

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

The author Ogden Nash once wrote, “I can resist anything except temptation.” With one sentence, he pretty much summarized our human predicament. Today, we are surrounded by the attitude that nothing is really that wrong, except people who claim there is such a thing as right and wrong. We are immersed in a culture that mocks the concept of sin as laughably old-fashioned. That's a real problem. If you've ever made soup, then you know that when you immerse something in soup stock and turn up the heat, things begin to take on the same flavor. A great danger to Christians is that we will take on the flavor of the world and stop taking sin and temptation seriously.

In his wisdom, Jesus offers you a corrective in his Prayer. When you deliberately pray the words Jesus taught, there's no getting around the fact that temptation is real and something to be avoided, as we pray: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” As you consider this part of the Lord's Prayer today, may the Holy Spirit help you to fully trust in the deliverance that God provides from temptation and sin.

At first glance, this might be the strangest part of the Lord's Prayer. Taken by itself, “lead us not into temptation” makes it sound like God might lead us into temptation, so we'd better ask him not to! But that's an artificial division. The entire thought is “lead us not...but deliver us.” Hebrew poetry does this a lot; it expresses one idea in two ways. One example is in the Psalm we spoke together today: it says: “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.” One idea, two ways of saying it. Here in the Lord's Prayer, it's much the same. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Two ways of saying one idea: We need to be delivered and led out of the trap of temptation. Two ways of saying, we need help, because we can't do this alone.

Still, we see bad things happen to people we love, and we have legitimate questions about that. When you inspect the Bible for some kind of answer, here's what you come up with: God does not tempt anyone to sin. He is perfectly holy, so it doesn't square that he would lead you in the direction of evil. But the Bible very clearly tells you that He tests those He loves. Think of Abraham. God told him to offer his only son Isaac, the child of the Promise, as a burnt offering. Think of Job. God allowed every blessing Job had been given to be ripped away from him. Think of Paul. He prayed for his thorn in the flesh to be taken away. But whatever it was, that thorn helped Paul to trust in God's comment, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

You see, God knows exactly where we need to be in order to depend on him fully. The thought of suffering is intolerable to most; yet it is precisely in suffering that we learn how all of life is supposed to work. In suffering, we start banging on God's door a lot and leaning on Him more and more. That's where we should've begun in the first place. In suffering our pride and self-reliance are stripped away and we are humbled. And right there in our desperation we meet a

God who did not come to eliminate all suffering but to enter it Himself. He has delivered you from evil by confronting it; by walking right into it. At the cross of Jesus we see a love so profound that it transforms suffering. It changes its very nature. Without the cross, suffering drives a person away from God, but with the cross of Jesus in view, you are driven to God. Suffering is not meaningless; it can create deep dependence on God's mercy. It can create a faith so full that it accepts all of God's decisions as good.

One summer an author was vacationing on Lake Michigan, and he decided to take his sailboat out into the bay. He enjoyed the sensation of quietly skimming across the water and had gone quite a way out when the wind abruptly died. His boat came to a complete stop. Not a breath of air stirred the sail. The direct rays of the sun began to beat down on his body. He had come out with a stiff breeze, and naturally, he began to pray for a breeze to take him back.

He prayed on and off for more than an hour, but no breeze came. But soon he saw a boat coming towards him. An old fisherman, realizing that the author would be helpless out in the bay with no wind, came out to tow the sailboat to harbor. Then, the writer said, he learned a lesson: his need had been for deliverance, and God had provided his need, even though it wasn't exactly what he had asked for.

Deliverance comes from outside ourselves. The history of God relating to his creation and especially his people has always been a history of God taking the first step; of God initiating contact; of God doing the hard work of making the relationship right. The climax of that work was Jesus' incredibly difficult mission of dying for people who didn't ask him to. He took the step. He paid the penalty. He sends the boat out to get you. Deliverance has arrived! Hitch your line to Jesus. Believe that he took the whip and the nails and the terrible suffering for you, and he will bring you to safe harbor.

The apostle Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians that "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." Hitch your line to that promise. He will provide a way out, and the way you find that way out is through prayer. If there is one great temptation-fighting weapon you have been given, that's it. Prayer. What better way to put Satan on his heels than with a prayer written by the Son of God Himself?

Do you remember what Jesus did when the devil tempted Him personally? He responded with Bible verses. He turned to something outside himself--not that he needed to--but to show us that the Word of God gives the power to say 'No' to temptation. The Lord's Prayer is the Word of God. They are Jesus' own words. It is a prayer that most of us know by heart, which means its power is always available to you. It is spiritual treasure. May you pray Jesus' words with awareness and great joy.