

Thoughts on the Lord's Prayer

9. "But deliver us from evil"

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THE SENSE of the Greek in the phrase "deliver us from evil" is "the Evil", as if it were not a thing or an abstract concept but a person. Many may have thought that Jesus was teaching us to pray for deliverance from evil things. Almost certainly he is not. There are two things to be said against that idea.

Firstly, adverse or evil circumstances may be sent by the hand of God for our spiritual improvement, and to ask for them to be removed would be counterproductive. God may well have delivered us into such evil on purpose, and have no intention of removing it. The Apostle Paul found himself in such circumstances with the thorn in his flesh, and despite repeated requests to God to remove it the discomfort continued.

Secondly, as God responds to the prayers of His children, if Jesus was teaching us to pray that evil circumstances might not come, then God has been dramatically inactive in answering these requests over the last 1,900 years. If Jesus was teaching believers to pray that evil things might not happen, it has not been effective!

Whilst we may shrink from the suggestion of deliverance from an evil person because it sounds similar to the notion of a supernatural devil, it is quite a Scriptural concept. Consider the following verses, which leave us in no doubt at all:

"discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee: to deliver thee from the way of the evil man, from the man that speaketh froward things" (Prov. 2:11,12);

"For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life: to keep thee from the evil woman, from the flattery of the tongue of a strange woman" (6:23,24);

"I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil" (Jno. 17:15);

"Finally, brethren, pray for us . . . that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith. But the Lord is faithful, who shall stablish you, and keep you from evil" (2 Thess. 3:1-3).

In the light of these quotations, is it not reasonable to assume that Jesus is seeking deliverance

from evil men, particularly when teamed with the phrase, "lead us not into temptation"? The phrase "Deliver us from" is thus set against the idea of do not "lead us into". We might note here that the flesh is easily led astray but requires considerable assistance with deliverance.

Why seek deliverance from evil people? The Apostle Paul supplies a simple response: "Do not be deceived, good ways are spoiled by evil friends" (1 Cor. 15:33, Twentieth Century New Testament). Since we must be in the world, and our Lord himself in John 17 did not pray otherwise, we need to be careful that the evil people in it do not influence us to become evil. We ourselves have an important part to play in this. We cannot pray to God that we be kept from the evil of wicked men, and voluntarily immerse ourselves in the evil of those same wicked men.

There is prevention of a negative sort, that is, avoidance, but there is also positive fortifying that we can do. The quotations from Proverbs and 2 Thessalonians above give positive principles: discretion and understanding, commandment, law and instruction, and the free course of the Word of God. Just avoiding evil will not work, helpful though that will prove. We shall only be like the man in Matthew 12:43-45, who left an empty house that became filled by more and worse things than before. If we are to have success in avoiding the evil of wicked men then we must immerse our minds in the things of God and seek for His blessing to deliver us from the evil.

Let us consider by way of summary the three requests that we make for ourselves: "Give us this day our daily bread"; "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors"; and "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil". We have forgiveness for yesterday, food for today and guidance and deliverance for tomorrow. These three encompass all our lives, past, present and future, our physical and spiritual constitution. It is quite amazing that, when we boil it all down, life is quite simple. We need only basic necessities and a godly direction and purpose. This brings to mind the wise king's summary of life: "Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl. 12:13).