

“And lead us not into temptation”

GOING TO TRIAL

--There simply is no way to get through school without having to endure a test or two.

While they are the anxiety-producing bane of students, without tests, how else is a teacher to know that they have actually understood the concepts or mastered the material?

It is in this sense that our next phrase in the Lord’s Prayer is to be approached, one that is universally memorized as: *“And lead us not into temptation.”*

In its original Greek compositions, as found in Matthew (6.13a) and Luke (11.4ba), the two gospel versions, remarkably, agree word for word, right down to the sometimes- obscure endings on the verbs. Matthew and Luke read identically--meaning that we’re a long way here from all the confusion surrounding last week’s question of whether it’s “sins,” or “debts,” or “trespasses” about which we’re to be concerned.

--Perhaps key among the six words which comprise this brief sentence in Greek is the final one, the only noun in the sentence (*“peirasmon”*), which we have learned to recite as “temptation.” *Lead us not into temptation.*

Actually, that original noun has other meanings, too, each of which shines a slightly different light on what it is that, in saying this beloved old prayer, we think we are asking God to help us to be able to avoid.

The word can just as well, and perhaps more meaningfully, be stated as “being put to the proof,” or “test,” or “trial.” Though we have come to accept “temptation” as the preferred reading, it is but one rendering of that Greek noun--and it may not be the best of the alternatives (to see the struggle the translators have, check the tiny footnotes at the bottom of the pages pertaining to these verses there in Matthew and Luke!).

Working one’s way through the Greek, word by word, the best rendering of the sentence is something like, *“And do not bring us to the time of trial. Do not compel us to prove ourselves. Do not put us to the test.”* Ah, and that brings us back to the matter of the test!

--But enough of that noun. With all that focus on it, something far more provocative is to be discovered in the Greek verb (*“eiseneg’kas”*), which easily gets overlooked. It does not mean, “Help us not to put ourselves into troubling times,” or even “Deliver us from situations which we might find difficult”--either of which suggest God’s role as our protector, defender, or rescuer when rough patches occur to us.

Consider more carefully that verb. It specifically requests of God, “Do not lead us (or do not bring us) into temptation.” It’s not at all about “Save us when we find ourselves tempted”; it’s about “Do not put us in the situation where we will be tempted.” Meaning . . . that sometimes God does? Now, there’s a rather disturbing thought!

This petition, uniformly stated in both gospels, with precisely the same form of the same verb, gives us no wiggle room to suggest an alternate explanation. Such a request to “lead us not” or “bring us not” would be absurd if God, in some way or other, isn’t a purposeful instigator of the rough waters that we sometimes must navigate.

In other words, God plays an active, not just a reactive, role in our difficult, distressing times. God is more than

simply benignly responsive in our times of trial as positive support or encouraging consolation--though certainly God is both. However, beyond that, as is obviously implied here in the Lord's Prayer, God is also actively instrumental in creating our times of testing. Now, that is disturbing!

If God is said to be so good and loving, then how might we understand that? One possibility is this: Because of the manner in which we live our lives, with our centers of gravity so frequently inclined toward one thing or another that just isn't good for us, we are almost always leaning in the direction of some future crisis. God's "leading" us or "bringing" us to the time of trial is about allowing that inclination and leaning to come to a head. God allows us to have what we're asking for, even insisting upon.

Understand, it is not about God's setting up a situation with malice toward us so that we get our just desserts and suffer. It's about God's giving us what we crave, affording us the opportunity to experience what we're hankering for--and potentially learning from the mistake and getting better at being the highest human we can be.

That's what a test is for--to determine with some certainty or clarity, what we do and do not understand. Our trials produce the evidence related to what we're really made of--where we've got it right and where some amendment or improvement is in order.

--Let's bring all this back to us, shall we? I know you're itching to do that.

Surely, tough times afflict everyone's life sooner or later, in one form or another. They are always times of trial. It's not that God wishes for us to suffer. What sort of God would that be? It's that God wants us to gain insight into ourselves and, if we pay any attention to it, to grow. God is in the very serious business of growing humans, which, surely, requires some tempting and testing along the way.

As was suggested at the outset this morning, there simply is no way to get through school, or through life, without having to endure a test or two. God directly contributes to that. Without our tests, how else is God--how else are we?--to know that we actually understand the way that we are to be going?

"And lead us not into temptation," we ask. "Do not bring us to the time of trial. Do not compel us to prove ourselves. Do not put us to the test."

Fat chance of that happening!

No matter how many times we ask not to be brought "to the time of trial," where temptations abound to revert to our old inferior and infantile selves, unavoidably those times will come. God allows for that.

Ultimately, what distinguishes us from one another is not who experiences troubles and who does not. In one way or another, we all do. What distinguishes us from one another is who, through their troubles, succumb to temptation of whatever sort, and crumble and fail the test, and who, through their troubles, discover their true mettle, prevail, and, as a human being, take a giant stride forward.

Given your own personal moments of trial, any idea on which side you might be found?

Are we passing or failing the tests?