



February 17, 2001

### Prayer of the Day

Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

### Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

(15) The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. {16} And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; {17} but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die...." {3:1} Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" {2} The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; {3} but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" {4} But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; {5} for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." {6} So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. {7} Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

1. *the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal*: The serpent was not a supernatural creature, but a wild animal. "...the serpent which speaks here is no other than the animal speaking in its animality, the mother of all snakes as Eve is the mother of all men." [1] The serpent is not a symbol or metaphor of evil, but of human desire. [2] Paul was right when he wrote: "I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me (Romans 7:7-11)." Temptation arises when "the law," God's will, excites our desire for what the law denies us. [3] No supernatural agency is necessary. Human nature created in the image of God is enough.

5. *you will be like God*: In the P account of creation "man" was created in the image and likeness of God. He was already "like" God in many ways. This being "like God" involved a relationship to the rest of the creation proper only to the creator.

6. *good and evil*: Merism is a figure of speech in which the first or last of a series, or a pair of opposites indicate the totality of the subject under consideration, e.g. "from A to Z." "Good and evil" describes the relationship of the creator to the creation. [4]

### Psalm 32

(1) Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. {2} Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. {3} While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. {4} For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah {5} Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah {6} Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. {7} You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah {8} I will instruct you and teach you the

way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. {9} Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you. {10} Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD. {11} Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart

The theme of the Psalm is the great relief and joy of forgiveness. It is the Good News that, in fact, God has provided for our forgiveness. Therefore we rejoice and shout for joy. The Psalm is spoken by the congregation in worship: phrases like you are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance, are more than pious vacuity, they express our dependence of God's grace. By speaking it aloud and in unison we acknowledge God's grace, and place ourselves under its protection. Perhaps the Psalm could be read by responsively with verses 1-2 and 8-11 are read by a lector, while verses 3-7 are read by the congregation, in order to emphasize our recognition of our need, and our joy in response to God's goodness.

### **Romans 5:12-19**

(12) Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned-- {13} sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. {14} Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. {15} But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. {16} And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. {17} If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. {18} Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. {19} For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

*12. sin came into the world through one man:* Paul does not attribute the entrance of sin into the world to the devil or Satan or the serpent. It entered the world through one man. Who? Adam, the founder of our race! Sin is our business! We, in Adam, are responsible for it. To seek to blame others, the serpent, the devil, Satan is to deny our guilt, and to deny our guilt makes our confession trivial, and that in turn, deprives God's forgiveness of its wonder and magnificence.

Adam's sin brought death into the world, and many died because of his sin. God's grace has come into the world through Christ, and many have been made righteous by that grace. We have made no contribution to this except as we are the heirs of Adam's guilt as our susceptibility to death shows. The only new thing is the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man Jesus Christ.

### **Matthew 4:1-11**

(1) Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. {2} He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. {3} The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." {4} But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" {5} Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, {6} saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" {7} Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" {8} Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; {9} and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." {10} Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" {11} Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

*1. to be tempted by the devil:* Between the Testaments Satan developed from God's prosecuting attorney into the agent of cosmic evil. It is sometimes difficult to know which Satan we are dealing with. The term "devil" doesn't help much, since it is a generic term for a supernatural being. In this story the devil, Satan (verse 10), performs the classic role of the tempter, as, for example, Satan does in Job. Even the last temptation, to worship Satan, can be adequately explained on the basis of the Old Testament persona of the

tempter.

2. *He fasted*: Presumably fasting makes the temptations more severe.

3. *If you are the Son of God*: It is not a question of whether Jesus is the Son of God. Rather it is that since Jesus is the Son of God, therefore he turns stones to bread, to fly, and to rule the world. The tests that occur parallel the temptations of Eve: "good for food," "a delight to the eyes," "desired to make one wise."

4: Jesus relies on the words of his Father to defend his honor. The quotation is Deuteronomy 8:3: "He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."

6: The devil offers a quotation: Psalm 91:10-12: "Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."

7: The quotation is Deuteronomy 6:16: "...because the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the LORD your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth. Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah."

8. *a very high mountain*: In Matthew the important things in Jesus' life happen on mountains. Last week Jesus was on a high mountain where he was transfigured. His great sermon is preached on a mountain. After the resurrection his disciples go to the mountain in Galilee where Jesus said he would meet them.

10: The quotation is Deuteronomy 6:13: "The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear."

11: In Matthew Jesus is tempted again in 16:23 and 26:36-46. Luke 4:13: "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. In Luke Satan does not appear again until he enters Judas" (22:3-6).

In this story Jesus is tested by God's prosecutor, Satan. The point of the test is obscure. It cannot be to determine whether Jesus is "worthy." He is God's Son. God has said so. By being tested Jesus shows that he is like other human beings. It is to assure human beings that Jesus is really like them, a reversal of the attempt on the part of the first man and woman to be "like" God. [5] By withstanding the tests, and not succumbing to them, he shows himself truly to be "like" God. See Hebrews 4:15.

## Reflection

The lessons deal with sin and guilt and forgiveness. The first lesson provides the basis for that topic by setting the origin of sin in the beginning of the creation. The other lessons deal with aspects of the subject: the Psalm speaks of forgiveness, the second lesson contrasts the coming of sin and the coming of life, and the Gospel shows us Jesus who was tested and resisted.

Most of the sermons on the Gospel that I have preached or heard preached over the years have presented the temptations of Jesus as archetypes of the temptations we experience: the temptation to satisfy personal needs, the temptation to perform miracles, the temptation to seek power. While they may have something to do with that, they are first and foremost temptations offered to our Lord, submission to which would have destroyed his mission. To focus on their application to my life or yours is seriously to trivialize them. What we see is the earthly side of a heavenly event. God himself is being tested. The possibility exists that God could succumb to the temptation, and if God did all would be lost. Honor, righteousness, love and mercy would become counterfeit. Hope, joy, forgiveness, redemption and reconciliation would become bleak parodies. The Gospel, the good news, would become no news at all.

We need to recognize not only that our salvation depends solely on God's grace, but also that the loss of that grace would be catastrophic. If Jesus were to have accepted any one of the temptations the course of salvation would have been fundamentally changed. We would still have to deal with God's righteous judgment, but the God who judges would also be the God whose lapse abolished grace. Such a possibility is horrible beyond words. But God in Christ was not tempted, he was faithful to his own being; he has been tested as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15).

In the first lesson, the second lesson and the Gospel there appears to be the notion that temptation comes

to us by a agency apart from and in opposition to God. However, a close examination of the passages makes it clear that while testing comes from the outside, temptation come from within ourselves. God provides the opportunity, we do the rest. Yet though we are tempted and succumb, God's grace provides the way of salvation. This is the Good News for the day, beside which all other news, though it may be more pleasing, or interesting, is trivial.

The three temptations: turn stones into bread (4:3); jump off the Temple (4:6); worship Satan (4:9) demonstrate three kinds of control: material, spiritual and civil. They correspond to three evaluations; 1) those who have material resources are blessed by God; 2) those who spiritual powers are blessed by God; 3) those who have nationalistic power are blessed by God. These, in turn, correspond to three human-divine bargains: 1) I will worship you if you make me rich; 2) I will worship you if you endow me with magic; 3) I will worship you if you give me political power.

Jesus dismisses the temptations by references to Deuteronomy. One does not live by bread alone (Deuteronomy 8:3); Do not put the Lord your God to the test (6:16); Worship the Lord your God (6:13). They require a change in orientation: material possessions, spiritual power, worldly authority are impious. Wisdom rather than material or spiritual power; worship rather than rule are the true gifts.

“Matthew wants to say that Jesus is the son of God by being obedient. Jesus is the Son of God by keeping the basic commandment of the love of God. This understanding of sonship with God opens up a perspective for human existence: The Son of God lives in an exemplary way from God's word alone and obeys God alone. One might say that the entire Gospel of Matthew unfolds what this sentence means for the disciples. Then it also is not by accident that Jesus quotes the scripture three times before he begins at all with his own proclamation.” [6]

## Hymns [7]

*With One Voice* (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

228/9 --E--A Mighty Fortress  
470 --E--Praise and Thanks  
99 --D--O Lord, throughout  
450 --D--Who Trusts in

372 --I--In Adam We  
792s --P--Thy Holy Wings (741v)  
657v --G--The Glory of These  
738s, 211, 484, 88

## Prayers of the People [8]

P or A: Refresh us, Good Shepherd, as we come to you praying "Hear us, O God, and responding, "Your mercy is great."

A: That all theologians and pastors, teachers and bishops, would be open to your Word. Give us all teachable moments when we learn more deeply who you are and what we are to be, hear us, O God, Your mercy is great.

A: Select leaders of unexpected strength and courage to lead the nations to peace. Teach our leaders to depend on you and to know your wisdom. Hear us, O God, Your mercy is great.

A: That we all may live in the light, producing fruit in our life because of your light. Give us courage to expose the works of darkness. Let Christ shine among us. Hear us, O God, Your mercy is great.

A: You are compassionate to those in need. Bring healing to our sick and grieving that the work of God may be revealed in them, especially we remember \_\_\_\_\_. Hear us, O God, Your mercy is great.

A: Help us to honour your prophets, gracious God. May we never close our ears and our hearts to them or any other witness of your Word. Hear us, O God, Your mercy is great.

P: Heal our blindness and bring us light. We ask for all these things and whatever else you may see that we need in the name of Jesus, the light of all. Amen.

Or [9]

*Presider or deacon*

In the midst of the waters of creation, God formed the dust of our being. Let us pray for all created matter, for all human beings made in the image of God, and especially for those preparing for baptism.

*Deacon or other leader*

For the holy catholic church throughout the world, sharing the death and resurrection of Christ.

For N our bishop, for presbyters and deacons and all who minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.

For NN our catechumen(s) and NN their sponsors(s).

For all the peoples of the earth who live in the garden of creation.

For all who are tempted, oppressed, afflicted, or in need.

For the dying and the dead.

For our families, friends, and companions, and for all those we love.

*Presider*

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, who made us in your image, who lifts us and holds us high, who gathers us in loving arms. Hear our prayers for all peoples. Receive sons and daughters into your family, wash them in the waters of new life, and feed them with your bread and wine. Glory to you for ever and ever.

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**Notes**

[1] J. Hempel, "Gott, Mensch und Tier im Alten Testament," *ZSTh* 9(1932)229.

[2] In Revelation 12:9 the serpent is called "that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (see also 20:9). This is an expression of the dualistic world view of the book. I places the cause of sin outside of the human being in a supernatural entity with whom God is in conflict.

This is not what Genesis understands the serpent to be. Sin arose from the human desire to be "like God."

The serpent expresses what is already in the minds of Adam and Eve.

[3] James 1:13-14.

[4] Chris Haslam, *Comments on the Revised Common Lectionary for The First Sunday in Lent*.

<http://www.montreal.anglican.org/comment/nextweek.htm>, February 9, 1999.

[5] The identity and nature of *Satan* in the Bible is difficult. I believe it is best to understand this being as he is presented in Job 1:6-12, God's tester of his people, rather than as a supernatural creature opposed to God. There are references to such a being, and even an identification of Satan with God's metaphysical enemy in Revelation. Still, in the rest of the New Testament, Satan can be understood as a being who acts for God to test the righteousness of the people. "Our ancient enemy" is not necessarily also God's enemy.

[6] Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989, p. 190.

[7] <http://www.worship.on.ca/text/rcla9899.txt>

[8] [http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter\\_a2.txt](http://www.worship.on.ca/text/inter_a2.txt)

[9] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>