

Our Lenten read this year is *The Book of Joy* featuring the perspectives of two global leaders: The Dalai Lama and the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Love the picture on the back: [show]

The first part of the book covers obstacles to Joy, so naturally I read the chapter on “Fear, Stress, and Anxiety.” Archbishop Tutu talking about fear he lived under during apartheid. And this from Dalai Lama caught my attention: *fear/anxiety can result from too much ambition, and the unrealistic expectations we place on ourselves (or are placed on us.)* That got me thinking—versions of faith that promote a hyper or excessive or compulsive preoccupation with sin, can really ramp up anxiety. I’ve been studying the differing translations of the Lord’s Prayer, recently, and noticing that the traditional translation of the prayer tends to highlight the focus on sin, whereas the original language of the prayer does not. So let’s look at that.

The traditional version goes like this: “Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours forever.”

It’s beautiful. It’s also the version employed in one of the most powerful spiritual movements of our time: AA. So I would not discourage anyone from using it if it works for you.

But I’m interested in words and their connotations and their emotional impact, and the difficulty in translating from the original ancient Greek into English. Despite the resistance to changing the wording of the Lord’s Prayer, many churches have done just that, changing ‘trespasses’ to sins, and “lead us not into temptation” to “save us from the time of trial.”

Curious, I dug into it. And discovered that the closer you get to the original Greek, siding with the scholarly consensus, there’s a powerful shift in the connotations of the Lord’s prayer—away from what we might call sin-obsessed to one concerned with our human limitations and frailties, rather than personal sinning. I wish I knew this earlier!

Our reading today, is the Lord’s prayer as it appears in Matthew (a slightly different wording is found in Luke’s gospel.) I used a translation that is closer to the original Greek than we are used to hearing.

**Our father in the heavens,
May you name be held as holy
Let your kingdom come,
Let your will come to pass
As in heaven, so also upon earth.
Give us today bread for the day ahead;
And excuse us our debts
Just as we have excused our debtors**

**Save us from the time of trial,
But rescue us from him who is wicked.**

We're going to look at the last half of the prayer, starting with "Give us today bread for the day ahead." A more accurate translation than the familiar, "Give us this day our daily bread."

There isn't much doubt that "give us today our bread for the day ahead" or "tomorrow's bread" is the more accurate translation.

Consider the psychological shift that brings. The traditional reading implies—be happy if you have food enough for today, even if you don't know where tomorrow's food is going to come from. We call that "food insecurity." It's miserable.

If all we have is today's food, we will eat our food in a state of anxiety. We need a little buffer. We need a little money in the bank, food in the fridge, not just food on today's table.

Sarah Ruden, expert translator of ancient languages, including the gospels, proposes that in the Roman Empire of this period, including Israel, large portions of the population depended on a daily loaf distribution. A public dole. A loaf was a day's provision. But under occupation, no one dependent that daily loaf distribution, could be sure about getting it the next day. So, this is a prayer for an anxiety buffer, "give us today our loaf for tomorrow, so we can eat today's bread without worrying about tomorrow." This is Jesus saying, through the prayer: that's not too much to ask. We all need an anxiety buffer as well as bread for today.

Now let's take the next line flows from this, and the "closer-to-the-original language" translation also represents a psychological shift, a more humane, a kinder-gentler approach to sin: "excuse us our debts" rather than forgive us our trespasses or the more modern "sins." The more literal translation is "excuse our debts as we have excused our debtors." There was a Greek word for sin, and it's not used. The word that is used is debt, meaning an economic debt: owing someone money.

You could say "debt" is a metaphor for sin, and it could be. But it's just as likely that in a society where the vast majority of people were under a crushing burden of debt, it's could easily be a prayer to get out from under this burden of debt. What's the average student loan debt now? I think it's \$37,000 and takes 20 years to pay off. If that's the average, many have more than that. Add to that. Credit Card companies enticing young people get credit cards, pay the minimum amt and only later realize they're paying 18.4% interest. Then, in many low income neighborhoods you have legalized loan sharks giving advances on paychecks at horrible interest rates. Many people live under this triple debt burden. Freakonomics had an episode on poverty cited a study in Boston: white families have median net worth of 250,000, while non-immigrant black families have a net worth of \$8. Let's say, as some do, the sample size was too small, and it underestimated that \$8 by a factor of 100. Still a massive gap.

The actual wording of the Lord's prayer seems to be focused on this rather than on our moral failings that we should feel bad about.

In Luke's version, the Greek word employed is not the usual word for sin, it's a word that means "blunder" or "offense." Ruden translates it, "forgive our blunders." This is a very Jewish understanding. In the five different daily sacrifices of the temple, the only sacrifices that deal with sin, are for inadvertent offenses. Most of our sins are blunders, are inadvertent offenses. We don't need to gin up guilt or shame for mistakes, blunders, inadvertent sins. We take responsibility—and when we know better, we do better. A different emotional view of our human vulnerability, isn't it? Excuse our debts, forgive our blunders.

Next, "Save us from the time of trial" rather than "lead us not into temptation." The traditional wording serves to intensify the previous line: "forgive us our sins" followed by "and lead us not into temptation" implies "temptation to sin" and not only that, in English "temptation" especially connoted sexual temptation. The very next line, "and deliver us from evil" makes it even worse: forgive us our sins, lead us into temptation to sin, especially sexual sin, and deliver us from evil, because our sinning, especially or sexual sinning is so evil!

But the literal Greek of the original is "excuse our debts [or in Luke, forgive our blunders], followed by save us from the time of trial. A very different psychological impact, isn't it?

What does the original cultural-historical context suggest about "save us from the time of trial"? One of the strong connotations of the word is a judicial proceeding. The other is "an ordeal."

Let's take them both in turn: "save us from the time of trial" as a judicial proceeding. In an occupied nation like Israel, justice is hard to come by in a judicial proceeding. People under occupation are always fearing accusation from the authorities. Like driving while black, under a presumption of guilt, not innocence. Any teenage Roman soldier having a bad day could accuse you of anything and your goose was cooked. So save us from the time of trial in this context means, save us from these trumped up charges, these false accusation from bullies with a badge.

Or the second connotation of the word "trial" as "ordeal." In that case, "save from the time of trial" would suggest things like save us from major threats that affect us all, like a global pandemic, like nuclear war, like a global depression. Big ordeals we face from time to time, ordeals that our not our personal fault.

Finally, the last line: the literal language of Matthew is "rescue us from him who is wicked" [this last line is missing entirely in Luke's version]. Different connotation than "deliver us from evil." [especially when that line is tagged onto "forgive us our sins, lead us not into temptation."]

A Ukrainian could very properly apply it to Putin, "Deliver us Oh God from this wicked man!" As the threat of nuclear idiocy rises, we can all pray this prayer in this way. Deliver us from Vladimir Putin! We can think of other rulers to whom this prayer might also apply. God save us from narcissistic,

lying, sociopathic, fools who exert enormous power and influence over many people—whose wickedness affects us and people we love! Save us from governors and state legislators who advantage the wealthy and disadvantage the poor! Who pass laws that terrorize transgender kids and their parents, who use rhetoric and support policies that encourage the forces of white supremacy... and so on. This is a prayer for the world we live in.

And there the prayer ends. Everyone who has seen the earliest manuscripts available of the gospel of Matthew and Luke “and the power, and the glory are yours forever” is a later addition. It only appears in much later manuscripts. Nothing wrong with it. There’s just no evidence it was part of the original prayer. It was probably inserted for liturgical use.

There’s something stark, and bracing, about the way the prayer ends without a nice bow to wrap it up.

And all told, what a shift in the psychology that the differing translations promote! The traditional translation gins up feelings of guilt and shame—anxiety producers and joy suckers,

The Lord’s prayer, however, is not that. It’s dealing with the creaturely limitations and frailties of being human and asking God for help—mostly for things that are not, in fact, our fault. As if when God considers us, this is what he considers, in the same way that a loving parent, considers the limitations and frailties and vulnerabilities of a young child.

MEDITATION

In movie making there’s something called the “reaction shot”: you depict what’s going on, not by showing it directly, but by showing someone reacting to it. Horror movies use it a lot.

This prayer, recommended to his disciples by Jesus is a reaction shot of sorts. Jesus has an experience of God, and out of that experience he recommends this way of prayer. This is the sort of prayer that fits the God Jesus knows.

For our meditation time, let’s think of the prayer as a reaction shot of sorts. Picture someone else praying this prayer; what does the prayer say about the God it is addressed to?

We’ll just take a minute for this. I’ll read it once, pause for 20 seconds, read it a second time, pause for 20 seconds, and then close by reading it a third time.

**Give us today bread for the day ahead;
And excuse us our debts
Just as we have excused our debtors
Save us from the time of trial,
But rescue us from him who is wicked.**