

The Lord's Prayer

Study 5

Save us in the time of trial

The words of this petition, which are perhaps best translated from the original Greek as “do not pass us through the trial”, has replaced the old translation we knew as “lead us not into temptation”. It is helpful that this change has occurred in the English translation because it directs our attention away from a moralistic interpretation that has sometimes been associated with the word ‘temptation’.

What I mean by this is that in contemporary society temptation conjures up images of seductive or forbidden things that, in truth, don't really have power over us. The idea of temptation might, for example, issue in images of gluttony, self-importance, lust, or general dissipation. But, in all truth, we do not need God to help us to resist these things because if we want to resist them we have a native power to resist them. We know that they are bad for us and we don't need to ask God to ramp up our willpower in order to resist them.

Because temptation has come to be understood as an incitement to moral lapses it is difficult to pray “lead us not into temptation” with complete sincerity. We might want to be led into temptation! On the one hand someone may think that a temptation could add some spice to his life. On the other hand a pious person might actually like to be tempted so that she can show the rest of us how good she is at resisting temptations and, therefore, how superior she is in comparison to others.

Of course the word ‘trial’ can also be given a meaning that is opposite to that given it in the scriptures. A ‘trial’ can be seen as a way of testing our strength, as something to be endured to develop our character and self-discipline. On this understanding we would welcome a trial rather than praying that we should be saved from it. However because the Lord's Prayer tells us to pray that we will be saved from the time of trial, it must mean that the trial is something terrible. To what manner of reality, then, is Jesus referring when he teaches us to pray “do not pass us through the time of trial?”

In the scriptures there is one event of immense significance where Jesus speaks of the ‘trial’. In the gospels of Matthew and Mark we find the account of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane. In the garden Jesus is deeply agitated and grieved to death. In his agitation he throws himself on the ground and prays to God to “let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” He then finds the three disciples who accompanied him to the garden asleep and says to them “stay awake and pray that *you may not come into the time of trial.* (Matthew 26:36-41).

When Jesus is undergoing his trial, an event that begins in the garden and includes his torture, trial and crucifixion, the scriptures make clear that he has no strength of his own to resist what is being done to him. In the garden he is weak and he is terrified. He is abandoned to his ordeal by his friends but, even worse, by the One he prayed to by the name of Father, the Father whose arriving kingdom he proclaimed, and in whose name he has said and done everything. Even this Father deserts him. In his trial then Jesus is caught up in a maelstrom of evil in which he is nothing and the power of chaos, destruction, and nothingness are

everything, in which the truth that is Jesus is called a lie, and the liar is applauded as the speaker of truth. This is the terror of the trial.

There is a deep mystery in this terrible event because from the resurrection side of the cross we know that Jesus remains loved and treasured by the Father throughout his ordeal. But we should not let this knowledge seduce us into thinking that Jesus' trial was in any way made bearable because he really knew, deep down that he was not abandoned. Nothing in the scriptures allows us to draw this conclusion. A similar attempt to soften the terror of the trial can be seen in the story of Job from whom the power of evil, personified by the devil, takes absolutely everything. That the terror of such a trial is something we naturally resist hearing about is indicated by the pious inanities of Job's friends and the happy ending which some biblical scholars regard as a later addition written to soften a story of unrelenting sorrow.

Jesus tells us to pray, then, that we may not have to undergo a time of trial so that we may not be brought to an event where we are captured in a maelstrom of evil and chaos, in which we are powerless and nihilism engulfs us and isolates us in a terrifying emptiness. We are to pray this petition not only for ourselves but for also for all those men and women who perhaps, tragically, have a much greater chance of experiencing such a trial than we ever will. And we can pray this petition with confidence because the trial that Jesus bore was ultimately for our sakes. In the mystery of his relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit, Christ was resurrected. This event means many things not the least of which is that we can be assured that whatever trials assail us they will be borne in solidarity with our broken and victorious Lord.

Deliver us from evil

It is startling to note that the Lord's Prayer does not end on a note of harmony and satisfaction but rather with a desperate plea – Deliver us from evil. Make no mistake these words are a desperate cry; “snatch us from death” is their urgent sense. Because this petition is such a desperate cry there are those who are irritated by what they see as its negativity. Furthermore they think this negativity is unnecessary and also drives people away from Christianity. Yes, these people say, people do silly things but if we all try a little harder everything will turn out fine. But we know in our hearts of hearts that this is a shallow analysis. Our experience is, to give just one example, that our technological wizardry is used to both heal people and more efficiently to slaughter them.

The problem with those who are irritated by this final petition is that they have not taken into account the reality of evil as it was revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Jesus' trial before the high priest and Pilate we see evil writ large. In those events the One who is the truth and the light of the world, as the Gospel of John puts it, is overcome by the opposite of truth – is overcome by evil masquerading as truth. But in the resurrection of Christ we see that it is the will of God that evil will not triumph. Having been grasped by this truth we can then see that the world needs to be saved.

The point is that the person who has been encountered by Jesus Christ the way, life, and truth, longs for the kingdom he proclaimed to be the environment in which humanity shall live. The person grasped by Christ the Truth can no longer put up with the humanly caused wars and famines that result in so much suffering. We know that these things are not God's will for his creation. The resurrection of Christ, as the first of a general resurrection, shows that God's

will is a new creation in which the trauma of war and the violent destruction of peoples will have no place. So when we pray “deliver us from evil” it is the new order of God that is being invoked. It is the prayer for the ending of all that is opposed to the will of God.

Now I think it may be the case that for us in Australia this petition is not a desperate cry to God for the kingdom to come. For us in Australia the world is really a pretty good place. We would be happy here establishing and building up families and perhaps lending a hand where we can in helping those who can't have successful families. Could it possibly be true that the passing away of our social order in favor of God's new order would be a source of sadness for many Australians? In thinking this I am reminded of the story in the Gospel of Mark where it is reported that Jesus heals a man who roams the cemetery in his madness by driving the 'demons' that have wrecked his life into a lake where they are drowned. When the people of the village see the man sitting in his right mind they are afraid and beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood (Mark 5:1-20).

But as we have noted with the other petitions, we pray, “deliver *us* from evil”. This means that we pray on our behalf, and on behalf of all humanity. Despite our good life we know that the powers that tortured and crucified Jesus are the same powers that are responsible for Auschwitz, the Soviet Gulag, and the Rwandan and Bosnian massacres to mention just a few examples of evil. We know that positive thinking will not set humanity free so we cry out, “Deliver us from evil”. And we know it is not a futile cry. We know, because of the resurrection, that in the fullness of time the new order that Jesus Christ embodied will be the environment that supports and nurtures human societies.

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