

Jesus' Prayer - Temptation

Matthew 4:1-11 (Common English Bible)

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread."

Jesus replied, "It's written, People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God."

After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone."

Jesus replied, "Again it's written, Don't test the Lord your God."

Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me."

Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him." The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

The novel Barabbas tells the story of the insurrectionist and murderer released by Pilate during Jesus trial.

Years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Barabbas becomes a Roman slave. He's transported to Cyprus to work in the copper mines. He meets an old Armenian slave named Sahak, who's 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 spell out the name Christos Jesus. He may belong to Caesar, but his real allegiance is to Christ.

Barabbas says he wishes to follow the Galilean, and asks his disk be inscribed with the name of Jesus. The two slaves work secretly down in the copper mine, and scratch on the back side of Barabbas' disk the same markings on Sahak's.

Another slave finds out and reports them to the supervisor. Word finally reaches the governor of the island and the two slaves 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 god, and having other gods before Caesar is punishable by death.

Then the governor questions Barabbas. Does he believe in this god whose name is inscribed on his disk? Barabbas shakes his head no.

“You don't?” asks the governor. “Why do you bear his name on your disk then?” Barabbas says nothing.

“Is he not your god?” asks the governor. “Isn't that what the inscription means?”

After a long period of silence, Barabbas finally whispers “I have no god.”

Sahak looks at him with such despair, pain and amazement that it passes right through Barabbas, 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. As Sahak is led away, the governor comments, “Extraordinary man.”

Then he takes a knife, and holding Barabbas' disk in one hand, crosses out the name of Jesus. “There's really no need,” he says, “as you don't believe in him.”

The governor commends Barabbas for being a sensible fellow, and orders he be given a better job (Barabbas [New York: Random House, 1951], pp. 141-47).

For the rest of his life, Barabbas wears the crossed-out name of Jesus.

That's what the fifth petition of Jesus' prayer is about: “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” This petition is not so much about the minor temptations we face, the seductive voices of flesh and soul that hinder our discipleship. No, it's about the dreadful possibility we end up wearing the crossed-out name of Jesus.

The Greek word used for temptation is *peirasmos*. It also means trial or test. This petition is about the test of our allegiance to Christ. It's about the trial of our faithfulness to God. It's about the possibility of us turning our backs on God's kingdom, having set our hands to the plow, we walk away and leave the furrow unfinished.

Jesus experienced *peirasmos*. After his baptism in the river Jordan, he was led into the wilderness and tested for forty days. During that time of trial, Satan - the representative of evil - appealed to Jesus' humanity. He tempted him to turn aside from his devotion to the Father and commitment to God's kingdom.

First there was an appeal to basic appetites: Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread. Then there was an appeal to religious pride and confidence: Jesus was tempted to throw himself down from the highest part of the temple and be borne up by the angels. Finally, there was an appeal to

the desire for power and authority: Jesus was tempted to fall down and worship Satan in exchange for an earthly kingship.

All three temptations have one thing in common. They let self, instead of God, stand at the center of life. Isn't that when we always get in trouble? When we let self become the center of everything?

Jesus overcame *peirasmos* because he kept God firmly at the center. That's why, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he told the disciples, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Luke 22:40). Jesus knew if they prayed, if they kept God at the center, they would withstand the test. Otherwise, they were bound to fail. And fail they did.

Poor Judas was the first to succumb to temptation. Of all the disciples, he remained the most practical and self-sufficient. He was the keeper of their treasury. When he came into *peirasmos*, he became concerned about saving himself.

If Jesus was the captain of a sinking ship, he wanted a life preserver. So, he made a deal with the chief priests, and sold his Lord for the price of a slave. He put self at the center of the circle and left God out. Afterward, when he realized what he had done, he was so remorseful he committed suicide.

Judas wasn't alone in his failure. As Jesus stood before the Sanhedrian, Simon Peter put self at the center and flatly denied his association with Christ. Yes, before the cock crowed, he denied Jesus three times. One by one, each of the disciples abandoned their Lord in his time of greatest need. They all fled in the face of *peirasmos*.

The early Christians faced their own form of temptation when they were persecuted and killed because of their faith. But for us Jesus followers today, it comes more unexpectedly and quietly. We drift along, like people asleep on a boat, and wake up to find we've left our faith behind.

In a world where we are not imprisoned for our beliefs, where Bibles are available for the taking in every motel room, we forget the importance of God in our daily lives. Christ becomes a stranger to us. The absence of pressure leads to our forgetting, to our not taking it seriously, to our falling away.

I've heard the same story from men and women over my 37 years as a pastor. "I can't explain what happened to my Christian faith. I went to church with my family when I was growing up. But then I went to off college or into the military or to work and got out of the habit. I've been to church a few times, usually Christmas or Easter. But I haven't gotten involved with a congregation nor do I read the Bible or pray regularly. I sort of let it slide. I guess it's not unusual."

It's not unusual, is it? "I sort of let it slide." The crossed-out name of Jesus. Or, as the governor said, there wasn't much point in crossing it out. He didn't really believe, not enough to remain faithful.

We get busy. We neglect prayer and scripture. We neglect gathering for worship and serving our neighbors in need. We neglect staying close to our Father. There are always things to do – unfinished projects and last-minute tasks. There are Zoom family gatherings to attend. Here in Jemez there's fishing, hunting, hiking or other outdoor activities. There are ball games to watch during March Madness and shows on Netflix to binge. Life goes on, and before we know it, we've lost all contact with Christ. We didn't plan for it. It just happened.

Most of the time, you and I face casual temptation, as opposed to formal temptation. Nothing big, just not making an effort. Not remembering that Jesus said to pray to avoid it, to be delivered from evil. It's *peirasmos* we didn't expect, that caught us unaware. *Peirasmos* that ended with our being stuck in evil, like the fox and the tar baby, and we can't get away from it.

The author James Dickey understood. He wrote a book called Deliverance that was turned into a popular movie. His novel portrays what we're talking about. On the surface, it's the story of four city men, who take a canoe trip down a wild white-water river in north Georgia.

On the way, they're ambushed, but make a hair-raising escape. The rest of the story is about their hazardous trip down the canyon, where one local is stalking and shooting at them from above. When they finally reach safety, they can't talk about the ordeal. They are delivered. But just barely, with their minds scarred for life.

Dickey's story is a metaphor of our life of faith. It's is like a passage down a wild, primitive canyon, where we're easy marks for evil along the way. Evil is ready to spring out and devour us. It erupts when we least expect it.

A young man wrecks up his truck and is paralyzed for life. A fifteen-year-old daughter gets pregnant. A spouse betrays us and leaves us for someone else. We lose our zest for life and fall into depression. We find out we have cancer. A global pandemic upends life as we know it.

If we have no faith, if we've drifted away from God and can no longer pray, who will deliver us? Who will help us through the canyon of life?

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” This isn't an anticlimactic petition. Jesus didn't put all the good stuff at the beginning and leave the minor stuff at the end. This petition is more important than all the rest.

Jesus says, “When you pray, acknowledge God is our Father and pray for God's kingdom to come, and will be done. Pray for daily rations and forgiveness. Pray to hold on to your faith and never lose it.”

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