

## **‘Lead Us Not Into Temptation’ (Matthew 6:13)**

Lionel Windsor, Sydney, Australia

Biblical Theology Briefing

14 September 2005

As part of a series on the Lord’s Prayer, I was charged with preaching a sermon on this line: ‘Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One’ (Matthew 6:13). In Matthew, the Lord’s Prayer occurs in the midst of Jesus’ teaching about prayer (6:5-15) which in turn is part of Jesus’ famous ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (Matthew 5-7). Even a brief glance at the Sermon on the Mount reveals that Old Testament forms a significant part of the background for Jesus’ discourse (5:12, 17, 21, 27, etc.).

Indeed, the whole Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham (1:1), as the one who fulfils Old Testament categories and expectations.<sup>1</sup> At some points, Jesus recapitulates significant events in Israel’s history—e.g. the Exodus (2:15) and the exile and return (2:17). Jesus is also depicted as succeeding where Israel failed—e.g. the temptation in the wilderness (4:1-11) and the restoration of the far reaches of the promised land overrun by Gentiles (4:15, cf. Isa 9:1). When, in 5:1-2, Jesus sits and begins to teach his disciples on ‘the mountain’, there are strong echoes of the two great mountains of Old Testament revelation: the historical Sinai (e.g. Exo 19:3) and the eschatological Zion (e.g. Isa 2:3). It soon becomes apparent that in this ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (5:1-7:29), Jesus is forming his disciples into a new eschatological people. The Sermon’s unifying theme is ‘the kingdom of heaven’, a phrase which occurs at significant points in the Sermon (5:3, 10, 17; 6:10, 33; 7:12, 21-23; cf. 4:17, 23).<sup>2</sup> The Sermon ‘provides ethical guidelines for life in the kingdom, but does so within an explanation of the place of the contemporary setting within redemption history and Jesus’ relation to the OT.’<sup>3</sup> Hence the identification of Old Testament background, and the nature in which Jesus’ disciples are to ‘fulfil’ the Old Testament, are primary interpretive questions for the Sermon on the Mount and its constituent parts.

The primary difference between the eschatological ‘kingdom of heaven’ and the Old Testament kingdom of Israel is the nature of the relationship between God and his people. ‘[T]he emphasis in the Gospels on God as “Father” rests directly upon the announcement of the eschatological salvation that brings about this new relationship between God and his people. The expression “Father in heaven” is remarkable in that it combines the personal, or immanent, element of fatherhood with the transcendental element of God’s otherness, “in heaven.”’<sup>4</sup> Hence the Lord’s Prayer, which begins, ‘Our Father in Heaven’ (6:9), is the prayer of the new people of God—a people who are the fulfilment of the expectations of the Old Testament people of Israel but who go far beyond Old Testament Israel in their relationship to God as both universal Lord and personal Father.

---

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, ‘Matthew’, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Vol. 8* (ed. Frank E. Gæbelein; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 1-599 (28-29).

<sup>2</sup> Carson, ‘Matthew’, 127-28.

<sup>3</sup> Carson, ‘Matthew’, 128.

<sup>4</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (Word Biblical Commentary 33A; Dallas: Word, 1993), 101.

## Inadequate trails

Suggestions that I received from others about how to apply the text, ‘Lead us not into temptation’ were mainly along the lines of advice about avoiding various temptations (e.g. install Internet blocking software to avoid Internet pornography). Unfortunately, this advice by itself wasn’t very helpful given that Matthew 6:13 is found in a *prayer* rather than in a piece of ethical exhortation. It’s about asking *God* to not lead you into temptation—not about how to avoid temptation yourself *per se*.

Furthermore, when people in our society (Sydney) use the word ‘temptation’, they’re generally thinking about relatively trivial things. There’s the game-show ‘temptation’ that tempts contestants with various materialistic prizes like internet fridges and Volvos. ‘Temptation’ is also used of things like food and sex. But if this is what ‘temptation’ is all about, then it doesn’t seem important enough to explain why ‘lead us not into temptation’ is the sole negative request in the Lord’s Prayer, up there alongside such cosmic and theological concerns as ‘your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ and ‘forgive us our sins’.

What is ‘temptation’ anyway? Carson comments that the word for ‘temptation’ (*peirasmos*) almost always outside the NT means ‘testing’ rather than ‘temptation’.<sup>5</sup> He goes on to suggest that in the light of James 1:13-14, which says that God cannot ‘tempt’ anyone or be ‘tempted’ himself (assuming that the word here means ‘tempt’ and not ‘test’), it is hard to see that *peirasmos* means ‘temptation’ in Matthew 6:13, for then it would be asking God not to do something that is impossible for him to do anyway. On the other hand, Carson continues, if the word means ‘testing’ there is another problem, because the Bible promises that we will face testings of various kinds and we should consider them pure joy (James 1:2). Carson suggests that we read it more expansively, ‘trial or temptation that results in fall’, and that we simply run with the tension between asking God to spare us testing but rejoicing when such testing comes anyway.

A large part of the problem, of course, is that we are dealing with a Greek word (*peirasmos*) that has a different semantic range to any of our English equivalents (e.g. ‘trial’, ‘test’, ‘temptation’). In answer to the question, ‘What does *peirasmos* mean?’ we *could* answer that sometimes it comes close to the English words ‘trial’ and ‘test’ (e.g. James 1:2, 12) and sometimes it has the same meaning as the English word ‘tempt’ (e.g. James 1:13-14). Or, we could answer, it means both. Or we could answer that it is ambiguous. However, in this case there is a better way. We don’t have to import our own preconceived notions about what ‘temptation’ or even ‘testing’ might mean from the English usage of these words. Instead, we can look at what the Bible itself says about the word *peirasmos*. Who was ‘tested / tempted’ in the Old Testament, by whom, how, where, when and why?

## Understanding the Old Testament Background

I began with a word study on the word *peirasmos* as it appears throughout the Bible.<sup>6</sup> Of course, it’s important to realise that word studies by themselves can be misleading.

---

<sup>5</sup> Carson, ‘Matthew’, 173-74.

<sup>6</sup> Using the computer program Bibleworks, I performed a search on all words with roots beginning with the letters *peira* in the LXX (Greek Old Testament) and in New Testament. I confirmed this with a search on the equivalent Hebrew root N-S-H in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament, and cross-checked with the article by J. I. Packer, ‘Temptation’ in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (ed. J. D. Douglas; Leicester: IVP, 1980), 1532-33.

This is because there is never a perfect overlap between a word and a concept. A word study can fail to pick up other words associated with the same concept, and can pick up usages of the word that are extraneous to the concept under investigation. The main way to guard against this is to look at the context of every instance of the word to check out how it is being used; and to follow up on other words that consistently appear in these contexts.

Nevertheless, in this case there seemed to be a very close relationship between the word *peirasmōs* and the concept of ‘testing’. This is mainly because the word *peirasmōs* in the Old Testament is most commonly the name of a *place*, ‘Massah’. This place is named in Exodus 17:7. ‘Massah’ is simply the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word *peirasmōs*; it seems to be derived from the piel feminine singular participle of *nasah*, to test or ‘put to the test’, hence ‘place of putting to the test’. The Greek verb equivalent is *peirazō*. Although in later references the name has the definite article (e.g. Deut 6:16, 9:22, Psa 94:8) when originally introduced it has no article (Exo 17:7; as here in Matt 6:13).

‘Massah’ was a place named after an event. In my sermon, I explained this by reference to a few place names in Australia. When Captain James Cook was exploring the East Coast of Australia in the 1700’s, his boat the Endeavour struck a reef, and nearly sank. He wasn’t a very happy sailor at the time. The first thing next morning he looked out and saw a Cape. He called it ‘Cape Tribulation’. Behind it was a mountain. He called it ‘Mount Sorrow’. Up the coast, the place where they finally rested for repairs was called ‘Weary Bay’. They’re all places with stories attached to them, and ‘Massah’ is the same. In the OT, Massah was the paradigmatic place where Israel’s relationship with God was fractured and God became somewhat distant from them, despite his covenantal commitment just recently demonstrated in their deliverance from Egypt.

In Exodus 14-15, God had saved the nation of Israel from slavery in Egypt, taking them through the Red Sea into the wilderness of Sin. This great event is summed up in the word *rhuomai*, ‘to deliver’ (cf Matt 6:13, ‘deliver us from the evil one’):

*Exodus 14:30 Thus the LORD delivered (errusato) Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.<sup>31</sup> Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.*

But no sooner had God delivered Israel from the Egyptians, then they began to grumble and complain against God their deliverer. They had been delivered through two walls of water ‘into the wilderness’, and their first act on being delivered was to complain about the lack of water (Exod 15:24). They seemed to think that the God who had just parted the Red Sea couldn’t give them a few mouthfuls of water in the desert! From that time on, God’s relationship with the Israelites was a relationship characterised by ‘testing’. God gave them water, but in doing so he ‘tested’ Israel to see if they would obey his commandments (Exod 15:25). Next, they complained about food, so he gave them bread, but even the bread-giving included a ‘test’ from God, a command not to gather too much (Exod 16:4)—which many failed (Exod 16:20).

Then, once again, in Exodus 17 the people complained about lack of water. Moses ominously describes this complaint as ‘putting the Lord to the test’, that is, ‘testing’ God to see if he really loved them and cared for them (Exod 17:2). God again gives

them water, but the place is named from that time on ‘Massah’, the place of testing (Exod 17:7):

*Exodus 17:7 And he called the name of the place Massah (peirasmos) and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested (peirazein) the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"*

God had delivered them from Egypt because of his love. But he had then led them into ‘testing’ in the wilderness, the place where God tested their commitment to him and where the people tested God’s love for them. I suggested that God and Israel are like a newlywed husband and wife; on the honeymoon, the wife complains that her husband doesn’t love her and wishes she were back home as a single woman and the husband sets up surveillance cameras and hires a Private Eye to make sure she’s going to be faithful.

Like any relationship that begins on such a rocky start, the prognosis was not good. Sure enough, the ‘testing’ continued. Later on, just before the people are about to enter the Promised Land, they again ‘tested’ God. God had promised them the land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey, to be theirs. But the people didn’t believe him. They were afraid of the previous inhabitants of the land, they suspected that God didn’t love them and they didn’t trust God. They didn’t enter the land. As a result, God told them they would not inherit the land for forty years. This ‘test’ was the final straw for God; his people didn’t trust him and so he banished them to forty years’ wandering in the wilderness (Num 14:22-23).

Throughout the rest of the OT, ‘Massah’ is referred to as that terrible place of testing, the place where mutual suspicion entered into the relationship between God and his people (which was not God’s fault, of course for he was always faithful to his promises. They had no right to test God). The law and the prophets began to refer to Massah, the ‘place of testing’, as if it applied to the whole wilderness experience, from the crossing of the Red Sea until the entry into the Promised Land 40 years later. (Deut 6:16, 8:2, 9:22, 33:8; Psa 78:18, 78:41, 78:56, 95:8-9, 106:14) In the end, Israel emerged chastened and humbled by the whole ‘testing’ experience (Deut 8:16). But even then, the people still had a problem: they did not fully trust God, and so the testing continued throughout Israel’s history. God tested them to see if they would obey him (Deut 13:3; Judg 2:22, 3:1, 3:4; 2 Chron 32:31) and they generally failed; for their part, the people tested God to see if he really cared for them and loved them and would keep his promises (Judges 6:39).

In the light of the OT, Matthew 6:13 literally means ‘Don’t lead us into Massah’. That is, it is a prayer asking God to make sure that we don’t relive that desert experience of Israel, where they suspected God of foul play, and God (quite rightly) suspected them of ungrateful and disobedient hearts.

## **Jesus: the ultimate test**

One of the first acts of Jesus is to go out into the wilderness after emerging from the waters of baptism. He is led into the wilderness by the Spirit of God, but he is not actually tested by God. Instead, he is tested by Satan (Matt 4:1, 3; Heb 4:15). And instead of failing the test, like the people of Israel did, Jesus passes. He proves that he completely trusts God as God’s loving and faithful Son. He is hungry, but trusts God’s Word to sustain him (Matt 4:4). He isn’t suspicious of God his Father; he

completely trusts his Father to give him whatever he needs - whether it is food in the wilderness or authority over the world. He doesn't 'put God to the test' (Matt 4:7).

From then on, there are two types of people. There are those who continue the pattern of the old Israel, people who 'test' God and Jesus, people who don't trust God but are suspicious of his love and care for them. In Matthew's Gospel, the Pharisees and associated hangers-on are like this (16:1, 19:3, 22:18, 22:35). But those who follow Jesus, his disciples, must be characterised by trust in God and Jesus. They mustn't go by the way of Massah, they mustn't have an attitude of 'testing' but of 'trusting' (1 Cor 10:9, Heb 3:8-9).

In the Garden of Gethsemane, that place of great fear and anxiety before Jesus is arrested and taken to die on the cross, Jesus tells his disciples to 'watch and pray that you may not enter into testing.' The cross of Jesus is the ultimate act of deliverance, where we are saved from our sins, where we can have confidence that our debts are forgiven (Matt 6:12). But it looked like the ultimate disaster, where God's Son Jesus seemed defeated by the world and all the authorities. In the midst of this greatest trial of all, the disciples are urged to pray that they will not enter into testing - suspecting God of reneging on his word, and so turning away from Jesus.

## Testing and God's redeemed people

God never tests his people in the NT like he did in the OT. Christians certainly do undergo 'tests' in the NT, but these 'tests' are not an act of God 'testing' us to see if we will obey him, like a distant examiner or a suspicious husband. Christians never undergo special 'tests' such as God gave his people in the wilderness, but simply the 'trials' that are common to humanity (1 Cor 10:13), or the temptations of Satan (1 Thess 3:5). God always provides a way of escape from these type of trials (1 Cor 10:13, 2 Pet 2:9). They are described like a refiner's fire, proving our trust in God and our willingness to follow Jesus (1 Pet 1:6, 4:12). In all these things, God's attitude to us is always as a loving heavenly father, never as a 'suspicious heavenly examiner'.

The book of James provides an extended commentary on the theme of testing, applying the 'testing' that Jesus mentions in his prayer to a Christian's everyday life with all of its economic inequalities—(modified ESV):

*James 1:2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet testings (peirasmois) of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. <sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. <sup>6</sup> But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. <sup>7</sup> For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; <sup>8</sup> he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. <sup>9</sup> Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, <sup>10</sup> and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. <sup>11</sup> For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. <sup>12</sup> Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under testing (peirasmon), for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. <sup>13</sup> Let no one say when he is tested (peirazomenos), 'I am being tested (peirazomai) by God,' for God cannot be tested (apeirastos) with evil, and he himself tests (peirazei) no one. <sup>14</sup> But each person is tested (peirazetai) when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. <sup>15</sup> Then desire*

*when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*

## **Exposition of Matthew 6:13**

Here, then, is the text of the first part of my sermon. I began with popular contemporary definitions of the word, ‘temptation’:

Our world is just full of temptation. Turn on the TV at 7 PM each weeknight, and you’ll have half an hour of ‘Temptation’. Here’s what the Channel 9 promo has to say:

*‘Be tempted beyond your wildest dreams with Australia’s most successful quiz show, Temptation, the new Sale Of The Century ... Temptation has new twists to the format that will increase the pace of the show and add more temptation for contestants. Fabulous prizes will include trips to Hawaii, Paris and Vanuatu, Volvo cars, Louis Vuitton luggage, plasma televisions, Versace watches, Internet fridges, jewellery, Bang and Olufsen and Pioneer home entertainment packages, Harley Davidson motorbikes and giant cash jackpots!’*

And it’s not just the TV is it? All around us there are temptations of the senses: food, chocolate, alcohol, internet pornography. Temptation is everywhere

I then tried to help people realise that the Bible is not necessarily talking directly about the things we care about—it often has far more important things to teach us:

Now when we read the Bible, sometimes we can read it as if it’s talking directly about our own issues. So we might read this line, ‘lead us not into temptation’, and we think it’s a prayer asking God to miraculously guide our steps away from internet fridges and Harleys and hi-fat chocolate ice cream.

Of course the Bible is deeply relevant to our personal lives. But sometimes we need to just pause and ask ‘What exactly is the Bible saying?’ before we presume we know what’s it’s all about. You see; what, exactly what does Jesus mean by this word ‘temptation’? And what is so bad about it?

Do you notice that ‘lead us not into temptation’ is the only negative request in the Lord’s Prayer? All the others are positive, asking God to do something. ‘Give us our daily bread’, ‘Forgive us our sins’. But ‘lead us not into temptation’ is the only thing in this prayer that we specifically ask God not to do. It’s a serious thing. Surely it’s not just about game shows and chocolate?

I spent some time talking about the Old Testament background, because I wanted to define the word ‘temptation’ using the concrete biblical story rather than define it according to abstract terms or contemporary usage.

Well if you looked up any decent Bible Dictionary you’d soon find that the word ‘temptation’ is the same as the word ‘testing’ in the original language of Jesus’ day. A ‘test’ is something you do to somebody to see what they’re made of, to check out their performance. So another way of saying this line of the prayer is, ‘Lead us not into testing’.

NB I mentioned the Bible Dictionary to help people to see that the original languages are not actually beyond the reach of the ordinary lay person who attends church each week. Even if they can’t read Greek, they can all read a Bible Dictionary! They don’t have to rely on me to tell them what the word ‘temptation’ actually means.

But more than that, the word ‘testing’ is actually the name of a place in the Bible. There’s a place called ‘Massah’ in the Bible—and ‘Massah’ means

‘place of testing’. Massah is one of those places with a story behind it. There’s places like that in Australia. When Captain James Cook was exploring the East Coast of Australia in the 1700’s, his boat the Endeavour struck a reef, and nearly sank. He wasn’t a very happy sailor at the time. Now Cook was in the business of naming places. So first thing next morning he looked out and saw a Cape. He called it ‘Cape Tribulation’. Behind it was a mountain. He called it ‘Mount Sorrow’. Up the coast, the place where they finally rested for repairs was called ‘Weary Bay’. They’re all places with stories attached to them

And it’s the same with Massah (Exodus 16-17). Just to set the scene—God had just delivered his special people Israel, from slavery in Egypt. God parted the waters of the Red Sea, and the Israelites escaped from the Egyptians:

*(Let’s read Exodus 14:30-31)*

Now you’d think Israel would be grateful and would trust God after that amazing miraculous rescue. But no! The first thing Israel did on being rescued was to whinge! You see, on the other side of the Red Sea was wilderness, desert, and as soon as Israel got into the desert, they whinged that they were thirsty! Even though God had just parted the Red Sea, even though God had just shown them his awesome power over walls of water, they whinged that God couldn’t give them a few mouthfuls of water in the desert! God gave them water—he was faithful. But next, they whinged about food. So God gave them bread, bread from heaven—he was faithful. But when he gave them the bread, he also gave them a test:

*(Let’s read Exodus 16:4)*

In the interests of time I compressed the story of Exodus and Numbers somewhat, just bringing out the salient points:

Then again, in the very next chapter, the people complained about being thirsty.

*(Let’s read Exodus 17:2)*

Again, they get their water—God was faithful. But Moses was fed up.

*(Let’s read Exodus 17:7)*

This is bad, this testing of God. Can you see why it is so horrible? God had saved this people. He had shown his unconditional, undying love for them. He’d carved up the ocean for them, for goodness sake! But there in the wilderness, the people wouldn’t trust him. They wouldn’t trust that God cared for them, that he would give them little things like food and water. They complained, they tested. And God knew their hearts weren’t right. So instead of a relationship of love and trust it became a relationship of testing, of suspicion. It’s like God and Israel are a newlywed husband and wife, and on the honeymoon, the wife complains that her husband doesn’t love her and wishes she were back home, single again and the husband suspects something, so he sets up surveillance cameras and hires a Private Eye just to check up on her. On the honeymoon! At Massah, Israel tested God. God tested Israel. Mutual love turned into mutual suspicion.

And it didn’t end there. The whole Bible is full of references to Massah, to the place where the relationship between Israel and God turned sour as soon as it started. Look at Psalm 95, for example:

*(Let’s read Psalm 95:7-11)*

An explanation of Jesus' successful recapitulation of the 'story' of Israel was needed before moving to application:

But when Jesus came, more than 1,000 years later, something wonderful happened. You see, Jesus succeeded where Israel had failed. In Matthew chapter 4, after Jesus is baptized (chapter 3), he comes out of the water. Let's read from verse 1:

*(Let's read Matthew 4:1-11)*

Jesus is sort of reliving the experience of Israel. God's Spirit led him into the desert to be tempted. It's as if God led Jesus back into Massah. He didn't eat for forty days. And he was hungry, starving. But Jesus didn't do what Israel did in the desert. Jesus did the opposite of Israel. No complaining, no whingeing

The evil one came, the devil, Satan. He 'tested' Jesus. He lied. He tried to capitalise on Jesus' weakness and hunger. He quoted the Bible at Jesus, verses out of context, trying to get Jesus to stop trusting his Father. And what did Jesus do? He refused to test God. He trusted God, he served God, he worshiped God, even in this most extreme situation. He proved through his obedience that the relationship between him and God his Father is one of pure love. No suspicion. No testing required on either side.

Then we move on to talk about the relevance of Jesus for us and our situation, through his death on the cross:

What has that got to do with us? When Jesus died on the cross for us, he brought us into a perfect relationship with God. He brought complete forgiveness by his death. And he rose from the dead, to bring us life. He gives us a relationship with God as dearly loved children. The kind of relationship where God is pleased with us—because he is pleased with Jesus. A relationship with God where there is love, not suspicion; trusting, not testing.

And you can see that by the kind of prayer Jesus gives his disciples to pray. The Lord's Prayer is a prayer of trust in God our Father. It begins 'Our Father in Heaven'. You can only pray the Lord's Prayer if you trust God as your heavenly Father, like Jesus did. You can only pray this prayer if you trust that God's name is wonderful and holy ('hallowed by your name'), that his kingdom and his will is the best thing for us, that he will give us our daily bread, that he will forgive us our sins.

And so when you pray, 'Lead us not into temptation', you're asking God to keep you trusting him, to stop you from doubting his loving care for you, to form you more and more as his child, just like Jesus.

## **Applying Matthew 6:13**

Hence the prayer of Matthew 6:13 is a prayer of confident trust, asking God to keep us trusting his loving care for us. It is a prayer that God our Father will keep our focus firmly on his ultimate act of care and provision for us: the deliverance from sin provided by Jesus' death on the cross. It is a prayer that, in the midst of the common trials of this life, God will help us remember that he is not distant from us, he is not standing back and testing us to see if we will obey, he is not inflicting these things on us as a test; but that he is lovingly refining us and making us more like his Son Jesus Christ. It is a prayer asking God to 'give us our daily bread', not to test us to see if we will obey him (as he did when he gave bread to the people in the wilderness), but simply to provide us with what we need as a loving heavenly Father. It is a prayer to deliver us out of the clutches of Satan, who lies to us, who tells us that God does not

have our best interests at heart in the midst of these trials, who wants us to become suspicious of our Father and forget how much he loves us. The evil one wants us to think that we know best, and that God doesn't love us as much as we love ourselves. We may not know exactly why we are suffering; like Job, we may never find out the precise reason for until the Lord returns - all we may know is that God is compassionate and merciful in our suffering (James 5:11). But that is enough.

The application part of my sermon, therefore, was along these lines:

Of course, when life is easy it's easier to trust God's care for you, isn't it? But how do you react when things are tough? When it looks like God's abandoned you?

You see, in our life, things can sometimes look a lot like they did for Israel back at Massah. The Israelites passed through the Red Sea—they were saved from slavery and mortal danger. But out in the desert, they were thirsty. They were hungry. They knew God had saved them. But they felt that had to test God to see if he was really still with them. They suspected that God had just brought them out into the desert to starve to death. You might be tempted to think the same thing. You might be confident that God has done the big things for you—saved you, died on the cross for you, given you eternal life. But you might start to think—that's all very well, but does God actually care about me day to day? Especially when I'm hungry or thirsty or in pain, grieving, abandoned, used, persecuted, ripped off, depressed. You might start to think that God is testing you. That he's fiddling with your life. Up there in heaven with his computer watching you on the screen, and putting various tests in your way to see how you'll react. Tempting you.

James has a lot to say about testing, trials and temptation (James 1:12-15). James tells us that God never tempts us. God is quite simply not like that. He is our heavenly Father, not our heavenly examiner. There are trials in our lives. But these trials aren't tests from God to see if we're worthy, as if he didn't know already. No, they're simply there to show to us and the world that we are God's children. To make us more like Jesus.

But Satan, the evil One, is still hanging around, waiting to lie to us. Wanting to tell us that God doesn't really care about us. That God doesn't really know what's best for us. Or if he does he doesn't care, that he's a meany who's giving us these tests just to see what we'll do. The greatest lie we can ever hear from the Evil One is that God doesn't care for the people he saved, that God has saved us through the precious blood of Jesus ... only to bring us in the desert to starve to death. Satan wants us to believe that we really should give in to the trial and just, well, just do what's easiest, just sin, just give in to our own evil desires. And when we do that, when we suspect God's goodness and stop trusting him, that is temptation. That's why we need to pray: 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one'.

When would you need to pray, 'Lead me not into temptation'?

Maybe you have accepted that Jesus died for you and brought you into heaven ... But you still think your life is a desert wilderness, and you need stuff to fill up the void. You suspect God because you don't trust that he will give you what you need. So instead of generosity and love, your life is about greed and holding on to things that you don't really need. Satan is just as active in material things as he is in spiritual things. You need to pray, 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one'

Maybe you are tempted when it comes to your relationships. Maybe you're unhappy with whatever relationships you have, or unhappy because you don't have a relationship that you long for. You may be single, widowed, divorced, married, friendless, unappreciated, just tired of giving. And you know that God has saved you from sin, and given you eternal life. But you suspect that he doesn't really have your best interests at heart when it comes to these human relationships. And you think he's being mean; he's saved you from the greatest enemy of all—sin and death—but he's just brought you into a dry desert wilderness and he's not going to give you anything to drink.

Of course, that can lead to disaster, can't it? You are tempted to look for other ways to gratify your desires, ways that God hates. You join in with your mates when they drink too much so you'll be accepted by them. Or you look for cheap thrills. But you don't care because God doesn't seem to care for you. You need to pray, 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one', trusting God's goodness, even in the desert.

Addiction can be a form of temptation too, can't it? When you start to feel that some thing can look after you, or ease the pain, because you think that God doesn't care. Whether it's alcohol or pornography or sex or even food.

Of course, it might be helpful to take some active steps to remove these temptations from your life. Don't watch the TV shows that provoke you to greed or lust. Put blocking software on your computer. Whatever. But the most important thing you can do is to pray.

And do you know, this is quite an amazing prayer? Because the act of praying is itself part of the answer to the prayer! If you ask God to not lead you into temptation, to help you to trust him, that prayer is itself an act of trust. When you talk to God, you trust him. And the more you trust, the less you suspect him of being mean, and the less you are tempted; because you know that God is good to you, even in the hard times.

You may not know why your life seems like a desert now. You may never know until the end of time. But we do know that God is our Father. And God is our Father because Jesus has died for us and made us God's children.

As Paul says in Romans,

*(Read Romans 8:34-39)*

## Resources

- Carson, D. A.. 'Matthew'. Pages 1-599 in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Vol. 8*. Edited by Frank E. Gæbelein. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.
- Hagner, Donald A. *Matthew 1-13*. Word Biblical Commentary 33A. Dallas: Word, 1993.
- Packer, J. I. 'Temptation'. Pages 1532-33 in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Edited by J. D. Douglas. Leicester: IVP, 1980.

The *New Bible Dictionary* article by Packer was very informative and a helpful synthesis of the data of both testaments. However, it did not bring out the biblical theological movement—the way that Jesus' 'testing' is the lynchpin of the idea of testing in the whole Bible.

The two commentaries I consulted (Carson and Hagner) both (quite helpfully) cross-referenced a number of other NT and texts (Matthew 4:1-11; James 1; 2 Peter 2:9; 1 Cor 7:5; 1 Thess 3:5; Rev 2:10) and also Sirach 2:1, 33:1 to aid in their discussion of

the verse. The main hermeneutical issue they discussed was whether the 'testing' was a future time of severe apostasy and trial (which they both rejected). However, neither commentary looked in any detail at the Old Testament background. This meant that there was very little to say positively about the verse. After reading these commentaries I could tell the congregation what the verse *doesn't* mean, but not much about what it actually does mean.