

Two weeks ago, I asked the question ‘How we do pray?’ Do we spend time dwelling on God’s goodness, thanking God that we can call God Father? Do we praise God for God’s love and kindness; do we pray that God’s will would be done? Or do we run straight to ‘daily bread’?

Sometimes we treat prayer one dimensionally, as merely asking for God stuff, and so we miss the purpose of prayer, which is to spend time with God. When we reduce prayer to one only thing, we fail to take prayer seriously. Someone once said that Christians are meant to be serious people. They didn’t mean that Christians are stuffy, rigid, uptight, stick-in-the-muds, but that they’re people who have deeply and thoughtfully examined the claims of Jesus and made the intentional decision to follow him, fully understanding the cost and commitment faith requires.

If this is true, then as Christians we must take seriously Jesus’ teachings when it comes to temptation, if only because the Biblical story tells us that temptation and our inability to resist it, is one of our core problems.

According to James 1:14, we are tempted by the desires that spring from within us. We usually are not tempted by things we don’t want, which makes James 1 a warning to master our desires.

In the first recorded temptation in the Bible, we see this played out:

“When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate ...”¹

Eve *wanted* to eat the fruit, she desired it. If she had not, she wouldn’t have eaten it.

Today we come to the second to last phrase of the Lord’s Prayer, one that we weekly pray as “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” It’s worth noting that different Bible translations render this particular phrase in different ways. The pew Bible translates Matthew’s version of the Prayer, as “do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”

There is a difference between temptation and testing. While both take many forms, the key difference is that temptations never come from God; while testing

¹ Genesis 3:6

may well be instigated by God. Key passages on this distinction would be James 1:13, which tells us that God does not tempt anyone, and Genesis 22, when God tests Abraham.

If the pew Bible's translation is to be preferred, then Jesus is not telling us to pray that we won't be tempted by some personal sin, but that we would be spared from testing, from 'the time of trial.'

This prayer, like all the other petitions in the Lord's Prayer, is firmly grounded in Jesus' life and ministry. Testing, temptation, and trial were all marks of Jesus public life.

Straight after Jesus stepped onto the public stage at His baptism, He found Himself led into the wilderness to face testing – testing that wasn't fundamentally about whether He was hungry, but if He would trust God; when Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit, to announce the Kingdom, he faced opposition on many fronts, from tormented souls who yelled and raved, to the equally tormented souls who criticised and attacked him, claiming to represent the voices of either reason or tradition. He even faced opposition from one of his own followers, Peter, one of his three closest friends.²

As Jesus came to the end of his ministry he said to his followers:

*You are those who have stood by me in my trials.*³

The final trial or temptation, Jesus faced was in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He faced the enormity of what was about to unfold. In that moment, Jesus shrank back from drinking the cup held out to him. But he turned that shrinking back into agonised prayer, until he finally stretched out his hands in obedience.⁴

Gethsemane suggests the deepest meaning of the prayer "Do not lead us to the time of trial." Jesus was about to face what Tom Wright calls "The great tribulation, the birth pangs of the new age, the moment of horror and deep darkness." Wright then continues: "... in his own moment of agony [Jesus] fears, with good reason, that the whirlpool of evil which is to engulf him will suck down his close followers as well. Jesus knows that he must go, solo and unaided, into

² Tom Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 66–67

³ Luke 22:28

⁴ Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer*, 67

the whirlpool, so that it may exhaust its force on him and let the rest of the world go free.”⁵

Something we may not have considered is that while Jesus taught his disciples to pray “lead us not to the time of trial, deliver us from evil” – when Jesus himself prayed this prayer, the answer He received was *no*. Jesus was not delivered from evil, rather evil was able to unleash its horror upon him.

But in prayer, Jesus brought together both this prayer, and the earlier clause “Your will be done”. He held them both side-by-side, and in Gethsemane He found that God had called him to a unique purpose – He would be the One Who *was tested, who faced the trial, and who was not delivered from Evil*.⁶

In this purpose Jesus was unique. Where He went, we cannot follow, and so we are commanded to pray “deliver us from evil”. And we can pray it with confidence because Jesus has faced evil, exhausted it, and defeated it.

But if we are to pray “deliver us from evil,” how are we delivered?

I said last week that there were three things we can do with guilt. Likewise, there are three things we can do with evil. We can pretend it doesn’t exist; we can wallow in it; or we can pretend that we are the solution. The first is the head in the sand approach; evil either doesn’t exist, or it doesn’t matter. The second simply gives in; and the third adopts a self-righteous posture.

None of these is appropriate or helpful. Jesus didn’t think or behave this way, and he doesn’t want us to either. For Jesus this led him humbly to Gethsemane and Calvary.

We are delivered from evil when we recognise both the reality of evil, and Jesus’ victory over it.

So, we don’t pretend evil is not real; we don’t wallow in it, and we don’t think we can defeat evil on our own. We do humbly recognise that at Calvary Jesus defeated evil, and we lean on Him and His power.

In acknowledging that evil is real and powerful, we also don’t fall into the fallacy that it is only “out there” in other people, we accept that it is within each of us.

⁵ Ibid., 67-68

⁶ Ibid., 68

But we also don't fall into the mistaken belief that evil is simply the sum total of all our impulses; the Bible personifies evil, calling it 'Satan' or the devil. Evil is more than 'just us.' This personification is not an equal and opposite force to God; Christianity does not subscribe to dualism. Nevertheless, this evil is powerful, otherwise this clause in the Prayer would be unnecessary.

Jesus' victory over this evil, however, is absolute; and his power is also not only "out there" it is available to us here and now; and when we resist temptation, we 'breathe in' Jesus victory at Calvary – and we begin to be transformed. The only way to defeat evil, both within and without, is through humility; not simple human humility – as though we can 'solve' evil by our humility – but a humility that recognises our utter dependence on Jesus. So, in our dependence on God, we pray, and we remember Paul's words of assurance, that "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."⁷

But to pray this prayer is more than simply to overcome our own personal temptations, it is more than simply to pray that our faith is not tested. To pray this prayer, is once again, to pray it on behalf of others – for the world.

"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil" is to pray that God's kingdom would come. I close with the words of Tom Wright:

"... it is [a] prayer [for the] forces of destruction, of dehumanization, of anti-creation, of anti-redemption, [to] be bound and gagged, and that God's good world may escape from being sucked down into their morass. It is our responsibility, as we pray this prayer, to hold God's precious and precarious world before our gaze, to sum up its often inarticulate cries for help, for rescue, for deliverance. Deliver us from the horror of war! Deliver us from human folly and the appalling accidents it can produce! Let us not become a society of rich fortresses and cardboard cities! Let us not be engulfed by social violence, or by self-righteous reaction! Save us from arrogance and pride and the awful things they make people do! Save us—from ourselves ... and deliver us from the Evil One."⁸ Amen.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 10:13

⁸ Ibid., 74-75