

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Praying Like Jesus: And Do Not Bring Us to the Time of Trial, but Rescue Us from the Evil One”

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Matthew 6:9-13

As we near the end of this sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer, I encourage you to reread or listen again to each of the previous sermons, for this prayer is not only our moral code, it is effectively the gospel in prayer form. It highlights two themes that are on Jesus’ mind throughout his ministry: how to love God more fully and others more deeply.

The first 3 petitions in the prayer are requests for the Father’s glory, and the other 4 petitions are requests for the disciples’ (and our) needs. Today we focus on the 6th and 7th petitions: “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”

“Temptation, Time of trial” ... why these different presentations? If, as it says in the book of James 1:13, “... God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one”, then why do we use the word temptation in our Lord’s Prayer? First of all, the Greek word used can refer to temptations to sin, or it can refer to the trials and testing of faith and obedience. Secondly, there is an eschatological (or end times) testing through which we all must pass, and the petition is that God will not let us fail in this testing. But this morning I want to focus on: “What does this mean for us right now, here today?” And we can sum it up like this: this is a request for protection... and a plea to save us from ourselves. Jesus is teaching us to pray that we may be protected when we find ourselves faced with situations and enticements that would drag us away from loyalty to him. Protection from that which would separate us from God. God may not tempt us, but God does allow us to be tempted. And God allows us to be tested. And testing, while seldom pleasant, can be a good thing.

Steel and aluminum undergo strenuous testing before they are used to make cars and airplanes. Would you really want to drive or fly in a machine that hadn’t been tested for strength? Testing in school is sadly used and abused these days, but the real intent is to see what students have learned and what they are prepared to handle in the future.

And without our being tested along the way, how can we know if our faith stands up? After all, it’s easy to have faith in God’s goodness when things are going well.

When I was a chaplain at Children’s Hospital in Detroit, I saw a lot of sadness and tragedy. [Some of it caused by other humans.] Never for a moment did I believe that what I saw was caused or planned by God. But I did see God’s presence, and I saw how God would use a heartbreaking situation for good... if we but open ourselves to it. Those parents were surely tested and tempted in a myriad of ways by their situations.

But those with strong faith were able to glimpse beyond their own circumstances and trust that God’s ultimate goodness and love and faithfulness were even greater than their individual circumstances and

their personal pain. They stood strong in their faith and held on to God, resisting the temptation to be drawn away.

Evil is not just about doing “bad things” ... it is about being drawn away from God. Evil is real. It does exist and it is powerful. Evil is out in the world and it is within each of us. When we worship anything other than God, we give power to the forces of malevolence... and we call that Satan, or the Devil, or the Adversary, or the Evil One.

We do have choices. Those of us who are old enough to remember Flip Wilson’s comedy show will remember his famous character, Geraldine Jones. One of her most famous lines was, “The devil made me do it!” And while we laughed and often repeated this line in jest ... we know in our hearts that we are responsible for the decisions we make and the things we do. And it brings to light that while God may not tempt us, there are surely many temptations in this life. Worldly forces tempt us every day... and they are different for each one of us. If anyone understands this, it is Jesus. Jesus teaches us to pray as someone who has come to the breaking point and knows the temptations we face.

This prayer, this powerful prayer, asks for protection from the temptations that will come before us, and the trials we must go through. We are praying to be relieved from the great tribulation that will one day come on all the world. We are praying that no temptation will be too great for us. We are praying to pass that which tests our faith, and to be led into deeper relationship with God. We are praying with and for ourselves and each other. We are praying to be “God-centered” and not “self-centered.”

How do we do this? We train. Soldiers train every day, and may never see battle. Athletes train every day, and may never play in a game. But they are as ready as they can be. We, too, need to train every day. For at some time or another we will see battle and we will be put in the game.

How do we do that? Through trust and obedience. Through remembering that although evil is real and powerful, so is Jesus’ victory over the power of evil. By realizing that Jesus is here for us... and with us. By following Jesus, we can resist temptation and pass those trials that are set before us, and be delivered from evil.

This part of the Lord’s Prayer asks for protection against the forces which try to separate us from God. But within it is also a prayer for transformation ... and our motivation ought to be obedience. Our faith is strengthened not just by studying the Bible, or listening to sermons... it is strengthened by the trials we experience, and by the lives of others in whom we see God at work. Through our relationships, we can help each other keep God as the main focus and authority... and by example, demonstrate the love and the goodness of God. Through our relationships we remember that although we may have our individual trials, we are in this together.

And so the challenge this week is to ask ourselves:  
How am I training now to face the unknown trials that will come?  
And how does my faith-life help others in their times of trial?

Let us pray...