

Back when I was an intern, we were just beginning to try out new versions of the Lord’s Prayer. Needless to say, that didn’t always go over real well. In fact, one day this guy went on and on about it in Bible class – ending with the question, “Why can’t we just pray the original version of the Lord’s Prayer?” Well, I was a lot younger and feistier back then, so I said, “Sure. We can do that. Let us pray.” And I gave him the original version – right out of the Greek New Testament: Πατερ ημων, ο εν τοις ουρανοις, αγιαζετε ονομα σου...

I know. Kind of snotty. It probably would have been better to just pray the petition we’re focusing on tonight: *Lead us not into temptation*. But on second thought, that might not have been so helpful, either. In fact, it would have just brought me back to the original problem: *Which version of the Lord’s Prayer should I use?* You see, of all the petitions in the Lord’s Prayer, this one changes the most depending on which version we use. There’s “*Lead us not into temptation*,” of course. But then, another version says, “*Save us from the time of trial*.” Another says, “*Do not bring us to the test*.” And still another says, “*Keep us from falling into sin*.” So which translation is right? That’s where it gets dicey! All of them are right. Or all of them can be. In fact, this is a case where it might actually be easier to pray the original version!

Here’s the problem. In the original Greek, the word *peirasmon* can mean three different things – trial, test, or temptation. It all depends on the context. Now, a Greek would know right away what was meant – just as we would, for instance, if someone were to say, “Your sweater is really hot!” That could mean the sweater feels hot, or it makes you hot, or it looks really good – but we wouldn’t have to spend a lot of time pondering which was meant; we’d know from the context. And in Greek that’s true for the word  $\square$  *peirasmon*. Unfortunately, we’re not Greek, and in English we don’t have a word that covers all the bases, so we have to use three different words to translate it: trial, test, temptation. Trial is its more neutral sense, test is somewhat negative, and temptation is really negative.

Here’s how it works. Imagine that a couple of your friends are doing something wrong, and they are encouraging you to join in, too. Now, just being in that difficult situation is a trial. But what if there were a part of you would like to join in? The pressure to do wrong makes it a temptation. On the other hand, there is also the chance that you will resist the pressure and do what is right. In that sense it is a test of your commitment to God. So it’s the same situation, but seen from three different angles it can be a trial, a test, or a temptation.

And why is it important to know this? Well for starters, so that we don’t get the wrong idea about God. I can’t tell you how many times someone has asked me, “*Why would God lead us into temptation?*” I mean, the very idea is unnerving! At best, it sounds counter-productive, at worst it sounds downright cruel, and in

either case, it hardly encourages trust in God, does it? So for this reason alone we need to know what this petition means and what it does not mean.

The Bible itself makes clear what it does *not* mean. James 1:13: **“Whenever we’re tempted, let no one say, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil and He Himself tempts no one.”** Now, this verse could just as easily be translated, *“Let no one say, ‘I am being tried by God’”* and *“Let no one say, ‘I am being tested by God.’”* So it clears away a lot of bad theology about God “punishing us” on the one hand or “not giving us more than we can handle” on the other. God does not sit up in heaven like some divine Snidely Whiplash thinking, *“Nyah-ah-ah! What trials, tests, and temptations can I inflict on those poor humans today?!”* There is another figure in the Bible who operates that way, but he got kicked out of heaven some time ago! God does not do that. In fact, the Bible tells us not to even suggest such a thing. **“Whenever we’re tempted, let no one say, ‘I am being tempted by God.’”**

Actually, when we pray, **“Lead us not into temptation...”** we’re asking God to protect us from all that – to protect us from trials, tests, and temptations. Because obviously, they’re still going to come up in life, aren’t they? Even though God doesn’t cause them, they’re still going to come up. In fact, they’re pretty unavoidable. That’s just the downside of living in a world where free will can be used and abused; where evil can things happen to the best of us. So what we’re praying is that, far from bringing us *into* trying situations, God would deliver us *from* them. The sixth and seventh petitions are really one request! *“Please do not lead us not into” trying situations, “but rather deliver us from” them and from all the bad stuff that can happen in them.*

I know, it probably sounds like I’m reading more into these petitions than is really there. Believe me, I’m not. It’s there. But here again, the problem is that a lot hangs on a couple of Greek words that are hard to translate into English.

One of them is: **alla**. *“But...”* is how we usually translate this word., however the meaning is much stronger. It really means *“but rather,”* or *“but instead,”* or *“but to the contrary.”* It’s as if a boy told his dad, *“Please don’t make me go to bed at 8:00, but let me stay up until 9:00.”* He’d really be saying *“but rather let me stay up until 9:00.”* In English, that’s just understood. In Greek, there’s an actual word for it, which we find in the Lord’s Prayer. **“Lead us not into temptation, *alla* – but rather, instead, to the contrary – deliver us from evil.”**

And speaking of “evil,” that is another tricky little Greek word: **poneros**. It can be translated *“evil”* in the generic sense; bad stuff, all-inclusive. It can also be translated *“the evil one”* – meaning the devil. In some Bibles it’s translated one way, in some Bibles the other way, but there’s really no need to pick and choose. Think “both/and.” We’re asking God to **“deliver us”** – literally *“drag us away from”* – every kind of evil imaginable. Evil experiences, evil people, evil forces, evil situations, even – perhaps especially – any evil tendencies within ourselves.

Any trial that might tempt us away from God or test our relationship with God: *“Protect us from all of that,”* we’re praying. *“Don’t bring us into it, but instead drag us out of it.”* **“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”**

Okay, got all that? So now that we’ve had our little Greek lesson, what is Jesus actually teaching us here about prayer? Think of these final petitions as bringing the model prayer full circle. We start off focusing on Who we’re praying to: a divine Father who only wants what is best for us. Then we spend most of the prayer asking God to give what is best for us. And now, before we close, we seek one more thing. We ask God to protect us and help us hold onto what is best for us. Yes, hold onto it – which is easier said than done!

Experience teaches this all too well! How easily God’s blessings can be stolen, ruined, or twisted by evil in its various forms! We don’t want that to happen, of course! We want to be faithful come what may! Yet we know our own weaknesses; we know the pressures around us. So what do we do? What we don’t do is go it alone! That’s really just not very smart! What we need to do is ask God for help. And in these final petitions, that’s what we do! We enlist God as an ally! To make sure nothing undermines His rule within us, to make sure nothing keeps His will from being done, to make sure the things He’s given us to don’t become idols or distractions, to make sure guilt or broken relationships don’t separate us from Him, we pray in these final petitions: *God, help us! We cannot go it alone! We need your help not to mess up! So please don’t lead us into situations where evil could sabotage us, and if we get into such situations, please drag us out of them a.s.a.p.!* Yes, we enlist God as an ally when we pray these final petitions, **“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”**

If this sounds obvious – *“Of course we want God as an ally!”* – please think again! Theoretically, we may trust that God is there for us – **“and if God be for us, who can be against us?”** – but when we’re slogging it out amidst the challenges of life, we can operate in a whole different way! How easy it is to think: *“I can handle this! I won’t cave into that! And if I get in over my head, well...maybe then I’ll ask God for help!”* In fact, we may feel quite confident going it alone – and how the devil must love to see that! Going it alone, we’re much easier targets! Going it alone, we’re more vulnerable to his ploys! If he doesn’t get to us this way, he can get to us that way. He knows all kinds of ways to get to us. Perhaps without us even realizing it. Certainly without us realizing it’s not smart to go it alone – until we are in over our heads and the damage is done!

That is why Jesus teaches us not to make God our last resort but our first resort – our first defense, our ally – and to do it not just in theory but as an integral part of our prayer life. With these final petitions, Jesus teaches us to prayerfully claim the many promises and invitations of God’s Word – like:

- **“Cast all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.”**
- **“Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him, and He will act.”**
- **“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”**

- “He will not let you be tested beyond your ability to endure, but with the test will provide a means to get through it.”
- “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

The list of God’s promises could go on and on! And Jesus teaches us to prayerfully claim each and every one. Don’t think of God as the Tough Guy Upstairs who sends us trials and tribulations. Don’t think of God as the helper of last resort, who’ll hopefully bale us out if things get too bad. No, turn to God first. The divine Father wants to be our ally, one we can rely on and need to rely on to handle whatever challenges come our way.

Honestly, this reminds me so much of something that happened to me years ago. I was having some car trouble, and as I feebly fumbled under the hood, trying to figure out what was wrong, my neighbor, Chip, came over. “Having a hard time getting it started?” “Yeah,” I said, “and I’ve tried everything!” “No you haven’t,” he told me. “Yes, I have,” I replied. “No, you haven’t,” he repeated. “You haven’t asked me for help.” Which was true. I hadn’t. And Chip was an auto mechanic! Doh! In minutes, he not only figured out the problem but fixed it. I thanked him profusely, of course. “No problem,” he said, “but next time, don’t be afraid to ask. I’m more than happy to help!”

That’s pretty much God’s attitude as well. “*Don’t be afraid to ask. I’m more than happy to help!*” I mean, God wouldn’t have put His promises in Scripture if He didn’t mean for us to claim them, and these final petitions of the Lord’s prayer encourage us to do just that. Claim God’s promises! Cling to God’s promises! Right up front! Each and every day! And make it an integral part of our prayer life! That is why Jesus tells us, “**Pray then in this way...Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**”

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This brings us to the end of our Lenten series, “*Lord, Teach Us To Pray,*” so I’d like to close with a comment from Frederick Maurice: “*The Lord’s Prayer may be committed to memory quickly, but it is slowly learnt by heart.*” Over the past few weeks, I hope that we have gained new insights into the Lord’s Prayer. Even more, I hope we’ve gained new insights into prayer itself – how and why we pray. A model, after all, is only a model. That’s true even of Jesus’ model prayer. The basic principles are what matter most, and the ones we learn here can enrich our prayer life in so many ways! First and foremost, we want to learn *this* principle by heart: God will always be waiting to hear from us, ready to give and do what is ultimately best. May this give us confidence and encouragement every time we pray to “**our Father, who art in heaven...**” Amen.