

## Special Section: The Lord's Prayer

### Lead Us Not Into Temptation, But Deliver Us From Evil If God would never lead us into sin, why does the Lord's Prayer include the phrase, "lead us not into temptation"?

By Paul Thigpen



Calligraphy by Tim Botts

Of all the petitions in the Lord's Prayer, perhaps the most perplexing is the phrase "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The prayer's preceding requests for a holy and loving Father to forgive us and to feed us no doubt would flow naturally from our understanding of His character. But would a holy, loving God consider leading us into temptation in the first place?

Historical records show that from as early as the second century Christians were already asking this obvious question. The African theologian Tertullian, commenting on the Lord's Prayer in about A.D. 192, bristled at the notion that God could tempt us. "Far be the thought," he wrote, "that the Lord should seem to tempt, as if He were either ignorant of [the limits] of someone's faith, or else eager to overthrow [that faith]."

Of course, Tertullian was only echoing the biblical statement written by James to Christians much earlier—perhaps in response to a similar question: "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed" (James 1:13–14).

What, then, are we to make of Jesus' words? Are He and James speaking about the same thing when they refer to temptation? If not, what's the difference?

### The Meaning of Temptation

Some of the confusion arises because we need a clearer understanding of what the Bible means by temptation. The New Testament Greek term used by the gospel writers in recording the Lord's Prayer is *peirasmos* (Matthew 6:13; Luke 11:4). James in his epistle uses the verb form of the same word.

Though the same root term is intended in both texts, we must note first of all that the Greek word has more than one meaning. Today the English noun temptation commonly means "enticement to sin." But *peirasmos* can also mean "test" or "trial" in the sense of adversity, as in fact our English term also did in earlier days.

James himself utilizes the other meaning of the word in the same letter, where he writes: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials [*peirasmos*] of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. . . . Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial [*peirasmos*], because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life" (James 1:2–3; James 1:12).

We should note here that even what we would call a test or trial in the life of a believer usually involves in some way an enticement to sin as well. For example, the Christian who is tested by painful circumstances is tempted to sin by finding an easy but compromising way out, by doubting God's goodness, or even by leaving the faith altogether. The person who is tested by persecution, abuse, or misunderstanding from others is tempted to sin by growing bitter instead of forgiving. This connection probably accounts for the double meaning of the Greek word in the first place.

In light of these multiple senses of the term, we must ask whether James's statement that God cannot tempt us means that God will not test us or that God will not entice us to sin. The last clause of his sentence provides a telling clue: "but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and *enticed*" (James 1:14, emphasis added).

Clearly, the kind of *peirasmos* James means here is not the test or trial he refers to earlier, but rather the enticement to sin that we commonly mean today when we speak of temptation. James insists that God simply does not lure us into sin that way. And even if God should test us or allow us to be tested by adversity, the accompanying temptation—the enticement to doubt or compromise or grow bitter—comes not from God, but from either the devil or our own desires.

## God's Role in Temptation

With James's words in mind, we can safely assume that the one thing Jesus is not saying in the Lord's Prayer is that God could entice us to sin. But notice that in Jesus' words to the disciples, the action on God's part that He describes is not so direct. Jesus doesn't say, "Don't tempt us," but rather, "Don't lead us into temptation."

What would it mean for God to lead us into temptation? Is that different from tempting us? If God would not Himself entice us to sin, might He nevertheless lead us into a place where we could be enticed?

The story of Jesus' encounter with the devil in the wilderness shows us that God would in fact do just that. On that occasion, Satan set up three temptations to entice Jesus (though of course unsuccessfully) to sin. What was God's role in all this? Matthew tells us plainly how Jesus came to that place of temptation: "Then Jesus was *led by the Spirit* into the desert *to be tempted by the devil*" (Matthew 4:1, emphasis added).

Why would the Spirit of our holy and loving Father do such a thing? Certainly not to cause Jesus to sin. Evidently temptation—whether in the sense of a trial or an enticement to sin—can be used redemptively by God for His glory and for our good. A look at a few biblical passages will illustrate.

## How God Can Use Temptation

First, Scripture shows us that God can use temptation *to reveal what is in our hearts*. Temptation is a test of character. What God discovers in us this way may lead to commendation, to repentance, or to judgment.

For example, when God tested Abraham with His command to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22:1–14), the old man resisted the temptation to disobey and instead demonstrated a faithful heart. So God used the occasion to provide a commendation and a promise (Genesis 22:15–18).

When David was tempted by the sight of Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11), he chose to commit adultery and murder, revealing the extent to which lust ruled his heart. Yet when such behavior manifested his character, the ugliness of what he saw there caused him to repent—showing that within his heart lived as well a desire to please God.

In Psalm 51, a confession that David wrote after this experience, we find the words of a man who has learned important lessons about his own sinfulness and weakness. Even though David failed the test with tragic consequences, God apparently used the temptation to reveal to David attitudes and desires in his heart that needed correcting. Meanwhile, the king also learned a lesson in humility, for as someone has aptly said, “Temptation is a file that rubs off the rust of our self-confidence.”

Sometimes the results of temptation are not so edifying. King Saul was tested several times and failed, yet without repentance (1 Samuel 13:1–15; 1 Samuel 15; 1 Samuel 22; 1 Samuel 28). These temptations revealed Saul’s character to be deeply stained with selfishness, jealousy, and anger. Surely God’s desire was for Saul to obey. Yet the Lord nevertheless used these tests to uncover Saul’s heart before the nation so that they could recognize God’s justice and wisdom in judging Saul and removing him from the throne so that a better man could fill it (1 Samuel 15:28).

A second purpose God can accomplish through temptation is *to allow us a choice that clarifies significant issues*. The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness accomplished this divine purpose. For example, when we read how Satan enticed Jesus to use His power for self-preservation, or to bow down and worship him in exchange for earthly power and splendor, we recognize that these tests pinpointed the ultimate issues involved in our Lord’s mission on earth (Luke 4:5–8).

Third, God can work through temptation *to fortify our will*. Sin’s power over us grows every time we give in to temptation. But by the same token, our commitment to God and our ability to resist evil is strengthened every time we say yes to God and no to the devil or our own wrong desires. The Apostle Paul told Timothy, “Train yourself to be godly,” comparing the process to physical training (1 Tim. 4:7). Just as our physical muscles grow stronger through exercise, so also the “muscle” of our will is strengthened by exercise in doing right.

Finally, God allows temptation *so that we can provide an example for others and a witness of God’s grace before His enemies*. Perhaps the clearest biblical example of this divine purpose is Job. Though Satan brought adversity on Job in the hope that he would curse God to His face (Job 1:9–11), the man resisted that temptation. Instead he provided us all with a model to imitate that is even today memorialized in the phrase “the patience of Job.” Meanwhile, when believers like him maintain faith despite suffering, they present Satan with a frustrating enigma and unbelievers with a reason to ponder.

## Why Pray Against a Good Thing?

In all these ways we can see the purposes of God in leading us into temptation. Though He doesn't tempt us Himself, He allows us to be tested for redemptive results. As the church reformer Martin Luther once noted, "My temptations have been my masters in divinity."

Yet that still leaves us with a glaring problem: If such testing can be for our good, why would Jesus have us pray to escape it?

Just now I am desperately trying to find a way to prepare for my doctoral examinations in historical theology. For every hour I may spend in study, I must spend a week in other labors to provide for a family of four. So when my faculty advisor suggests that we set an exam date, I answer, "No, not now. I'm not prepared. I need to strengthen this area. I need more practice in that area. I'm not ready for the test."

Do I believe that the exams are a good thing and for my benefit? Of course. Do I believe they will help me to grow spiritually and intellectually? No doubt. Do I recognize that the tests will inevitably come? Certainly. But knowing what I do about my present limitations, would I be wise to ask for them? No, I would not.

I think a similar truth is at work in this petition of the Lord's Prayer. Though tests are useful, we nevertheless ask that they stay away from us simply because we recognize our limitations, and we don't presume to be up to the test. In fact, we don't pray for temptation any more than we pray for adversity. On the contrary, we say emphatically in the second part of this petition, "deliver us"—another translation would be "*rescue* us!"—from such a situation, because we dare not come close to evil.

Actually, we need only change this petition into its opposite to realize what pride would be implied if we prayed otherwise: "Go ahead, Father; put us to the test! After all, we know we can pass it." Humility requires that we pray instead to be rescued. In short, "Lead us not into temptation" is a confession of our weakness.

When I was a young Christian, I was taught by a wise man that confession is one of the fundamental elements of prayer—an admission of our dependence on God, our sinfulness, our weakness. I agreed with his observation, yet I was puzzled to discover that in the Lord's Prayer, the model prayer, I could find no such statements. Later, however, when I began to read between the lines, I realized that the confessions were there, but they were all implied.

In this brief but beautiful prayer, each petition offered to God and each statement made about God is also a declaration about ourselves. "Give us this day our daily bread," after all, shows our dependence on the Lord. "Forgive us our debts" assumes that we are sinful. And "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" is another way of saying, "Father, we're weak."

So why didn't Jesus simply teach us to make an outright confession? Why didn't He tell us to pray, "We are dependent . . . sinful . . . weak"? In part, I believe, the answer lies in our Lord's desire to offer the prayer as a simple and thus easily learned model. By having the petitions imply the confessions, He achieved an elegant simplicity that nonetheless cannot be fully fathomed even by a lifetime of meditation on its words.

Yet more significantly, I think Jesus was also making a point about the focus of our prayer. All too often when praying we find ourselves at the center of what we say. Whether confessing our sins or asking for provisions, we tend to make ourselves the subject of most our sentences: "*I* failed. *I* need help. *I* want to grow. *I* . . . *I* . . . *I*."

This is not to say, of course, that using the word "I" in prayer is inappropriate; we certainly have ample biblical precedents for praying that way. But the great beauty of the Lord's Prayer is that it maintains a focus on God. We may be the grammatical *object* of some sentences there, but we are never the *subject*; God alone holds that position. Even in confession, we turn our eyes to Him and say, "*You* give us bread. . . . *You* forgive us. . . . *You* lead us. . . . *You* deliver us."

That kind of prayer provides us with an oft-needed corrective. For perhaps the most subtle temptation, the most persistent evil of all is to stand ourselves in God's rightful place at the center of the landscape of our hearts.

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: In Your Own Words*

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: Why "Us"?*

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

PAUL THIGPEN, a freelance writer and editor, is working on a Ph.D. in historical theology from Emory University.

On Your Own  
**In Your Own Words**

Review what the article says about the phrase, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Then write out this petition as you would pray it, using your own words.