

Praying for Victory over Evil

Our second Scripture is from Matthew 4:1-11 about Jesus' experience of being tempted by the devil at the outset of his public ministry.

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."⁴ But he answered, "It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,'

and 'On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹ and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him.'"

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The final petition of the Lord's Prayer is, *And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one* (Matt. 6:13).

It's significant that the last request in the Lord's Prayer is for the heavenly Father to deliver us from evil. We're not certain, nor are the best of Greek scholars, if the text should be translated "the evil" or "the evil one," but the fact remains that we're to acknowledge in our praying and in our living, the reality of the devil. In his classic, *The Screwtape Letters*, CS Lewis imagines for us the correspondence between Uncle Scewtape, the older demon, and his understudy demon, his Nephew Wormword. Screwtape advises Wormword in tactics for leading to the spiritual destruction of his "client. Uncle Scewtape notes that the best thing he and other demons have been able to do is convince us humans that the idea of a personal devil is a medieval superstition, and that "'devils' are predominantly *comic* figures in the modern imagination."

Those who're doing the most to advance the Kingdom of God have no difficulty in believing in the existence of a personal devil and his organized host of fallen angels called demons. Even the Great Reformer Martin Luther threw an inkwell against a wall to ward off an attack from the devil. The more we're involved in the work of the Kingdom of God, the more we'll be convinced of the reality of a well-organized and formidable kingdom of darkness.

The devil is real to those whose lives are attacks upon Satan's strongholds. The people who dismiss the idea of a real devil are those who pose no threat to his cause and thus are exactly where Satan wants them. Although we must not fear him, we need to recognize his reality and his designs on us. Thus Jesus taught us to pray that we not be led into his tempting power and be delivered from his powerful attacks upon us.

As Jesus' followers, we're no more immune from the attacks of the devil than was Jesus himself. Satan's the liar and the deceiver, whose intent is to destroy our souls. If he can't do that, he'll seek to destroy our joy and usefulness in the Kingdom of God. Just as he did with Adam and Eve, and has done with everyone since, and even with our Lord himself, Satan tempts us by appealing to the desires of the flesh, the appeal of our pride and of the fallen world and its society (Genesis 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11).

Satan doesn't come to us as a sinister-looking creature in a red suit, with horns and a tail and carrying a pitchfork. As Paul, says, he disguises himself as an angel of light, and comes to us as an attractive tempter (2 Cor.11:14). He doesn't present us with choices that are obviously evil and counter to God's word and will. Instead, he begins where we are, and presents at first attractive and seemingly harmless alternatives to God's will. This is what he did with Jesus. He tempted him to use his miraculous powers to satisfy his physical appetites; he tempted him to gain a following through sensational displays of power; and he promised him an immediate following and earthly kingdom without the pain of the cross (Matt.4:1-11).

The devil will attack us in our most vulnerable places, including at the level of our physical and sexual desires, and at the level of our need for ego gratification of pride, and our lust for success, even in Christian service. Many Christian workers, including pastors, have fallen morally and sexually in the context of spiritual ministry, counseling and Scripture quoting. The devil will tempt us with anything, including good things (such as "success" and popularity) that will separate us from God. Friends, marriage, family, job, our even "Christian" service can become a temptation if these tear us away from God and become substitutes for the Lordship of Christ. What we are to pray is "Let nothing become a temptation to me" (Thielike).

The Greek word for temptation (peirasmos) can also be translated "test." God never tempts us, as James reminds us (1:13f). His purposes for us are always good. But at times he allows us to be tested—never for our harm but always for our good. As the writer of Hebrews says, his desire is to discipline us through times of difficulty and trial, as a Father disciplines the children he loves (12:4-13). God doesn't initiate temptation (Jas. 1:13), but rather we bear the responsibility for yielding to temptation. And tests and all of the trials of life are not initiated by God but by Satan himself (Job1:6ff; 2:1ff). In this fallen world, God permits Satan to initiate evil things, including our difficulties and all diseases. But the God of sovereign love and wisdom is able to cause all of these things to work together for our spiritual and eternal good (Rom. 8:28f).

Some interpreters say that in this petition Jesus is teaching us primarily to pray for deliverance from life's trials and difficulties. And to pray for the Father to not lead us

into these tests and difficulties is an expression of “no confidence in self” and our total dependence on him to deliver us (Willard). These tests are necessary for our spiritual growth and development, just as a child needs to be given discipline and experience difficulties to learn to cope with life as an adult. Even moral temptations are important to teach us to be disciplined and dependent on God to resist. In this prayer we’re actually praying, “Keep us away from or deliver us out of” temptation (Carson). We’re to pray that when we have the opportunity to sin we’ll not have the desire and when we have the desire we’ll not have the opportunity. A young girl was spotted wearing a tee shirt which said, “Lead me not into temptation. I can find it myself.” Being tempted is not a sin, but yielding to it is. Martin Luther said, we can’t keep the birds from flying overhead; but we *can* keep them from building a nest in our hair.

Most of us will be forced to admit that we enjoy some temptations and find them exciting and a boost to our ego to be tempted and to flirt with danger. Yet we fail to realize that when we dramatize temptations, even in our secret thoughts, we “gather gasoline for the devil’s spark” (Buttrick). Even as being-redeemed followers of Christ, we need to remember Jeremiah’s words, that “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (17:9). Who can trust it? Certainly we can’t, but must heed the counsel of Scripture to flee from it (1 Cor. 6:18; 2 Tim. 2:22).

Jesus also warned us about the evil that comes out of our hearts and defiles us (Matt. 15:19). *The Message* paraphrases this petition, “Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.” James, in explaining that we can’t blame God for tempting us, since he cannot be tempted or a tempter, says we must look for the fault within ourselves: *But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death* (1:14f). We need to pray for God to keep us safe from ourselves, from our old sinful nature, as well as from the devil. I know in my life, God has often protected and delivered me from my own stupidity and poor judgment.

In his crucial and agonizing prayer in Gethsemane, on the eve of his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus asked his inner circle of disciples to watch and pray with him. But at this hour of Jesus’ need for their prayerful support, Peter, James and John couldn’t even stay awake for an hour. Jesus asked Peter, “Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (Matt. 26:40f, NIV).

Temptations come in many shapes and forms and not always as blatant seductions to be sexually impure or unfaithful, but even to allow the fallen world to captivate us and lead us away from our close walk with Jesus. This is true even for those of us in the profession of church leadership and service. In the 1940’s, Helmut Thielicke spoke of the spiritually eroding influence of daily doses of radio and movie watching that can come between us and God. I wonder what he would think of today’s entertainment industry, movies, images and Internet influence, which so pervades the consciousness of many if not most Christians.

God is able and willing to deliver us from the grip of moral temptation. Paul warns us to be on guard against temptation and not to have the presumptuous attitude that we can resist temptation in our own strength: *So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.* ¹³ *No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.* (1 Cor. 10:12f). God gives moral strength and also he intervenes in our behalf when we think we're overwhelmed by the power of temptation.

As John says, we have the Holy Spirit within us, and "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 Jn. 4:4). The Apostle Paul reminds us that our spiritual warfare 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." He then admonishes us to "put on the full armor of God," so that we can stand against the onslaught of the Evil One (Eph. 6:12f). We've been given all we need to resist the devil and his fiery arrows of temptation, even those that appear so harmless and even "spiritual." We're given the Word of God, which the psalmist says keeps our way pure and guides us in the right path (Ps. 119:9, 105). We're given the power of the Holy Spirit, to enable us to not gratify the desires of the sinful nature and to live in step with the Spirit who produces godliness in us (Gal. 5:16-25).

This word in our text includes temptations but also can refer to trials, tests and difficulties that happen to God's best people. Even Paul himself had a great trial he described as a thorn in his flesh (2 Cor. 12:7). It's good we haven't been able to identify Paul's thorn, which allows us to apply it to just about any difficulty or suffering that God allows to come our way. And James says we can even welcome these trials with joy, knowing that God is going to bring good out of apparent evil (1:2).

The devil's at work with his persecution of faithful believers around the world. Many are being tested and tempted to renounce their faith in Christ under the threat of the loss of property, homes, families and their lives. To renounce their faith in Jesus is a huge temptation, so we must pray for them in this petition of the Lord's Prayer that the Lord would them out of their distress and deliver them from the destructive power of the Evil One. The cup we're to drink is a cup of blessing and joy but also one of sorrow, as we take up our cross and share in the sufferings of our Savior. How then are we to pray for ourselves and others, that the Father to "lead us not into testing" and "deliver us from the evil one"? We're to ask God to spare us all from trials and tests we can't endure, but to give us his grace and deliverance from the trials he allows to come our way. We can drink the cup he gives us but not one we would grasp for ourselves.

As we pray for victory over evil, we need to bear in mind that, whatever we experience in the way of temptation and trial, God desires to give us his victory and use us a mighty warriors in kingdom service. Those who have proven to be victorious are those God is able to use in his service, even in the most demanding and difficult of assignments. What we need to remember is Jesus' words to his disciples to watch with him and pray alongside him. We need to remember that "The spirit is willing, but the body is weak"

(Matt. 26:41). We're unable within and by ourselves to resist the devil and his temptations and trials he initiates against us. But the battle is the Lord's. He's gracious. If you have fallen, he stands ready to forgive and to restore you so you can once again experience his faithful love and victory over evil.

"And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one" (Matt. 6:33).