

Tuesday, July 14, 2020

When temptations and trials come

- Pastor Hank French

Save us from the time of trial (Matthew 6:13).

So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:12-13).

The words of the sixth petition could be read as: “Lead us not into temptation,” or “And do not bring us to the time of trial” or “Save us from the time of trial.” Which leads to an important question: Does God *lead* us or *bring* us into temptation or trial?

The Old Testament tradition thought so—sometimes directly (e.g., Genesis 22:1-2, Exodus 16:4, Psalm 26:2), and sometimes indirectly, as in the book of Job where God allowed Satan to test Job severely. At first glance, Jesus’ prayer seems to reflect this ancient tradition. But this tradition raises a problem.

Given that temptation is the temptation to sin, and given that we all too often give in to temptations, if God leads us into them, wouldn’t that make God complicit in evil? Given that the trial or test is to see whether or not we will follow the will and way of God, and given that we all too often fail the test, wouldn’t that make God culpable in our fall into sin? It would seem so, but that’s not something that people who believe in the righteousness and goodness of God want to say.

And so we find James saying: “No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin.... Do not be deceived, my beloved” (James 12:13-16).

Which is to say that God is responsible only in the sense that (for reasons known only to God) God allows evil to exist. God does not directly or indirectly tempt or test humankind, but in a world where God’s name is not perfectly hallowed, where God’s kingdom has not perfectly come, and God’s will is not perfectly done, the threats and enticements of evil confront everyone, and every day we are tempted to yield. In this prayer we pray that God would both protect us as we face this inevitability and give us the wisdom and strength to make good choices, choices that mirror the will and way of God disclosed by Jesus.

Prayer: Holy God, in those times when life presents me with temptations and trials, help me to stay strong and resist. Amen.