

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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Teach Us to Pray: Save Us from the Time of Trial

Matthew 6:9-13

Today we continue our sermon series on the Lord's Prayer. So far, we've listened as Jesus calls us into his relationship with the Father, who is the source of our life and salvation, and whose holiness shapes us, individually and together. Then we listened as Jesus teaches us to long for and pray for the loving sovereignty of God, the reign of Christ, to be fully and finally manifested in the world and in our lives. Then we listened as Jesus reminds us of our dependence upon God for our daily provision, and our responsibility for practicing the kingdom by providing for the hungry. Then last week we listened as Jesus reminds us of our need to receive God's gift of forgiveness and to pass it on to others by practicing mercy in our lives. "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

That brings us to the next petition in the Lord's prayer: "Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil." Or as many of us have learned it, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." As with other parts of the Lord's prayer, so here in this petition, translation issues come into play. The church has a long history of debating what the right wording should be. A few years ago, Pope Francis joined in the discussion when he supported a decision by the French Catholic church to change the wording in this petition. Instead of "Lead us not into temptation," the phrase was updated to "Don't let us go into temptation." The pope's concern was that the traditional wording suggests that God causes people to sin. As he put it in a television interview:

It is not a good translation because it speaks of a God who induces temptation. I am the one who falls; it's not [God] pushing me into temptation to then see how I have fallen. A father doesn't do that, a father helps you to get up immediately. It's Satan who leads us into temptation, that's his department.¹

Many people, including lots of Bible scholars, commended Pope Francis for his desire to guard against misinterpretation of this part of the Lord's Prayer, even if they didn't completely agree about the way the phrase should be translated. They pointed to texts like James 1:13: "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" (NRSV). James goes on to say, "But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it." Maybe this angle on the issue was echoed by a young woman who was walking through a shopping mall in Denver wearing a sweatshirt that said, "Lead me not into temptation. I can find the way myself."²

We need to take responsibility for our part in the reality of sin and the brokenness of our relationship with God. We can't pin the blame on God. But at the same time, we recognize and affirm that God's loving sovereignty is operative in our lives, in their totality, and that God's ways of working in our lives and forming us as his people are often mysterious and beyond our comprehension. What's more, the Bible includes stories about God bringing people into experiences of testing, in order to refine their faith and obedience. One of the most famous is God testing Abraham's loyalty by asking him to offer up his son Isaac as a

sacrifice. It turns out that Isaac is spared, but not without Abraham's faithfulness first being tried. We also have the story of what Job endured when God allowed Satan to destroy his family and livelihood. Add to these the words of the psalmist, "Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind" (26:2). These kinds of stories and statements call upon us to reflect on our own experiences of hardship, suffering, and sacrifice, and to consider how God can work in such circumstances to refine our devotion to him.

"Lead us not into temptation." Even if it doesn't mean that God deliberately puts us in situations where temptation will make us fall, it certainly doesn't mean that God will exempt us from or protect us against circumstances where our faith will be tested. In fact, the Greek term used in this part of the Lord's Prayer, translated as "temptation," appears in other parts of the Scriptures and designates periods of "trial" and "testing." The verbal form of this word appears earlier in Matthew after Jesus has been baptized. Jesus, embodying the story of Israel emerging from its journey through the Red Sea, immediately journeys into the wilderness. Matthew says, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil" (4:1). Notice that the Spirit of God doesn't prevent Jesus from facing temptation, but actually leads him toward it, such that this trial or testing is somehow part of God's providence and purpose. And yet, God doesn't do the tempting; that's Satan's business.

So when we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," we're not so much asking God to protect us from testing as much as we're asking God to protect us from succumbing to testing. We're petitioning God to give us victory over whatever would bring us into disobedience, death, and destruction. Thus the second part of this petition: "Lead us not into temptation, *but deliver us from evil.*"

The best translation of the final word in this petition isn't "evil," but the "evil one." Jesus doesn't just have in mind evil in the abstract, but evil as the tempter whom we've already met during Jesus' period of preparation in the wilderness (Matt. 4:3). Our battle isn't simply with our own inward impulses, as dangerous as those can be, but with a malevolent personal being whose aim is to break down our faith, deceive us into disobedience, and separate us from God.

NPR journalist Scott Simon tells about interviewing Romeo Dallaire, who commanded U. N. peacekeeping forces in 1993 and 1994. During that time, more than 800,000 Tutsi Rwandans were slaughtered over three months. According to Simon,

Dallaire said that what happened made him believe in evil, and even a force he called the devil. "I've negotiated with him," he told us, "shaken his hand. Yes. There is no doubt in my mind . . . and the expression of evil to me is through the devil and the devil at work and possessing human beings and turning them into machines of destruction. . . . And one of the evenings in my office, I was looking out the window and my senses felt that something was there with me that shifted me. I think that evil and good are playing themselves out and God is monitoring and looking at how we respond to it."³

The Lord's Prayer isn't a mild and timid request for the basic things we need just to get through each day. No, the Lord's Prayer is a way of entering daily into a clash of kingdoms, the spiritual conflict generated by the arrival of God's reign and the devil's resistance to it. We live out our lives on a battleground, where there are forces at work greater than our own human capacity to combat. As Paul writes in Ephesians, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (6:12). It's no wonder that the verses that follow, describing what it looks like to put on the "full armor of God," culminate with an admonition to pray. "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all

kinds of prayers and requests" (6:18a). That includes urgent requests like "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

The great Reformer Martin Luther wrote a book titled *A Simple Way to Pray*, in which he gives his friend Peter practical instructions on prayer. That includes advice on how to repeat and elaborate on each petition of the Lord's Prayer. As for the petition, "Lead us not into temptation," Luther recommends,

Say: "O dear Lord, Father and God, keep us fit and alert, eager and diligent in thy word and service, so that we do not become complacent, lazy, and slothful as though we had already achieved everything. In that way the fearful Devil cannot fall upon us, surprise us, and deprive us of thy precious word or stir up strife and factions among us and lead us into other sin and disgrace, both spiritually and physically; Rather grant us wisdom and strength through thy spirit that we may valiantly resist him and gain the victory. Amen."⁴

The good news is that the victory has already been won through Jesus Christ. In and of ourselves, we cannot overcome evil. But we have a Savior who has done so for us. In today's Scripture reading from Matthew, we saw how Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to square off with the devil. Our Lord went there not just for himself but for us. His triumph was also our triumph. As one writer has put it, "Every time we implore God to 'lead us not into temptation,' we rehearse our gratitude for the Son he led into temptation on our behalf, to pass the test we have flunked."⁵

Recall what I said earlier about the Greek word that means not only "temptation" but "trial" and "testing" as well. This word shows up in the story of Jesus' experience in the wilderness with the devil. And then it shows up again near the end of Jesus' ministry. After Jesus' final meal with his disciples, they go with him to the garden of Gethsemane. When they arrive, Jesus exhorts them, "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" (26:41). It can also be translated "that you may not come into the time of trial" (NRSV). So as Jesus goes further and deeper into the darkness of his own suffering and death, he reminds us that he's entering into the ultimate trial. At both the beginning and the end of his earthly ministry, he faces testing that will determine his future and ours.

The book of Hebrews is viewed by many as a kind of early Christian sermon. Some of you may recall the wonderful passage where the preacher speaks about Jesus' intercession for us: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted [tested] in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (4:15-16). Our trials and tests, our battles with the devil, are real. But so is what God has accomplished for us through Christ. And so is the power and strength available to us in Christ for the temptations we face.

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." When it comes to full and final deliverance, only our Lord who has given us this prayer can do that. Only God can save. Our only hope is in him. For now, we face our tests, confident of the victory we already have through Christ, and remembering what the Scriptures tell us about these trials: "These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet. 1:7).

¹ Quoted in Wesley Hill. *The Lord's Prayer: A Guide to Praying to Our Father*. Christian Essentials (Bellingham: Lexam, 2019) Kindle edition. See also, Caleb Lindgren, "Should the Lord's Prayer Be Changed?" *Christianity Today* website. December 14, 2017. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/december-web-only/should-lords-prayer-be-changed.html> (November 10, 2021).

² Haddon Robinson, in his sermon, "The Disciple's Prayer." Preaching Today website. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2005/august/117.html> (November 10, 2021).

³ Scott Simon, "A Meditation on Evil." NPR (April 8, 2017).

⁴ Quoted in "Martin Luther—Later Years and Legacy." *Christian History*, No. 39.

⁵ Matt Reynolds, "The Lord's Prayer's Hard Plea." *Christianity Today* website. February 20, 2018.
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/march/lords-prayers-hard-plea.html> (November 11, 2021).