*Deliver us from Evil*

Fifth in Lenten Series on the Lord’s Prayer

By

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from the pulpit of

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James 1:12-18

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. 17Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Luke 22:39-46

39Jesus came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. 40When he reached the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” 41Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, 42“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” 43Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. 44In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.

45When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, 46and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”

Earlier this month the news reported on a three-week fight in southern Ukraine which was described as the largest battle of tanks in the war so far. It was a stinging setback for the Russian Army which lost a hundred and thirty tanks and armored personnel carriers in the Ukrainian ambush. Ukraine, of course, has also seen the horrible toll of lives lost to the Russian invasion. So many skilled soldiers have been killed or wounded, that they have been replaced with inexperienced, green recruits who are gaining all their knowledge in the field. The Ukrainians figure out the roads the Russian tanks will travel down, and then they sit and wait and prepare for ambush. “It’s always scary,” said one Ukrainian soldier. “We destroyed a lot of Russian equipment… but what they did wrong was come into Ukraine in the first place.”

The Ukrainian commander who led that battle a few weeks ago, Private Dmytro HRebenok, leads a three-man crew to perform a ritual before each of these wartime encounters. The men walk around the tank, patting its chunky green armor while the mechanic says, “Bring us in and bring us out.” And the commander recites the Lord’s Prayer.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I bet those Ukrainian soldiers really mean it when they get to the phrase, as it’s worded in Matthew’s gospel, *And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.* I bet there are Russian soldiers on the other side of this evil conflict offering the very same prayer.

We have attended to the Lord’s Prayer through the season of Lent, and it makes sense that this Sunday before Holy Week would coincide with: *Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.* It is as if these words place us next to Jesus himself, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying for God to remove the cup of suffering from him, and yearning that the disciples be spared their time of trial. Now, before we get too deeply into trials, temptations and evil we have to pause at

the first two words of this petition, *lead us,* because they quiver with issues of translation. It is not every day that the Lord’s Prayer makes headline news, but that’s exactly what happened in December of 2017 when the BBC’s worldwide news led off with the teaser, “Lord’s Prayer: Pope Francis Calls for Change.”

In an interview on Italian TV, the pontiff had said, *“Lead us not into temptation”* is not a good translation, because God does not cause humans to sin. The wise pontiff said a better translation would be “do not fall into temptation,” explaining, “It is I who falls… It is not God who throws me into temptation, and then sees how I fell. A loving parent does not do that, but rather helps you get up.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Pope Francis had consulted with good biblical scholarship, as we would assume. *Lead us not* *into temptation* is not the best of translations.

The English word temptation means the desire to do something, especially something unwise or wrong. But the word in Aramaic or Greek, carries the idea of *time of trial* or *time of testing* with more nuanced undertones. A more accurate translation would be “may we not fall into,” or “do not let us enter into.” The connotation is not a matter of someone else steering us in a certain direction as it is our walking in the wrong direction.

With these translation issues in mind, it’s also worth noting the context. The prayer is growing in intensity, guiding us from asking for basic human needs to be met, *daily bread,* to spiritual and relational help, “forgiveness of sins” to critical need in danger. *Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil* is yearning for God to deliver us from trials, to rescue us from evil. This prayer is uttered for times of crisis. Think the cries of brutal suffering the ancient Israelites endured as slaves in Egypt. Think the *valley of the shadow of death*. Think the Garden of Gethsemane just before torture, mockery and the most brutal death imaginable on the cross.

When I went to Israel with a group of Jewish and Christian clergy a few years ago, one of the things that surprised me is how close the Garden of Gethsemane is to the wall of old Jerusalem. The Garden hangs over a big busy street intersection now, but you can see how physically close Jesus was to his literal *time of trial*, a short walk from Gethsemane to the Lion’s Gate in the city wall, the beginning of the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Suffering. Biblical scholar, John Carroll, writes of Jesus midnight prayer before he takes that walk, “Jesus summons strength, through prayer, to face the ordeal that lies ahead…Meanwhile the conspiracy to seize Jesus and deliver him to the Roman governor brings Judas, and an armed crowd to the Mount of Olives. Throughout the arrest scene, Jesus and his words dominate, providing the interpretive lens through which readers experience the act of betrayal as only a momentary triumph of the power of evil. But while Jesus prays, we also see the working out of the divine purpose and confirmation of Jesus’ fidelity, under duress, to his vocation…”[[3]](#footnote-3) The will of God be done; the disciples be spared.

Under Roman rule, a rebel arrested for sedition would be rounded up with his followers, all of whom would be tortured and killed. Jesus urges his disciples to pray that they will not come into this time of trial, because Jesus knows he must travel the path of horror and evil before him alone. In his humanity Jesus knew the worst of suffering so that we are never alone in ours. and every time we give voice to this petition, we are joining Jesus in prayer – both spiritually and physically - asking for God’s will to be done.

As Albert Schweitzer once put it, Jesus was called to throw himself on the wheel of world history, so that, even though it crushed him, it might start to turn in the opposite direction.[[4]](#footnote-4) As part of that turning, this prayer guides us to ask God for help with the trials and temptations that keep us from honoring our faith, that keep us from honoring God. As in every other petition of this prayer, there is a profound corporate dimension. In saying, *our* Father, we pray for ourselves, and we pray for every other human being to be set free from evil.

Here’s a story worth remembering today when the names of the 516 people killed to gun violence las year are listed in today’s *Philadelphia Inquirer.* Tish Harrison Warren is an Anglican priest and author, who lives in Austin, Texas.She joined pastors from a dozen churches who rushed to Uvalde after the Robb Elementary School shooting last May. They circled up in a church fellowship hall two miles from where the mass shooting took the lives of nineteen children and two adults. She wrote, “Together these pastors faced an impossible question: What do you do whenyou are charged with the spiritual care of a town confronting an incomprehensible horror?”These additional pastors were there to “help the helpers” by offering prayer and presence to the school counselors and teachers, to local pastors and first responders who had been up all night with families waiting.

She notes that what this country needs are policy changes, stricter gun laws, mandatory licensing and training, a more workable system for background checks, and better mental health services. And yet, she urged, while that debate rages on in the broader culture, don’t give up on

the power of prayer. As the Texas politicians descended and used that mass shooting as a political football, the pastors in Uvalde insisted on linking the need for policy change to a faith that changes hearts, and thereby leads to action.

Sam Garza, a youth pastor at First United Methodist Church told Warren, “If people just say ‘thoughts and prayers’ or put something like that on their Facebook profile, and then don’t give another thought to Uvalde, that is not helpful. In prayer we find needs and a call to action, he said with this example: If people know that Aunt Tilly’s transmission needs to be repaired, and pray for that, then we also need to help her repair her transmission and pay for a mechanic.” Prayer is a powerful act in and of itself because in prayer, he said, “I find the answers I need or the strength I need” to change my heart, to change direction, to effect real change for human welfare. Summing up her experiences over those meetings with pastors and the large Uvalde Prayer Service that thousands attended, Warren wrote, “I believe that through prayer, God sends us into the hard work of loving others, in action and in policy. Political action is not to say that it will ever be enough. We need people to show up and stay with families till late in the night. We need people who love their city and their church and pour their lives out for people around them. We need changed hearts.”

In the wake of that horrible tragedy, prayer is what gave pastors the strength to be present, to comfort, to grieve and to pray with the families. Prayer is what gave the community of women and men strength to help search for mutilated children and sit with grieving neighbors. Prayer is what turned a Methodist church fellowship hall into a rec room for local youth for the months and years to come when all the news outlets have long since left Uvalde but the children there are still

growing up traumatized.

Warren concluded, “America has always been a nation of religious zeal and a nation of violence. Faith in America is complicated. It motivates courageous action but also inaction. It fosters unity but even within faith communities, people disagree deeply. It yields breathtaking acts of love, but it can also be manipulated for cynical ends. It drives personal and political change and can be a cop-out. Uvalde is still grieving and heart-broken. But every single person I talked to agreed on one thing: they could use your prayers.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

They, and we, and those Ukrainian and Russian soldiers, and apparently Jesus himself plunging to the depths of all human suffering especially need this prayer: *Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.*

AMEN.

1. Andrew Kramer, “In an Epic Battle of Tanks, Russia was Routed, Repeating Earlier Mistakes,” *New York Times*, March 1, 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James E. Miller, *Our Abba: Praying the Lord’s Prayer so it Will Come Alive in Us*, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John T. Carroll, Luke: The New Testament Library, p. 144-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Schweitzer quote from N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer,* p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Tish Harrison Warren, “In Prayer, I Find the Answers I Need or the Strength I need,” *New York Times*, June, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)