



Reflections on the Lord's Prayer: A Lenten Study

SESSION 6

And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 4:1–11

Everybody's Prayer

"One question has always bothered me," an elderly man said one day as he took me aside at a church gathering. I braced myself for the question; this man was a patron saint in the congregation and as good a human being and as earnest a Christian as one is likely to know. I wondered what question would trouble this man through the long, honorable years of his life.

"This," he said. "What is the meaning of the sentence in the Lord's Prayer, 'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'? Would *God* lead us into temptation?"

I suspect that anyone who has spoken the Lord's Prayer with any measure of concentration has asked that question. Why are we instructed to plead with God not to lead us into temptation?

Would God actually lead us into temptation? And do we need then to plead with God not to do so? The answer in the Bible itself seems quite clear. The New Testament book of James says simply, "No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one" (Jas. 1:13). One wonders if perhaps the author of this letter, writing a generation after Jesus taught the prayer, was seeking to correct a question that the prayer had raised in the minds of early believers. I think it's quite possi-



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HUMANS AND TEMPTATION

No phrase of the Lord's Prayer comes closer to our humanness than this particular phrase: "Lead us not into temptation." If any sentence in the prayer applies distinctively and uniquely to our human race, this is it. It is our capacity for temptation that defines us as being human. If animals could pray (and perhaps you feel that they do), they could rightly ask for daily bread, but only we humans must worry ourselves about temptation—and every human being must do so. As for the angels of heaven, they can hallow God's name and pray too for God's kingdom to come, but from what we understand about angels, there is no need to pray for exemption from temptation. It is we humans who are capable of good and evil, so it is we humans who are so painfully susceptible to temptation.

ble, but in any event James makes clear that temptation is altogether outside the province of God, whether as receiver or initiator. Then he goes on to explain how it is that temptation works: “But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it” (Jas. 1:14).

Let’s look for a moment at the word *temptation*. Nearly four hundred years ago, when the King James translation of the Scriptures was made, the word *temptation* meant to test or to prove. Thus the New Revised Standard Version, translating the meaning of words for our time, casts the prayer this way: “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one” (Matt. 6:13). The classic words of the King James translation probably come to most of our lips more naturally than the more recent translations, so it is important to pause with those words before going further into the content of the prayer.

Of course temptation is itself a time of trial. For a boy or a girl who wants to make the baseball team or softball team, the time of trial is the sharp grounder that he or she must field or the curveball to be hit. For all of us in what we sometimes call the game of life, the testing comes multiple times each day, by way of passing thoughts, casual conversations, or perhaps those insistent television advertisements. These occasions are in truth tests of will and character. We wouldn’t necessarily identify all of them as temptations; indeed, we probably wouldn’t think of them as tests or trials, either. These matters are just the stuff of everyday living. And yet it is from this common *stuff* that our characters are shaped and our destinies committed.

When we hear this prayer from Jesus’ lips, we think quite naturally of his time of trial in the wilderness. Matthew’s Gospel puts the matter in bald terms: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matt. 4:1). To go back to my sports illustration of a moment ago, we might say—perhaps rather inelegantly—that this was when Jesus was being tried out for the team. How would he handle that hot ground ball or that wicked curve? What Jesus suffered were temptations, no doubt about it. But they were also the tests that prepared our Lord for the years of ministry just ahead. And fierce as those tests were, in ultimate terms they were—to continue with our sports analogies—only exhibition games before the real season began.

Being Tested

I’m thinking, you see, of what the Gospel of Luke says. After the three fierce tests in the wilderness, Luke tells us, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). One doesn’t need too much imagination to calculate what some of those “opportune” times must have been. If Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness with the promise that he could make the whole world bow down to him, I suspect that such a temptation came to our Lord more than once when people idolized him.

And so, of course, it is with us. Our tests rarely come wearing a black hat, like the villain in a melodrama. Some of our most serious tests of character come in highly attractive form. When you were elected an officer in your high school class, or when you received a promotion or an increase in salary, did you fear you were entering a serious place of testing? Probably not. But in truth success and recognition may pose much greater hazard to the soul than some of the headline sins—partially because we brace ourselves against the headline sins, while the more subtle sins of greed, pride, envy, and arrogance slip alongside as friends. They come with the territory of success.

The early Christian church went through recurring periods of persecution under a succession of Roman emperors. I’m sure they thought of those periods as times of testing, and no doubt some believers lost faith during such times. But as we look back on church history, we realize that Christendom survived the periods of persecution in better fashion than the acclaim and recognition that came when Constantine gave the church the endorsement of the throne. Public approval, acceptance, and acclaim proved more damning tests than persecution.

Testing has its value. That’s why we go to a doctor for a periodical checkup and to a financial consultant for some long-term planning. And it’s not just for our own well-being. We go to a state or county office of some sort when we want a driver’s license, and they test us for our own safety and for the safety of others who may be in reach of our skills or lack thereof.

So, too, with any number of life’s trying circumstances. I think I will never forget the colleague who spoke with me when I was watching over my then-three-year-old daughter, who had just passed through an emergency

appendectomy and whose life was still hanging in the balance. He said, "I would give a great deal to learn what you will learn from this experience, Ellsworth, but I would give still more to avoid going through it." He was right on both accounts. I learned things during those weeks that still benefit me half a century later, but I wouldn't wish the experience on anyone else. Trials can make us stronger, wiser, more gracious, and certainly more conscious of God. But not necessarily so.

As valuable as life's tests may be, only a fool or a masochist would seek out trouble. We live in a world where health is in peril of germs and sickness and accident, where our finances fluctuate with boom and bust, and where in spite of our best efforts we experience both defeat and success and garner both enemies and friends. We can't help but meet a certain amount of testing in the normal course of daily living. If given the choice, we would be glad to escape these tests. So the pious among us—and the irreligious, too, for that matter—appeal to God to guide us past life's perils. And if we sense that we have come to a place where our road divides into two (or perhaps even three!), and we cannot know which is the better way, we pray, "Lead us not through the place of testing."

Jesus and Testing

Here as at other points in this great prayer, Jesus must have shaped the petition from the context of his own earthly experience. His was no theoretical gospel, no ivory-tower analysis, but truth that had itself emerged from the place of testing. When the biblical story reports on Jesus' wilderness experience, we're told that he came through it without sin. But it is also very clear that the test of the wilderness was intense. Mark's Gospel is so succinct in reporting this experience that he doesn't list the specific temptations, as Matthew and Luke do; he says simply, "He was . . . tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (Mark 1:13). I am blessed to know that the angels waited on our Lord, but I have often pondered what Mark meant when he said that Jesus "was with the wild beasts." Was he simply emphasizing the violence that prevailed in that wilderness and with this physical description giving us an emotional setting for the spiritual struggle? Or was Mark portraying hell's invasion in the imagery of "wild beasts"?

As we have noted already in passing, the testing in the wilderness was only a preview of the continuing struggles



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Jesus would face. It's the daily-ness of life that is most trying. Friends failed Jesus, in the fashion of Judas and Peter; people like James and John who should have understood his plans were instead dull and difficult; crowds praised him and put his ego to the test; long days and insistent human need must have rubbed Jesus' nerves to a fine edge. And simple weariness was perhaps the greatest test of all, for there are instances where we can be courageous in the face of every imaginable struggle and then lose character from the dull weight of exhaustion.

So I wonder: did our Lord, who knew testing and trial so well, build into his prayer a simple recognition of the kind of lives you and I must live? Is this a prayer drenched in humanness, one that perhaps says, "When life comes to a place where one road leads to testing and another to freedom from testing, show me the road that leads the easier way"? Does this phrase suggest that while testing does, indeed, do us good, we prefer nevertheless to be spared its rigors?

Rescue Us from Evil

This portion of the prayer has a second phrase: "but rescue us from the evil one," or simply, "but deliver us from evil." This phrase, in the fashion of Hebrew poetry, balances the preceding line. In the times when two roads lie before us, we sometimes take the more difficult one: perhaps because life demands it; perhaps because we have erred. When that happens, we need help to deal with the evil we encounter. That intrepid frontiersman Daniel Boone is said to have prayed one day when he faced a hungry bear, "Lord, if you can't help me, don't help that bear." I understand that prayer.

These two balancing phrases tell us two important facts: the first, "do not bring us to the time of trial," reminds us that testing is universal in human life, part of the fabric of each day for every human being. The second, "but

deliver us from evil,” reassures us that we can be helped and that we can count on God for victory at any place of testing.

Part of the glory and quality of the Lord’s Prayer is in its altogether realistic take on life. We’re conscious of this when we speak the phrases that ask for daily bread and for forgiveness of sins. This is a prayer for life in the daily run—yes, even the daily grind. And it is this same quality that comes through so feelingly in the two phrases we are presently considering. The first admits that we live in a world of testing, and it makes concession to our human frailty when it allows us to say, “Spare me from the day of testing.” But it goes on to acknowledge that some testing can’t be escaped, and it offers help for such instances: “but deliver us from evil.”

The late David Read illustrated the point by a homely illustration. Suppose, he says, that you work in an office in close contact with several other employees. One gets on your nerves by making a certain remark at the same time and in the same tone of voice every day. It isn’t a big thing (indeed, you’re ashamed that you let it get to you), but get to you it does, planting in you the seed for temper and unpleasantness. Dr. Read suggests that you might well close your prayer “some gloomy morning” by asking, “Don’t let him say it this morning: it would be too much for me—but if he does, then help me to keep my temper.”¹ That’s an example of “Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”

Most of us can easily imagine just such a prayer in our daily round of life. In truth, if we had the good sense to apply this petition from the Lord’s Prayer more frequently, we would no doubt be better equipped to deal with a fellow worker, a spouse, a pupil or teacher, the threat of morning and evening traffic, an unpleasant customer, or our boss or employer.

But this prayer applies not only to such sometimes-trivial matters but also to the whole crushing load of living. I think of an alcoholic who is trying desperately to reorder his life. He prays that the deadly urge will

not come upon him, that well-meaning but thoughtless associates will not press him to take a cocktail—but if they do, that he will have the inner strength to refuse. And here also is a person who has suffered the loss of a dear friend or beloved: at times the sense of loss throws her into a pit of despondency, an almost suicidal place. She prays that God will save her from those circumstances that push her to the brink of loneliness and self-pity, but if the situation arises, that she will nevertheless be given the resources to fight back the black mood and to turn to the mood that lifts and cheers. “Deliver us from evil!”

This is a prayer, you see, for everyone, because all of us live in a world where testing happens. This prayer works for a child who is tested by her little brother or her big sister, for a teenager whose greatest test in high school is the chance to elevate a grade by a little cautious cheating. And this works for the husband or wife who just now finds marriage a bore, and for a woman who has the ability to write or speak a clever, sarcastic, destructive sentence, and for the man who is bright enough that he finds it difficult to suffer fools gladly.

I’m hoping to suggest to us that our problem with this prayer is that so often we don’t recognize our tests when we see them, and that as a result, we don’t plead to be delivered from their evil. This petition, you see, fits every human being. It recognizes that we are sometimes very frail, but that in God’s mercy there is strength to emerge triumphant from our time of trial.

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. David H. C. Read, *Holy Common Ground* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 80.