

# “When We Are Tested

a sermon by

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Text: “And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one” (Matthew 6:13).

It was King David who once said: “There is but one step between me and death.”

Howard Edington, who for a number of years was minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Orlando, once told of the sudden death of his son who was killed in an automobile accident in Orlando. It was December 21<sup>st</sup> when Dr. Edington and his wife were wakened during the middle of the night by a telephone call. The voice on the phone said, “There are Orlando policemen at your door, please let them in.” When they opened the door to allow the policemen into their house, they were told that their twenty-two year old son, John David, had died that night in an automobile accident, when he lost control of his car in the middle of a violent rainstorm and crashed into a tree.

## I.

One of the most puzzling verses in all of the New Testament is found in the middle of the Lord's Prayer. In the sixth petition of the prayer that Jesus taught to his disciples we find these words: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Many people have struggled with these words. Do we really believe that God leads us into temptation?

Scholars have struggled to understand what Jesus meant with these words. Of course, the Lord's Prayer does not mean that God seduces people into sin. The author of the Book of James states this emphatically when he writes, "No one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God;' for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one" (James 1:13). That is why the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is more accurate in its rendering of this verse when it says, "And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13).

Now, all of us are familiar with "trials." When the Apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Corinth, speaks of the "trials which befell me," or when Peter writes of being "put to grief in manifold trials," or when in the Book of Revelation God promises "I...will keep you from the hour of trouble," we know what is meant.

That is what we are talking about this morning: difficulties, struggles, and times of testing. Jesus prayed that prayer: "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me." That is a prayer that springs from so many hearts: parents facing the loss of a child, a husband facing the loss of a wife, a person facing some terrible illness, someone going through a painful divorce. This is the prayer that springs from the heart of every one of us. "Spare us, we pray, from these terrible trials that shake our very souls, but, if that is not possible, deliver us from evil."

One of the clear truths of the Bible is that people are put to the test. Abraham is told to sacrifice his son, Isaac, (Genesis 22); the people of Israel are forced to wander in the wilderness for forty years (Exodus 16:4); Job is put to the test by God to see if his faith is strong. Most of us can sail a boat if the breeze is mild, but our skills as a sailor are more likely demonstrated when the gales of a storm blow.

So all of us can pray: "Let us not fail in the time of testing." But what are the conditions within ourselves that must be fulfilled if that prayer is to be answered?

## II.

For one thing, we ought never to think of a time of trial or testing as a tragedy alone. Often when we are faced with a difficult situation in our lives, we are tempted to believe that an earthquake is overwhelming us. It seems so overwhelming and beyond our control. When we imagine a trial in such a fatalistic way, we are tempted to grow cynical and lose all faith in such a diabolical world. Often we fall back on self-pity and feel sorry for ourselves. We grow hard and try to grit our teeth and bear it. These reactions are natural, of course. But we should not be content with them.

One of the striking things about the Bible is that from beginning to end it paints a very different picture of the meaning of disaster. To be sure the image of the earthquake is there: “Therefore we will not fear,” writes the Psalmist, “though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.” But then he goes on to say, “the Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

So women and men have met catastrophes with faith and courage. But why they were able to do so is best explained in terms of other metaphors that symbolized what they thought disaster really meant.

“A refiner’s fire”--that is a common figure of speech in the Bible. When trouble comes, it says, it can separate the gold in us from the alloy, bringing out the best and destroying the worst.” “Tribulation”-- that is another term one finds in Scripture. It means “threshing.” It is the process by which the grain is separated from the chaff on a threshing floor. Trials and testing do that. They separate the best in us from the worst. “Chastening”--that is another way the Bible speaks of testing. The Book of Proverbs says, “Whom the Lord loves, he chastens.” That is to say, sometimes the difficulties we face provide great opportunity for learning the lesson of life we deeply need to learn. Sir Humphrey Davy, a great scientist, once said, “the most important of my discoveries have been suggested to me by my failures.”

So, gold does come from a refiner’s fire, wheat from a threshing floor, and wisdom comes from chastening. To see times of trial as positive possibilities in our lives at least opens the possibility of the Lord’s Prayer being answered in us: “Grant that we fail not in the time of trial, but deliver us from evil.”

### III.

Then, too, a second factor in overcoming these times of trial is to remind ourselves of those individuals who have gone before us. In the New Testament the Book of Hebrews was written just as the persecution of the Christians was getting underway. They had not yet “resisted unto blood,” the writer said, but the prospect of it was close at hand and the writer did not want the church to fail. To that end, he argued earnestly not only the resources of the faith, he did something else. In the magnificent Eleventh Chapter of Hebrews he marshals out the great heroes of the faith and parades them in his imagination before those who were being tested: Abel and Abraham, Moses and Gideon, Samuel and David. The writer of Hebrews imagined that these people being tested were running a race in one of the great Amphitheaters of the Roman Empire and in the grandstands watching was this “cloud of witnesses.” They were there to encourage, to hearten, to support, and to ensure that the race was won.

I think all of us need heroes--people whom we have known in our lives who encouraged us, who persevered in difficult times. One of silent witnesses in this sanctuary are the names of individuals place on plaques on the pews and walls, or on the stained glass windows. These too are part of a “great cloud of witnesses” that have gone before us: Mrs. Stonewall Jackson, who after the death of her husband remained in Charlotte as one of the most respected citizens of our

city; Walter W. Moore, the first President of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond; Robert Hall Morrison, the first minister of this church and the first President of Davidson College. How often these men and women must have prayed, "Spare me, O God, from the time of testing, but deliver me from evil."

#### IV.

All of this, however, leads us to this final matter. When we are tested, we have the opportunity to dig deep into the divine resources of the Eternal God that do not fail us even in the deepest of waters.

Sometimes I feel sadness for those who have never known what a vital faith is all about. So often when an emergency comes, there is no warning, no real time to get ready. Someone has observed that life is a series of ambushes. Trouble commonly does not evolve by slow gradations. It rather leaps on us and when that happens, there is so little time to get ready. One has to be ready. I think of Howard and Trish Edington and that phone call on a December evening. There really wasn't any time to get ready for the call that tells you a child has died.

During World War II when the Nazis took over Holland, one of the first cases of resistance that they met was an official at The Hague. The Nazis commanded him to inquire of any person applying for a position whether the applicant had any Jewish ancestry, and this official called his staff together and said, "As a confessing Christian and as a Dutchman I cannot ask anyone this question. It is against the deepest foundation of our faith in Jesus Christ, in whom all men are equal, to prefer one person to another because of a certain race or nationality." So he stood he ground and they sent him to a concentration camp. When the time of testing came, he was ready.

So it was with Jesus. When he went into the Garden of Gethsemane, there was no real time to learn to pray. But he had prayed all his life and he was ready.

So he prayed the prayer he had taught his disciples: "If it is possible spare me this time of test--but if not, deliver me from evil.  
Amen