

## LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION

The Lord's Prayer is one the Lord Himself taught His disciples to pray. Most of the words and phrases have a clear and immediate meaning. But not so the plea not to be led into temptation. Does the Lord lead into temptation? The Heavenly Doctrines and common sense say no. He does not lead into temptation (AC 3425:5). Why, then, did He teach His disciples, His followers, to pray so?

To explain this apparent contradiction, we must first examine the word temptation. In the original Greek, and in the Latin of the Heavenly Doctrines, the word means a period or process of trial. It does not mean what we normally assume it to mean, namely an enticement, urge, or attraction.

That is why the prayer includes the words, "but deliver us from evil." Evil is something bad, including not only moral and spiritual evil, but also natural occurrences of misfortune or adversity.

Consider the so-called sacrifice of Isaac in the book of Genesis (Genesis 22:1-14), an account which begins with the words, "Now it came to pass after these things that God tempted Abraham."

Abraham was not enticed or drawn to do something. To sacrifice his son was not something he wanted to do. God's tempting him was to test His obedience, constituting a trial of His loyalty and compliance.

When we pray, therefore, "lead us not into temptation," we are praying, or should be praying, not to be led into a state or process of trial, but to be delivered from misfortune and adversity.

But if the Lord does not lead into temptation, that is, if He does not lead us into states of misfortune or adversity, why then did He teach His disciples to pray what He did, namely not to be led into temptation?

There are many things permitted by the Lord which He does not will. He permits them for the sake of some good that He does will, which otherwise would be thwarted. Many of these permissions involve a concession to human free will, in order to permit a person to will and act in freedom in accordance with his or her own reason.

So then we ask, what good is achieved by periods of trial, of misfortune and adversity, that would otherwise not be achieved?

There is a common saying, that whatever does not kill you makes you stronger. This expresses a general truth that we build character through facing adversity and dealing with misfortune. It is in adversity and misfortune that we find out what we are made of, so to speak, and it is in overcoming adversity and surviving misfortune that we assert a commitment to such virtues as patience, courage, forbearance, perseverance, resolve, and the like. It turns children into adults, the fearful into heroes, the oblivious into more aware, the thankless into more grateful, and so on. It is, in short, adversity and

misfortune that test us and offer us an opportunity for self-realization and improvement.

Adversity and misfortune in this natural realm of life may include such unhappy events as job loss, unwanted divorce, financial difficulties, the illness or death of a loved one, sickness and disease, the collapse of revered institutions, political reverses, and other disappointments in general.

These all fall into the category of natural temptations. And though we pray not to be led into them, still they can serve us for our betterment if we meet them with a faith in Divine providence and a trust that sooner or later we will find happiness again, in this world or in the next.

Such adversities and misfortunes are natural temptations or trials, but there are also others on the deeper, higher plane of the spirit, which in the Heavenly Doctrines are called spiritual temptations.

Spiritual temptations are trials of the intellect and will that involve spiritual ideas or values. They may occur independently of natural trials or they may be brought on by them. The latter is the case when natural trials induce doubt regarding the existence of God or the leading of Providence. If God is a loving God, why does He permit bad things to happen? Why did He permit this or that misfortune to happen to me? Like natural temptations or trials, these too constitute moments of crisis in which we discover what it is that we really believe and what it is that we are really committed to.

Spiritual trials of the intellect are typified by doubt, when some formerly believed truth of faith becomes no longer certain. The intellect is disturbed at the thought. Could it have been mistaken? Such trials are more or less severe depending on the degree of the disturbance — mild if the disturbance is less severe, more troubling if the disturbance is more severe.

An instance of such a trial is found in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, which depicts a father having brought his extremely mentally ill son to the Lord to be healed, and the Lord telling the father that all things are possible to someone who believes. Then “Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!””

This illustrates the fact that the intellect, in doubting the truth, becomes disturbed by that doubt because of its wish to believe. The existence of God, the possibility of life after death, the possibility of life in heaven and of a reunion with relatives and loved ones there — these and other concepts like them, when doubted, initiate the onset of mental trials that can be quite anguishing until they are resolved. And they are resolved when the intellect either submits to the doubt or confirms itself in the truth. That is why such intellectual trials are permitted, to occasion the intellect to move from a casual knowledge and perhaps understanding of the truth to a confirmation of it, so that the truth becomes indelibly imprinted on the person’s character.

More severe than spiritual trials of the intellect are spiritual trials of the will. Spiritual trials of the will are direct assaults on people’s spiritual loves. They involve not only doubt but also despair.

An instance of this kind of trial is exemplified by the so-called sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-14). I say, “so-called,” because Isaac was not actually sacrificed. But Abraham did not know the outcome beforehand. All he knew was that God had commanded him to go to the land of Moriah and there offer up his son Isaac as a burnt offering. According to the account, Abraham did not hesitate to obey, but we can imagine the wrenching despair of his heart at the thought of what he had been ordered to do.

So it is with all spiritual trials of the will. We may despair of our success in trying to reform ourselves. Regeneration—rebirth—may seem impossible, despite our desire for it. We may doubt the sincerity of our love for our spouse or for our children and condemn ourselves because of that doubt. A truly charitable will may seem beyond our capability. And so on with all good loves that seem, for us, beyond our sincere achievement.

All of these temptations or trials are not something we would wish to befall another, especially people we love and care for. And so it is also true that they are not something the Lord wishes for us. In that light we can understand why He taught His followers to pray not to be led into temptation, but to be delivered from evil. Because that is His wish for us.

And yet He permits these temptations, these trials, and because He permits them, it appears as though He is responsible for them.

To understand this, let us consider by way of an analogy the relationship of parents to their children. Loving parents wish nothing but the best for their children. They nourish them and protect them and teach them how to behave and succeed in life. And yet, in each child’s life the time comes when the child needs to begin to fend for himself: to solve his own problems, to fight his own battles, to work his way out of his own difficulties. A wise parent gradually begins to allow this, in the knowledge that it is necessary for the child’s wanted independence, that it is necessary for his maturation, that it is necessary for his survival when he comes of an age to leave home and make his own way in the world.

In short, the parent permits what he or she does not will. The parent does not will the injuries and injustices, the adversities and misfortunes, that the child inevitably encounters. And yet, more than this, the parent wishes the child to be able to deal with such trials, in order to become a self-reliant adult, able to care both for himself and for others.

Some misfortunes and adversities, too, are beyond the parents’ ability to prevent. No parent can mend a broken heart. No parent can protect against all accidents and diseases. The best a parent can do is to prepare the child to suffer them with courage and with the necessary tools to survive them.

So it is with the Lord and His children, namely ourselves. He permits much that He does not will, because it is necessary for our development, both spiritually and naturally. And He permits much that He cannot prevent.

Suppose a parent could swoop in every time his or her child faced some misfortune or adversity and could deal with the misfortune or adversity on behalf of the child. Think about it. Would you have liked your parents to more or less run your life by swooping in to take charge and handle every difficulty or unhappiness you experienced?

Neither would we like it if the Lord were to swoop in, so to speak, to take charge of our lives and handle every difficulty or unhappiness we experience. We may think we would like such to be the case, but eventually we would find it an interference, just as a child in a similar circumstance finds his parents meddling in his life an interference.

Such difficulties and unhappiness are therefore things He cannot prevent. He cannot prevent them without His interfering with our freedom to live apparently independently and without His becoming Himself then reason for our distress.

Having said that, however, we need at the same time to consider some of the really awful atrocities and plagues that have occurred in the history of mankind and which still occur in places — atrocities and plagues whose horror and misery exceed the distress of periods or processes of trial that in the end prove useful to those suffering them. What use is served by permitting such atrocities and plague such as those which have occurred during times of war or pandemic disease?

The quick answer, of course, is the teaching in the book *Divine Providence* which tells us that Divine providence regards eternal ends and not temporal ones except as they accord with eternal ones (DP 215ff.). For us, death and its attendant suffering is the ultimate calamity. But not so from the Lord's point of view, nor for that of angels in the spiritual world. For death is not the end of life, but only a transition.

Consider, by analogy, the birth of a child. For the child, birth is a traumatic experience. From continuing in a warm and comfortable existence in the womb, it is thrust suddenly into a cold dry world, a world which bombards it with sounds and light more intense than anything it experienced before. And yet we celebrate the birth of the child, because we know a better world awaits it outside of the womb.

So it is with the death of the body. The transition of the spirit is not the end of life, but only the beginning of a better life in a better world.

Moreover, seen from the perspective of time, good has, in the end, always triumphed over evil. Civilization has always eventually overcome barbarism; medical cures have always eventually overcome plague and disease.

In this we may see the hand of Providence. To consider but one example, during World War II, two military blunders early on spelled the eventual defeat of the Axis powers.

The first military blunder occurred in June of 1941, less than two years after the onset of the war in Europe, when Hitler inexplicably sent his forces against the Soviet Union, and did so not in the spring, but in the summer, when the Russian winter was sure to doom the enterprise, even as it had defeated Napoleon before. Hitler's military staff warned him against the assault, but Hitler was adamant. And the result was a war on two fronts that Nazi Germany could not win.

The second military blunder occurred six months later, in the Pacific theater, when in December Imperial Japan attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, commander-in-chief of Japan's naval forces, warned Prime Minister Tojo and Emperor Hirohito against the attack, saying that it would only serve to awaken a sleeping giant, namely the United States. But Tojo and the emperor overruled him. And although the populace of the United States had to that point been deeply committed against entering the war, the attack on Pearl Harbor almost instantly aroused in it a desire to retaliate, and it launched the United States into the war, leading to the utter defeat of the Axis forces.

In these inexplicable military blunders it possible to see in hindsight the guidance of Providence to ensure the victory of goodness over evil, and to bring about a new world order of benefit to peoples of both the east and the west.

Still, war and plagues are not the work of Providence, but the work of men. And though Providence has led in every case to the eventual triumph of good over evil, still it would have been in accord with the Divine will for the calamities not to have taken place.

So the Lord taught His disciples to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."