

REV'D DR NICK GRIFFIN

It's exam results time and I want to know – what was the worst exam experience of your life? What was the toughest test you ever went through?

For me, I was having a viva – an oral exam. It wasn't the exam it was the waiting. I was 2.5 hours early and where I thought I was going to be in this really grand room, it was just a side room in a library and the exam board didn't know where it was supposed to be. Then the examiners were late – but do I leave...when they were 15 minutes late I decided to go to reception only to see these three professors step out of a lift....

We've been working through a series on the Lords' prayer – last week we looked at the line on 'forgive us our sins, as we forgive' as God calls us into a real honest relationship with him allowing him to be our judge and salvation that grants great freedom and peace.

'Lead us not into temptation'

This is a tricky little phrase. In 2017, the pope called for a fresh translation of the Lord's prayer – to “do not let us fall into temptation”. It's subtle but he is concerned that the traditional version seems that God effectively sets people up to fail – like inducing them to sin. Pope Francis is quoted as saying 'The Father does not lead us to sin to watch us fall – that is the role of the devil – the Father picks us up when we're down'. The problem here is that the word 'temptation' has only come to mean something negative – when the root of the word really refers to 'test'. Now we're in a different game - does God tempt people and does God test people are different questions aren't they? If we think back through our bible, can you think of temptations that God puts in people's way? I cannot. Why? When you tempt someone, you want someone to fall for it. When I try to get my dog to eat her worm medicine – I know it says pork flavour – she's not buying it. She is not tempted by pork flavoured chalky tablets – she wants cheese. Cheddar Cheese. That is the beginning of her temptation and I know it. And I know she can't resist the cheese, so I get her to take her medicine! I am her tempter. It is true sometimes that those in authority over us want us to fail. You have had schoolteachers who want to catch you out, or your driving test examiner that wants to find mistakes or a perfectionist parent who just won't let something go. One of my best friends tells of her joy at receiving an A for a paper, only for the teacher who was handing them out to go actually, it's more of a B+. Petty. And sometimes we can project that onto God like he is a mean teacher or petty parent.

No. Not today friends. My God is for you, not against you. The gospel is good news. Not bad news. God is for you, he is not a petty parent, but a good, good father. And this Father you pray to, wants you to flourish. How does the Father help us to flourish? Christians aren't like veal cows – kept

still and wrapped up to keep us soft and fleshy – nope – we’re sent out into battle. A good father doesn’t grow their child by wrapping them up in cotton wool and keeping them in a cellar – instead they give them opportunities to grow. Us Christians - we’ve got stuff to do. And as we go, we’re going to get tested – there is a risk – we might fail – there is a risk we might grow and change. This prayer is the most common one you probably pray – protect me from failing in the face of tests ahead. When we look forward to the Garden of Gethsemane it’s what Jesus prays – can you spare me this cup Lord? Keep me from this testing? Praise God that Jesus was not spared – that his work brought us home – what test is the Lord calling you to?

‘But deliver us from evil’

Our tradition always says evil – but the original Greek actually is closer to ‘evil one’. That is protect and save me from the evil one. The first question that is normally asked on an Alpha course, is ‘if God is good, why is there evil?’ It’s seen as a sort of check mate question, like ha ha! I have you now! You do-gooder Christians have never thought of this before!

The good news is that yes, a lot of people a lot cleverer-er than you and I have thought about this question a lot and even better news is that some of these thoughts can be helpful. But, the truth is that when we talk about temptation, when we talk about struggling with evil with sin, when we talk about actual real suffering – this is not some abstract discussion. When you do a science experiment you try and remove all ‘confounding variables’, that is be able to focus on the ‘one thing’ that you are trying to measure and nothing else. Sometimes theologians try that approach too - but this stuff doesn’t belong just in a laboratory or a classroom. Because believe me when I say that the brightest and most theologically informed people do not make the holiest people – you can have all the right answers on paper, but Christianity is lived, not just thought out in the head. You yourself face temptation, you, my friends face the challenge of evil; sometimes evil that you create, sometimes evil that you confront. The scriptures don’t spend a lot of time speculating on the origin of evil or where it comes or why but how to deal with it.

Fundamentally dealing with the brokenness and evil in the world doesn’t happen on our own. We read the news and can feel like – how can all this take place – so much weight – and it can weigh us down. In my experience churches go two ways here, some churches get obsessed with worrying about issues and constantly have a shopping list of bad stuff they’re worried about. Or other churches get all macho, watched too many movies and try to find the devil under every doily, and demons behind every door. The evil one is happy with both distracting worrying spirit that paralyses and the attention given to darkness. Because it’s that first word – deliver, deliver us that is the key bit. For Christians, Evil is not confronted in the human mind – it’s not like in the movies where you’ve got big jets of energy coming out of hands but in the space of prayer. It’s given over to

God – deliver us from the evil one – from the fiery darts that drag us down and taunt, from the temptations that beset every side. In prayer, we pour ourselves out to God, recognise that dependence on him, that by ourselves in testing and in confrontation we will fall, but in prayer resting on the hands of God, I can be delivered, hope, courage, trust and love can flourish beyond all evil.

One small example, tiny in the world. I was in a lecture with the guy that helps churches get planted across the country – which means dealing with planning permission, heritage rules, building suppliers and licenses. Ugh. He said, every project gets stuck at some point but God is always leading us forward in prayer – we're reminded -we need to pray. And when we do. Stuff happens. Licenses are granted, bricks appear, heritage agencies get less cross about pews.

One last thing. The word on everybody's lips now is anxiety. I'm not here talking about clinically diagnosed anxiety – that needs support – get it. I'm instead talking about FOMO – fear of missing out. I'm talking about that question that nags at the back of the mind...what if...I don't want to do this because, what if I fail, if I choose this I won't be able to...if I love this one is there someone better, if I go to this should I be doing something else....Netflix is the best example – how many times have you not watched something on Netflix because you can't decide – so you just scroll – there might be something better. There might be a better opportunity, there might be a better person, a better time...maybe maybe maybe. And what it causes is paralysis because there is never certainty about what will be next. We live in difficult times. We cannot see the future. But God is not calling you to 'live your best Instagram life' – he is saying when that testing comes, when that challenge of the evil one comes, it's time to stand not scroll, it's time to fight not fly, it's time to go. And why? Because he will deliver you.

Deliver us from evil Lord. Whatever form it might take.