



## Test After Test

*And lead us not into the time of trial (or into temptation)* has become the definitive liturgical preference for what in 'Q', Matthew and Luke is rendered from the Greek as *and please don't subject us to test after test* - and what in the Pesheta (Aramaic) is rendered as *don't let surface things delude us*<sup>1</sup>. The sense of the Greek (peirasmos) can mean temptation, testing, trial, or experiment and in the Aramaic (Nesyuna) has the sense

*of inner vacillation or agitation, diverting us from the purpose of our lives*<sup>2</sup>. In this session we will be thinking about how these different understandings colour our own understanding of what we are praying when we say this prayer.

My first observation would be to ask questions again of what the word *trial* means to us today? Especially if we consider that this phrase follows after the bidding to have our *sins* forgiven. Together, *sins* and *trial* can easily have a condemnatory implication suggesting that we once again focus in on the negative rather than the positive elements of what it means to be living in relationship to a generous and forgiving God. Our individual or collective subconsciousness can take these two concepts and leave an underlying sense of guilt as we imagine ourselves on trial for our misdemeanors. Of course, understood correctly it can also leave us feeling liberated from our mistakes and acquitted of any crimes against the will of God that we may have been guilty of. Nevertheless we cannot underestimate the strength of feelings around issues of self worth and guilt that runs deep in many of us in the modern age. These feelings have traditionally been played out again and again from our childhood in the depiction of the drama of salvation, with lavish and somewhat over zealous descriptive reference to the depth of suffering and pain suffered by Christ on behalf of each of us, and all this through song, liturgy and sermon (and much of it in our own imaginations). Time after time as I have engaged in conversation with many who are 'outside' the church I have been challenged by the statement, *I may not go to church but that doesn't mean that I am a bad person*. Even those 'inside' the church can find themselves making judgements, both of themselves and (more often than not) on others, based on external rather than internal realities as they strive to keep up appearances – *for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*<sup>3</sup>. The consequence of a mind set of condemnation is that we become a judgemental community, often harsh in our criticism of ourselves and of others. This is a far cry from the liberty and abundance of life as promised by Jesus as he proclaimed sight to the blind and freedom for the captives.

The environment that Jesus came into was one of Über-judgement, a society in which degrees of judgement were pronounced based on social or religious status, health, hereditary, or religious rigour. Indeed, it was to this generation, bowed down with overbearing religious requirements that Jesus announced, *Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden – and I will give you rest*.<sup>4</sup> Even a cursory reading of the gospels will show that even Jesus himself was subject to such judgements (ultimately leading to his execution). Indeed it is entirely possible that his own understanding based on his unique experience of his God was shaped by his reaction to his being rejected by his religious and social setting. He embraces those his society has rejected and rejects those who have been honoured – he turns everything upside down, *the exalted are humbled and the humble are exalted*!<sup>5</sup> This enraged those in authority and amused and enthralled those who were under their authority. Jesus is saying that God alone is the judge and that ultimately his judgement is one based on abundant grace to those who have been marginalised and rejected. This is harsh judgement to those who believe they have achieved all that is necessary for their acceptance but pure joy to

<sup>1</sup> See Klotz, Prayers of the Cosmos pg 35

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 16.7

<sup>4</sup> The word translated *heavy-laden* denotes *to load one with a burden (of rites and unwarranted precepts)* see Strong's Enhanced Lexicon.

<sup>5</sup> See Luke 14.11, Matthew 23.12

those who have never been able to 'meet the mark'. This philosophy caused problems for the first Christians since it seemed to be so liberal and free – indeed Paul himself is careful to make it clear that such abundance of Grace is not a licence to go on to sin all the more!

It is when we understand this emphasis that we can also understand why this phrase might better be rendered as *and please don't subject us to test after test*. This is a plea for release from moral obligation and harsh judgement in order to be acceptable. It was common for the prophets and the psalmist to ask God to test them to see if their hearts and minds were right before him – but this also has to be balanced by the acceptance that God is also a refuge and one in whom we can find rest and peace. If the measuring mentality becomes the dominant force then we can quickly be worn down and lose heart. In the context of this prayer this phrase follows the request to be free of debt and to free others from indebtedness. It is then emphasised by making a plea for the religiosity of life to be lifted and for a spirit of liberation to be poured out. Whilst only Matthew has the following phrase *but deliver us from evil* it is included in the liturgical prayer used in our weekly worship. The sense of this is in the same vein as *and please don't subject us to test after test* as it asks instead that the 'evil' of self condemnation or the judgement of others be lifted from us. In the Aramaic the sense is one of *don't let surface things delude us, but free us from what holds us back (from our true purpose)*.<sup>6</sup> If we understand these phrases to mean these things we ourselves will be delivered from the 'evil' of self condemnation and low self esteem and instead, we will rise to the challenge of living the transformed life that Jesus calls us to. My purpose is to believe enough in the reality of God's love and acceptance of me that it inevitably overflows from me to others in the same way – as you have received, freely give<sup>7</sup> is the commission that Jesus gives to his disciples. This is an embarrassment of riches that only a truly liberated people can draw on – we must be wary of becoming less generous than God in our Scrooge-like mentality – the doors of the sheepfold are open wide and all are welcomed in.

## Conclusions?

So, what have we learned from the past few weeks of investigating this most well known prayer? In the first instance we have learned that for Jesus to name God as *Abba* was something unconventional and shocking at the time. It was not so much a gender reference as in defining God as *Father* (a male parent), rather it was a declaration that God is intimate and not distant, as a parent is to a child so God is to us. Today the same response would be provoked if we were to begin our prayer with *Dear Mother* since most would be shocked by addressing God as such, and yet we have to remember that 'God' has no gender, it is only that in our language we have to make reference to God in personal terms and 'Father' has traditionally been the reference. By defining God (Yahweh) as *Abba*, Jesus was reframing the peoples understanding and experience of God as a cosmic parent intimately engaged with humanity, rather than a distant and ethereal divine power sitting outside of human experience pronouncing judgement and making laws. "If you have seen me you have seen the Father"<sup>8</sup>

Also, we have seen that when we pray *Your kingdom come, on earth as in heaven* we are not setting up some kind of dichotomy between heaven and earth, as if heaven were the perfect prototype of earth, which is a poor reflection of heaven – that would be platonic dualism. Instead, Jesus emphasises the kingdom, or reign and rule, of God right here, right now on earth – in our very lives. Once again Jesus is dragging God down to earth in order that we do not make the mistake of thinking that we are somehow distant from God and we have to work our way back to 'him'. Rather Jesus is making a declaration, *Create your reign of unity now, through our fiery hearts and willing hands*<sup>9</sup>. We are making the declaration that the rule of God, the kingdom, is enacted through each

<sup>6</sup> See Klotz, Prayers of the Cosmos pg 34

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 10.8

<sup>8</sup> John 14.9

<sup>9</sup> Douglas-Klotz, Prayers of the Cosmos – see notes from week 02

of us become the kingdom is within us – we are the kingdom when we understand ourselves as being united in Christ. This is a prayer that calls us to action.

We have learned that as we ask for our daily bread we are making a faith statement about living in the now. We need not be anxious for tomorrow for any amount of fretting about the future will not add anything to our lives (quite the opposite). As we pray *Give us this day our daily bread* we are in fact saying to God, *all I need is all that I need for this very day in your care*, once again Jesus is compelling us to live in the here and now. I recently came across the following words in my journal;

2008 Sunday, 28 December

Fettered by the phantom chains of the past and fearful of the unknown future we fail to find ourselves in the present moment - the eternal now. Instead we falter between that which was and can never be again and that which will be although we know not what. Meanwhile we loose out on the promise of our eternal life lived in this very moment. This is what prompts Jesus to warn against the futility of being caught up in an anxious preoccupation with the future (or indeed the past for in a sense they are the same thing) stating that to do so can not add anything to our lives (and by implication can only take away - and what we lose is the opportunity to live fully in the now). “And this is eternal life - to know God”<sup>10</sup> *NOW*.

We have seen that forgiveness is not so much about an obsession with moral correctness and our own wickedness but rather it is about indebtedness – may we be debt free as we allow others to free of debt to us. Forgiveness becomes the undoing of all that has entangled us in our lives of faltering humanity. There is no sense in which we dismiss the seriousness of sin but neither do we focus unnecessarily on it. Our humanness will inevitably mean that we make mistakes and get things screwed up – forgiveness is that force of God’s love that is able to disentangle us patiently from our failings, from our stubbornness and anger, our lust and our selfishness, restoring us to a debt free life in which we no longer have to fear God. We will truly understand that whilst the wages of sin may well be the deep debt of death, the free gift of our prodigal and benevolent God is the free gift of a debt free life in the eternal now.<sup>11</sup>

I hope that we have discovered that this ancient and so well known prayer may yet have some secrets to unfold to us in our own creative prayer lives, helping us to live in the great grace of our God – right here, right now.

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<sup>10</sup> John 17.3

<sup>11</sup> My take on Romans 6.23