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Fifth Sunday in Lent – Lord's Prayer Series 4 – April 1, 2001
Texts: Genesis 3:1-7  Matthew 6:9-13  James 1:12-16

This petition of the Lord’s Prayer brings us face to face with the most vexing of all religious problems: THE PROBLEM OF EVIL. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. What are we praying for here? For God to “not bring us to the test?” Our world is full of tests and examinations. Are we asking here for an easy way out?

Or is this a prayer for God to not tempt us to do evil things? After church a long time ago a woman accosted me and insisted, "My father loved me, and MY father never would have tempted ME to do wrong. And I can't believe GOD OUR FATHER would either."

I suspect you, too, would agree that surely GOD would never tempt us to do evil. It just doesn't fit with what the Bible teaches about God. So what does LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION mean? This is the only petition of the Lord's Prayer that is stated IN THE NEGATIVE. It appears that even Jesus struggled with how to address the problem of evil in positive, uplifting, unequivocal terms.

Lead us not into temptation. Is TEMPTATION always bad? Our first answer is "Of course!" But think again. How do we use the word "temptation"? When we say we are tempted to do thus and so, we might mean tempted to do good or tempted to do bad. A popular perfume label is Temptation. Some of us can remember an old song called “Temptation” or the popular Motown singing group “The Temptations.” What's the message here?

Our use of temptation reflects a timeless fascination with temptation: the temptation to break the rules is titillating - why else does a teenager sneak a beer or smoke cigarettes? Temptation brings a sense of excitement to life. And, when we DO OVERCOME temptation, we feel STRONG and powerful or good - "I was tempted to have that second piece of cake, but I DIDN'T do it". We may be AFRAID of being tempted, but we are also drawn to it.

LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION: More than any other phrase of the Lord's Prayer, this phrase reflects OUR POINT OF VIEW. The rest of the prayer leads us upward, leads us to reach out for God, and appeals to our highest ideals and faith. Lead us not into temptation addresses our deepest doubts and most immature thoughts about God. It is as if Jesus is condescending to our level of thinking.

For to be led into temptation is our GREATEST FEAR: that we will fail God as did Adam and Eve. DELIVER US FROM EVIL: this is our GREATEST HUMAN NEED. To be delivered from the brokeness and disappointments of life, and to make it successfully to the other side of the abyss.

First, let's establish exactly what the TEXT SAYS.

The Greek word Peirasmos is commonly translated TEMPTATION. But word really carries TWO meanings. Peirasmos can mean "temptation" as in being misled into sin or enticed to do wrong. OR, the word can mean TRIAL or TESTING, as in one's faith or fidelity being put to the test.
The word occurs in the NT only 21 times. It means "temptation (into sin)" unequivocally ONLY ONCE (I Tim 6:9). In every other instance, the reference is to the testing of faith or to God's fidelity being put to the test. That is the meaning too, here in our Lord's Prayer. (cf Jeremias, The Lord's Prayer) So the NRSV translates our phrase do no bring us to the time of trial.

What we are praying for here is that we will not collapse in the trials and travails of life. That we will not drown in an ocean of obscure existence. That we will not crumble under the weight of our daily burdens of family and work. That we will not be destroyed in the fiery crucible of living, but will be purified and strengthened as in a refiner's fire. Do not bring us to the time of trial. Lead us not into temptation.

But DELIVER US FROM EVIL. Again, there is some ambiguity in the translation: the phase can mean, deliver us from THE EVIL ONE or deliver us from the POWER OF EVIL.

We are quick today to dismiss the notion of a personified evil as superstitious, and a remnant of an ancient mythical worldview we no longer share. Adam and Eve were tempted by the devil. Jesus struggled with the devil. Martin Luther threw an inkwell at a devil he saw. And John Milton wrote a great epic poem on the devil. But most of us we don't believe in the devil as personified evil. Most of us (myself included) view evil as a terrible force to be reckoned with, but not necessarily an embodied force. Certainly not a guy in a red suit with horns and a pointed tail.

But however you slice it, the Lord's Prayer acknowledges our human predicament: evil is present in our world. Even as the evil serpent was present in paradise, evil is with us in the age of the risen Christ. Evil is here. There is no escaping it. There is no removing it. There is no overcoming it. Our only hope is for God to DELIVER us from it - for God to deliver us from EVIL.

Dietrich BONHOEFFER wrote that there are really only TWO temptation stories in the Bible: That of Adam and Eve, which led to the FALL of MAN; and that of Jesus in the wilderness, which led to the fall of SATAN. "All other temptations in human history," Bonhoeffer wrote, "have to do with these two stories of temptation. Either we are tempted in Adam or we are tempted in Christ. Either the Adam in me is tempted - in which case we fall. Or the Christ in us is tempted - in which case Satan is bound to fall." (Temptation, 101)

It is good to remember The Lord's Prayer does not say, "O God, REMOVE the test, remove the trials and temptations and testings of life." Life without tests is no life at all. The prayer rightly acknowledges that such tests exist, and are even desirable for building faith and developing character. As an old saw puts it, "God, I don't pray that you REMOVE this mountain, only that you give me the strength to CLIMB over it." Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

In Deliverance, a James Dickey novel that became a cult film of the 1960's, some naive city "good ole boys" discover what temptation and evil are all about. They set out to conquer the white water of the Chattooga River, only to discover they are barely up to the test of nature and human evil. They are capsized and marooned by the river, and then brutalized by mountain men. In the end, they receive their deliverance - but not before one of their party is sexually assaulted and they commit murder. Their lives were never the same after that weekend on the river. Deliverance comes at a very high price.

And OUR DELIVERANCE comes at a high price. The highest price. In ADAM we are given over to the power of sin. In Adam we suffer brokenness. In Adam we know only death. But in the death of Jesus Christ WE have been DELIVERED from the power of temptation and the forces of evil. For Jesus Christ was tempted in every way as we are. And he has OVERCOME that temptation - for us.
So it is that we dare to pray, lead us not into temptation. But deliver us from evil. “For the temptation has already come and been conquered...” in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (Bonhoeffer)

So Christ lived and Christ died. And so we pray. AMEN.

Genesis 3:1-7
1Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” 2The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” 4But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; 5for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” 6So 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; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

James 1:12-16
12Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. 13No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. 14But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; 15then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. 16Do not be deceived, my beloved.