

Thoughts on the Lord's Prayer

8. "And lead us not into temptation"

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ON THE SURFACE these seem strange words indeed. It is written, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed" (Jas. 1:13,14). How shall we reconcile that thought with the one our Lord seems to present when he instructs us to pray that God will not lead us into temptation? Is Christ saying that all who do not request to be left alone will be sorely tempted by God and as a result fail?

Similar thoughts to this have been voiced by most of the churches of Christianity for many years. It has been thought that a supernatural monster, desiring to draw us away from God, is continually looking to tempt us to sin, but by prayer and vigilance in spiritual matters we will ward him off, and he will then look elsewhere. What nonsense!

Consider some similar words from our Lord in the garden of Gethsemane: "And when he was at the place, he said unto them, Pray that ye enter not into temptation . . . And when he rose up from prayer, and was come to his disciples, he found them sleeping for sorrow, and said unto them, Why sleep ye? rise and pray, lest ye enter into temptation" (Lk. 22:40-46). What did Jesus mean? The present weakness of the disciples, "the flesh is weak", was in need of being matched by a strong spirit. At that time their spirit was "willing" but not strong (Mt. 26:41). The trial that would in a few hours overtake them was to be very fierce indeed, and they needed to prepare. Without assistance from God (through prayer) then they would certainly fail. Jesus seems to suggest that the antidote to failure in trial is prayer.

Did Jesus ask God to bring him into the trial for which he had been sent? Did he not ask on several occasions to be delivered from it, not trusting the weakness of flesh? This was a recognition of the frailty of humanity and a leaning upon God for strength. As we ask to be delivered from evil we are recognising the inherent weakness in our frame. Contrast this with the bold, almost reckless, confidence of Peter before he failed, and of the other disciples: "Though all men shall be offended

because of thee, yet will I never be offended . . . Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee" (Mt. 26:33-35).

In that Jesus said, "lead us not into temptation", are we to understand that the opposite is, "lead us into temptation"? Will God, unless we request to the contrary, drop us right in it, so to speak? The word "lead" is best understood as 'bring into'. The word "temptation" is used in various ways; it is used of trouble we bring upon ourselves (1 Tim. 6:9); it is used of circumstances that come upon us for Christ's sake (1 Pet. 4:12-16); it is used of the everyday trials which we all experience (1 Cor. 10:13). We might, then, broaden our concept of temptation to encompass trial and difficulty generally, rather than the concept of enticement to sin.

There are several principles that it would be well to state clearly:

- 1 Temptation and trial are not bad things when viewed from the Divine perspective, but are tools to mould our character, if we allow them to be used by God for that purpose (Jas. 1:2,12; 1 Pet. 1:6).
- 2 Trial and temptation are difficult for us to bear (Heb. 12:11).
- 3 We must yield to the will of God and allow Him to direct our lives (Prov. 3:5,6).
- 4 God will never tempt us to sin (Jas. 1:13).

God uses the adverse circumstances of life, and particular Divinely sent trials, to shape our character. To wish to be rid of all difficulty is to deny God the opportunity to work with us. It is reasonable to make the comparison between the prayer of Jesus, "if it be possible, let this cup pass", and our prayer, "lead us not into temptation". We suggest that we are praying as our Lord did for our trial and testing to be minimised, yet understanding (as the prayer has already made clear) that God's will for us must be done.

This is the prayer of the person who understands his or her weakness and is frightened by the strength of sin within. Such people are not self-confident, but trust in God. Clearly those who understand this will not place themselves in positions of temptation, but will rather "make no provision for the flesh" (Rom. 13:14).