

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“The Lord’s Prayer, Part V”
Jeremiah 12:1-4
James 1:12-15**

**Fifth Sunday of Lent
April 7, 2019**

Jeremiah 12:1-4

Righteous are you, O Lord, when I complain to you; yet I would plead my case before you. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive? You plant them, and they take root; they grow and produce fruit; you are near in their mouth and far from their heart. But you, O Lord, know me; you see me, and test my heart toward you. Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and set them apart for the day of slaughter. How long will the land mourn and the grass of every field wither? For the evil of those who dwell in it the beasts and the birds are swept away, because they said, “He will not see our latter end.”

James 1:12-15

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

“The Lord’s Prayer, Part V”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today, we pick up where we left off in our series on the Lord’s Prayer. Thus far, we’ve looked at verses nine through twelve of Matthew’s recording of the prayer: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” Hopefully, you’ve seen how this prayer is not simply words to say in church or before God, but truly an outline through which we live our lives. And today will be no different as we examine the penultimate petition, *and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*.

In the previous petition—forgive us our debts—Christ focused us on past sins. He now transitions us to look beyond today and into our future vulnerability to sin. With this petition, our Lord is showing us that we are to ask the Father to spare us from the temptations and the spiritual attacks that can lead us into new sin. Now, a cursory reading of this request should jar us to some degree. When we hear “*lead us not into temptation*,” one might be quick to assume that we are praying that God stop leading us astray. That for some reason it is God who is causing us to sin. Friends, nothing could be further from the truth. As we read from the Apostle James, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.” Temptations certainly come to us internally, from our own desires, and from the outside, from fellow sinners or from the chief of tempters, Satan himself. But God the Father does not engage in temptation to sin. That is not in his character. How, then, are we to understand this petition?

The answer lies within the translation. When we hear the word “temptation,” we automatically associate that with something negative, but that’s not entirely the connotation with the Greek word *peirasmos*. The word has the meaning of “putting to the test” or a “trial.” So, a better wording might be, “Do not lead us into the place of testing,” or “Lead us not into the time of trial.” What Jesus is saying is that we should pray God will never cause us to undergo a severe test of our faith or of our obedience. The Greek has one word, but in English we have two: test and temptation. And the Scriptures are adequately clear: God tests, Satan tempts. Now, we used this example a few weeks ago. Abraham was promised by God that he will be the father of a peoples as numerous as the stars, and yet his wife was barren. God was true to his promise and gave Abraham and Sarah their son Isaac. But a few years later, God tested Abraham by commanding him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. While it was undoubtedly hard for Abraham, he went through with it, even to the very last second, when an angel intervened. The Patriarch passed God’s test. There were many more such tests of faith in Scripture, and even with us today. God tests us to make us better and stronger. Christ is instructing us to pray that God be gracious in his testing of our faith.

Jesus does not simply teach us to pray that God would not lead us into trials and testing. He reinforces and expands his teaching in the second part of this petition. When we pray this prayer in worship or in devotion, we see that Jesus teaches us to pray, “and deliver us from evil.” The use of the word *evil* in this translation is not entirely accurate. In Greek, the way a noun ends reveals its gender. When a noun is in the neuter, it often means that word can be understood in the abstract. But when it is masculine or feminine, it is referring to something specific. There are many manuscripts that use the word *poneros*, which has the masculine ending. This tells me that Jesus is speaking specifically here, and a better rendering would be, “deliver us from *the evil one*.” Jesus is speaking distinctly of Satan.

Presbyterians don’t often like to talk about the devil. And many other Christians are wrong when they consider Satan’s abilities. A couple weeks ago I was approached by a Jehovah’s Witness evangelist. He started off our conversation by asking the question, “Who has power over the world?” He gave me three options, A. God, B. Man, C. Someone else. Once I saw his options, I knew where he was headed, so I chose option “A. God.” I could tell he was happy I chose that one, because he went on this whole spiel about how Satan has dominion over the world. I kindly informed him I am a Calvinist and showed him the errors of his ways. I don’t think he appreciated it, and I think I may be struck from their list. God is the Creator and Ruler of the universe. Period, full stop. Christ is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Period, full stop. The only one in dominion is the Lord. Period, full stop. His kingdom may not be of this world, but it certainly includes this world, and Jesus has all authority over heaven and earth.

As Creator and King, there are attributes that only God possesses. Omniscience—he knows all things; omnipresence—he is in all places; omnipotence—he is all powerful. These attributes belong to God, and he alone. Jehovah’s Witnesses and even real Christians ascribe to Satan powers he cannot have. Satan is a powerful being, don’t get me wrong. He’s an angel, and angels are powerful creatures. But they are nonetheless creatures. And like angels, Satan is subordinate to God. We see in Scripture, when Satan does test, it is through deceit or permission, and not through powers that are ascribed to God. For instance, in the Garden, Adam and Eve encounter

the serpent, who “was more *cunning* than any beasts... *the Lord God had made.*” Satan, in the form of a snake, was a created creature. And in the narrative of Genesis three, we don’t see him infiltrating Eve’s mind, or possessing her body, or forcing her to do anything against her will. Rather, he uses lies and trickery to deceive her. In their conversation, Satan is essentially saying, “God didn’t tell you the truth. Don’t believe him. Believe me.” God gave Adam and Eve one command, and he allowed them to be tested, and they failed miserably.

Or fast forward to the patriarch Job. Even as a member of the fallen race of Adam, he distinguished himself by his extraordinary righteousness and obedience. Let me recount for you this conversation recorded in Job 1:6-12.

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, “From where have you come?” Satan answered the Lord and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” [*Not omnipresent*] And the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” [*Not omniscient*] Then Satan answered the Lord and said, “Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” [*Not omnipotent*] And the Lord said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.” So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

And he does not hold back. Job’s livestock, his servants, and his children are all taken away. But he refuses to find fault with God’s providence. His steadfastness only leads Satan to return to the heavenly courts, this time asking God to allow him to strike Job with physical ailments, which God allows. In the midst of all this hardship and turmoil Job says to his wife, “Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?” And to his friend, “Though [God] slay me, I will trust in him.” Job aced his test, and God blessed him and restored the things he had lost.

What more, in this season of Lent, we commemorate Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness being tested and tried by Satan himself. We have no idea of what our Lord endured in that time alone in the wilderness. While the first Adam fell to a single seductive moment, the new Adam endured everything that hell could throw at him. And indeed, while the forty-day temptation had ended, Satan still had blows he was preparing to throw, culminating in Christ’s crucifixion. Yet, even then, the devil failed. The enemy thought he had won, but Christ defeated the final trial of death itself. From his personal experience, Jesus is teaching us to pray, “O Lord, please do not expose us to the place of temptation where we are going to be assaulted by the power of Satan. And if we are in a time of trial, protect us and deliver us from the enemy. Build us up with confidences in your power over death, and even over the devil.” It’s unlikely we’ll ever be tested to the degree of Abraham, Job, or Jesus, but we all will face trying times and our Lord is arming us for these moments.

Now, I don't want to close on this note of temptation, because I don't think Satan's real work is in trying us. In fact, if you read through the story of Job, it should be apparent that all the hardships on him were actually allowed by God. God granted Satan extra powers just to assail Job. That level of adversity is not natural to Satan. What is natural to him is his work of accusation and this work wreaks havoc on believers. He's known more so in the New Testament for his work of accusing the saints. He seeks to do everything in his power to paralyze believers with unresolved guilt. God promises Christians that "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) But as soon as God forgives our sins, Satan and his minions show up trying to convince us that we are not indeed forgiven, but that we are still guilty. And when a Christian listens to these lies, she becomes burdened and weighed down with a paralyzing load of guilty. And that guilt, in turn, robs her of her assurance of salvation.

Paul addresses this problem when he writes, "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn?" (Romans 8:33) The answer is only Christ, and he died for us and reigns over us in newness of life. God has justified us on the basis of the righteousness of Christ. We are no longer legally guilty before him because that guilty status was washed away by the blood of Christ. My friends, the Lord's Prayer gives us the tools so that we can, as James says, resist the devil and his lies. And in case you were wondering, the regenerate Christian, the born again believer, does not need to worry about becoming demon possessed. While Satan's minions may besiege us and lie to us, they cannot possess *us*. Unbelievers can be, but Christians cannot be possessed by the devil, because the Holy Spirit resides in the regenerate person. When we pray to not be led into times of trial and delivered from the evil one, we are putting on the protection and assurance of God. When we open ourselves to God's love, we close ourselves to Satan's lies. In a way, we are "possessed" by God's Spirit, and as John reminds us, "greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world."

Let us pray. O Holy God, you are our Refuge, our Fortress, and our Strength. We turn to you in times of trial, asking that you keep a hedge of protection around us. Do not put us in places of testing. Deliver us from the evil one, who goes about like a roaring lion, ready to devour whomever succumbs. We pray for your divine protection and deliverance from all the forces of evil that surround us, and your church around the world. May we be strengthened in the knowledge of your providence and in the steadfastness of your love. In the name of Christ our Savior, we pray. Amen.