

Transcript Segment, Part 4
“Praying the ‘Our Father’ with Jesus”

Presented by Michael Simone, S.J.

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Linguistic reality: in Aramaic, the line “lead us not into temptation” is probably a causative stem. Those of you know Semitic languages might understand this. It might, in Aramaic easily be translated, “Keep me away from temptation, keep us away from temptation. Do not cause me to enter into temptation. Cause me not to enter.” That’s nice, if we had the Aramaic text, which we don’t. We have the Greek, and the Greek text is inspired, so that’s what we have to do business with. What we have is “Lead us not into *peirasmós*,” which could mean testing, trial, temptation.

I don’t think this is really that hard to understand. This used to bug me, as a kid, when I first learned this prayer, because why would God try to tempt me? That’s the devil’s job. But I think the biblical God, both Old and New Testaments, tests people to test the genuineness of their faith, the genuineness of their devotion. I don’t think we can get around that. We can get around it in later tradition. We can say that this is not really the way that God has ever been, this is the way humans understood him. But when you just stick within the biblical text, you get a lot of images of God testing the faith of the people who claim to be his disciples.

So the test of Abraham, *Aqedah*, this is a good example of that. I think this is what Jesus is asking: *Please don’t let this happen to me or anyone I love*. I think the testing of Job—actually, I think Job’s testing is a little more significant to Matthew, I’ll point that out in a minute—Jesus prays to be spared this, and the Evangelists, as they write the Gethsemane accounts, incorporate a lot of this language into Jesus’s dialogue with his disciples. “Pray that you not be put to the test.” Certainly, Jesus himself speaks of feeling tested in Gethsemane.

So this is probably a straightforward prayer: “Do not test me the way you tested Abraham, the way you tested Job, the way you tested your people in the desert.” But there’s a boldness to it, too, I think. “You can trust me,” is what Jesus seems to be saying to his Father. Now these are my words, and this might be, again, an infusion of my piety. But I wonder if there isn’t some of this new heart and new spirit from Ezekiel and Jeremiah behind this. “You can trust me, God, because you have put a new heart,” this is God’s promise, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. I’ll remove from you your heart of stone, give you a heart of flesh. I’ll put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will be careful to observe my ordinances.” It will come because it comes from your heart in the new creation, which Ezekiel probably thought was going to happen when he returned from Babylon, but by Jesus’s time, clearly people believed it was delayed. I think there is this bit of boldness in this part of the prayer, “Lead us not into temptation,” possibly, God, because you can trust us. Now on my best day I would never tell God that he could trust me. I don’t want to project and say the same about anyone else in the room, but I’m pretty sure I can’t, with great confidence, say that. I hope he can, but I think there is some of that.

As for the “deliver us from evil,” this is Matthew’s addition to this line. I think this is more Job-specific. I think Matthew is inheriting an understanding that this kind of temptation happens because

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Satan's job is to go around and test the faith of people who claim to love God. This is exactly what Satan is doing in the book of Job. I think Matthew inherits that. Luke, not interested in that kind of heavenly dualism, probably is of not much interest to his readers. Certainly, where the image of Satan goes in later Christian thought also takes us kind of far away from what Matthew is doing here. But Matthew's prayer is more Joban in this regard. "Don't let that happen to me, please God."

Again, I think the deeper prayer, here, Jesus is praying that God have a people that he can trust, and Jesus is praying that, God preserve us from the very test that he put his Son through on the cross, or the very test that he put his loved ones through in the Old Testament. Again, this is all primary source work. I'm sure that there are plenty of nuances there that I need to look at. But this is where my mind is with this.

Just looking at the conclusions, now, where does Jesus's attention turn? I think I've mentioned enough prophetic names that I realize, and you might realize, that the prophets—this seems to be where Jesus's mind goes when he's looking for words to describe his own hopes. Now, you could attribute this to observer bias on my part, except that the prophetic corpus is probably the part of the Old Testament that I've studied the least, which is not to say I don't know it, but I'm much more at home in Pentateuch and Wisdom lit. I find, except for Job, very little Wisdom lit in this prayer. But the words that Jesus seems to be drawing on seem to come from prophetic texts. To a lesser extent, Jesus is drawing on images from the Pentateuch, from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. This doesn't surprise me. Those were the texts that might have been the best known in his day. But he's very inspired by prophecy.

We also see that God is Father. He's tender. He's concerned for the poor. He has a deep love for Israel. Again, Evangelists probably did more out of this than Jesus, a deep love for the Son of David. The relationship between God and Jesus has something to do with that promise that God will be a Father to David's Son.

The prayer also includes this idea that God is in heaven, he's universal, but he acts on earth wherever his name is involved, so actions done in his name, invocations of his name in prayer.

The Kingdom that Jesus imagines, it's not hard to read the eschatological images from Ezekiel into it. I'm convinced that that's probably what underlies a lot of what he was doing in his own ministry. He was praying to see that vision, be it done on earth as it is in heaven. The trust in providence implied in Jesus's evocation of the manna in the desert is probably what it will be like to live in that Kingdom. Yeah, speculation on my part, but I think more than just pious speculation. I think I'm seeing maybe where Jesus's mind is going with this, and I think living in the spirit of the Jubilee, not taking on the obligations of others and freeing others from obligations to you. I think later Christianity certainly runs wild with that. This is an essential part of the social justice tradition in every generation. But at the end, a very deep humility: "Save me from the test." We've seen a lot of religious people in every age kind of beg for the test and then fail. I'm not going to name names, but there have been a lot of great scandals. Jesus's prayer is the exact opposite of that. Jesus, who probably could have handled anything, and he did in the Crucifixion, "do not lead me into the test," for me at least, again, my piety is at work here, but it's an important gut-check, and I think that's where Jesus is drawing from, the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures.

One thing also that I've notice, and this is something that I would want to play on is, how much is Jesus praying for himself, and how much is he praying on behalf of others? In other words, how much of this is private prayer, and how much of it, on his part, is priestly prayer, is mediation? Certainly when you have lines like, "Forgive us our sins, forgive us our debts," that seems to be a prayer that would be more at home as a mediatory prayer. Not only that, what was the other one? Oh, being freed from temptation. Again, he prays that his disciples, certainly, would be free from temptation. It

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might be more mediation than private prayer. That's a whole other element of this prayer that I probably hadn't considered, necessarily.

But I think all of this, especially the mediative aspects, bring us back around to the first word that we only see in Matthew, which is "Our Father." This is not just a prayer for ourselves, it's a prayer for the whole world. Every time we say it, it's a prayer for the whole world. I know how easy it is to rattle off this prayer because I've probably been doing it since first grade. But we pray on behalf of the world with this, and this is Jesus praying on behalf of the world. This is a prayer for that kind of freedom and hope in providence, and in a sense of being protected by God. But again, I think even more so, a sense to have this kind of heart and spirit to be God's trustworthy agents in the world. I think that's what Jesus was doing with this. I think that's what he inherited from his own Hebrew Bible tradition.

Thank you.