

Luke 11:1-4 (1984 NIV)

Prayer: Lead Us Not Into Temptation

1 One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

2 He said to them, “When you pray, say: ‘Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.

3 Give us each day our daily bread.

4 Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.”

Introduction

Luke 11:2-4 is commonly known as the Lord’s Prayer. There’s a longer version of it in Matthew 6:9-13. In Luke, the context for this prayer is that of Jesus praying in a certain place with His disciples watching and hearing Him. When He had finished praying, one of His disciples asked Him in Luke 11:1, “Teach us to pray.” In response, Jesus said to him and all the other disciples in Luke 11:2, “When you pray, say ...”

More accurately, the words of the Lord’s Prayer should be called the Disciples’ Prayer. This is because Jesus uttered these words to teach His disciples to pray these same words themselves.

One debatable part of this prayer is in v. 4b where Jesus prayed, “And lead us not into temptation.”

The debate has to do with this question—if we are to pray “lead us not into temptation”, does that mean God might actually lead us into temptation under some circumstances?

It is possible to answer this question in two ways—“no” and “yes”. Let me explain.

I. Two Possible Ways to Answer

Seen from one perspective, this petition appears to mean something like, “Lord, keep us from trouble. Don’t let anything really bad happen to us.” In other words, this petition is essentially a prayer to God for spiritual protection.

But that still does not answer the question raised by the verse—does God lead us into temptation? It all depends on how you understand the word “temptation”.

If you are in seminary, one of the things you have to do whether you like it or not is to read and study the New Testament in the original Greek language. Fortunately, I like my Greek. And one of the things I have learnt is that the Greek word (*peirasmos*), sometimes translated into English as “temptation”, actually has two basic meanings. It can mean something positive or it can mean something negative.

In its positive sense, it can be (and often is) translated by such words as “testing” or “trial”. In those cases, it refers to a difficult circumstance in your life brought about by God in order to help you grow faith and trust in Him.

In its negative sense, it refers to temptation in the usual English sense of the word—i.e. to seduce or lure to do evil.

So this one word in its original language can have two very different meanings. It can mean a difficult test/trial or it can mean a temptation to do evil.

Your answer to the question, “Does God lead us into temptation?” is going to be much affected according to which one of these two meanings you think is predominant in the text.

In fact, this word has been used with both meanings present in the same passage of Scripture. E.g.:

- In James 1:2: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers when you face trials of many kinds.” The meaning is something like this: “Rejoice when you face trials, hardships, and difficulties of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance and perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete not lacking in anything.” In this sense the word is very positive. James is telling us that God uses trials, hardships, and difficulties to produce spiritual maturity in our lives.
- Further down in James 1:13: “When you are tempted to do evil no one should say ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” Here the word translated “tempt” or “tempted” or “tempting” is the verb form of the same Greek word translated as “trials” in James 1:2. Note also that the word translated “trials” in James 1:2 is the same word in its singular form and translated as “temptation” in Luke 11:4b.

The same word is used in a positive sense in James 1:2 and a negative sense in James 1:13. Here we have one word with two different meanings used without any contradiction at all by the same biblical writer in the same passage. I believe the first readers then would be able to pick up the difference not because they were smarter than us today, but they were well immersed in the international language of that time (i.e. Greek).

What is sure is this—God will never lead you to a place where you are forced to do evil. 1 Cor. 10:13 says, “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.”

In that sense, God will never tempt you to do that which is wrong. He will never lead you to a point where you are forced to do evil. You may find yourself in a tough spot, and under pressure, you may choose to do evil. In your mind, you feel “forced” by the circumstances to do wrong. But even in those cases the choice is yours. Put in another way, God never sets us up to fall into temptation. To do that would contradict both His holiness and His love.

So, does God lead us into temptation in the sense of directly and personally seducing us to do wrong? The answer to that question must be “no”.

But the word in its original language also contains the idea of testing or trials. I believe this is the primary meaning of the word in Luke 11:4b. Note that I say the primary meaning, not the exclusive meaning. I believe that while it primarily means testing and trials, the negative meaning is also present to some degree.

But to say that raises two questions.

- One, if it means temptation to do evil and if we know that God does not tempt us to do evil, when we pray, “Lead us not into temptation,” are we then asking God not to do that which He obviously would not do?
- Two, if we know that testing and trials are good and even necessary for our spiritual growth in faith, when we pray, “Lead us not into testing and trials,” are we then asking God to exempt us from that which is good and even necessary for our own spiritual maturity?

What’s the solution to understanding this petition of asking God not to lead us into temptation? I believe the key is the “double meaning” of the word translated “temptation” in Luke 11:4b.

A key statement for understanding Lk 11:4b is this—what God gives to us as a test or trial is almost always used by Satan as a temptation. Let me illustrate.

A man dropped a \$100 note before your eyes. But he was not aware of it and kept walking. You hear a voice saying to your inner self, “Pick up that \$100 note. Run to the man and return it to him.”

Let me ask you, “Who is speaking to you?” I hope we all agree that it is God who is speaking. It is a test from God to see if we would obey His command not to steal (i.e. to take away something not belonging to us). If we obey God in that situation, we pass the test.

Suppose you heard another voice in that same situation. The voice said to you, “It’s your luck today. That man is not looking. Go pick up the \$100 note and give yourself a big treat today.”

Now, let me ask, “Is that God speaking to you?” I hope we all agree that it is Satan speaking. He is using that same situation to tempt us to steal, to be dishonest, to be greedy. And if we listen to him in that same situation, we don’t pass the test but we fall into temptation.

The very same event may be both a test/trial from God and a temptation from Satan. Or if you will, God uses it to accomplish one thing in your life and Satan at the very same time is working through that event to try to accomplish something diametrically opposite.

The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is a clear example of this two-sided reality. We know that the devil came to Jesus in the wilderness, tempting Him to turn away from the path of obedience to His Heavenly Father.

Matthew 4:1 - “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.” Who did the leading? The Holy Spirit. Who did the tempting? The devil. Is there a contradiction here? Not at all. Did God know what was going to happen when He sent His Son into the desert? Yes, He did. He intended from the beginning to demonstrate that His Son would not yield to Satan’s temptations. Was God tempting His own Son? No, He wasn’t. Was God putting His Son in a place where He could be tempted by the devil? The answer to that must be “yes”.

God sends a test and Satan turns it into a temptation. From God’s point of view it’s a test. From Satan’s point of view it’s a temptation.

- A test/trial sent by God is often in the form of a difficult experience. E.g. let’s suppose a Christian contracts a deadly sickness. Could that sickness be a testing from God? Yes, it could. It could lead him to look away from the things of earth to the things of heaven, and to turn his eyes on the Lord. Many good things are accomplished through sickness in the life of a believer.

Does Satan also work through sickness? Yes, he does. And through that very same sickness Satan will be working to tempt you to despair, to anger, to bitterness, and even to turn away from the Lord. What God intends for your spiritual good is the very thing Satan uses to pull you down.

- A test/trial sent by God can also be in the form of a good experience. E.g. let’s suppose you get a promotion and a nice raise in salary. Now you are better off financially than you’ve ever been. Can promotion be a testing from God? Yes, it can. Prosperity is often a testing from God to see how you will handle His material blessings. Prosperity ought to make us more generous towards the needy. But Satan wants to use that same prosperity to tempt us to be greedy, selfish, and blind to the less fortunate.

At the height of your success and blessed state, know that Satan will tempt you to say, “This is so good! And I want to store up more for myself.” At the same time, know that God is testing you and He wants you to grow in thankfulness and gratefulness so that you can say with godly contentment, “This is so good! And I have more than what I need to share some with others.”

So, when you are feeling most successful and blessed, be watchful! It may be the time in your life you need God most because you are most vulnerable to the evil one.

These are just some examples of how something God intends as a means of testing with the view of building you up can, at the same time, be used by Satan as a means of temptation to pull you down.

Jesus taught His disciples to pray in Luke 11:4b, “Our Father in Heaven, lead us not into temptation. I believe the Lord is teaching His disciples (and us) to pray with a “two-sided” reality in mind—i.e. when we seek God to help us stay close to Him, the devil is at the same time trying to stray us away from Him.

We have considered the 2-in-1 answer (i.e. the “no”-and-“yes” answer) to the question—“Does that mean God might actually lead us into temptation under some circumstances?” Let us draw two conclusions from this “two-sided” reality.

II. Two Conclusions

Conclusion # 1: Testing and trials are a normal part of the Christian life. They are part of God’s curriculum for us. He puts difficult choices in front of us every day so that by following Him and by trusting Him in those circumstances we become stronger. Our faith becomes strengthened and we become an example to other people of victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil.

In God’s School of Grace, God doesn’t offer a “No Trials” programme. All of us will be tested many times in many ways in life. So, in our desire to attract people to Christ, please don’t say that Jesus promises them a bed of roses in life if they believe in Him.

Read to them the promise of Rom. 8:35, 37 - “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

Tell them that when they are weak, Jesus will be their strength. When they are helpless, Jesus will be their help. When they are hopeless, Jesus will be their hope.

Conclusion # 2: A test/trial becomes a temptation when we respond wrongly. That which has been sent into our life in order to make us stronger

can be that which actually tears us down and makes us weaker when we respond in the flesh. What God works for good in one situation, Satan works it for evil in the same situation. So we will be naïve to separate tests/trials and temptations as if they are so far, far apart.

The biblical writer James in James 1 had no problem using the same word to mean tests/trials in one verse and then using that very same word to mean temptations just a few verses later. He understood what we have overlooked. Everything good comes from God, and everything He gives us is ultimately for our good and His glory. He does not sin nor does He tempt us to sin. But in every test/trial is the seed of a temptation that Satan wants to use to harvest a crop of evil in our lives.

Since all of us are put to the test in one way or another all the time, we all understand what it means to pray for deliverance, for “help in our time of need”.

Hebrews 4:15 points us to the Lord Jesus as the one who can help us when we cry out to Him because He was “tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin”.

The KJV translates it as Jesus is “touched with the feeling of our infirmities”. Jesus is “touched” by the weakness of our feeble flesh. What troubles us, touches Him. Jesus is truly moved by our sorrow, aware of our tears, and touched by our failure. He truly knows what we are going through. That’s what Hebrews 4:15 means when it says that Jesus is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He knows our pain, He sees our weakness, and He understands what we are going through. Because He was the Suffering Servant, He is not a stranger to our grief.

Jesus had faced every kind of temptation we can face—in the area of fleshly desire, in the area of visual lust, and in the area of boastful pride.

- In Luke 4:2-3, the devil tempts Jesus to turn a stone into bread at a time when the Lord was obviously hungry because He had not eaten anything for 40 days—that’s an appeal to the flesh.
- In Luke 4:5-7, the devil tries to mesmerize Jesus with the splendour of worldly kingdoms, and promises to give the Lord all authority over these if He would worship him—that’s an appeal to the lust of the eyes.
- In Luke 4:9-11, the devil challenges Jesus to throw Himself down from the highest point of the temple mount, so that He can show-off His status as the beloved Son of God when the angels lift Him up and save Him from the fall—that’s an appeal to the boastful pride of life.

Jesus defeated the devil in these three areas. Where we failed, He succeeded. Where we gave in, He stood firm. Where we collapsed into disobedience to God, Jesus obeyed His Father right to the end. He was tempted, yet He did not sin. Because He was the only person on earth who never yielded to

temptation, He is also the only person on earth who knows to the full extent what temptation means.

This has enormous implications for our spiritual life. Because Christ was tempted and never gave in, we may be sure that He is never surprised by anything we say or do. We gave in too early and easily so we never felt the full force of temptation. But Jesus let the waves of temptation rush over Him, yet He stood like a solid rock. When we pray we don't have to worry that we will somehow shock Him. He's heard it all and seen it all. We can go ahead and be totally honest about our failure. After all, He knows about it even before we tell Him.

Conclusion

We don't have to prove ourselves worthy when we pray. It's so easy for all of us to believe that our worthiness somehow commends us to God, that if we are just "good enough", God is more likely to hear our prayers.

We pray not because we are good enough to pray and to be heard by God. We pray because, as A. J. Gordon, the 19th Century American Baptist preacher and founder of Gordon College which is now Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, once put it, "You can do more than pray after you have prayed; but you can never do more than pray until you have prayed."

Prayer is our acknowledgement that we need God as we live for Him and work in His name.

I want to close with this call to those who have yet to believe in Jesus Christ. Because Jesus knows how sinful we really are, we don't have to pretend before Him. We can come to Him just the way we are.

The fifth petition of the so-called Lord's Prayer—"Lead us not into temptation"—is meant for helpless people. But that should not discourage us. God does His most beautiful work with helpless people who will cast themselves wholly on His grace.

When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," we are admitting that we have no power and no clue how to face the problems of life. God delights to help those who have nowhere else to go but to Him.

If that's where you are now and how you are feeling, I want to lead you in a prayer. You say these words after me silently in your heart to Jesus:

Jesus, I know I am a sinner who needs help in life.
I believe you came to die for my sins and later arose.
I now ask you to forgive my sins, and receive me into your life.
Help me to live a new life with you as my Master.
Amen.

Let's seek the Lord to help us see His hand and grow even in the tests/trials of life so that these will make us more like Jesus day by day until He comes again. Amen!