

The Larger Catechism

Question 195

195. Q. What do we pray for in the sixth petition?

A. In the sixth petition, (which is, *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*, [1273]) acknowledging, that the most wise, righteous, and gracious God, for divers holy and just ends, may so order things, that we may be assaulted, foiled, and for a time led captive by temptations; [1274] that Satan, [1275] the world, [1276] and the flesh, are ready powerfully to draw us aside, and ensnare us; [1277] and that we, even after the pardon of our sins, by reason of our corruption, [1278] weakness, and want of watchfulness, [1279] are not only subject to be tempted, and forward to expose ourselves unto temptations, [1280] but also of ourselves unable and unwilling to resist them, to recover out of them, and to improve them; [1281] and worthy to be left under the power of them: [1282] we pray, that God would so overrule the world and all in it, [1283] subdue the flesh, [1284] and restrain Satan, [1285] order all things, [1286] bestow and bless all means of grace, [1287] and quicken us to watchfulness in the use of them, that we and all his people may by his providence be kept from being tempted to sin; [1288] or, if tempted, that by his Spirit we may be powerfully supported and enabled to stand in the hour of temptation; [1289] or when fallen, raised again and recovered out of it, [1290] and have a sanctified use and improvement thereof: [1291] that our sanctification and salvation may be perfected, [1292] Satan trodden under our feet, [1293] and we fully freed from sin, temptation, and all evil, forever. [1294]

Scriptural Defense and Commentary

[1273] **Matthew 6:13.** And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. [1274] **2 Chronicles 32:31.** Howbeit in the business of the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent unto him to inquire of the wonder that was done in the land, God left him, to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart. [1275] **1 Chronicles 21:1.** And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel. [1276] **Luke 21:34.** And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. **Mark 4:19.** And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful. [1277] **James 1:14.** But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. [1278] **Galatians 5:17.** For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. [1279] **Matthew 26:41.** Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. [1280] **Matthew 26:69-72.** Now Peter sat without in the palace: and a damsel came unto him, saying, Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee. But he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou sayest. And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth. And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man. **Galatians 2:11-14.** But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews? **2 Chronicles 18:3.** And Ahab king of Israel said unto Jehoshaphat king of Judah, Wilt thou go with me to Ramoth gilead? And he answered him, I am as thou art, and my people as thy people; and we will be with thee in the war. **2 Chronicles 19:2.** And Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him, and said to king Jehoshaphat, Shouldest thou help the ungodly, and love them that hate the LORD? therefore is wrath upon thee from before the LORD. [1281] **Romans 7:23-24.** But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? **1 Chronicles 21:1-4.** And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel. And David said to Joab and to the rulers of the people, Go, number Israel from Beersheba even to Dan; and bring the number of them to me, that I may know it. And Joab answered, The LORD make his people an hundred times so many more as they be: but, my lord the king, are they not all my lord's servants? why then doth my lord require this thing? why will he be a cause of trespass to Israel? Nevertheless the king's word prevailed against Joab. Wherefore Joab departed, and went throughout all Israel, and came to Jerusalem. **2 Chronicles 16:7-10.** And at that

time Hanani the seer came to Asa king of Judah, and said unto him, Because thou hast relied on the king of Syria, and not relied on the LORD thy God, therefore is the host of the king of Syria escaped out of thine hand. Were not the Ethiopians and the Lubims a huge host, with very many chariots and horsemen? yet, because thou didst rely on the LORD, he delivered them into thine hand. For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him. Herein thou hast done foolishly: therefore from henceforth thou shalt have wars. Then Asa was wroth with the seer, and put him in a prison house; for he was in a rage with him because of this thing. And Asa oppressed some of the people the same time. [1282] **Psalm 81:11-12**. But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lust: and they walked in their own counsels. [1283] **John 17:15**. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. [1284] **Psalm 51:10**. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. **Psalm 119:133**. Order my steps in thy word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me. [1285] **2 Corinthians 12:7-8**. And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. [1286] **1 Corinthians 10:12-13**. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. [1287] **Hebrews 13:20-21**. Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. [1288] **Matthew 26:41**. Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. **Psalm 19:13**. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression. [1289] **Ephesians 3:14-17**. For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love. **1 Thessalonians 3:13**. To the end he may stablish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints. **Jude 24**. Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy. [1290] **Psalm 51:12**. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. [1291] **1 Peter 5:8-10**. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world. But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. [1292] **2 Corinthians 13:7, 9**. Now I pray to God that ye do no evil; not that we should appear approved, but that ye should do that which is honest, though we be as reprobates.... For we are glad, when we are weak, and ye are strong; and this also we wish, even your perfection. [1293] **Romans 16:20**. And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen. **Luke 22:31-32**. And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren. [1294] **John 17:15**. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. **1 Thessalonians 5:23**. And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Introduction

In the fifth petition, we recognized the need for *God's forgiveness of our sins* and in this sixth petition, we recognize our need for *God's protection from our sins*. The petition assumes many things and therefore this petition may surprise you. It is not as simply, "God, protect me from sins."¹ It says, *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil*. It suggests that God is somehow related to our temptations and that we must petition God to deliver us.

The sixth petition assumes that the world is hostile and that we are not equal to the task. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign and in this hostile world, God orders all things in the midst of seeming chaos and evil. We can't "wish" away the difficulties or project a "positive" outlook on life to avoid the conflicts and temptations. Those things come to us and the petition unapologetically assumes God is somehow behind all of these things yet without sin.

¹ The Heidelberg Catechism #127 defines it this way: "'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil;' that is, since we are so weak in ourselves that we cannot stand a moment: and besides this, since our mortal enemies, the devil, the world, and our own flesh, cease not to assault us, do thou, therefore, preserve and strengthen us by the power of thy Holy Spirit, that we may not be overcome in this spiritual warfare, but constantly and strenuously may resist our foes, until at last we obtain a complete victory."

God and Temptations

The petition is asking *God* to not lead us into temptation. The LC explains it this way: **“acknowledging, that the most wise, righteous, and gracious God, for divers holy and just ends, may so order things, that we may be assaulted, foiled, and for a time led captive by temptations...”** That is, God, for various reasons, can order temptations into our lives. Is there any biblical warrant for such a thing? Let me give two texts that support this (2Chron. 32:31; Deut. 8:2). In 2Chronicles 32:31 we read, *“And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart.”* Hezekiah was left to his own self to respond to the Babylonian envoys. He had been healed of his sickness (v. 24) and envoys were sent to him to inquire about his sickness (cf. 2K. 20-12-13) and the miraculous sign given by God. Hezekiah gladly received them and his willingness to show his military supplies and armory “implies his readiness to form an alliance...”² There were repercussions to all of these things but what is important to us is the phrase “God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart...” Matthew Henry’s words are helpful in explaining this verse: “God, by the power of his almighty grace, could have prevented the sin; but he permitted it for wise and holy ends, that, by this trial and his weakness in it, he might know, that is, it might be known (a usual Hebraism), what was in his heart, that he was not so perfect in grace as he thought he was, but had his follies and infirmities as other men. God left him to himself to be proud of his wealth, to keep him from being proud of his holiness.” Yes, God could have prevented this sin but chose to withdrawal to allow Hezekiah’s heart to act out.

A similar but less forceful text comes from Deuteronomy 8:2, “And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not.” God humbled Israel in the desert through all the difficulties. Would those years in the desert compel them to trust God and keep His commandments? They needed to learn that man did not live by bread alone but “by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (8:3). Though these difficulties (e.g. hunger) were not temptations per se, they did test their hearts. The point here is simply that God ordered the external circumstances to test them so as “to bring out into the open that which is hidden, for His own glory and justification and for the *heil* [salvation] of those who are His.”³

Our good God can **“for divers holy and just ends...”** order these events. It may be for sanctification, humbling, the purpose of weaning us from self-dependence, creature dependence, etc. God has His purposes and they are holy and just because He Himself is holy and just. We are also told that God **“may so order things, that we may be assaulted, foiled, and for a time led captive by temptations...”** **Assaulted** means that temptations actually do come to us — they cannot be avoided, they are upon us. **Foiled** means that we are undone by the temptation; it defeats us as we succumb to it. And **“for a time led captive...”** means that the temptation has led to sin and that we are under its sway “for a time” (e.g. David and Bathsheba). This is not a permanent “bondage” per se but the power of sin will molest and compel us. God can order all these things as He sees fit. Ridgley explains that God orders these things either *objectively* or *permissively*.

² *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (ed. D. A Carson et al.; Accordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 380.

³ J. Ridderbos, *Deuteronomy*, trans. Ed M. van der Maas, Bible Student’s Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 127.

He does it objectively, when his providential dispensations, which in themselves are holy, just, and good, offer occasions of sin. ... God leads into temptation permissively. This he does when he does not restrain the tempter, which he is not obliged to do, but suffers us to be assaulted by him, and, at the same time, denies the aids and assistance of his grace, to prevent our compliance with his temptations. Hence, when we pray that he would ‘not lead us into temptation,’ we desire that he would prevent the assault, or fortify us against it, that, through the weakness of our grace, or the prevalency of corruption, we may not comply with the temptation.⁴

Ridgley’s explanation supports what all Calvinists have traditionally maintained. God can actively allow things to happen (like Israel in the wilderness to humble them, cf. Deut. 8) or permissively allow events to transpire and persons to act. God sovereignly rules all things.

The Assumptions in Temptations

Before positively explaining what the petition entails, we must come to terms with what the temptations assume. On account of these theological assumptions, we are compelled to petition God to lead us not into temptation.

1. *The petition assumes we have enemies.*

We have enemies without and within. The LC states “**that Satan, the world, and the flesh, are ready powerfully to draw us aside, and ensnare us...**” Satan opposes us and will do much to cause us to sin. This is the way Ursinus explains the phrase:

When the devil is said to lead us into temptation, it means that God permits him to entice and solicit us to sin. We are here in this petition taught to pray for deliverance from both of these forms of temptation. We therefore pray, 1. That God will not tempt us for the sake of trying us, if such be his will and pleasure, or if he does tempt us, that he will give us strength to endure the temptation.⁵ 2. That he will not permit the devil, or the world or the flesh to entice us to sin, or if he does permit us to be tempted, that he himself will be present with us, that we may not fall into sin. This, therefore, is the true sense and meaning of this petition, *Lead us not into temptation*—suffer us not to be tempted above that which we are able to bear; neither permit the devil to tempt us in such a way that we may either sin, or wholly fall from thee.⁶

We do not wish to be tempted. We are too weak to stand and without the Lord’s sustaining grace, every temptation of Satan will undo us. We should not seek to be tested or tempted — this prayer has that in mind. Before going on to develop Satan’s role in temptation, as an aside, let us note the important advice John Newton gave in this regard. The young John Ryland believed he needed temptations to preserve him from growing cold and indifferent. Newton shot back: “And

⁴ Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity, Volume 2* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855), 645.

⁵ In English, we use the word “test” when God is actively or permissively involved. Passages in Scripture often do not make that kind of distinction. The word for *temptation* in Mt. 6:13 (πειρασμόν) is used as *trials* (πειρασμοῖς) in 1Peter 1:6.

⁶ Zacharias Ursinus and G. W. Williard, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Cincinnati, OH: Elm Street Printing Company, 1888), 654.

I advise you to be cautious how you indulge a desire to be exercised with Satan’s temptations, as supposing they would be conducive to make you more spiritual, or would of course open you a way to great consolations.” What was Newton concerned about? Isn’t Ryland’s desire a noble one? Not really. He wrote to the young minister these wise observations: “He who knows our weakness, and the power of our adversary, has graciously directed us to pray, that we enter not into temptation. Have you considered what the enemy can do, if he is permitted to come in like a flood? In one hour he could raise such a storm as would put you to your wit’s end.”⁷ We must be well aware of the fact that we are utterly feeble and should not ask for temptations (whatever the form).

Getting back to Satan’s role and method in tempting us, allow me to give two weighty quotes on this matter. Herman Witsius gives a full sobering account of how the devil works — episodes taken from Scripture.

He attacked David, that invincible king, who had gained celebrity by his victory over the huge giant, and over so many fierce nations, and more than once overthrew him [1Chr. 21:1]. Not only did he stir up the perfidious [i.e. deceitful] Judas to a heinous crime, and make him the betrayer of the best and kindest of masters; but he attacked Peter, who, till then, had been a powerful adversary,—strove hard “to sift him as wheat,” and after large, express, and confident promises, drove him to deny three times his beloved Lord [Lk. 22:31]. He manifests the same disposition towards all who are the servants of God and of Christ, attacking them at one time with the cunning of the serpent, at another with the fierceness of the lion, “seeking whom he may” ruin and “devour.” [1Pet. 5:8] In whatever direction we move, we have the strongest reason to suspect that, under the herbs and flowers, this deceitful and cruel serpent lies concealed.⁸

These accounts in Scripture remind us that the evil one is alive and well during our pilgrimage. He does not rest or sleep and we cannot stand up to him on our own strength. These are not fairy tales — they are accurate accounts of spiritual warfare. He wants to sift (σινιάσαι, Lk. 22:31) and devour (καταπιεῖν, 1Pet. 5:8) — there is no mercy in him. I offer one more extract to further unpack how Satan works and affects us. We need to be well aware of his devices.

That tempter has his stratagems, which, without suffering great injury, it is hardly possible for us to detect. The Apostle Paul calls them “the devices,” [2Cor. 2:11]⁹ “the wiles;” [Eph. 6:11]¹⁰ and Christ calls them “the depths of Satan.” [Rev. 2:24]¹¹ It is astonishing with what power and efficacy he everywhere acts on the minds of wretched mortals. (1.) He enters into a man, so as to seem a domesticated enemy. [Luke 22:3; John. 13:27] (2.) He throws evil thoughts into the heart [Jn. 13:2], and “fills the heart” [Acts 5:3] to do evil. (3.) He “blinds their minds.” [2Cor. 4:4] (4.) And with all “subtlety.” [2Cor. 11:3] (5.) And with the greatest success. [Eph. 2:2] (6.) So that he frequently

⁷ John Newton, *Wise Counsel - John Newton’s Letters to John Ryland Jr.*, ed. Grant Gordon (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2009), 38; also in *The Works of The Rev. John Newton* (New York: Williams & Whiting, 1810), 1:233.

⁸ Herman Witsius and William Pringle, *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord’s Prayer* (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, 1839), 348-49.

⁹ οὐ γὰρ αὐτοῦ τὰ νοήματα ἀγνοοῦμεν (“for we are not ignorant of his designs”)

¹⁰ τὰς μεθοδείας τοῦ διαβόλου (“the schemes of the devil”)

¹¹ τὰ βάθη τοῦ Σατανᾶ (“the deep things of Satan”)

“prevails,” [1K. 22:22] and takes some of them “captive at his will.” [2 Tim. 2:26] All this is plainly taught us in scripture.¹²

The second external enemy is **the world**. Luke 21:34 and Mark 4:19 support this point. Remember, Satan and the world “**are ready powerfully to draw us aside, and ensnare us...**” We can readily see how Satan can powerfully draw us aside but what about the world? Jesus exhorted us to watch ourselves: “*But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap.*” (Lk. 21:34) A real danger exists for all believers; the world and its ways can carry us away. The “cares of this life” (μερίμνας βιωτικαῖς) pertain to anything this life offers, the good, the bad, and the indifferent. One commentator said, “A warning against literal drunkenness is no doubt included, but the main force is probably metaphorical, warning disciples against succumbing to the intoxicating attractions of the sinful world...”¹³ We can easily be dulled to spiritual things precisely because we are preoccupied by earthly things (βιωτικαῖς means ‘belonging to [daily] life’) — these necessary things can also easily intoxicate and dull our spiritual senses and thus “**powerfully ...draw us aside, and ensnare us.**”

Mark 4:19 is about the parable of the sower. The seed sown among thorns is likened to those who have been choked by the world: “*but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.*” The Marcan phrase “cares of the world” (αἱ μέριμναι τοῦ αἰῶνος) is just like the “cares of this life” from Luke. The cares of the ages, the concerns of this world, the anxieties of this side of eternity, etc. can easily draw us aside and ensnare us. Yes, drunkenness and the waste spoken of in Luke 21:34 are outright sinful but the phrase “cares of the world” can be neutral but just as dangerous. Work, finances, retirement, vacation, backyard picnics, nice furniture, etc. may have their proper places in the life of a believer but they can also “choke the word” and so we prove to be unfruitful. We must not forget that many “unfruitful” professing believers are honest hard working busy men and women in the world. They may not be outright drunks and may not be living in debauchery but the world has nonetheless choked them from their spiritual concerns and interests. As Ridgley says, “The good things of the world, namely, its riches, honours, and pleasures, are sometimes a snare to us or an occasion of sin.”¹⁴ Entertainment, good friends, the internet, television, simple seemingly harmless pleasures, etc. can easily corrupt us. The question we must be asking ourselves is not only “Is this sinful?” but also, “Does this draw my heart away from my Lord and ensnare me?” We delude ourselves into thinking that since the activity itself is not sinful, we cannot possibly use it sinfully. The cares and desires of this world can ensnare us.

Satan and the world represent the external foes opposed to our spiritual growth. But the battle goes one step further. The **flesh** also will draw us aside and ensnare us. The flesh denotes the sinful inclination in every person (the fallen weak God opposing principle) — it stands for the enemy within. James 1:14 teaches that we fall into sin because of our own indwelling lusts or desires. “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire (τῆς ἰδίας ἐπιθυμίας). Then *desire* (ἡ ἐπιθυμία) when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” (1:14, 15) It is our own desire, our own lust that lures and

¹² Herman Witsius and William Pringle, *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord's Prayer* (Edinburgh: Thomas Clark, 1839), 349.

¹³ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 782.

¹⁴ Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, 2:647.

entices us into sin. One commentator correctly calls this “the traitor within”: “James has excluded, or at least strategically ignored, the tempter without... , but only to point to the traitor within underlined by the emphatic ἰδίᾱς [his own].”¹⁵ Though Jesus declared that the Devil had nothing to work with, nothing for him to find guilty, nothing for him to draw into sin, etc.,¹⁶ we cannot claim the same. We have desires for things unlawful and sinful— these lusts repeatedly humble us. These desires, left unchecked, can easily and powerfully draw us aside and ensnare us. “All other temptations might, without much difficulty, be resisted and overcome, were there not a corrupt disposition in our nature, which the apostle calls ‘lust,’ which inclines us to adhere to them and comply with them.”¹⁷

When it comes to the flesh, our prayers against it is not that we would be perfect but rather that we be restrained, mortified, etc. Once again Ridgley gives a helpful answer here:

What we pray for is, that God would restrain and prevent the irregularity and pernicious tendency of our natural temper; or that he would keep us from those sins which more easily beset us, by reason of the propensity of our nature to commit them. We pray also that he would sanctify our affections, and bring them under the powerful influence of a principle of grace, which may maintain a perpetual opposition to those habits of sin which are daily leading us to turn aside from God; so that whatever temptations we meet with from objects without us, our souls may be internally fortified against them, and disposed to hate and avoid every thing which is contrary to his holy law, or tends to his dishonor.¹⁸

2. The petition assumes that though we are pardoned, we are nonetheless still corrupted and weak.

These three (Satan, the World, and the Flesh) assault you and me. On account of these overwhelming foes, we are compelled to petition our heavenly Father to not lead us into temptation. The divines take the matter further than merely listing our enemies. In a sense, the rest of the statements in this answer unpacks the nature of “the flesh” that affects us. The statement deals with Christians — **and that we, even after the pardon of our sins.** Christians struggle with this after being pardoned for their sins. This observation should compel us to be humble before God. These assumptions drive us to our God to petition Him to deliver us from temptations and the evil one.

Many assumptions about our own nature regulate this petition: **“by reason of our corruption, weakness, and want of watchfulness, are not only subject to be tempted, and forward to expose ourselves unto temptations, but also of ourselves unable and unwilling to resist them, to recover out of them, and to improve them; and worthy to be left under the power of them...”**

¹⁵ Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 83. All the commentators note James’s use of the Jewish *yetzer* (יֵצֶר) theology, the evil desire or impulse in man (cf. Gen. 6:5) leading us to sin. Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James* (NICNT; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 119: “To make sense of life by avoiding chaos, Jews had three options to explain evil: God is the cause of evil, Satan is the cause of evil, or humans are the cause of evil. Jewish *yetzer* thinking focused on the third while not denying the second as a contributing factor.” (

¹⁶ ESV has, “He has no claim on me” for Jn. 14:30. Literally, it can be translated as, “In me he has nothing” [ἐν ἐμοὶ οὐκ ἔχει οὐδέν].

¹⁷ Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, 2:649.

¹⁸ Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, 2:650.

The first thing is the plain admission that we are still corrupted (**by reason of our corruption**). Being impure, we do not perfectly desire the right things: “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” (Gal. 5:17) Romans 7 also teaches the same (Rom. 7:8, “But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.”). An indwelling corrupt nature still exists in our bosom and haunts all that we do: “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Rom. 7:15)

Our corrupt nature expresses itself in making us weak and feeble when it comes to holiness. The clearest expression of this weakness is our lack of vigilance: **weakness, and want of watchfulness**. Why would Jesus say this unless we need it? “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Mt. 26:41) Here, our Lord is expressing a theological truth — we are weak and need to watch and pray so as not to enter into temptation. This declaration has little effect on us. We lack watchfulness and we can hardly get ourselves to be serious about spiritual matters much less be spiritually vigilant.

Because of our nature we **are not only subject to be tempted** but we are also **forward to expose ourselves unto temptations**. One of the clearest examples is king Jehoshaphat (2Chron. 18:3; 19:2). He thrust himself to be with the ungodly Ahab and entered into an ungodly alliance with him. He should have avoided the opportunity but willingly entered into this temptation and ended up dishonoring the Lord. We foolishly think we would never commit such a particular sin or do such a wicked thing. We place ourselves in dangerous situations and think somehow we will leave unscathed. Into how many compromising situations have we placed ourselves? Because we didn’t sin before, we foolishly conclude we will not sin the second time. Each temptation has fed our carnal sense of security. Temptations will undo us eventually if we keep placing ourselves in them.

Some people think this may be going too far to say that believers actually consciously expose themselves to temptations. Doesn’t Christ’s work of grace prevent such things? Vos’s answer to this very question is helpful.

Of course Christians are not *always forward* to expose themselves to temptations, but only sometimes. We very easily become proud and confident of our own ability to stand upright and resist evil, and then we are very likely to become careless and even foolhardy with reference to temptations, and too often the outcome is a humiliating lapse into sin from which we are later recovered by the grace of God. (Vos, 581)

To make matters worse, we do not only expose ourselves by putting ourselves in harm’s way **but also of ourselves unable and unwilling to resist them, to recover out of them, and to improve them**. The two words “unable” and “unwilling” convey the effects of our corrupt nature. We do not want to resist the temptations that present themselves to us and we find we are unable to do so. A person secretly or openly lusts after the sin in the temptation. He is unwilling to avoid it because he desires it (whatever sin it might be). In turn, he finds that he is also unable to stop himself: “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?.” (Rom. 7:24)

When David was incited by Satan to number Israel, Joab confronted him. Even in the face of this clear good awakening challenge, David insisted that his directive be followed

through (1Chron. 21:1-4). We often set our hearts to do what is against the light of God's Word and the conviction of our souls.

We are unwilling to be delivered and repent but instead we thrust ourselves into it. Have we not said, "Well, I've gone this far; there is no turning back now?" The venom of sin has infected our judgment and will. Let us remember, despite our hard hearted foolishness, God often, out of His rich compassion and mercy, sends a means of getting out of the ensnaring situation. Let us quickly repent and use the means of recovery while we can. We must flee to our Father for mercy, to go to the throne of grace that we may find mercy in our time of need.

The idea of **improving our temptations** may sound odd to our ears. It simply means to learn appropriate lessons from them and to take steps against them.

To improve our temptations means to benefit from them in some way, as by learning the lessons that they can teach us, being humbled by them, resolving to be more watchful in the future, and praying to God increased grace to resist the devil. Every temptation that comes to a child of God is permitted in the wisdom and love of God for a good purpose. We are to discern, so far as possible, what that purpose is, and to learn the spiritual lessons involved accordingly. (Vos, 581)

We should learn from our own temptations as well as from others (from those recorded in Scripture to those we have heard about or witnessed). But how sad we are in this. Rather than learning from them, we tend to repeat them and display a level of obstinacy and stupidity that astonish us.

Many professionals say that people will not change until they grow sick and tired of being sick and tired (cf. Dave Ramsey, AA, NA, etc.). But after falling into sin, we are not at liberty to simply change and alter our own wills and propensity. The inclination to sin is too strong and left to ourselves, we will not grow tired of our iniquity — we will dig in deep and justify ourselves. That is why the last clause is so frightening. This last clause conveys much: **and worthy to be left under the power of them.** God can judiciously leave us since that is what we deserve. These sobering words of Psalm 81:11, 12 should cause us all to tremble: "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels." Spurgeon says this to the verse: "No punishment is more just or more severe than this. If men will not be checked, but madly take the bit between their teeth and refuse obedience, who shall wonder if the reins are thrown upon their necks, and they are let alone to work out their own destruction. It were better to be given up to lions than to our hearts' lusts."

God is better to us than we to Him; He is faithful to us in the face of our fickle faithlessness. In His mercy, He will deliver His elect and more often than not, will not allow us to be as bad as we can be for His mercy's sake. Our corrupt nature can overpower us but we are His and He will bring to perfection what He began in us.

Why pray this?

Why must we remember this last clause before we (as it were) pray this petition? We should be afraid of our own hearts and God's just judgment. Knowing what we are capable of and knowing what we justly deserve, we should immediately run to our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ. This knowledge gives the needed sense of urgency in our prayers. Our lack of urgency reveals the power of our corrupt nature.

This petition also implies something we can easily overlook. All these clauses up to this point teach us what *normally* happens if God does not intervene. That is, even as believers, if our gracious God does not help, sustain, and keep us, then we will fall into temptation and sin.¹⁹ Our corrupt nature is active even though we are redeemed and the dominion of sin is broken in us. The world, the flesh and the devil are active principles and left to ourselves, we will fall. As some Puritans have noted, past grace cannot help in the present struggles. We need God’s daily grace and the sustaining care of our heavenly Father. Many think their past spiritual experiences will somehow keep them in the present. Too often we believe the past experiences will be effective in repelling present temptations. If grace is not present, then we will fall. For that reason, we pray to our heavenly Father to lead us not into temptation.

We Pray That

Now we unpack what actually is involved in this petition. The foundation for this petition has been offered above. Therefore, **we pray...** the following things:

1. We pray **that God would so overrule the world and all in it.**

This request may appear to be out of place for this petition. Yet it is the basis for all that follows. The sixth petition reflects the biblical teaching of God’s sovereignty. “If God is not absolutely sovereign, then he does not really control all that comes to pass, and he cannot make *all things* to work together for good for his people.” (Vos, 582) In praying to God regarding our temptations, we must remember His absolute sovereignty. As many have frequently stated, when believers are on their knees, they always pray like Calvinists.

The verse used to support this request will not immediately convince the reader. They cite Jn. 17:15, “I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil (or most likely, “from the evil one,” ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ).” How does this relate to the request? Jesus’ high priestly prayer petitions the Father to keep us from the evil one while we remain in the world. In order for that to happen, our God must overrule everything because everything is against us. One commentator summarized it this way, “The reference to the devil is unmistakable, for he has already been identified as “the ruler of the world” (14:30), or of “this world” (12:31), and near the end of 1 John the reader is reminded that “the whole world lies in the Evil One.” Thus, to “keep them from the Evil One” is to keep them safe in the hostile “world.””²⁰ Since God keeps us in the world, He must overrule all things in it to keep us from the evil one.

2. We pray that God would **subdue the flesh.**

Though sanctification requires that we act in response to God’s grace, yet God must first act lest we fall into temptation. The child of God, if not completely duped, understands how powerful and wicked his own heart is. He cannot subdue the flesh; it rises too mightily. In humility and in deep self-awareness, he begs his heavenly Father to subdue his flesh. Two verses support this simple but absolutely necessary petition. David, after his deep defection into sin, repented and cried to God: “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.” (Ps. 51:10) David did not blame his circumstances and his difficult experiences — he

¹⁹ Cf. John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006), 194-95.

²⁰ J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 873.

witnessed the risings of his own heart and their powerful debasing effects. He asked God to cleanse Him and renew a “right spirit” (רָךְ) within him. As Spurgeon noted, David did not ask to make his old heart clean. Rather, that God would create (צָרַף) in him a clean heart.²¹ Only God can do such a thing. This verse reveals how corrupt our hearts can become. Calvin summarized the verse with these words:

he acknowledges that we are indebted entirely to the grace of God, both for our first regeneration, and, in the event of our falling, for subsequent restoration. He does not merely assert that his heart and spirit were weak, requiring divine assistance, but that they must remain destitute of all purity and rectitude till these be communicated from above. By this it appears that our nature is entirely corrupt: for were it possessed of any rectitude or purity, David would not, as in this verse, have called the one *a gift of the Spirit*, and the other *a creation*. (Calvin on the Psalms)

The Psalmist also prays, “Order my steps in thy word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me.” (Ps. 119:133) Iniquity can easily dominate us; it can have mastery over our lives — the Psalmist begs God to let not sin master him but instead (or in addition to), to order his ways to walk according to God’s Word.

In these two verses, we see the Bible’s realistic understanding of our hearts. Calvin says of Ps. 119:133, “So long, then, as we are left to ourselves, Satan exercises over us his despotic sway uncontrolled, so that we have not power to rid ourselves of iniquity. The freedom of the godly consists solely in this — that they are governed by the Spirit of God, and thus preserved from succumbing to iniquity, although harassed with hard and painful conflicts.”

Every true believer feels the weight of this and he must not despair — that he so desires to have God subdue his flesh is a wonderful indicator of the work of grace (albeit humbling). Indifference to internal depravity reveals either a hardening or unregenerate heart.

3. We pray that God would **restrain the devil**.

We can only imagine the amount of influence and power the devil would have over us if our God did not restrain him. God restrained the devil in Job’s life (cf. Job 1:12; 2:6) but did not restrain him against Ahab (2Chron. 18:21, “You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.”). Satan wanted to destroy Peter (Lk. 22:31) but was preserved. Satan was sent to serve a limited role in Paul’s life — “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.” (2Cor. 12:7) He served a sanctifying or medicinal role in Paul’s life — restrained to serve God’s purpose. That does not mean the devil meant well, as Calvin said, “Satan, in accordance with his disposition and custom, had nothing else in view than to *kill and to destroy*, (John 10:10,) and that the *goad*, that Paul makes mention of, was dipt in deadly poison; but that it was a special kindness from the Lord, to render medicinal what was in its own nature deadly.” A modern commentator makes this astute observation (Note: *skolops* [σκόλοψ] = thorn):

²¹ Though the same verb as in Gen. 1:1 is used, the point here is not for a *creatio ex nihilo*. Rather, David is petitioning God to do a radical work much like the creation of the world from nothing.

This verse expresses a supreme paradox. A painful *skolops* whatever it actually was was “given” to Paul, and that by *God!* This is expanded upon as “a messenger of [or from] Satan.” The juxtaposition of “was given [by God]” and “messenger of Satan” recalls the early chapters of Job, where God allows Satan to afflict Job’s household (Job 1:12), then his person (Job 2:6–7). This language suggests (1) that Satan was the immediate cause of Paul’s difficulty symbolized by the word *skolops*; (2) that, because the *skolops* was given by God, Satan is subject to God, not his equal (as in dualism); and (3) that in a profoundly mysterious way God was the ultimate source of that *skolops*. Paradoxically, *God* is the invisible source of this suffering in the life of Paul, his child and minister.²²

Satan’s malice against believers (Rev. 12:17) cannot be repelled if left to themselves. God restrains him so that we would not be consumed. If we stand, it is not because of our strength or vigilance. We stand because God has not unleashed our enemies against us. Continue to pray that our heavenly Father would restrain the devil; we are not equal to him so we ask our heavenly Father to blunt his force in our lives.

4. We pray that God would **order all things**.

Given the verse used to support this point, the petition is not just about God’s providence and sovereignty but in particular, that God would order all things regarding the temptations we encounter. Just like the way parents shield and protect their young children from bad influences, so our Father must order all things regarding the temptations we encounter.

Notice what Paul says in this oft quoted verse: “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” (1Cor. 10:12, 13) These verses teach us that God controls or orders all things regarding the temptations we encounter. God’s faithfulness keeps us, we do not keep ourselves. We do not stand because of our own personal holiness and integrity. God faithfully orders all things in our lives so that we can mature and grow and He may permit temptations into our lives **for divers holy and just ends** (this phrase is found in the beginning of the LC answer).

5. We pray that God would **bestow and bless all means of grace**.

All the preaching we hear, all the reading we undertake, all the praying we regularly pursue, etc. depend on God’s blessings. They are not effectual in and of themselves — they are “means of grace.” The psalmist longed for the courts of the Lord (Ps. 84) and it may be the psalmist was not able to make the pilgrimage to the Temple. Spurgeon said, “One who was debarred the holy company of the pilgrims, and the devout worship of the congregation, would find in this Psalm fit expression for his mournful spirit.” The point is, we must ask the Lord to continually **bestow** the means of grace to us because the freedom, ability, mobility, etc. to attend to the means of grace is a blessing itself (churches without pastors, houses without Bibles, a believer without fellowship, etc.). Let us not take these things for granted.

God alone can bless our use of these means of grace (the Word, sacrament, and prayer).

²² Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 570.

Heb. 13:20-21²³ teaches that God alone can do good to us and in us. Peter O'Brien's comment on these verses can help us to understand how this passage applies to the petition.

Jesus said he was given a body 'to do your will, my God' (10:7); they are divinely equipped with everything good for the purpose of doing God's will (13:21). The assumption is that only as God provides the community with every good grace will they be enabled to do his will (so also Phil. 2:12-13)... Not only does God provide every grace to his people that will enable them to do his will. Through Jesus Christ he also accomplishes in *us* (and here the writer includes himself) what is pleasing to him.²⁴

God gives us the grace to do His will and "through Jesus Christ he also accomplishes in *us* ... what is pleasing to him." God gives us the means of grace and blesses the means of grace to do us good. Without Him, all is nothing.

6. We pray that God would **quicken us to watchfulness.**

This last phrase (before getting into another aspect of the sixth petition) explains the purpose of petition "**and quicken us to watchfulness in the use of them, that we and all his people may by his providence be kept from being tempted to sin...**" We are praying that as God orders all things and as we by His grace attend to the means of grace ("in the use of them"), we might be quickened, enlivened, stirred, etc. to watchfulness so that we (all of us) would not be tempted to sin. It is one thing for God to order matters so that we would be tried but it is completely a different thing if we by negligence and indifference (even by willful rebellion) fall into temptation and therefore fall inevitably to sin (John Owen has argued the once we fall into temptation by the lusts of our flesh, we will sin unless providence prevents it — lighting a match on gasoline will ignite a fire unless something stops it [see Ridgley's quote below]). Jesus commands us to "watch and pray" so that we would not enter into temptation (Mt. 26:41). The prayer of the Psalmist goes to this very point: "Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression." (Ps. 19:13) As God keeps us, then (and only then) will we be "innocent of great transgression."

Sin is what we must avoid and temptations can easily lead us into sin. May God hear our prayers and keep us fearful and watchful as we attend to the means of grace. Once we trust in the means of grace (*ex opere operato*), then we are not attending to the means of grace with lively watchfulness. We must trust God in them and attend to them looking to God with all watchfulness.

Objections²⁵

Objection 1. "*We should not pray for deliverance from things good and profitable to us. The temptations which are from God, such as trials by afflictions, poverty, false prophets, &c., are*

²³ "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

²⁴ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (PNTC; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 536.

²⁵ Z. Ursinus lists three objections that are helpful and I offer a summary of them in this section. Zacharias Ursinus and G. W. Williard, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Cincinnati, OH: Elm Street Printing Company, 1888), 656.

things good and profitable to us. Therefore we should not pray for deliverance from them.”

Ursinus notes that trials, afflictions, etc. are not profitable in themselves — they can destroy us. But in so far as they bring good to us “we should not pray for deliverance.” But “afflictions and the cross itself, which are evil in themselves, being destructive to our nature, from these we should pray for deliverance, as Christ himself also prayed when he said, *Let this cup pass from me*, that is, let it pass from me in as far as it is a destruction and evil, in which sense the Father himself did not desire it. But in as far as the death of Christ was a ransom for the sins of his people, in so far both Christ and the Father desired it; “Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.” (Matt. 26:39.)” Good can come of evil but that doesn’t make the evil good. Afflictions by themselves are not “good” but if they tend to our good and God sees fit to not remove them, let us pray for the good use of them.

Objection 2. “*We ought not to pray for deliverance from what God wills. But God wills our temptations. Therefore we ought not to pray for deliverance from them.*” That God has ordered them into our lives (his simple secret will) should not immediately regulate our prayers. Temptations can easily harm us and for that reason we pray for deliverance. Ursinus says “that God “does not will them in as far as they are destructive to us; but only in as far as they are trials and exercises of our faith, prayer and constancy.” If God does not deliver us from the temptation, then we must pray that we most assuredly would not fall into sin (more on this below).

Objection 3. “*It is in vain that we pray for what we never obtain. But we shall never obtain a complete deliverance from temptations in this life; for “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” (2 Tim. 3:12.) Therefore it is in vain that we pray not to be led into temptation.*” Ursinus answers, “we pray that we may not be led into temptation, not because we are here wholly to be delivered from temptations; but because we are delivered from many temptations and evils in which we should have perished, had we not sought and prayed for deliverance.” This fatalist mentality is something we Calvinists must resist. If this objection has merit, then we can also reason, “Why resist sin since we will never be perfect in this world?” More importantly, our Lord commanded us to watch and pray so that we will not enter into temptation.

The Danger

Let us never forget how dangerous temptations really are. Without God’s grace, we will fall into sin. Ridgley’s words are instructive and are reminiscent of Owen’s own teaching.

An hour of temptation is not only afflictive, but dangerous, by reason of the united assaults of the enemies with whom we have to deal. The world continually presents objects which are agreeable to corrupt nature; and Satan is unwearied in his endeavours to turn us aside from God by means of these objects, in order that he may have us in his own power, and drive us from one degree of impiety to another. Hence, though it is not impossible to be tempted without sin, yet it is exceedingly difficult. As, therefore, we are to take heed that we do not go in the way of temptation; so we are to address ourselves to God, that he would keep us from it, if it be his will.²⁶

²⁶ Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity*, 2:660-61.

For that reason, it is not enough to *not* sin but rather, it is far better to not enter into any temptation. That is, an addict must not only avoid drugs, he must also avoid the occasions that entice him to take drugs. Once he enters into the lair of temptation, the enticement will overwhelm him. So we must avoid entering into temptation because of its danger.

John Owen spoke frankly of this danger. His sobering words merits our deepest reflections: “If your business, course of life, societies, or whatever else it be of the like kind, do cast you on such things, ways, persons, as suit your lust or corruption, know that you are entered into temptation; how you will come out God only knows.”²⁷ Some frequent the very haunts and circumstances that lead them into temptation and inevitably into sin. But how difficult will be for us if our course of life thrusts us into such dire circumstances!

When Tempted and Fallen

But what do we do when we are in the heat of temptation? What if we already fell into sin? Does the sixth petition only pertain to situations before all of this? The divines recognized that this petition addresses all aspects of temptations: “**or, if tempted, that by his Spirit we may be powerfully supported and enabled to stand in the hour of temptation; or when fallen, raised again and recovered out of it, and have a sanctified use and improvement thereof...**”

1. When we enter into temptation

Though we have spoken of the dangers of entering into temptation, we cannot overlook the simple humbling fact that we too often enter into temptation. We are to pray that **by his Spirit we may be powerfully supported and enabled to stand in the hour of temptation**. The powers of sin and Satan pull us into sin — the strength of the temptation allures and draws us. Here we must give ourselves to praying and fighting. We cannot stand on our own and we must by faith and by grace filled resolve resist the evil one and if possible, to flee the temptation.

Perhaps we are trapped in a car, a guest in someone’s house, an employee of some tempter or temptress, etc., what do we do? We may have naively placed ourselves in this temptation or we have foolishly and willfully walked into a temptation — are we to merely give in? We must flee if we can and cry aloud with repentance. Don’t stop to ponder the temptation but flee from it. Owen said, “[D]o not so much employ your thoughts about the things whereunto you are tempted, which oftentimes raises further entanglements, but set yourself against the temptation itself. Pray against the temptation that it may depart...”²⁸ Pray against it; flee from it.

We confess our desperate weakness and inability when we pray to be powerfully supported. God loves His people so do not abandon yourself to despair — with the temptation, the devil twists your thoughts of your gracious heavenly Father. Now is not the time to see God through the devil’s lens. Look to Him and do not let go. Believe all that you know to be true of Him.

Joseph entered into a temptation and prevailed (Gen. 39:9). Daniel no doubt was tempted to forgo his communion with God and yet did not succumb to the pressure (Dan. 6:10). Paul mentions that all deserted him and then adds, “But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me (ἐνεδυνάμωσέν με)...” (2Tim. 4:17). God can effectually strengthen us (remember how God sent an angel to strengthen our Lord on the Mount of Olives, Lk. 22:43). We can sadly recall more instances of defeat than victories but small victories are possible through Him who

²⁷ John Owen, edited by Kelly M. Kapic, Justin Taylor et al., *Overcoming Sin and Temptation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 190.

²⁸ John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, 206, 207.

strengthens us.

2. *When we fall into sin*

As humbling as it is, we do fall into sin (too often). We pray that **when fallen, raised again and recovered out of it, and have a sanctified use and improvement thereof**. We can so bemoan our sin that we despair and wallow in self-pity to the point of not recovering. Own your sins and be restored by confessing your deep defection. David cried, “Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.” after his great sin against God! Let the Lord restore and do not heal yourself (by playing mind games and speaking peace to your own souls prematurely, cf. Is. 50:10, 11). To be recovered means to remain no longer under the sway and power of the sin that you just committed. By not justifying it, excusing it, making light of it, throwing yourself under its influence (“Why bother resisting and repenting — I’ll just do it again.”), etc. you confess and repent by returning to your first works. Sin is not the last word for the believer; come to terms with it and seek pardon from Him who says, “Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord...” (Is. 1:18).

When you recover, learn from your sins: **and have a sanctified use and improvement thereof**. Peter fell into sin and our Lord restored him and his triple affirmation of his love to Christ shows how he changed and improved what happened (Jn. 21:15ff.). Carson writes,

Three times Jesus asks the same question. When Peter is particularly grieved (v. 17), it is not because Jesus has changed verbs, but because the same question is being asked for the third time. As he had disowned Jesus three times, so Jesus requires this elementary yet profound confession three times. There is no trace of self-righteousness in Peter’s response. He can only appeal to the fact that the Lord knows everything, and therefore knows Peter’s heart: *Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you*. And that is enough. Lest there be any doubt that Peter is fully restored to future service, Jesus again commands, *feed my lambs*.²⁹

Colin Kruse writes similarly: “Jesus may have given Peter three opportunities to re-express his love for him and recommissioned him three times as well because of his threefold denial (18:15–17, 25–27). The record of Peter’s reinstatement stands as an encouragement for all who might crack under pressure and deny their Lord.”³⁰ Recommissioned, we can only imagine that Peter will no longer look at the ministry in the same manner. As a pardoned apostle, he will proclaim Christ’s grace fearlessly.

John Owen makes a penetrating observation about many who have fallen into sin. He says, “They are sensible of their *sins*, not of their *temptations*—are displeased with the bitter fruit, but cherish the poisonous root. Hence, in the midst of their humiliations for sin, they will continue in those ways, those societies, in the pursuit of those ends, which have occasioned that sin; of which more afterward.”³¹ That is, they have not improved upon what caused them to sin — though humbled, they stumble back into their old ways (expecting a different result?). They grieve but have not learned. Temptation led them to sin; they are aware of the latter and

²⁹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Accordance electronic ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 678.

³⁰ Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC 4; IVP/Acordance electronic ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 386.

³¹ John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, 187.

oblivious to the former. Let us spend time to reflect, meditate, ponder, pray, and consider the ways in which we have been led into sin so that we might be better prepared.

Did the sin occur with certain friends? At similar times (evenings, alone, late at night)? Away from home on a business trip? When the TV is on? When you are tired? Is it the television? The internet? Was it when you drank? Is the problem Facebook, games, etc.? We can list many examples but we must learn from them and improve upon them.³² If you know the answers to these questions and secretly decided to not do anything about it, then you have most assuredly entered into temptation and sin.

Why does God allow us to be tempted?

We have seen that for “**for divers holy and just ends**” God allows us to be tempted. Though many more reasons could be listed, I list the four that Thomas Watson offers. Before listing them, I make one more observation. Both Watson and Ridgley give extensive attention to the way Satan tempts. Watson listed 27 ways Satan tempts and disturbs believers (his subtleties).³³ Ridgley gives four broad strategies of Satan. Struggling with sin is not merely a private matter but a deep spiritual conflict! With that in mind, these are the four reasons (offered by Watson) why God allows you and me to be tempted.³⁴ Certainly He does it for many “wise and holy ends.”

1. “He lets them be tempted to try them.” Satan may tempt but God tries us. God tried Job’s sincerity while Satan sought to get Job to blaspheme. “One reason why God lets his people be tempted is, that their metal may be tried, their sincerity, love, and magnanimity. When grace is proved, the gospel is honoured.”
2. “God suffers his children to be tempted, that they may be kept from pride.” Even Paul could have become proud but he was given a thorn in his flesh to keep him from it (2Cor. 12:7). “When Paul was lifted up by revelations, he was in danger of being lifted up with pride; then came the messenger of Satan to buffet him: that was some sore temptation to humble him. The thorn in the flesh was to prick the bladder of pride. Better is the temptation that humbles me than the duty that makes me proud. Rather than a Christian should be proud, God lets him fall into the devil’s hands awhile, that he may be cured of his swelling.”
3. “God lets his people be tempted that they may be fitter to comfort others who are in the same distress, and speak a word in due season to such as are weary.” Paul says that he was not ignorant of Satan’s wiles, 2Cor. 2:11. We have all witnessed his ways and having been foiled by him and repeatedly deceived, we grow wiser and we can give a word in season to those who enter into similar situation. Furthermore, it enables us to deal more gently with them.
4. “God lets his children be tempted to make them long more for heaven, where they shall be out of gunshot, and freed from the hissing of the old serpent.” We can grow attached to this world and we can become desensitized to sin, so God allows us to be tempted and frightened so that we

³² I have heard of a man who believed it was entirely appropriate to speak with the very woman with whom he committed adultery and could not understand why his wife went ballistic. This is wrong on so many fronts but it clearly reveals that he learned nothing from his sin.

³³ Thomas Watson, *The Lord’s Prayer* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 262-282.

³⁴ Watson, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 282-284.

yearned to be rescued from this wicked world. “Satan is not yet fully cast into prison, but like a prisoner who is under bail, he vexes and molests the saints; he lays his snares, throws his fireballs, but it only makes the people of God long to be gone from hence, and pray that they had the wings of a dove, to fly away and be at rest.”

No doubt we could offer other reasons God might have in allowing us to be tempted. Without temptations, we grow soft, insensible, etc. If we are not proud, we grow negligent; if not negligent, we lose all sense of urgency, etc. God has His purposes — we are to pray that we may not enter into temptation and let God wisely determine the course of events in our lives.

Sanctification and Salvation

Lastly, in our struggles against temptation, part of the petition includes our yearning for our entire sanctification and final salvation: **that our sanctification and salvation may be perfected, Satan trodden under our feet, and we fully freed from sin, temptation, and all evil, forever.** We are praying that through all these trials and temptations, we would be sanctified and that eventually, we would be fully saved (from sanctification to glory). In addition, we are praying that our enemy would be crushed (Rom. 16:20) and that eventually (though never perfectly in this world), we would be freed from sin, temptation and all evil (Jn. 17:15). That is the heart of Paul’s prayer, “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1Thess. 5:23)

Part of this growth and development can be seen in the way our Lord deals with Satan. Our enemy will be crushed in due season. Vos’s statement is helpful here:

Sometimes after a long and weary conflict with temptation and suffering, God shows his favor by giving his children special and noteworthy victories over the devil and his works. Persecutors of the saints may be cut off by death or otherwise, obstacles to Christian profession and practice may be removed, closed doors may be opened, burdens or handicaps may be removed, etc. Acts 16 narrates how Satan was trodden under the feet of the saint of Philippi, a city where he had previously had the field pretty much to himself. (Vos, 586)

We do not think Satan will be completely defeated until Christ returns and many passages teach that his powers will be unleashed just before his final defeat (the great tribulation, Gog and Magog, Antichrist, etc.). Yet, our Lord gives us seasons of victory to show His power and extend His purposes so that the elect may be saved and God be glorified through His saints.