

The Lord's Prayer: 5) Times of Testing

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”

Matthew 26:36-56

March 20, 2005

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” might have summarized the prayers of Ashley Smith as she was taken hostage a week ago by murder fugitive Brian Nichols in Atlanta. Tied up with masking tape, a curtain, and an extension cord, she gained the trust of her captor by telling her own story of pain, loss, and sin. She shared her faith, reading to Nichols from *The Purpose-Driven Life*, encouraging him to trust that God has a purpose for his life, even after the damage he has done. She helped him see how other families had been torn apart by the murders he committed. He would not want to leave another child without a mother and a father. After several hours, he let her go to see her daughter. She called police, who went to her apartment, where he surrendered.¹

Under the threat of losing her life, Ashley reached into the experiences of her life and the depth of her faith to remain calm, to relate to her captor, and to bring the ordeal to the best possible end given the circumstances. Finding herself in the grasp of evil hands, she was ultimately delivered.

Ashley Smith's remarkable experience prompts us to consider how we respond in times of testing. The trials we undergo may include a medical diagnosis, a test of our moral character, competition for college admission or a job, a chronic illness, or an unexpected turn of events. Life confronts us with challenges, so our prayer is for God's guidance in dealing with these trials.

This phrase, as the other parts of the Lord's Prayer, comes from a daily Jewish prayer which includes the words, “bring me not into the power of sin, or into the power of iniquity, or into the power of temptation.” When we stand at a crossroads and are faced with a choice about how to respond, we pray that we will not be lured into sinful reactions.

I would not suggest that Ashley Smith was selected by God to undergo her trial, nor did God predetermine its outcome. She was the random selection of her captor, given his location at the time. The phrase, “lead us not into temptation,” does not mean that God designs and inflicts us with trials. Life, however, does confront us with difficult circumstances, sometimes even dangerous situations. Jesus' instruction here seems to be telling us to pray carefully, something like Jesus prayed in Gethsemane: “Lord, keep us from having to undergo trials,” but if we must endure

testing, God, help us to be faithful to your will for us. Finding ourselves in the midst of trying conditions, we ask for strength to remain steadfast and not to deny God. We pray that we will not forsake God and God's desire for our lives. We ask that God's love would continue to sustain us, even if God seems far away.

The second phrase of the prayer, "Rescue us from evil," is a kind of confession. It acknowledges that there is evil, that evil can be systemic, and that we can easily become involved in cruel, unkind, even demonic patterns of evil. Personally we may at times feel "prone to evil," arising from a combination of our freedom, motivations, and desires. Additionally our corporate loyalties may be contexts in which, almost haplessly, we can be drawn into evil. Jesus was crucified by people acting within their loyalties to religion, empire, social class, and military. They were not individual sinners acting out of their own psychological hates, hurts, guilt, and greed. They were participants in systemic sin that is woven into the context of our human world.

This petition is a confession not only of our weakness, but also of our willing captivity to social patterns of thought and behavior. The request is that we might be rescued from participating in patterns of evil that are so pervasive in our world. It expresses our yearning to be God's people and to walk in God's way. The prayer also expresses our hope that God will rectify the injustices that exist in the world.

The evil in which we participate may be subtle, such as settling for lower standards of ethics or character. Sometimes we are reduced to silence when another is ridiculed or abused. Without conscious awareness, we can easily stumble into greed or racism. The forces of evil often masquerade as freedoms we have been graciously given or as necessities we can live without. The media and marketing techniques have tricky ways of influencing our desires, opinions, and attitudes. If we do not scrutinize those outside influences, carefully evaluating them against Jesus' guidance, we may be tempted to fall into evil ways.

This prayer requires our partnership with God. We must remain alert and attentive to the contexts in which we place ourselves. That is why baptism is such a central act in the life of faith. In baptism we are immersed into the living waters of Christ. We "drown" to an old way of life and we rise up forgiven and cleansed for a new way of life, a Christ-like way of life. Baptism initiates us into the Body of Christ, so that we are part of the community of Christians. We are not left alone to negotiate the trials of life. We have sisters and brothers who are waging similar battles in the journeys

of life and faith. We need one another to receive strength and support for the challenges of life. We need the Body of Christ to help us discern our response to the temptations and evils life presents.

As Jesus' life was threatened by Jewish leaders and Roman authorities, the faith and loyalty of his disciples was tested. Some fell short. They could not resist the temptation to save themselves, and so they turned away when he needed them. In the garden of Gethsemane while Jesus was praying, Peter, James, and John could not even stay awake to pray with their Lord. There was Judas who betrayed Jesus for a few silver coins. There was Peter who denied Jesus rather than die with him. There was the crowd who earlier had hailed Jesus with shouts of acclamation, "Hosanna! Hosanna!", but at his trial they changed their tune to "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

This Holy Week, we are invited to follow Jesus to the cross. We are confronted with the question of our own loyalty and faithfulness. In the face of temptation, do we deny him or do we embrace him as our Lord? In the time of trial, do we follow his Way or do we choose our own way? In the ultimate test of loyalty, will we stand strong and boldly say, "Yes, I know the man. I follow him. I love him. I will even die for him." Or will we be cowards, betray him, and deny our faith?

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." We pray that we might be strong. We pray that in the face of crisis, pain, disease, or whatever kind of trial we encounter, we might have the courage to hold fast to the faith, to resist the temptation to give in to despair, to counter the urge to return evil for evil. We pray to be rescued from all the forces of evil which threaten to separate us from God and cause us to be hostile toward others. We pray for the courage to carry the cross of Christ, proclaim him as our Savior, and wear his name with pride.

In a fictional novel about Barabbas, the murderer who was released at the crowd's request, there is a convicting scene that takes place after Jesus' death. Barabbas becomes a Roman slave and is transported to Cyprus, where he works in the copper mines. There he meets an old Armenian slave named Sahak, who is a devout follower of the Messiah. Each slave wears a metal disk proclaiming that he belongs to Caesar. But Sahak has strange markings on the back of his disk which supposedly spell out the name "Christ Jesus." Although he belongs to Caesar, his real allegiance is to Christ.

Professing that he too wishes to follow the Galilean, Barabbas asks that his disk be inscribed with the name of Jesus. Working secretly in the

copper mine, they scratch upon its reverse side the same markings that are on Sahak's.

But someone overhears and they are reported to the supervisor, who tells the governor of the island. Sahak and Barabbas are brought before him. He questions them about the markings. Sahak says they are the name of his god. The governor reminds him that Caesar is a god also, and warns him that having other gods before Caesar is punishable by death.

The governor questions Barabbas. Does he believe in this god whose name is inscribed on his disk? Barabbas shakes his head.

"You don't?" asks the governor. "Isn't that what the inscription means?"

"I have no god," Barabbas answers at last, so softly that his words are barely audible.

Sahak gives him a look of such despair, pain and amazement that it seems to pass right through him, into his inner self, even though he keeps his eyes averted.

Once more Sahak is questioned. Does he realize the consequences of wearing the name of his god? Yes. "If you renounce your faith no harm shall come to you," says the governor. "Will you do it?"

"I cannot," says Sahak. The governor orders him to be taken away and crucified.

"Extraordinary man," he says as he looks after him. Then he takes a knife, and holding Barabbas' disk in one hand, crosses through the name of Jesus.

"There's really no need," he says, "as you don't believe in him anyway." He commends Barabbas for being a sensible fellow, and orders that he be given a better job.²

May we so love our God that in the face of testing, we will not betray our God, nor willingly participate in evil forces that work against the ways of God. May we never be ashamed to claim the name of Christ and may that name guide all our thoughts, words, and actions. May our lives be marked by the integrity of our faith. That's what we mean when we pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

¹*The New York Times*, March 13-15, 2005.

²Par Lagerkvist, *Barabbas* (New York: Random House, 1951), pp. 141-147.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church