



Question from a congregant:

It has not been frustrating my faith but I find it strange that God who loves us so much would lead us into temptation. Since we always pray in the Lord's Prayer: LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION. I believe in the original prayer it probably said: LEAD US IN THE TEMPTATION. I have often seen in biblical verses if you take a word away or add one all of a sudden, it makes sense.

I agree with this questioner! It does seem strange that God would lead us into temptation and we are not the only ones. Pope Francis agrees. The *New York Times* reported:

...Pope Francis said the common rendering of one line in the prayer—"lead us not into temptation"—was "not a good translation" from ancient texts. "Do not let us fall into temptation," he suggested, might be better because God does not lead people into temptation; Satan does. "A father doesn't do that," the pope said. "He helps you get up right away. What induces into temptation is Satan."

Pope Francis' comments raised the hackles for some believing he was ignoring orthodoxy, history, and the Biblical text.

But challenging this passage's translation and meaning is by no means new. It started at the very beginning. Tertullian, a second century theologian wrote, "Lead us not into temptation, that is to say, do not allow us to be led." In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Augustine also reflected these nuances and reported that those praying in his time simply changed the words, "Many people in their prayers, however, say it this way: 'and do not allow us to be led into temptation.'"

Despite my sympathies with these ideas, it is hard to justify based on this Biblical text and others.

Yet, a closer examination of other words in this phrase can shed some light.

The history of interpretative tweaking focused on "lead", but more recent scholarship focused on the word, *πειρασμόν*, traditionally translated as "temptation" in the Lord's Prayer, but may refer to something besides moral testing.

The Greek word for temptation in the Lord's Prayer is translated as "testing" or "trial" in other places. In fact, in Mark's gospel the very same word describes Jesus' time in the wilderness.

A trial may include temptation but is not identical. The time in the wilderness was not a screening process. That is the type of temptation in which a boss might place a wad of

cash near an employee to see if they are trustworthy. Another type of temptation might be for the precise purpose of trying to make someone fall into sin because you want to see them fail. It is this type of temptation that Pope Francis and others are referring to. Certainly, God does not lead us into temptation in order to make us fail.

Testing, training, or trial might be a more accurate understanding of Jesus' prayer.

In workouts led by a colleague of mine, Robert Bannan, after 45 minutes of grueling exercise we would finish with "The Prowler", (or he would *finish us* with The Prowler!). I remember the first time he said with a smile, "Be careful of The Prowler flu". I didn't know what he meant until afterwards. The Prowler was a weighted sled we had to push up and down the track. It was a gargantuan effort that took every ounce of energy you had. Immediately afterward, when I tried to stand up, I felt dizzy and laid down on the floor. That was The Prowler flu! But over time I got better. Apparently finishing a workout with something as challenging as The Prowler not only jacks your heart rate for the moment but also increases your metabolism for hours and days, training your body into a new place of strength and endurance, preparing you for even harder workouts to come. Soon I was in better shape than I had ever been in my adult life, enabling me to keep up with daughter, Liz, as we enjoyed many hikes in the mountains of the Carolinas.

Clearly, God gives us trials. When God sent Jesus into the wilderness, it was to build spiritual endurance for the times to come. In

Luke's gospel, Jesus is "led" but Mark tells us He was "driven" by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps another indication that Jesus was not too keen on these times of trials.

Evidently, Jesus no more enjoys trials than you or me! He put it in the heart of our primary prayer. But God regularly gives us trials in order to strengthen our faith, fortitude and resilience.

The time in the wilderness was critical for preparing Jesus for the soul-crushing trial He would have to face. And there is good reason to think, it is those types of trials to which Jesus refers. At least the NRSV clearly thinks so, thus their radical departure from the traditional rendering changing "lead us not into temptation" to "Do not bring us to the time of trial." The trials that God does give us are in preparation for the inevitable trials that a broken world forces us to confront. Trials like COVID that test our moral fiber.

The tragedy of COVID is not only the loss of life but also the degradation of relationships. This trial has perhaps caused us all to fall into temptation. It has led us to judge one another and call people names, "anti-vaxer" or "alarmist". Certainly, I have opinions, but this trial – this time – has led me to actions and thoughts that I am not proud of, that I need to ask forgiveness for.

But others have had to face terrible decisions, the type that can weigh on a soul for a lifetime, in which there are no right answers.

As no doubt you have heard, COVID has been extremely taxing on our healthcare workers. The combination of endless overtime, personal danger, waves of deaths and a

seemingly indifferent population has made it especially hard.

Last week Andrew Jacobs of the New York Times reported on the crisis in Pascagoula, Mississippi. \*

Imagine for a minute, this small delta town is where you grew up and all you have ever wanted to do is to offer care and compassion for the sick; you have always wanted to be a nurse. But, "...Successive waves of illness and death have left them exhausted and numb; nearly one in five have left the profession over the past two years." As a result, nurses cannot keep up. Flashing lights up and down the corridor signal a need for water, help to the bathroom, or more often, the need to clean up because it is too late. It may even be something more critical like an oxygen mask that needs to be put back on.

One of the nurses, Teresa Phillips, sighed and tried to explain the challenge of juggling the complex medical needs of so many patients with 25 percent fewer staff. "I want to make sure my patients are bathed, given their meds on time and have their vital signs continually assessed, but you can't do that when you're stretched this thin," said Ms. Phillips, who had just returned to work after battling Covid for the second time.

With 40% of all COVID tests coming back positive, the system has broken many of these nurses. Of the 350-bed hospital, 90 beds are shuttered because of 80 unfilled openings.

And here lies the temptation in this trial. You are exhausted, afraid, and almost broken. You can quit and find another job. But if you do, you also know that it will make the work

of those you leave behind that much harder. These coworkers are your neighbors and friends that perhaps you have known for generations. You know the patients you so desperately want to care for will be that much worse off if you leave. And perhaps your choice is even harder. Maybe your family, like most every family, needs more money. You are making about \$30 an hour. You can commute to Mobile, AL and make 50% more, or you can become a travel nurse and make \$200 per hour.

This is a time of trial, the temptations are many, and none of the choices will bring you peace.

Jesus is talking about these trials with a capital "T", the ones that feel like they can make or break a life. Thus at Gethsemane Jesus pled with God, "If possible take this cup from me." This is how we know Jesus was sane. He didn't want the cross. He feared that moment. But His prayer continued, "But not what I want, but what you want." He trusted God with His sanity, His life, His soul. He taught us to not stop the prayer at "Lead us not into temptation", knowing the trials would come, but continue by saying, "Deliver us from evil." The evil that we ourselves do. The evil that others commit upon us. The evil choices we must face in a broken world. The evil forces that seek to destroy and to ravage.

This prayer asks for God's intervention. It is why God sent the only Son into the world to begin with – to deliver us from this evil. To destroy it once and for all and for everyone.

But until then, God uses you and uses me to relieve the desperate trials of others. So when we make health decisions perhaps we

make them not only taking into account our personal needs and those we love, but those working so desperately in the trenches. There are many ways we can live in this world to help others through times of trials, through the temptations they face. Let us always be mindful, for even as we pray to God, “deliver us from evil” so too should we pray, “God use me to deliver others as well.”

\*<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/23/health/covid-mississippi-nurses.html>

\*\*<https://morningconsult.com/2021/10/04/health-care-workers-series-part-2-workforce/>