira pronounces three woes. On whom, and why is losing endurance (2:14) treated so seriously?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Woe to timid hearts and slack hands, to the sinner who walks a double path, to the timid heart that does not trust, and to you who have lost your endurance. The double path is divided allegiance: serving God while keeping an escape route. Endurance is treated as life-or-death because in this book faith is not a

feeling but a hold; to release the grip mid-furnace is to lose everything the fire was producing.

4. Read 2:7-9 aloud slowly. Three sentences begin with the same address. Who is addressed, and what three commands are given? Then read 2:10-11: what evidence does Ben Sira offer that the commands are reasonable?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

You who fear the Lord: wait for his mercy, trust in him, hope for good things. The evidence is an appeal to the entire track record of God: consider the ancient generations and see, who ever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame? None. The Lord is compassionate and merciful, forgives sins and saves in affliction. Ben Sira invites us to cross-examine history itself.

Connect the thread: the people commanded to trust are the fearers of the Lord. Fear of the Lord and radical trust turn out to be the same posture seen from two sides.

LIVE DISCOVERY

5. Now the discovery. Someone turn to Matthew 3:16-17 and read it; someone else immediately continue with Matthew 4:1-4. Watch the sequence closely. What happens to Jesus, in what order, and where have we seen this pattern tonight?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

At his baptism Jesus publicly comes forward for his mission, and the Father declares him beloved Son. Then the Spirit leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1; Mark adds immediately, 1:12). Come forward to serve, then prepare yourself for temptation: Jesus walks the very pattern Sirach 2:1 describes. The pattern is not a malfunction of discipleship; it is the path the Master himself walked.

Push one step: Israel was tested forty years in the wilderness and grumbled; Jesus is tested forty days and stands, answering every temptation from Scripture. He is the faithful Israelite, the acceptable man proven in the furnace.

6. Notice how Jesus fights in Matthew 4: three temptations, three quotations of Scripture. Now look back at Sirach 2:15-16. What do those who fear the Lord do with God's words, and what does that suggest about how we prepare for temptation before it arrives?

ANSWER (*share after the discussion*)

Those who fear the Lord do not disobey his words; they seek his approval and are filled with his law. Jesus answers each temptation from a heart already full of Scripture. Preparation for the furnace happens in peacetime: Scripture memorized, sacraments frequented, prayer habitual. You cannot forge armor during the battle.

7. Read 2:18 to close the chapter. Given a choice of judges, whose hands does Ben Sira choose to fall into, and why? Where does a Christian hear this sentence echoed?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, but not into the hands of men, for as his majesty is, so also is his mercy. His mercy is proportioned to his greatness: infinite majesty, infinite mercy. King David makes the same choice in 2 Samuel 24:14, in closely related terms, and the penitent in the confessional makes it again: it is safer to entrust oneself to God, whose judgment is perfectly just and merciful, than to merely human judgment.

Dig Deeper

DIG DEEPER: Peirasmos and the Our Father

The Greek word in 2:1 (peirasmos) is the same word family as lead us not into temptation (Matthew 6:13). The Catechism explains the petition: we ask God not to let us take the path that leads to sin, and to distinguish between trial, which strengthens, and temptation, which entices to evil. God never tempts anyone to evil (James 1:13), and trials met in faith work steadfastness (James 1:2-4). See CCC 2846-2847.

DIG DEEPER: Sirach in the Mass

Sirach 2 appears in the Lectionary for weekday Mass. Watch for the Church reading you this book: Sirach turns up at Sunday Mass in Ordinary Time, on feasts, and in the Liturgy of the Hours. The Church never stopped teaching from Ben Sira's classroom.

Send: Taking It Out

Send 1. Name one furnace you are in right now, big or small. Bringing 2:5 into it, what would change this week if you asked God to make this fire refining rather than destroying?

Send 2. Ben Sira says woe to the one who walks a double path. Is there an escape route you are keeping open, a corner of life fenced off from God, just in case? What would closing it cost?

Live It This Week

- Memorize the memory verse cold. It is the title of our whole study; you will use it for the rest of your life.
- Take the trial you named in the Send question and write one prayer at the top of a journal page: Lord, use this furnace to refine me. Under it, each day this week, write one line about what God might be burning off.
- Pray the last petitions of the Our Father slowly each night (lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil), remembering that the Greek of Sirach 2:1 uses peirasmos, the same word family as this petition.

Closing Prayer

Father, as your majesty is, so also is your mercy. We choose to fall into your hands. Steady the timid heart, strengthen the slack hands, and keep us off the double path. Refine us in the furnace and do not let the fire go to waste. Through Christ our Lord, who was tempted in every way yet without sin. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation." (**Sirach 2:1**)

Before next session: Read Sirach 3:1-16 and 3:17-31, and notice which two very different topics the chapter joins.

SESSION 2: LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Session 2: Prepare Yourself for Temptation

Principal passages in order of use:

6. Sirach 2:1-2
7. Sirach 2:4-5
8. Sirach 2:12-14
9. Sirach 2:7-9
10. Sirach 2:10-11
11. Matthew 3:16-17
12. Matthew 4:1-4
13. Sirach 2:15-16
14. Sirach 2:18
15. 2 Samuel 24:14 (leader reference)
16. James 1:2-4 and 1 Peter 1:6-7 (leader reference)

Memory verse: Sirach 2:1, "My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for temptation."