

8. *Jesus' Prayer: Protection*
With Christ in the School of Prayer
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Matthew 6.13 (NRSV)

“And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.”

Introduction

In the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer that we have all memorized, we pray the petition thusly: “lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” That is akin to this prayer:

*Now I lay me down to sleep;
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

My mother taught me that prayer when I was a little boy as I'm sure many of your mothers or maybe even fathers taught you. I understand parents don't teach this prayer much any more. It's said to be too frightening for children. I guess that's the most frightening thing for me, that we no longer teach our children to pray for God's protection.

For that's what this last petition in the Lord's Prayer is all about. We need protection. We need protection from trial and tribulation and the evil one because without God's protection there isn't any hope for us. We need to live in the faith that God not only wants to but does in fact protect us. Here are a couple of thoughts to help us both pray and trust in what Jesus said.

ONE: We are dependent on God

“Do not bring us to the time of trial.” Can Jesus have really meant what he said here? Many interpreters think not. Heroic efforts have been made to read the original language to mean other than what it says.¹ Would God really ever bring us or lead us into trials, temptations, or testing?

Yes! Because we need to learn to live in dependence on God. God expects us to pray that we will escape trials and when trials come, as they inevitably do, that we will be able to stand up under them. We are to pray for deliverance because trials and difficulties *are* dangerous for us. The danger is that they so easily undermine our faith.

Trouble comes and the human instinct almost immediately blames God. This is a little like the trouble preachers have with sermon compliments. A full sanctuary of people can come by and shake our hands and tell us what a wonderful, powerful message it was and how it has already changed their lives. And one person can come by and say, “That didn't do anything for me,” and it will blast away all the other comments. So, too, a thousand days of

¹ Emmet Fox, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Key to Success in Life* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1966) 177.

blessing can be wiped out by an afternoon of suffering. *Why me, God? Why are you doing this to me?*

So God expects us to pray for protection and deliverance from trials that undermine our faith. For God's protection isn't a magical shield around us that keeps all harm away. God's protection is the daily reality of the presence of God, a presence, when we are conscious of it, that is for us delight and blessing, even great mirth and peace. But we get into sloppy habits of thinking that when life is good, things are normal and God isn't doing anything. But when bad things happen, we think that God is somehow at fault or punishing us or both.

I don't want to trivialize or make light of the tragedies and sufferings that from time to time rattle our souls as they leap at us from the newspaper or television screen, things like the Corporate Airlines commuter plane that crashed, apparently without warning last Tuesday, on a flight from St. Louis to Kirksville, Missouri. All but two of the 15 persons on board died.² It's hard to imagine the horror they must all have experienced in those final moments. It's impossible to imagine the horror the two survivors will relive again and again for the rest of their lives. And who doesn't think about such things when we climb on board a commuter plane or any plane for that matter. Yet somehow we want to know why God lets things like that happen or even worse things and we don't think of God or thank God for the thousands of flights that take off and land safely every day. Why is God involved in the one and not the other? The truth is that God is always present and we are to pray that the trials will not lead us to doubt God's presence in all things.

This doesn't mean that suffering isn't real. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't hurt when it happens to us. It doesn't mean that everything that happens is God's will. It does mean that when we truly pray as Jesus taught, we are never outside of God's presence. In other words, to pray that we not be undone by the trials of life is to pray in dependence on God for everything. In fact, the whole Lord's Prayer is about being dependent ultimately on God. Dallas Willard says the prayer "is a vote of 'no confidence' in our own ultimate abilities."³ For when we are excessively confident in ourselves, we are insufficiently trusting in God.

Remember when the disciples James and John, along with their mother of all people, came to Jesus and asked that they sit on his left and right hands in the heavenly kingdom? (See Matthew 20.20-28.) Jesus asked them if they were able drink the cup he was about to drink. In other words, could they go through the suffering he was going to go through. They replied, "We are able. Yes Sir, we can do it!" This is precisely the bravado of self confidence we must avoid and that's why the last petition of the Lord's Prayer says what it says.⁴ Our only enduring strength is in God and if we do not acknowledge that, trials will inevitably

² On October 19, 2004 Corporate Airlines Flight 5966 was on a regular route carrying 13 passengers and two pilots when it crashed shortly after 7:50pm. The American Airlines affiliate was on a normal approach to the airport with no mention of any problems.

³ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998) 265.

⁴ Willard, 266.

lead us away from God.

Dr. Willard suggests that if we make the Lord's Prayer a part of our constant bearing in life, we will see how God indeed does keep us from trials and deliver us from evil. But people who do not ask God to spare them from trials and evils usually do not recognize God's hand when they are spared. They live under the illusion that their lives are governed by chance, luck, accident, the whims of others, and their own cleverness. And because they do not ask or constantly invite God in, it may be no illusion. God doesn't "fix" our illusions. "God respects us, no matter how wrong we are. But we will never know our life to be ... in [the Kingdom]. To that kingdom Jesus' words about prayer are an ever open door."⁵

God expects us to pray for protection so we will remain dependent on God and experience that dependence more and more each day, each hour, each moment.

TWO: There is evil that is against us

"Rescue us from the evil one." Jesus also teaches us to pray for deliverance from evil. As much as we might not like it, the original text is quite clear that Jesus is urging us to pray for rescue not from evil in general but from the evil one, namely, Satan. We don't talk much about Satan and it doesn't sit well with our modern and postmodern sensibilities. But it's what Jesus actually meant.

The great German theologian Helmut Thielicke preached about this right after the Allied occupation of his hometown of Stuttgart near the end of the World War II. He commented about our modern, "spiritualized," impersonal sense of evil.

Dear friends, in our time we have had far too much contact with demonic powers; we have sensed and seen how men and whole movements have been corrupted and controlled by mysterious, abysmal powers, leading them where they had no intention of going; we have observed all too often how an alien spirit can ride people and change the very substance of men who before may have been quite decent and reasonable persons, driving them to brutalities, delusions of power, and fits of madness of which they never appeared to be capable before; year by year we have seen an increasingly poisonous atmosphere settling down upon our globe and we sense how real and almost tangible are the evil spirits in the air, seeing an invisible hand passing an invisible cup of poison from nation to nation and throwing them into confusion.⁶

Thielicke and others had seen evil fact to face. They knew it was not ultimately abstract but all too personal.

Of course, talk about Satan and demons can certainly be overdone and trivialized. But let's not be naïve. However we describe it or name it, there is evil in the world and it is against human life because it is against God.

⁵ Willard, 266, 268.

⁶ Helmut Thielicke, *Our Heavenly Father: Sermons on the Lord's Prayer* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960) 133.

Nothing since World War II or since any other horrendous suffering suggests we should now be embarrassed to continue singing Martin Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress." The third verse goes:

*And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim, We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, For lo! His doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.*

That one little word is Christ and to pray the prayer he taught is to know at the depth of our soul that Christ is on our side and that his kingdom and we in his kingdom are forever.

Conclusion

The book of Lamentations, much of which is a plaintive cry of a suffering people, nonetheless affirms that "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning." (Lamentations 3.22-23) The psalmist declares that "The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." (Psalm 145.8) In light of these affirmations, there is a prayer called the Prayer of Protection:

*The light of God surrounds us;
The love of God enfolds us;
The power of God protects us;
The presence of God watches over us;
Wherever we are, God is!*

So we ask God to not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one because without depending on God there is no hope for us.

*Now I lay me down to sleep;
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

Whether or not we taught that prayer to our kids or grandkids, we can pray it ourselves for it expresses both the need and the certainty of God's protection, now and always.