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“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”

Temptation and Evil: Led and Delivered

Scripture: Genesis 4:1-16; Luke 4:1-14a; Matthew 6:13

A few weeks ago, someone let me know she does not pray this part of the Lord’s Prayer because the language seems to them to suggest that God would actually lead us into to temptation. She is not wrong to be concerned. The language is strange here; especially since we have asked God to provide for us and to forgive us. Here we ask God to not treat us like pawns in some chess game, like at the beginning of Job’s story. This person is not alone in her concern over this verse, “*Lead us not into temptation...*” Ever since the verses were written down, there have been issues and concerns. Many commentators have gone to great lengths to soften the potential blow suggested here - that God is responsible for temptations. Many translations work at it as well. This is because the word ‘temptation’ can be also translated as ‘test’ or ‘trial’. Here are some examples:

*The Message: Keep us safe from ourselves and from the Devil*

*Good News Bible: Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One*

*Common English Version: Keep us from being tempted and protect us from evil*

*New Living Translation: And don’t let us yield to temptation, but deliver us from the evil one*

*New Revised Standard: Do not bring us into the time of trial, but deliver us from the evil one*

My personal favorites are the New Living Translation and the New Revised Standard. They seem to speak most closely to the truth as I see it in this verse.

Let’s clear one thing up from the beginning: God does not ‘tempt’ us. James 1:12-17 says, “*Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. 13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14 but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. 15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. 16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*”

We are tested by God, but we are not tempted by God.

Herein lies part of the difficulty - when we are tested by God, as Paul was tested, or Job was tested, or Abraham, our faith is strengthened. When we are tempted by evil and cave into it, our faith is eroded and weakened. The difficulty for us is determining what is a test sent by God for the sake of our faith, and what is a temptation sent by the “Evil One” to undermine our trust and faith in God. There are no easy answers here. Sometimes, as in the case of Job, God may allow evil to be present in such a way to challenge us and to strengthen our resolve.

The strengthening of faith requires testing, just as metal requires tempering in order to be strengthened. We need times of trial in order to mature in our faith. This seems true, does it not? An untried faith is no faith at all, really. It is just an intellectual exercise, a playground built on the surface of the mind. If we expect our faith to reach every corner of the mind, heart, soul and strength, however, we should also expect that faith to be challenged. Many of you have had strong challenges to your faith, either through sickness, injury, death of loved

ones and these strengthened your faith. Some of you faced strong temptations to evil, some of which you could not or did not resist and you have experienced the erosion of your faith

This is a difficult part of the Lord's Prayer, but I want to acknowledge two things with this section of the Lord's Prayer.

1: Whether we use 'trials' or 'temptation' in the prayer, we must, I think, acknowledge we are not really capable most of the time of telling the difference between a trial brought about by God in order to strengthen our faith, or a temptation brought about by the Evil One brought about to undermine our faith. We need God's leadership and presence with us at all times.

The former Pope Benedict, in a short treatise on the Lord's Prayer, was fully aware of the challenges this part of the Lord's Prayer brings to those who would pray it. He expands this part of the prayer to read in this way:

*"I know that I need trials so that my nature can be purified. When you decide to send me these trials, when you give evil some room to maneuver, as you did with Job, then please remember my strength goes only so far. Don't overestimate my capacity. Don't set too wide the boundaries within which I may be tempted and be close to me with your protecting hand when it becomes too much for me."*

Benedict is taking here as his cue 1 Corinthians 10, which says,

*"12 Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. 13 No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."*

God tells Cain, "*Sin is always crouching at your door. Its' desire is for you, but you must rule over it.*" Temptation, evil, seeks you out. Temptation and sin wait for *you* to open the door and let it in. Are we capable of resisting? I don't really think we are unless we have a lot of help. And that help is what we are praying for here: *May I resist the temptations and sin which crouch at the doorways to my soul, O Lord.*

It is important for us to remember that we are not Jesus-- facing down Satan in the wilderness is not what we are called to do. We are, though, called to follow God's leadership, and to trust that the Lord is leading us in ways that will bring us closer to Him. We are being led to love God more deeply and to trust in Him completely. There are constant challenges in the world which require us to stay in God's presence - by the strength of the Holy Spirit *and* by our own deepening will and desire to be closer to God. Some of those challenges will be presented to us *in order to strengthen* our will and desire to be with God.

We can only face those challenges, those trials, those tests by trusting in the leadership of God, by having confidence that Christ is the Good Shepherd who will lead us into the gate and that the Lord will lead us on paths of righteousness and mercy all the days of our lives.

So our first acknowledgment in this prayer is that God is the one who is leading us and we must trust that leadership, whether we are faced with temptations or trials, regardless of their source. We ask, then, that God leads us in such a way that we recognize the presence of God with us in the trials we face, and also that we do not confuse the temptations we face for God and thereby make decisions which lead us further down the path of evil ways.

2. We must also acknowledge that evil is real and that we require God's deliverance from it. Once we are

mired in sin and evil, we cannot of our own willpower escape it.

Acknowledging evil is a hard thing for modern Americans to do. We don't hear about evil much anymore, just as we do not hear of sin. Evil is the single best reason for believing in God and in Jesus Christ. And evil is the single best reason for someone to no longer or to never believe in God at all. The question that immediately arises is the fundamental question of God's power relative to evil. If God is all-powerful, then why can God not simply put an end to evil? God is not all-powerful if evil is not defeated. If God is all-good, then evil cannot exist where God exists, so why is there evil at all? God cannot therefore be good if evil also exists. And if God is everywhere, then God cannot be good or powerful because evil still exists. This is known in philosophy and theology as *theodicy*, or the problem of evil.

Evil is a problem. You and I know that. We either acknowledge it exists and then deal with all the issues claiming its existence means for our worldview; or we claim it does not exist and then deal with all the issues claiming its non-existence means for our perception of our experience in the world. Saint Augustine solves the problem by saying evil is simply the absence of good. Evil has no definition outside of God's goodness. Others, like Luther, attribute evil to Satan, an opposing force to the will of God in the world. Evil is therefore identifiable in and of itself. Some conflate this to a war between good and evil where we are the agents and warriors who are fighting for one side or the other. Others reject the entire notion of evil, such as the Christian Scientists, and say evil is simply an illusion and a misperceiving of the goodness of God.

Jesus' temptation in the desert shows Satan to be a person, in the same way the Archangel Gabriel is a person and in the same way we refer to other supernatural forces in Scripture as a person. A person, in Thomas Aquinas' view does not need a body to be considered a person. What persons do need, however, is will, intention and the ability to communicate that will and intention. I am keenly aware that many of us here, including myself, are unwilling to personify evil and give it a name such as Satan or the Devil. Often, I will simply opt for something being Satanic or Demonic rather than committing myself to a personal name for evil. But in the Lord's Prayer we acknowledge the existence of evil and ask to be delivered from evil.

I am not going to solve for you today the conundrums of theodicy. There are far smarter people than I who have dealt with the subject better than I have. For today, based on the Lord's Prayer, whether we use "evil" or "the Evil One" when we pray it, I want to at least acknowledge that Jesus saw evil as personified. I would like to suggest to you that evil is in fact personal, that evil does care about you in some deliberate way, that evil will seek you out, that evil has intelligence and will. In those aspects, evil functions in the world very much like a person. In the movie Constantine, John Constantine, a demon hunter, says to someone who says "I don't believe in the Devil", "You should, because he believes in you."

Evil is at its most destructive when it is elusive. Evil is obvious in the acts of the boy who shot up Sandy Hook Elementary school. So also with the man who shot up the movie theater in Aurora, Co. Hitler and the SS is the epitome of evil of how states can become agents of evil in the world. The destruction wrought by natural disasters is a kind of inchoate evil when towns, villages and lives are destroyed. These are easy to name as either acts or events of evil.

What is not nearly so easy, and where I think the Lord's Prayer speaks best, is the many places where evil is acting in more subtle ways. We are most vulnerable to evil when evil, or Satan, is *deceptive* - pretending to be one thing when in fact it is something else, *misdirecting* - showing you one thing while doing something else in a hidden way, or *flattering* - luring you with compliments and promises. It is in those subtle ways that we get

drawn in, where we don't even know we have opened the door to the sin and temptation around us, and find ourselves in the middle of some situation that reveals itself as evil.

Again, just as being led into temptation, we can be in the middle of evil and realize we have no way out. Then, we need deliverance. We need to be rescued. We need the power of God, the God who acts in the role of Father for us and wishes us to follow in his holy ways - *Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name*, the God who seeks to restore and redeem His creation in such a way that heavenly ways become earthly ways and reflect the Kingdom to come - *thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven*, the God who provides our earthly and spiritual food and also forgives us so we might be freed to forgive completely - *give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*; we need the power of this God to lead us and to rescue us - *Do not lead us into the time of trial, into temptation, but deliver us from evil*.

When temptation and evil are deceiving us, misdirecting us and flattering us, we are often really being led to replace God with something else. We may not even realize we are opening the door to misperceptions, false deals and a spiritual bait-and-switch. This is why we need to pray always and this is why Jesus has given us the Lord's Prayer, so we might rely completely on God's leadership and God's ability to deliver us, free us, from the bondage of those things which have ensnared us.

In the desert with Satan, Jesus returns always to faith and trust in the God who leads and delivers, the God who provides and protects, the God who creates and rules over all things. Jesus, we assume, *could* turn stones into bread, *could* rule all the nations of the earth, *could* sprout wings and rescue himself from a swan dive off the walls of Jerusalem. But he doesn't. For our sakes, he does not. Instead, Jesus does what he wishes his followers to do - rely completely on the God of Abraham, Jacob and Moses. For it is only God who can keep temptation at bay and deliver us from evil.

Amen.