

Lord Teach Us to Pray - Chapter Eight

"Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil"

The Christian life is no safe harbor, secure from storms and struggle. Those who are members of this promised kingdom are, with Christ, at war with the powerful. We are thus those who pray to be saved.

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" (Matthew 8: 23-25)

Christians are those who ask to be saved. When we pray to God to save us, we are not asking for some changed self-understanding, some new way of feeling about ourselves, something to put zest in our lives. Salvation in Christ is being adopted (baptism), made members of a people, Israel, and the church. We really believe that if we were not part of this people we could not be saved.

So when the church has opinions about how you spend your money, how you have sex, how you vote, this is salvation. You are not simply being saved from personal greed or licentiousness, you are thereby being made a member of God's people.

Note that we don't pray, "Save me." It's, "Save us." Certainly, the "me" is included in the "us." Just as we began by praying, "Our Father," so here we find again that we are being included in a larger drama (salvation) that is more determinative of who you are than any available "me." You join all those saints through the ages who have had their lives transformed, commandeered, turned over, and detoxified by the love of God in Christ. Like the disciples in Matthew 8, we are all in the same boat, tossed by a storm not of our creation, praying, "Lord, save us!"

Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak. (Ephesians 6: 18-20)

Words like "save" and "trial" and "deliver" are words of crisis. They remind us that to pray this prayer means to be thrust into the middle of a cosmic struggle. At this point the temperature rises within the Lord's Prayer. Things are not right in the world. It is as if something, someone has organized things against God. You pray this prayer faithfully, attempting to align your life to it and the next thing you know, it's like you are under assault.

How often is salvation presented as some sort of helpful solution to everything that ails us. "Lonely? Come to Jesus and get that fixed." "Alcoholic? Come to Jesus and be delivered of your addiction." "Confused? Join the church and find all the answers." In such a presentation of the gospel, salvation is the resolution of all your problems, the way to fix whatever ails you.

But this petition, in which we ask for salvation, deliverance, and help in time of trial reminds us that salvation in Christ is an adventure, a journey, a larger drama. Praying this prayer is the beginning of problems we would never have had had we not met Christ and enlisted with

Christ's people. The forces of evil do not relinquish their territory without a fight and, in being saved, God's newly won territory is you.

You become a virtual battleground where the living God fights the powers. So praying this prayer is a bit like war: *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.* (Ephesians 6: 10-13)

In praying that God will not "put us to the test," we pray that God will not make us vulnerable to those powers that rage against God's kingdom. What you are up against, in being saved, is not simply your personal faults and foibles, your petty temptations and peccadilloes. You are up against what we call "the principalities and powers." Evil is large, cosmic, organized, subtle, pervasive, and real. The powers never appear as evil or coercive. The powers always masquerade as freedoms that we have been graciously given or as necessities that we cannot live without.

For example, "the economy" is a power. We have been taught to believe that there is some autonomous, freestanding reality that is called "the economy," which is determinative of our lives, which can make us glad or sad, and which is worth our most frantic efforts and deepest dedication. "Wall Street has decided" we sometimes hear and say.

Another power is "race," which we describe as a reality that determines a person's fate, the person's outlook on life, and is the source of all meaning and value. "Gender" is another power. The world tells us, when face-to-face with the powers, our main job is to adapt and to adjust. After a bombing raid in the war with Iraq, a general was asked why so many people were killed. The reply, "National defense required it." End of discussion. Those are powers.

"The media" are a power. It appears to be good— we need information, don't we? From morning until night, "the media" feed us images, facts, names, sights and sounds that determine our angle of vision. "The media" offer to tell us what is going on in the world, what is and what is not. We call it "news."

Yet in praying this prayer, you have joined in a battle over what is. What is "news"? Who defines "reality"? Through what metaphors and images will we describe the world? In any given week, something like fifty million Americans attend a service of worship in their church. Only a small fraction of that number go to a movie. Yet, when you read this morning's newspaper or watch morning television, there will be no mention of church. Most of the talk is of movies and movie stars, leading one to believe that Hollywood is more important than Jerusalem. In a way, the powers make it so— our lives are in the grip of the images the media offer us. We are incapable, on our own, of thinking about the world other than through the images that the media offer. It takes some superhuman power for us to break free of "the powers."

One of us was talking with a group of students about the alcohol policy on our college campus. "We should be free to drink beer when we want, and how much we want, with no outside coercion from the university administration," said a student. "We should be free to do what we want to do."

Unfortunately, "being free to do what we want to do" is a rather complicated matter. It begs more pressing questions like, "Who are you and what do you want to be when you grow up?" or, "How do you know that what you call 'freedom' only seems free because you lack the imagination to conceive of any kind of life other than the one you are now living?" or, "How do you know what you want to do when you have as yet no goal in mind for where you want to go?"

It was pointed out to the students that beer consumption among American adults has been declining every year in the last two decades— except among one segment of the adult population, young adults about the age of college students. That's why you never see anyone our age in a beer commercial!

And the amazing thing is that, all the time these students are guzzling beer and thinking of themselves as free to do whatever they want, the students are having their strings pulled by Madison Avenue! It is the nature of the powers (like "Wall Street" or "Madison Avenue" or "The Pentagon") to enslave us in the very freedom we thought we were freely enjoying.

In the act of praying this prayer, devils are loosed. The "powers that be" rage against such prayer, can't stand to have one free person running loose who is able to throw off the chains and pray, "Our Father . . . save us."

You know from your own experience that a lie becomes more violent once stripped of its pretense and exposed as a lie. So when you pray to be saved, to be delivered from the test, you are acknowledging that you are not in control of your fate, that there really is something in the world worth resisting, that this world and its rewards are not enough, and that you answer to some greater power than that which the world bows before. Satan masquerades as an angel of light and resists being unmasked. Get ready for a fight.

Note that Paul— Saint Paul— wrote these anguished words after he had become a Christian: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.... Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?* (Romans 7: 15-20,24)

Thus we ask to be rescued in the time of trial, to be delivered from evil. Obviously, something more interesting is going on here than the mere affirmation of a set of beliefs or a search for meaning in life. To be a Christian is not to believe this or that, though certainly we believe in very specific ways, but rather it is to be made part of a people who have learned that they must pray because they are in such fearful struggle. Just by acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord, in bowing to a ruler other than Caesar, in praising God rather than the American economy for our well-being, we threaten all that is arrayed so fearfully against Christ.

God refused to abandon his conflicted creation. God called forth a new people, by water and the Spirit, Jews and Christians, who are to exemplify for all people what God's providential care of creation looks like. God did not merely create the world, then walk off, leaving us to our own devices. God intruded, continued to create, struggled. We are in a war where God battles the powers of evil. Though we know for sure how the war will end— the cross made clear that God's purposes for creation will not be defeated— there are still battles to be fought.

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers ... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8: 31b-39)

We don't know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future. Knowing that, we have patience in the midst of struggle. Knowing that we live in God's good time, we can take time. The world lives by the story that our lives are rushing toward their conclusion, the oblivion of death and dissolution. We must therefore frantically work to make every minute count— for the world tells us that nothing counts other than what we make. The world attempts to convince us that things are in a terrible mess and it is up to us to set things right or things will never be right. The world tells a story that all suffering, confusion, or pain must be resolved now through earnest human efforts, drugs, economic development, or medical technology, or else life is damned. Violence is the inevitable result of the absence of a story that gives us the freedom to be patient, to take time.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4: 4-7)

In praying this prayer, we are given something good to do in the meantime. We refuse to let the powers rush us into despair or false hope, premature conclusions or frantic busyness. We are not in a hurry to have things worked out, brought to completion, finished and done because we know that, in Jesus Christ, God has given the world all the time we need.

It takes time and patience, the gradual acquisition of skills to bake bread. And just before this petition, we have prayed for the patience to make daily bread. Resistance to the powers may take the form of marriage, having a family, baking bread— all matters that require communal effort, time, patience, and the acquisition of skills that are not natural and normal. You ought to demand that your church give you the equipment you need to resist the powers.

Because patience is a virtue in short supply in the modern world, because we are enmeshed in the powers, we pray, "Deliver us from evil." Some versions of the Lord's Prayer say "Deliver us from the Evil One." Thus the prayer makes explicit that there is a conspiracy against God's good kingdom in which a personification of evil (Satan) makes sense.

Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith. (1 Peter 5: 8-9a)

In praying to God to deliver us we acknowledge that God is greater than any foe of God. The power of evil must be admitted and taken seriously, yet not too seriously. Perhaps that is why, though the Lord's Prayer honestly focuses upon trial, temptation and evil, it never mentions

Satan by name. Evil is a threatening power, though a defeated one. Though the battle rages, we know who has won the war.

When we pray for deliverance from evil, we acknowledge that we have not the resources, on our own, to resist evil. The Lord's Prayer is so honest. The powers that be are powers over our lives. In our weakness, we reach out and there is deliverance. Isn't that how Alcoholics Anonymous puts it? "We had to reach out to a power greater than ourselves." Note that one of the ways Alcoholics Anonymous enables you to reach out "to a power greater than ourselves" and the chief means through which that power intervenes in our behalf, is by putting you in a group. The community enables us to be free from the powers. Standing alone, as isolated individuals, we are no match for the powers. Therefore we are adopted by a community (church) whereby our prayer "Deliver us from evil" is answered.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8: 26-27)

Willimon, William & Hauerwas, Stanley. Lord Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer & the Christian Life. Abingdon Press, 1996. (pp. 87-95).