

Travels with the Spirit: A Summer Travelogue Through the Book of Acts
Travel Testimony
“Lead Us Not Into Temptation, But Deliver Us From Evil”
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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa

That’s part of what was stamped onto the little aluminum medallion I carried in my pocket every single day for around three years when I was about 6 to 8 years old. I have no idea where I got it, but I think it seemed appropriate to carry it. My family was living in the Williams Bible House, a lovely old home located right on the campus of Hastings College in Hastings, Nebraska. The house had been donated to the college by a wealthy, pious alum with the stipulation that it would be the home for the college’s Bible Professor. That was my dad’s title, so that’s where we lived. As a resident of that house, perhaps I felt obligated to keep the Lord’s Prayer coin with me at all times.

Although I remember reading over the prayer every day before the shiny disc went into my pocket, I certainly didn’t understand what the prayer was all about. “Temptation?” “Evil?” Tough concepts for an early elementary kid!

My parents certainly brought me up to know and understand right and wrong. But calling any part of that “evil” didn’t come up, as I remember. The closest I remember to an overt lesson about that took place when I was 5 or 6. We were on our way from our home in Nebraska to San Anselmo, California, the location of the San Francisco Theological Seminary, just north of San Francisco across the Golden Gate Bridge. Dad was going to spend the summer doing graduate work back at the Presbyterian Seminary where my folks had met and each earned advanced degrees.

As I have come to understand, we were living on a shoestring at the time, so every penny was important as we made our way West. As we finished lunch one day in Sparks, Nevada, just before entering California, something inspired my dad to teach my brother and me a lesson about the evils of gambling. The change after paying the lunch bill was a nickel. He wanted us to see how foolish and wrong it would be to plug that nickel into a slot machine next to the checkout counter. Why would we just give money to someone who was, in essence, simply trying to steal it from us?

So ... in went the nickel, and Dad was ready to give us the “See, I told you so” sermon. However, the bells clanged and lights flashed because he had hit the jackpot! I believe the total payment was only something like \$5.00, but it was enough to pay for a couple more meals for the family, and definitely enough to spoil his teachable moment. “Hmm ... if that is evil, Dad, I’d like some more!” I learned something dramatic from travel that day, but not at all what my dad intended.

Probably the first time I had a real inkling of what evil was, was later that year, after we returned to Nebraska. During the Fall of 1957 and early in 1958, 19 year-old Charles Starkweather and his girlfriend went on a killing spree that ended with 12 people in

Nebraska and Wyoming dead. There was no real motive ... just the enjoyment of the experience for the two teenagers.

I was old enough to understand that killing was wrong ... and scary. Probably as a result of hearing newscasts during the weeks-long manhunt, I felt genuine fear for the first time in my life, and got a 6 year-old's glimpse into what evil could look like. At that time, that's probably what I thought the words on that aluminum coin were describing.

It's likely that coming face to face with evil wasn't part of my life for another 15 years. Sorrow ... confusion ... disillusionment? Probably. But not pure, genuine evil. Not the kind of evil that has driven the thoughts and prayers of religious people all over the world and throughout time.

In January of 1973, that changed for me. Kathy and I were part of a January Term study trip during our senior year at St. Olaf College. The focus of the trip was to be immersing ourselves in the art and musical culture of Austria and Germany, with a special focus on opera. What a grand experience! We were also encouraged to learn about all aspects of the local culture as we were able. To that end, several of us took a day trip to visit the Nazi Concentration Camp at Dachau, about 10 miles northwest of Munich, Germany.

From the moment of entry, the mood was sobering and almost surreal. Walking slowly through the museum displays which document the "Who" and the "What" of the Camp planted the seed of understanding in me about what evil really was and is. However, when we moved back to the part of the huge Camp where the gas chamber and crematorium were, we were faced with a stark, shocking, and sickening reality in full bloom. As we entered the gas chamber, we were greeted by huge photos of corpses piled right where we were standing ... emaciated, naked bodies stacked up, waiting to be wheeled down the corridor to the ovens where the bodies would be burned.

That all happened because evil existed and millions of people chose to disregard it or to try to explain it away. That is when the words of my childhood keepsake became real ... and really important.

Thanks to a little side trip between operas, one of the most frightening and inescapable realities of our world was made real for me. From then on, part of my goals as a person, and especially as a Christian, has been to stay alert for the kind of evil which poisons people's minds and to work to expose it and defeat it.

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."