

Deliver Us

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[0 : 00] As the pandemic goes on, it raises lots of difficult questions about suffering and about evil. How do we make sense of a world where there are such things as viruses that take lives?

And not only that, things like this pandemic lead to economic collapse, ramifications that will span years and years and years. How do we make sense of these kinds of things?

You know, what is evil? And how do we respond to evil? There's a lot being written about that. A lot of people are wondering about that. And so this is something that we're going to talk about this morning.

We've been looking at the Lord's Prayer over the past few weeks, which is a prayer that Jesus gave to his disciples and through them he gave to us. And this is not just a prayer, as we've been saying, but Jesus gave it to us to orient us and to ground us, to give us something to hold on to and to help us make sense of the world that we live in, to know how to live in this world and to know how to have a relationship with the God who made this world.

So that's why we've been looking at this prayer. And this week we come to the petition, Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. So we're going to talk about what this petition means, and we're going to talk about this question of what is evil and how do we respond to it.

[1 : 18] And we'll primarily be looking at James chapter 1, which is what I read a moment ago. But I'm going to be jumping around a lot this week, and that's partly to do with the fact that this is such a huge topic.

It's way beyond what we can fully address today. But we're going to try to get a good start at least. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you so much for your word, and we thank you that we can trust you to speak to us, and that when we encounter mysteries and things that go beyond our understanding, we can also trust you, Lord, because you're God and we're not.

So we pray that as we come to you with our questions and with our doubts and with our fear and with our pain, we pray that you would meet us through your word as you promised to do. We pray this in the name of the living word, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So first of all, what is evil? You know, there are a lot of different ideas about evil out there. You ask 10 different people, and you're likely to get 10 different answers. And most people tend to have a kind of distorted view of evil.

They have an unbalanced view of evil. And what you'll find is if you don't have a clear understanding of what evil is, you're not going to know how to deal with it, how to respond to it.

[2 : 32] And so the first thing we want to do is to clarify what do we mean when we talk about evil, or more importantly, what does the Bible mean when it talks about evil? The first thing about evil that we see in Scripture is this, that evil is both personal and systemic.

It's both personal and systemic. See, some people, I think maybe people on the right, tend to emphasize and focus on personal evil and personal holiness.

You hear language about preserving traditional values and focus on things like sexual purity. And so people that have this kind of focus are really focused on personal holiness and resisting personal evil in our lives.

But there can be a tendency to ignore or downplay the fact that there is systemic evil, that evil exists in institutions and in policies and in legislation.

Those things can also be forms of evil. Now, you see the exact opposite with people on the left. People on the left tend to focus on systemic evil, things like systemic oppression or racism that's been codified in some of our policies.

[3 : 46] And those things are true, but people that have this focus tend to de-emphasize or ignore the need for personal holiness. And so the idea is essentially that people can live however they want.

And the most important thing that we can do is to love and support and validate people, no matter what choices they're making. And so what we see in Scripture, the truth is that it's a little more complicated than either of those views, that evil is actually personal and systemic.

God continually says to His people throughout Scripture in places like 1 Peter 1, verse 16, be holy for I am holy. And part of what He has in mind there is absolutely your conduct, the way you live your life, the choices that you make.

Be holy for I am holy. So personal evil and personal holiness matter. But God also, all throughout Scripture, in the Old Testament and the New Testament, calls His people to do justice and to care for the oppressed and the poor and to love mercy.

And the Bible has a lot to say about how we handle and distribute wealth and land. The Bible has a lot to say about how masters should treat their servants.

[5 : 05] It has a lot to say about race relations and how we relate to and view people from different cultures and backgrounds. The Bible has a lot to say about this. And so what we see in Scripture is that we're called not just to personal holiness, but to structural holiness, to systemic holiness, to advance and promote legislation and to build institutions and establish governments that promote justice and wholeness for everyone.

And so both exist in Scripture. The second thing we want to see about evil is that it is both natural and supernatural. Evil is both natural and supernatural.

So irreligious people tend to think of evil only in naturalistic terms, meaning they reject the whole idea of supernatural evil.

They see that as being primitive or backwards or superstitious. And the view of suffering is essentially that that's part of what it means to live in a universe that is meaningless and chaotic.

If bad things happen to you, it's simply a bad roll of the dice. Now, on the other end of the spectrum, there are some religious people that tend to over-spiritualize evil.

[6 : 21] And that's weird for a person like me to say that, but it's definitely out there. There are some people that kind of see demons everywhere. If I'm feeling sad in the morning, that's a demon.

If the basement flooded because it rained last night, that's a demon. If something like coronavirus comes along, that's definitely a demon. And so this can kind of lead to a kind of paranoia almost where we're seeing demons everywhere.

And again, a biblical view holds these two things together, natural evil and supernatural evil. So on the one hand, not every negative emotion is demonic.

Sometimes we're simply sad, but that's part of how we're designed. And we even see in Jesus, who was absolutely not oppressed or possessed by demons, we see that sometimes Jesus was sad.

Sometimes Jesus felt and struggled with negative emotions, not necessarily demonic. Sometimes basements just flood because it rains and you don't have good drainage around your house. And so on the one hand, we need to recognize that we simply live in this kind of world.

[7 : 30] The world is broken and sometimes hardship comes. It's not necessarily always demonic. And yet, on the other hand, the Lord's Prayer, when you literally translate this petition, we are called to pray, deliver us from the evil.

And I think a better way to translate this is the evil one. Deliver us from the evil one. The Bible is absolutely clear on the fact, as it says in places like Ephesians chapter 6, that our ultimate struggle is not against flesh and blood.

It's not against natural enemies. It's not against natural enemies. That the struggle is actually against supernatural forces. It's against a supernatural evil. That there is actually a spiritual, malevolent embodiment of evil that we refer to as the accuser or the tempter or the Satan.

And, you know, when we see things like this past week, when we see militants storming a maternity ward in Kabul and slaughtering 24 people, killing women who are in labor, killing new moms, killing babies, killing medical professionals, when we see something like that, we have to recognize that there is a kind of evil behind that that goes beyond the sum total of what human beings are capable of.

That there is a malevolence there. There is a darkness there that is demonic. It's a supernatural evil driving that kind of thing. And I think it's extremely important that we have the language and to be able to name those kinds of things for what they are.

[9 : 09] That is evil. So evil is both personal and systemic. It's both natural and supernatural. The third is definitely the most complex.

When the Bible talks about evil, we're talking about something that is both opposed to God and subject to God's sovereignty. Now, I know that's complicated.

It's opposed to God, and yet it exists under God's sovereignty. Some people tend to think of good and evil as sort of equal and opposed forces, right?

You have God and the angels on one side. You have the devil and the demons on the other side, and they're battling it out. Good versus evil, light versus dark. And so when bad things happen, we say, well, evil won this round, and God must have lost this round.

And we think that they're on equal terms. Now, other people go in the other direction. They're so focused on God's sovereignty. They're so focused on God controlling every aspect of our lives that it almost becomes a kind of fatalism or determinism.

[10 : 13] And when it comes to suffering, we say that any and all suffering, if I'm suffering, it must be because God wants me to suffer. God is willing that I suffer right now. And again, as we've seen again and again and again, a biblical view is more nuanced.

And it's more complex. On the one hand, the Bible affirms again and again and again that God is absolutely sovereign. And essentially what that means is that God is free to do whatever God chooses to do, and nothing can impede him in doing that.

God is in absolute control. He's absolutely sovereign, and no one can thwart God. So there's no battle. There's no evil that stands equal to God's power. There's nothing that comes close to God.

He's incomparable. He's sovereign. And yet, and this is the mysterious part, I don't even pretend to fully understand this, and I don't believe anybody can fully understand this.

In some mysterious way that I don't fully understand, God allows or permits things to happen and evil to exist that stands opposed to his will, to his desire for us and for this world.

[11 : 27] He somehow withdrew and allowed or permitted Adam and Eve the freedom to choose to sin against him, which is what broke the world and us.

And this is not because God is powerless. It's not because there's a realm over which God is not sovereign. He's absolutely sovereign. He, in a way, actively permits or actively chooses to withdraw and allow things to happen that run contrary to his will, contrary to that which he states as his desire for us and the world.

And yet, somehow, even those things exist under his sovereignty, and ultimately, they serve his purposes. And so, we see examples of this in Scripture. The Bible's full of examples like this.

People like Joseph in Genesis, who's sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. People like Esther, who's forced into a Persian harem. Now, in both cases, those things that happen to these people are evil.

They run against God's desire for how he desires that people treat one another. And yet, somehow, these acts of evil serve God's purposes.

[12 : 40] They lead, in both cases, to the saving of countless lives. Now, I don't pretend to be able to understand this. It is breathtakingly complex. And trying to understand this would be like a single-celled organism trying to understand quantum mechanics.

I think, to a point, we just have to admit, I'm human, and God's ways are above and beyond mine. But here's what we're saying to kind of bring this together. Behind all of the evil in the world, both personal and systemic evil, there is a malevolent spiritual being, a kind of embodiment of everything in this world that stands opposed to God, the tempter, the accuser, the Satan.

And even though that being exists under God's sovereignty, it stands opposed to God and God's people. Now, once we recognize this, and we're talking about evil, this is what we're talking about.

Once we recognize this, the question then becomes, how do we respond? How do we respond? And this is why we pray in the Lord's Prayer, lead us not into temptation.

Because temptation is one of the main weapons that the tempter uses, or the accuser uses, to oppose God and his people. Temptation is one of the main ways he does that.

[13 : 59] Listen to what James says in the passage that we just read in verse 13. James says, Now, the Greek word for temptation, pyrosmos, has two meanings, actually.

And it's very ambiguous. It's the same Greek word can either mean a test or a trial, or it can mean temptation like James is talking about here. It can mean both, and it really depends on the context.

That first meaning, test or trial, this is something that we see God doing all the time in the lives of his people. God tests and tries people all the time.

He tests and tries us all of the time. James uses this same word earlier in the chapter in verse 2 when he says, Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials, same word, trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

So there are lots of examples in Scripture where God does this. God tested Abraham. Peter talks in his letter, 1 Peter, about, he says, Do not be surprised when the fiery trials come upon you to test you.

[15 : 18] Same exact word, right? And we see Jesus enduring this kind of testing and trial in the wilderness. So God tests people regularly. And tests like this are times when we are confronted with situations where obedience to God is going to cost us something.

We're confronted with a situation where to obey God, to follow God faithfully, that is going to cost us. And we have to choose to bear that cost in order to be faithful to God.

And so those tests are good. They can strengthen and refine our faith. And I think in many ways our faith can't grow apart from those trials. But then James goes on in the section that we read to describe the other meaning of this word, what we would translate as temptation.

And I think this is what Jesus has in mind in the Lord's Prayer. Lead us not into temptation. Here's how James describes temptation in verse 14. He says, Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death. Not just physical death, spiritual death.

[16 : 34] This is the anatomy of temptation. You start off with a need or a desire. It could be hunger. It could be thirst. It could be sexual longing.

It could be loneliness. It could be a desire for security or financial stability or the approval and admiration of other people. It could be any of those things. And the thing that we need to be clear on is these desires by themselves are not evil.

They're just desires. They're part of what it means to be human beings. But then, as we have those desires, we come across, either in person or just in our imagination, some way of satisfying that desire that runs contrary to God's will, that is opposed to what God desires for us and this world.

So, a classic example from Scripture, think of David out on the roof and looking down and seeing Bathsheba. And Bathsheba is a woman who is lovely, but she is married to one of David's best friends, Uriah.

Now, at this point, there's still no sin. You have a desire and you're sort of presented with this, in David's case, this person, Bathsheba. But no line has yet been crossed.

[17 : 53] At this point, David can turn away and go do something else with his evening. At this point, no line has been crossed. So, at this point, we could reasonably say that this is a test from God.

God has led David into this situation. But then, what happens is we cross the line. We, as James says, we allow ourselves to be lured.

We allow ourselves to be enticed. You begin to fantasize. You begin to indulge the appetite. You begin to indulge the desire. You begin to do things to kindle your craving, to allow it to become stronger.

And at this point, James says, once you've crossed that line, God is no longer leading you. Right? Once you've crossed that line, your own desires are taking over.

You're allowing your desires to be used against you. And then, it's not God who's doing that. This is why we call the evil one the tempter.

[18 : 54] Right? Because at this point, it's not God acting in your life. And these words, luring and enticing, the Greek words there actually are hunting and fishing terms.

So, imagine a hungry rabbit going along. And the rabbit smells food. It looks over and sees a little bit of food on a pile of leaves.

And that rabbit is hungry and curious. And so, it gets closer and closer. It's being lured by the smell. Lured by the sight of that food. And finally, the rabbit makes the decision to eat the food.

Steps on the pile of leaves. And the trap is sprung. Right? And the rabbit is ensnared. And then, it's trapped. And this is exactly what we see with David. David is lonely.

He's sort of full of desire. He's out on his roof. And then, he sees Bathsheba. But instead of turning away, he allows himself to begin fantasizing about her.

[19 : 49] Fantasizing about being with her. Fantasizing about all that that might be for him. And then, he summons her and sends for her. And then, he sleeps with her. And it's just like that rabbit.

He gets closer and closer and closer. He indulges the desire. Indulges the fantasy. And then, he's trapped. He's ensnared. And this is no fault of Bathsheba. It's no fault of God. This is David allowing himself to be lured and ensnared by his own desire.

And behind this is the work of the tempter. And all of this, of course, leads to David having his best friend Uriah killed just to cover up the affair. So, this is the kind of damage that happens when we conceive and give birth to sin in our lives because we allow this kind of thing to happen.

And so, this is the playing out of James' words. Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then, desire, when it is conceived, gives birth to sin.

So, God does lead us into times of testing to refine our faith. But he never leads us to fall to temptation. He never uses our desires against us.

[20 : 57] He never coerces us to sin. Whenever that's happening, we can't blame God. That's the work of the enemy. So, here's the first point I want to make as we look at this petition in the Lord's Prayer.

Pulling everything that I've just said together, if you want to fight evil, if you want to stand against oppression and injustice, if you want to fight that fight against evil in the world, that battle has to start in here.

The battle can't start out there. It has to start in here. Because the truth is, if you are driven only by your desires and your appetites, if you're driven only by your desires and your appetites, then you are no threat to the enemy.

In fact, more than likely, you belong to the enemy. You've been ensnared by the enemy. You're a slave to the enemy. And, you know, you might be thinking, well, I don't think temptation is a big deal in my life.

I've never really struggled against temptation. I don't think it's as powerful as you're saying. I would suggest that's probably because you've never really tried to resist your temptation. It's because you give in so quickly that you've never felt that struggle.

[22 : 10] That's something that C.S. Lewis says in one of his writings. That it's only the people who really try to resist temptation, the people who try to struggle against it, only those people really understand how powerful it can be.

So there are many people who are out fighting the good fight for this cause or that cause, all noble causes in the world. But those people are enslaved to their own desires.

They're slaves to food or sex or their need to make a difference or their need for approval or their need for meaning. And these things have enslaved them. So the caution is simply this.

Don't focus so much on winning battles out there that you lose the war in here. But the good news is this. Here's the good news of this petition.

If you do find that you're a slave to your desires, if you do find that you feel ensnared and can't find your way out and you're longing for freedom, the prayer goes on.

[23 : 09] Deliver us from evil or deliver us from the evil one. See, ultimately, we need a deliverer. Ultimately, we need someone outside of ourselves to come and deliver us.

And the gospel says that such a person has come. On the one hand, we can do all that we can in this fight. And there's a lot that we can do to not allow ourselves to be enticed.

But ultimately, we need someone to come and rescue us. And that deliverer has come. And his name is Jesus Christ. Right? So when we look at Jesus, he is the ideal deliverer.

Because on the one hand, Jesus knows exactly what it's like to be in our shoes. Just like us, Jesus faced temptation. Not just when he was in the wilderness, but all throughout his life.

From his earliest memories, all the way through his death and resurrection, Jesus was continually assaulted by temptation. And yet, as Hebrews 2, verse 18 says, because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

[24 : 16] So we have a deliverer who can empathize with our condition. He doesn't judge us. He doesn't judge us for our appetites and desires. He doesn't judge us for all of the times that we fail the test and we give in.

He knows what it's like to be us. And yet, unlike us, he never gave in. Unlike us, he was never taken in by temptation.

He never failed that test. Unlike us, Jesus always overcame it. And just as we believe that evil is real, so we believe that Jesus' victory over evil is real.

It is real. It is objective. It exists. It is true. And what we see is that Jesus Christ was able to overcome temptation. And he was willing to go to the cross because there was something vastly more important to him than his comfort or his satisfaction or even his own life.

And that is you. You mattered so much to him. He loves you so much that you were worth more than any of those other things.

[25 : 24] That is part of what enabled him to overcome all of the temptation and the fear that he had to face. And the truth is that when Jesus died and then when he rose from death, that signaled the ultimate defeat of evil.

That signaled, that guaranteed, that one day this victory will be enacted all across the world, in all of our lives. So that temptation will no longer even exist.

There will no longer even be a question of the existence of evil because evil itself will be eradicated. That's what the cross means. So what does all this mean for us?

To kind of draw all this together. Well, in times of such uncertainty and suffering, when there's so much that we're being bombarded by day in and day out, the death and the horrors that are happening around the world, if you try to take all of that on yourself, if you try to take upon yourself the sufferings of the world as you're reading the news and all of that, it's going to end up dulling your senses.

Compassion fatigue is going to set in. You're going to want to care. You know, you read about these horrible things happening and you want to care. But it's as though that part of you that does care, that does respond to tragedy, is simply overwhelmed.

[26 : 49] And it's beginning to shut down. And so your compassion will begin to be replaced with a kind of numbness, a kind of dullness. And that is not because you're a bad person.

It's not because you're not a loving person. It's because you're a human being. And by design, we were never meant to bear the sufferings and the sorrows of the world on our shoulders.

It's simply too much for us. The good news is Jesus Christ can. Jesus Christ can. And that's why Jesus came. Jesus is the only one who is able to take the sufferings and the sorrows of the world entirely on himself.

He's the one who is able to suffer with those who suffer in ways that we never can. He's the one who's able to offer empathy and compassion in ways that we'll never be able to offer.

And he's the one who's able to confront and overcome evil in ways that we can only hope to achieve. And that's actually the promise of Scripture. That one day, because of Jesus' suffering and death, suffering and death themselves will be no more.

[27 : 56] Evil will be no more. And so our part in this battle and struggle against evil and temptation is simply this.

Number one, Lord, lead us not into temptation. Lord, give us the strength to do that.

And then we pray with certainty that Jesus will one day deliver us and deliver this world from evil once and for all. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for this truth and we pray that you would embed it deep in our hearts. We pray that you would encourage us through this petition and remind us of our limits, Lord, and remind us where our true hope lies in our deliverer, Jesus Christ.

And it's in his name that we pray. Amen.