

Remembering to Rely on God

Matthew 6:13

A Scottish atheist was spending a quiet day fishing when suddenly his boat was attacked by the Loch Ness monster. In one easy flip, the beast tossed him high into the air. Then it opened its mouth to swallow him. As the man sailed head over heels, he cried out, "O God, save me!" All at once the scene froze in place and, as the atheist hung in midair, a booming voice came down from the clouds. "I thought you didn't believe in me?" the voice thundered. The atheist answered, "Forgive me, Lord. A minute ago, I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster either!"

Too often, our prayers for deliverance are a matter of afterthought rather than of forethought:

In this brief *Disciple's Guide to Better Praying*, we have learned to address God as "our Father in heaven." We have learned that this intimate union must be balanced with a sense of the holy, so we "hallow" God's Name and we pray that His Name be hallowed everywhere. We ally ourselves in obedience to His kingdom and will. Only then, do we start making requests. Our sense of the kingdom helps to keep those requests in perspective. "Daily bread" is all we need. Just as crucial is our need for God's forgiveness, so we ask that our grace to others might reflect His grace to us. We have confessed our indifference to God's holiness and our indifference to His will. We have admitted our sins. We believe the Bible when it assures us that God remembers our sins no more.

At first glance, it may seem an opportune time to just say "Amen." In our morning prayer, we have covered praised, established a sense of direction for the day, dealt with our daily needs and have asked for God's forgiveness while reflecting on our own relationships. What remains to be said?

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." - Matthew 6:13

The prayer closet is a safe place to be, but we cannot remain there forever. It may not have been obvious before we prayed, but it is obvious now; we could never make it in this world without the hand of God actively protecting us from forces committed to causing us to fall. Jesus took the presence of evil in the world very seriously. He taught His disciples to take it seriously as well. The final cry of the *Model Prayer* is a cry for divine help in the disciple's ongoing war against sin. A season of prayer may be coming to a close, but the battle against evil will continue as long as we dwell in the flesh. With God's help, we can stand. But, effectively withstanding evil begins with ...

I. Recognizing the War upon our Souls

A. There Is a Fine Line between Tests and Temptations

As a matter of fact, one and the same word is translated in the New Testament as "tests," "trials" and "temptations." The word used in this petition is rendered "trials" in James 1:2, 3: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance." That doesn't help, does it? How can the same word represent a temptation from which we cry out to God for help *and* a trial from which we derive joy?

We cannot deny that God plays a role in the trials of our lives if only in His choice to not spare us from them. Sometimes in Scripture, it is difficult to know who to credit most for certain trials we are called to endure. "Jesus was led **by** the Spirit into the desert to be tempted **by** the devil" (Matthew 4:1). Paul's testimony is especially intriguing. According to 2 Corinthians 12 :7, in order to keep him humble while he received great revelations of truth, he identifies God as the one Who *sends* "a thorn in the flesh," but the thorn itself is *described* as a "messenger from Satan." The trials of Job originate out of a conversation between God and the devil. God claims Job is righteous. Satan insists that Job would not be so were he not pampered. So, God *permits* Satan to take some rather brutal shots at Job. His children are killed. His body is covered with boils. He loses everything.

There are clearly times when a single incident can be viewed both as an inducement to sin from Satan, a *temptation*, as well as a *trial* from the hands of a loving heavenly Father intended to test or refine our character. It is not an easy issue to resolve, but we accept, on the weight of Scripture, that two distinct and powerful beings work toward two distinct ends, often, in the same circumstance.

B. One Circumstance, Two Agendas

Satan's agenda in tempting us is not complicated. Briefly, or indefinitely, he wants us to deny God. By an action, a doubt, a passion, a choice or a word, Satan wants us to exhibit that God is not worthy of our trust, our honor or our obedience. When Eve was tempted to disobey God's lone command, the serpent asked, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat...'" (Genesis 3:1). One act of disobedience would say volumes about the integrity of God's word to Adam and Eve. When Job was at the peak of his suffering, his wife prodded him to give up. Her advice was, "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9). "Deny, on the basis of your cruel experience, that God is ultimately good or just or kind!"

God's agenda for us in all things is likewise straightforward. He desires to bring His people into the perfected image of His Son, Jesus Christ. Sometimes, He sends hardship to discipline or to shape us just as any father might work to mold his children toward maturity. He might impose a trial upon us as a means to build the perseverance of our faith. Some trials we endure could in fact be punishment in the short run designed to salvage our souls for the long haul. It is not unusual in Scripture for God to use hardship simply to teach His people that their sufficiency rests in Him alone.

Trials are a part of life in this world. Will an event prove itself to be a temptation for our faith to cave-in or a test for the power of our faith to be showcased? The potential for either outcome often exists side by side in every circumstance. It is vital to know, however, that we have not simply been left at the mercy of whichever way the wind blows hardest. Someone is ultimately in charge. God has promised to shelter us from any temptations that are greater than our potential to benefit from them. "...God is faithful; he will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you can bear" (1 Corinthians 10:13). That promise can be a great comfort in the midst of our trials, but it is also a powerful condemnation of our bad choices. You see, the responsibility rests squarely on our shoulders when we fail, for God has given us the faith to stand. At times, we simply choose not to.

C. So, What Does This Prayer Mean?

"And lead us not into temptation" cannot mean that we are to ask God to never allow us to go through trials of any kind. That would be a futile prayer. Some trials shape our character while others build our patience. They are for our good, and God will always work for our good. On the other hand, the prayer cannot mean that we are asking God to never induce us to do evil, because that is something He would and could never do anyway. He has said as much:

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. – James 1:13-15

Is any single circumstance an occasion to sin or an opportunity to grow - an occasion to say "yes" to the evil desires that continue to reside in our hearts or an invitation to say, "no" to ungodliness? The purpose of trials is not always cut and dried from our puny human perspectives. But, this much is clear. The battle itself is unpleasant, so Jesus allows us to cry out from the basic instinct of our humanity, "Father, please don't put me through hard tests or force me to face hard choices!" Jesus prayed with the same human honesty when he prayed in Gethsemane, "Take this cup from me" (Mark 14:36). It is a lawful and an allowable prayer so long as it is accompanied by the spirit of submission that can say, "Yet not what I will, but what you will."

II. Realizing the Weakness within Our Souls

(In other words, we must realize that alone, we are not equal to the conflict.)

A. Know Your Enemy Well

"... but deliver us from the evil one."

We worship God only, but we are foolish if we fail to give the enemy his due. If we learned this prayer in childhood, we probably learned to pray, "deliver us from evil," but later translations acknowledge the presence of the definite article, "the," in the petition. These translations suggest that Matthew was emphasizing some "supreme evil", "an embodiment of evil," or "the evil one."

The Bible speaks often of such a character. He is not just a concept any more than God is just a concept. This character is identified as a person in both the Old and the New Testaments. The Bible gives him many names, but we know him primarily by two. *Satanas*, or Satan means "adversary." He is our opponent. He wants us to fail God. He remembers every time that we have failed God and he drums it up time and time again, long after God has forgiven whatever we have done. We also know him as *diabolos*, "the devil", which means "slanderer". He is everything that is anti-God and is opposed to God's high calling for man. He specializes in deception. His mission is to blind men to God and to sever believers from God. Jesus calls him "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).

Were this not enough, the devil, also called "the prince of this world," commands vast forces of evil:

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹²For 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. – Ephesians 6:10-12

If this all sounds a bit spooky, so be it. Paul wants us to understand that the battle against temptation is not to be taken flippantly. It's an all out war with darkness! Satan is pulling out every weapon in his arsenal to destroy your reliance on God, and we're content to pray, "Lord, please, help me not to be so cranky with the kids." Know your enemy! Grasp the full scope of the conflict!

B. Choose Your Influences Wisely

“Temptations, of course, cannot be avoided, but because we cannot prevent the birds from flying over our heads, there is no need that we should let them nest in our hair.” – Martin Luther
Sometimes, the inevitable attack of temptation is only exacerbated by the influences to which we foolishly expose ourselves. These influences can be the friends we choose. They can be the media by which we entertain ourselves. It can be the music we listen to. We like to think that we are sophisticated enough to maintain our Christian experience at a peak operating level even while we are completely indiscriminate regarding the things with which we fill our minds.

A person may very well have the self-control to never be influenced to act out some bad behavior he sees in a movie or hears on an album. But, can he really escape unscathed if he constantly feeds his mind on provocative images, listens to lyrics that degrade women and celebrate violence or hears his companions treat deviant behavior as though it’s funny? Eventually, even if he never acts out, he will damage the software of his values. His mind will grow callous. Things that once shocked him, and rightfully so, will no longer phase him. Paul wrote:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. – Philippians 4:8

We can all make definitive choices regarding how we feed our minds, and good choices will assist us mightily in our respective struggles with sin and temptation.

C. Respect Your Proven Vulnerabilities

It is futile to ask God to not lead you in the way of temptation if you insist on putting yourself in danger. An alcoholic on the wagon doesn't take an occasional nip just to see if he's making any progress in the area of self-control. In addition to calling out to God, Jesus expects us to never foolishly expose ourselves to temptations in areas where we have already proven we are weak. We must protect ourselves from tempting circumstances. Jesus said as much in this same sermon:

... ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. – Matthew 5:29, 30

Respecting our own areas of weakness is to protect ourselves. Respecting that another person might have vulnerable areas is to love him. We should be careful about persuading others to act against their better judgment. A floodgate of temptation might break loose. We should be cautious about judging others harshly when they do fall. We do not know what temptations they have endured.

D. Fear Your Alleged Strengths

Our weaknesses are not the only areas where we are vulnerable to temptation. Nothing opens the door to failure quite like the pride that comes with thinking you are invincible in certain areas. Pride is much like throwing the gauntlet down before Satan. If you feel sufficient in and of yourself in any realm of life, Satan might just set out to prove you are not. And, because it’s a lesson you need to learn, your heavenly Father might just let him. Paul’s warning to the Corinthians speaks to us as well:

"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." Ultimately, this is a humble prayer. It is an admission of self mistrust. It is an acknowledgement that we can never stand in a world opposed to our living to the glory of God unless God Himself is working to help us to do that.

Restore to your mind's eye that image we began this message with of that Scottish atheist flying through the air toward certain peril crying, "O God, Save me!" Recall the lesson that was attached to that image: Too often, our prayers for deliverance are a matter of afterthought rather than of forethought. We pray to God, "deliver us from the evil one," because we know that our hearts are at war. God's Spirit has cleansed us, and we are His possession. But, these new hearts still have old appetites, and the battle rages on. The only remedy is to remember how dependent we are upon our God and to pray for His protection as we humbly confess our reliance upon Him.

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