

Five Petitions #5: The Time of Trial

Three quick stories: the summer I was eleven or twelve, my cousin was visiting for a couple of weeks. The woman who lived across the alley behind us fed probably a couple dozen stray cats roaming around the neighborhood. One day got two of those cats and tied their tails together, and through them over a clothesline, just to see what they'd do. I still have scars from trying to get them apart!

Second story: that same summer when we got bored—hey, we were eleven, twelve years old; we were professionally bored. It was our reason for existence. So, to entertain ourselves, we'd draw a circle in the dirt (we didn't have lawns in west Texas; we had dirt—and very painful stickers called goat heads). We'd catch grasshoppers, pull one big leg off each grasshopper, and put them in the middle of the circle, just to see which one would hop out of the circle first. (Hey, I was considered one of the *nice* kids in the neighborhood.)

Third story: when I was in Vietnam we lived in "hooches", which we shared with rats. Somebody got hold of a rat trap—a small cage with a door that'd shut and latch when the rat got inside. There were latches that connected the cage to the tray-like bottom: you could undo those latches and lift the cage off—I guess to clean the tray. I don't know.

Anyway (and, by the way, I watched; but I didn't participate!) rats were caught almost every night, and some of the guys would take the cage outside and set it on the ground. They'd undo the latches at the bottom of the cage and soak the rat with lighter fluid. They'd toss a lighted match into the cage and jerk the cage away. The rat would be ablaze, and they'd make bets on how far it could run before it died. We call that military intelligence.

Believe it or not, there's a connection with today's Scripture:

<p>LUKE 11:1-4 (NRSV) <i>He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."</i>²<i>He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name.</i></p>	<p><i>Your kingdom come.</i> ³ <i>Give us each day our daily bread.</i> ⁴ <i>And forgive us our sins,</i> <i>for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.</i> <i>And do not bring us to the time of trial."</i></p>
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The wording of our fifth petition is identical in Matthew and Luke, and most English versions translate it, "Lead us not into temptation." So, why does the NRSV say "the time of trial?" When I see that kind of variety in translation, I know something's going on in the original language. Sure enough, in the original language the word is ambiguous. It can mean "trial," as in suffering or persecution; and it can mean "testing", as when we're pushed to our limits. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus sandwiches his prayer between the repetition of a command to his disciples, "*Pray that you may not come into the time of trial*" (LUKE 22:40, 46)—same word. He prays

and is strengthened for the trial he is about to face; they do not, and they fail.¹

To complicate the matter further, temptation and trial are not always about evil. Jesus knew about that kind of testing. Immediately after his baptism Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the dessert to be tempted (same word) by the devil.

“Weak as I am, if the devil came looking like a devil—you know: horns, pitchfork, red suit, forked tail—I could say, ‘Give me your best shot.’ I could handle it. But Paul says he comes as “an angel of light”—tempting”. In Luke, he even comes with a Bible under his arm quoting Scripture better than some of the Pharisees!”

And look at how reasonable the temptations are—temptations to do good things. “Why don’t you turn these stones into bread?” That’s reasonable. He’s hungry. Forty days in the wilderness is a long time. And he’s the Son of God. The devil could say: “After all, you’ve not yet worked a miracle. You’d better try one out here in the desert, so you won’t be embarrassed in front of a crowd. Give it a try.”

The devil says: “Here’s a good idea: jump off the pinnacle of the temple. Scripture says God will protect you. You won’t even bruise your foot! And, if you do that, it would make a lot of people believe.” See? It makes sense.

The tempter shows him the kingdoms of the world, and said, ‘These are yours, if...’ And wouldn’t it have been wonderful if Jesus had said yes and gained more influence over the social and political orders of this world? I mean, a little more justice and fairness and equality and peace sounds pretty good, doesn’t it? It makes sense.”²

To muddy the water a bit further, there’s that verb, “Do not bring us into the time of trial.” Why would we need to pray that? We can see the devil doing that; but, is Jesus suggesting God, indeed, would lead us into the time of trial? ...like pre-adolescent boys pulling legs off grasshoppers, just to see how far they can hop without them. (See, I told there was a connection.) When boys do that, we call it cruel. Why would we think God would do that?

Some people are very comfortable with the idea that God tests us, and there is the story of Job on their side; but I’m not one of them.

The Epistle of James leaves no doubt: *“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).

Paul is clear: *“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it”* (1 CORINTHIANS 10:13).

Somebody runs a stop sign and broadsides a vehicle, killing a high school senior about to graduate as valedictorian of her class. I had her funeral. I saw the family endure “the time of trial.” But God didn’t make that happen. That wasn’t God’s “will,” if by will you mean intention and desire. Somebody ran a stop sign.

Politicians enact legislation to benefit themselves and their cronies;

¹ M. Eugene Boring, Fred B. Craddock, The People’s Bible Commentary (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 272.

² Adapted from a part of a sermon by Fred Craddock. Reproduced from memory (which explains why it’s not as good as when Fred said it.)

legislation that brings "the time of trial" to others. God doesn't make that happen. That isn't God's "will," if by will you mean intention and desire. It happens because some people are greedy for wealth and power. Go work a shift at Soul Food kitchen and see "the time of trail" a lot of people endure as a result.

A college coach turns a losing football program into national contention, but ignores multiple cases of his players' sexual misconduct, and thereby was party to an entire university's "time of trail." God didn't "lead" him into "the time of trial." That wasn't God's "will," if by will you mean intention and desire. It happened because the obsession with winning was stronger than character.

Cancer happens. Alzheimer's Disease happens. Planes Crash. Madmen with AR-15s murder dozens of people in a few seconds. Public officials are corrupt and betray the people they've been elected to serve.

Things happen: sometimes the result of poor decisions—ours or somebody else's—and sometimes because of things beyond our control. Things happen. We're tempted. We're tested. We endure "the time of trial." But Paul and James are clear: don't blame God for those things.

Of course, God has a will and a plan; but God doesn't inflict anything on us. God invites us into alignment with God's will—invites us into partnership in carrying out the divine plan; but God does not lead us—or bring us—into times of trial or temptation. So, why this petition?

George Buttrick, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, writes, "...probably the prayer is best explained as a plea of conscious weakness—not as an exercise in logic, but as a cry of the soul."³

After much meditation, it occurs to me—has it occurred to you: there's another way of saying, "not into"? There are no punctuation marks in the biblical languages, and Gene Boring reads it like this: "Lead us; not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." "...not into... but... from..."

"Bring us away from the time of trial." "Lead us away from temptation." Whatever else it may be, at its most elemental level this petition is an expression of dependence upon God for direction.

God does not test us with the running of a stop sign, or poverty, or the onset of Alzheimer's Disease, or the weakness of character that disrupts campus life for an entire university. But in those times of trial—whether they emerge out of our own poor decisions or as a result of things beyond our control—in those times of trial, God is present—just as God was present with Jesus in the wilderness; and God is ready to lead us through those experiences—ready to empower us, just as God empowered Jesus, to say to the tempter, "Not today, Satan!"

³ Volume 7, p. 314.