

God's Perseverance With His Saints (Part One)

The Father's Protection

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Christ's enemies ask Him to speak more plainly, thereby implying that their failure to believe was due to His fuzziness and preaching. But Jesus puts the blame right back on them, right where it belonged. In John 10, in verses 26-28, Jesus said to the Jews,

John 10:26-28 "But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep, as I said to you. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand."

Now, they wanted the gospel said plainly so Jesus spoke it plainly. And therefore, these verses contain a statement of three things that Jesus wanted to impress upon them, and also His disciples. 1) mankind's hopeless corruption through sin, 2) God's electing grace and salvation, and 3) His perseverance with His saints. It is God's perseverance with His saints that I want to focus on today.

The same doctrines are also found in chapter 6 of John's gospel because there Jesus pointed out three things that are important to us today. 1) No one can come to Him unless the Father draws him, 2) all whom the Father has given to Jesus will come to Him, and 3) none of those who come will be lost. Such assurances that we have are so comforting and they are so much of a guarantee coming from our Father and Jesus Christ His Son.

It is not surprising that these essential truths also occur in Christ's prayer recorded in chapter 17. Because although they have already been stated, we would expect them to be especially included in Christ's intimate prayer to His Father on behalf of the disciples.

Turn with me, if you will please, to John 17. Now we traditionally read this section of Scripture during the Passover service. Jesus spoke these words just

prior to His arrest so they are very important, and they are some of the last words that Jesus wanted to not only let His disciples know of but what He wanted to tell His Father before He was crucified.

In verses 1 through 5, Jesus prayed for Himself, but by far the largest part of Jesus' prayer relates to the disciples. He was much more concerned about them than about Himself and He was sure of the suffering that was inevitable and the victory that was certain for them. However, the disciples were variable. In and of themselves, they were likely to fail and He had already predicted that they would desert Him. Nevertheless, He prayed for them with confidence that they would be kept by the Father's power and presented for a future ministry.

Jesus gives the reasons for His confidence in John 17, verses 6 through 8. And His prayer concerning His disciples actually begins in verse 6. But we are going to read verses 6 through 10.

John 17:6-10 "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. Now they have known that all things which You have given Me are from You. For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent me. I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them."

Next, Jesus asked for the continuation of God's protection of the disciples in the future danger that they were to face.

John 17:11-12 "Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those you gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition [you know that was Judas], that the Scripture might be fulfilled."

So we have, first, a clear distinction between those who are Christ's and those who are of the world. The implication is that the world cannot come to Him for salvation and certainly does not. Second, He teaches that those who come are those who have been given to Him by the Father. Third, He speaks of His own special ministry to them for which He is set apart, that is, sanctified. Fourth, He prays for all who will come to Him later as a result of the disciple's testimony, indicating that these will believe. And this includes you and me. Fifth (and finally), Jesus asks that they be kept by the Father and thus never be lost. And all five of these facts concern you and me as well.

Now these words in John 17:11-12 record Christ's second direct request of this prayer and it is His first for His disciples. Earlier, He had prayed for Himself in verses 1 through 5, asking that having glorified the Father on earth by finishing the work that He had been given to do, He might in turn be glorified. Now He turns to others and intercedes for them; and this prayer is for their safekeeping.

The remaining requests are for their sanctification found in John 17:17, is for their unity in John 17:20-21, and eventual presence with Him in permanent fellowship in John 17:24. So as we look ahead to these other requests, as well as to the one with which we are going to cover today, we cannot fail to notice that they all refer to spiritual things. It is interesting that Jesus does not ask for material things for them. He does not ask for them to become wealthy. He does not ask for them to have nice homes. He does not ask for them to be respected by the world. But *He does intently ask that they be protected from evil, separated from the world, trained for their responsibilities, and safely kept in spiritual fellowship with Him.*

We turn, then, to the second request itself, the request for God's safe keeping of His disciples, and that also includes you and I as members of His church. The first thing we notice is the danger that stimulates Christ's expression of concern. First, although Jesus was leaving to go to the Father, the disciples were not leaving, they were remaining on earth in the world. In fact, they were to remain in the world for quite a long time after that, for the rest of their lives. And this is a serious and almost ominous note in an otherwise joyful and optimistic prayer.

Also, there was a contrast between Himself in the glorified position that He was soon to enjoy and the disciples in their earthly position. How could there be much more of a contrast between showing the difference between the spiritual and the physical?

Let me give you an illustration. Now you remember the story of the disciples' storm-tossed crossing of the Sea of Galilee in Matthew 14:28-33. They had been sent across the sea while Jesus remained on the mountain to pray. But a storm had come and He looked down from the mountains, saw their little boat being pounded, and had come to them, walking on the water. Yes, He had come to them, but He had also deliberately allowed them to go through a period of struggle, did He not?

This is our condition now. One day Christ will return for His disciples and for us. But in the meantime, we are in the world and He prays for us because He knows the danger that we are in and the struggle that we face. When He was here, Jesus was their first and last line of defense. And if they were threatened, He was there to receive the blows. And if they were hated, He was there to allow that hate to be expended on Himself. And now He was going and the hate that had formally been directed against Himself would soon fall in equal fury upon the disciples.

Now, back two chapters to John 15, please. Earlier, He had warned them of it. Christ said,

John 15:20-21 "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me."

Flip back over to John 17, verse 12 (and you may want to keep a bookmark in John 17 just to make it easier for you to flip back to it when we need to). The second thing we notice about the danger that stimulates Christ's expression of concern is that the disciples were in very great danger because, apart from God's perseverance, they would certainly be lost. They could not do it on their own because they had so much human nature. And this is the reason for Christ's mention of Judas at this point in verse 12.

We must not think, although our English translations seem to suggest it, that Judas is referred to as an exception to God's perseverance with His saints, as though for the sake of a prophecy, God consented to abandon Judas. This is not the case because Judas was not one of Christ's originally. This is said elsewhere and even this passage implies it.

John 17:12 [the second part] "Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition [that is Judas] that the Scripture might be fulfilled."

The phrase "son of perdition" is in the nominative case rather than the genitive, which sets it off from the words "of them" which precede it. The true meaning is, "I have lost none of them whom You gave Me. None at all. But the son of perdition has been lost as has been prophesized in Scripture." The reference is to Psalm 41:9 which says, "Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." So the case of Judas teaches what would inevitably happen if God did not regenerate the individual and then keep in His care the one who has been regenerated.

If it were not for God, who could stand? Who could survive the onslaughts of the world if God did not keep us. Those onslaughts are daily, they are hourly, they are minute by minute; and cell phones do not help a bit, do they? They keep it right in front of us at all times. So the pressure on us is greater than any pressure that anyone has ever had, so to speak, in the history of man, because of the amount of media we have coming at us and the amount of information, and also that we are minute-by-minute observing what is going on in the world. But God *does* keep us.

And that is the point of these verses and the object of Christ's request. While Jesus was here, He kept those whom God had entrusted to Him and He kept them well, none was lost. So He is about to return to the Father and so He recommits those whom He had cared for to the Father's keeping. This theme occurs many times in the Old Testament, often in rich images. For example, in Psalm 121 the image is that of a divine watchman or protector. In the *New King James* version, notice the words help, keeps, and preserve as we read. These are all words describing the actions of a protector.

Psalm 121:1-8 [the caption in my Bible for this section is, God the Help of Those Who Seek Him, a song of ascents] I will lift up my eyes to the hills—from whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul. The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and even forevermore.

So this is total protection, not just totally at the moment, but totally *forever* protection by God. Under the watchful eye of God is the dominant idea in that psalm.

In the Hebrew text, only one word is used for what the *New King James* version translates variously as keeps, keeper, and preserve there in Psalm 121. That Hebrew word, *shamar*, is used six times. It is found twice in the second stanza as keeps in verses 3 and 4, once in the third stanza as keeper in verse 5, and three times in stanza four as preserve and that is verses 7 and 8.

Now, if the first stanza asks where the help of the devout disciple comes from, and answers that it is from the God who made heaven and earth, the next stanzas explore various ways in which that Creator God helps His weak disciple. Stanzas two and three explore by images, suggesting that God is like a watchman who does not sleep or like shade from the harmful effects of the sun. The last stanza abandons imagery and says directly that God is our protector at all times and in all circumstances.

So with God as our vigilant watchman, how much more soundly should we be sleeping when God, who never slumbers or never sleeps, is looking out for us and is guarding us? And with God as the shade on our right hand, the psalmist, through figurative language, expresses that nothing either by day or night can harm us. If God is keeping guard, God is our covering against

every calamity. He is our shade against the visible dangers of the day as well as the hidden dangers of the night. This is a thorough description of God's protection in Psalm 121.

The powerful fourth stanza sums up the preceding verses in a series of intensifying statements with God as our protector always. With God as our protector always, He will keep us from all harm. He will watch over our lives. He will watch over our comings and goings and He will do all of that, both now and forever. Complete protection.

These verses remind us of the corresponding passage at the close of Romans 8.

Romans 8:35-39 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What encouraging words those are! And how thoroughly they cover everything that we could be concerned about.

Now another passage in Ezekiel 34, verses 11 through 16 and in the verses immediately before this, God has been speaking against those who had been the shepherds of Israel, that is, Israel's leaders. They had not done their work. They had done a terrible job of leading Israel. And now says God, I will Myself be a good shepherd to them.

Ezekiel 34:11-14 [this section of Scripture is titled, God, the True Shepherd] 'For thus says the Lord God: "Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were

scattered on a cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country.

That kind of reminds us of the way we are today in God's church, just scattered everywhere around the world. Every week I get emails from all over the world for different reasons, you know, questions or they are interested in our websites and things like that. And the people that He is calling are all over, everywhere, every country.

Ezekiel 34:14-16 "I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. There they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down," says the Lord God. "I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment."

So God is the shepherd of His people. He will do all which the shepherd should have done but did not. And it is a characteristic of God as a shepherd that He judges between sheep and sheep, rejecting the proud and accepting the humble and brokenhearted. In Isaiah 27, God's keeping power is likened to the care of a vinedresser.

Isaiah 27:2-3 In that day sing to her, "A vineyard of red wine! I, the Lord, keep it, I water it every moment; lest any hurt it, I keep it night and day."

Turn back to John 17 please. These were the images upon which Jesus was drawing as He prayed for His people. And He had lived these images Himself as well. Obviously, during the days of His incarnation, He had been the watchman and the shepherd and the vinedresser. But now as He prepared to depart from them, He committed His disciples to His Father, and how could they be safer than that?

John 17:11 "Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are."

True, the danger was great without; the danger was even great within because they still had their own old human nature that would certainly drag them down into sin again and again, if they allowed it to. But over and against this was God, who was greater even than the danger itself and could give us whatever we need to resist whatever came our way.

Now, there is one more point here that must not be lost. Three times in these verses, Jesus speaks of keeping the disciples. Once in reference to God and twice in reference to Himself. But in two of these instances, He also speaks more specifically of that by which they are kept and it is by God's name. They are kept by God's name. I have mentioned this in previous sermons before. And it is very important that we understand it.

In John 17:11 we read, "Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom you have given Me." And then in John 17:12 we are told, "While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name."

So what does it mean to be kept in God's name? In John 17:6 Jesus said that He had revealed God's name to those who had been given to Him.

John 17:6 "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word."

The name of God is a Semitic phrase for speaking about God's attributes. To make the name known is to reveal the God who possesses those attributes. To be protected by the name is therefore to be protected by the one who is Sovereign and holy, all-knowing and wise and compassionate, omniscient, omnipotent—anything else that can properly be said of God.

And there is more because to be kept in the name is not merely to be kept by God as if He were only some distant force that could be called in to defend

us if it were necessary. It is rather that we are actually in Him and His Spirit in us, much like being in a fortress. Thus His power and other attributes surround us constantly. Proverbs 18:10 catches this exactly by saying, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe."

Indeed, we are!

Can anything touch us when we are safe in God's fortress? Is there any more powerful or more strong fortress than that? We are safe, not because of ourselves (we are too weak), but rather because we are kept by Jesus Christ and the Father.

And what of us? Do we feel free to sin because God is for us completely and entirely? Of course not. Rather, when we are called, we choose to go His way and seek to please Him because He and only He is for us. Who else is for us? Who else is for us 100%? No one! The world is not for us. And Satan is certainly not for us. Even our friends are not for us 100%. And when it gets right down to it, how could they be, still having human nature? Even as much as we try to be good and complete friends, we cannot as long as we have human nature because all are for themselves.

In the final analysis, human nature is self-centered and only God is for us completely and perfectly!

And lest we doubt it, we have the death of Christ on our behalf, the impartation of the Holy Spirit, and then the vast number of promises of God's perseverance, of which this is just one. Do you have a license to sin then? Well, of course not. Rather, we seek to please God. And what is more, we seek to persevere also, since we have learned perseverance from Him.

We will persevere in our work. It is often discouraging and we often see few results. But we will keep at it because God has given it to us. And we must be like Him in faithfully fulfilling that responsibility.

We will preserve in our witness. Again, we often find this disheartening. Men and women do not want God's truth. They hate God's truth and they hate the God who gave it. Still, we will

continue steadfast knowing that the same God who is able to keep us in the world is able as well to save some out of it. He may use our witness as one means of doing so.

Finally, we will persevere with our families. They are a special area of our responsibility; and we are disappointed when a son or daughter or wife or husband will not walk in God's way of life. Sometimes the situation seems hopeless, but it is not hopeless to God. And therefore we will not allow it to be hopeless for us. We will not give up, we will not quit. God is faithful. He is our keeper and with God, all things are possible.

So how in the world can we give up on God when He does not give up on us? God is for us and we must reflect God's perseverance in our thoughts and actions.

What do you think should be the distinguishing qualities of God's church, or to put it in a slightly different terms, what do you think you would list first of the most important characteristics? Would you say faithfulness or holiness or love? It may be surprising to you, but in studying the 17th chapter of John, containing Christ's prayer for His church, that characteristic of that church with which Jesus begins is joy. I am not suggesting in the least that faithfulness or holiness or love or any wonderful traits as such are not important, they are. Then why does Christ start with joy?

Jesus' prayer has three parts: a section dealing with Jesus Himself, a section dealing with the disciples, and a final section dealing with those who were to follow them in faith. That is, those who were to follow the disciples in faith. In other words, the prayer moves by stages from Jesus Christ to God's church.

John 17, verse 13, the verse to which we have now come, is halfway through the prayer, so not surprisingly, it introduces this first characteristic. The others that it introduces are holiness in verses 14 to 17, truth in verse 17, responsibility in verse 18, unity in verses 21 through 23, love in verse 26.

John 17:13 "But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they [that is, the disciples] may have My joy fulfilled in themselves."

That most of us do not think of joy as a primary characteristic of the church probably indicates both how little we regard it and how far we have moved from the attitude of the early church. Because if anything characterized the early church, it was that it was a joyous assembly and it had its first love; and I am sure that helped greatly in them having that joy. If you lose your first love, you lose some of that joy, do you not?

We see this immediately when we begin to study the subject of joy because the New Testament is a book of joy.

In the Greek language, in which the New Testament was written, the verb which means "to rejoice," "be joyful" is *chairein*. It is found 72 times. The noun which means joy is *chara*. It occurs 60 times. It is a lot of times to refer to rejoicing and joy and so forth. Besides, as we study these instances, we find that joy was not a technical idea as if we were to find it only in highly theological passages. Rather, it occurs most often simply as a greeting, meaning "joy be with you." In fact, it is not always restricted to the speech of Christians. It is used, for example, in the letter to Felix about Paul by the Roman officer Claudius Lysias in Acts 23:26.

But in Christian speech, it obviously meant much more than it did with pagans and is used more frequently. We notice, for example, that the angel who announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds said in Luke 2:10, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people." This obviously meant more than greetings. Again, we notice Jesus saying in John 15:11, "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full." In Acts 15:23, when the Jerusalem church sent a letter to the churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia after the first church council, they began their announcement of the momentous decision regarding Gentile liberty by the Greek word *chairein*, "Greetings." James begins his letter in the same manner with *chairein*, "Greetings."

So it meant more than just greetings in early Christianity with the apostles and the early church. In Paul's letters, there are many such greetings. So when in Paul's letter, literally flowing over with joy, the apostle wishes to give final admonitions to the Philippians, he writes in Philippians 4:4,

"Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!" Paul felt it was very important. He ended with it that way to be as encouraging as he could.

The great greeting, "joy be with you" is prominent throughout the New Testament. But is the church today joyful? Are Christians joyful? Obviously, we are far more joyful than we would be if we were not Christians. And there are some places where joy is more evident than others. For example, it is often very evident in new members of God's church. And as I mentioned earlier, a believer's first love is a joyous period above others. But when observing believers over time, would the joy that obviously characterized Jesus and the early church be visible?

We think of joy as something that should characterize the church ideally and will characterize it in God's Kingdom. But how can it exist here and now amid trials and suffering? Now, we often have frowns and griping and long faces and other manifestations of a fundamental inner misery, especially when we are going through a serious trial. There is a difference between what we profess and know we should be, and what we really are. We *should* be joyful, but often we are not. We get depressed, circumstances get us down instead of the victory we should experience. We often know defeat and discouragement.

Of course, no normal person wants to remain gloomy. So what is the remedy? It is one of the things Christ's prayer does. That He does pray for it indicates that He was aware of the problem that we so easily develop. That He prays in the way He does indicates that in addition to merely recognizing our need, He also knows the way our depression can be overcome.

So the first remedy for a lack of joy is not something you would expect. Jesus Himself says in John 17:13, "But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves." Or, in other words, "I say these things while I am still in the world so that they may have the full measure of My joy within them." And this means that the basis for joy is sound doctrine. Joy depends on doctrine, on truth. Joy is associated with a mature knowledge of God's Word.

Psalm 19:8 The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing to the heart.

Psalms 119:14-16 I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, as much as in all riches. I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways. I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word.

Now, please go back to John 15 once again. Earlier in these final sermons, Jesus declared,

John 15:10-11 "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full."

In speaking of doctrine here, I am not referring to the technicalities of doctrine in and of itself, but rather the practical knowledge of God's character and commandments that we receive from His Word.

Joy is established in the hearts and minds of God's people when they trust God's Word.

Psalms 34:8 Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in him.

Psalms 34:22 The Lord redeems the soul of His servants, and none of these who trust in Him shall be condemned.

In other words, joyous is the person who trusts in Him. None who trust in Him will be miserable.

Joy consists in having settled all our thoughts on God, His dealings with us, and His purposes with and through us. There is no way that we are going to receive or get or acquire true joy through material things or doing physical activities. We will get a temporary happiness or joy from it, but not one that lasts forever. And that is what God and His Son Jesus Christ are trying to develop within us, is that full joy that is permanent.

As long as we are unsettled, we are in a quagmire of doubt and inner turmoil. And when we are settled in our knowledge of God, His will, and His ways, we can trust Him peacefully and joyfully, whatever the circumstances. Probably all of us have blamed our circumstances on our gloominess. "My circumstances are so hard" or whatever wording might come. We have all said variations of that. Having this mindset, we have also probably felt that other people just do not understand our circumstances. And what that is saying is that you cannot understand someone's problems until you walk a mile in their shoes or something of that sort. And there is truth in that.

But when we look at our own circumstances, we often, if not always, feel that other people do not understand what we are going through, but you must change your attitude from negative to positive. You must be settled in Him by recognizing that He has planned those circumstances or allowed them, which is part of planning those circumstances, and look for His purposes in them.

Please consider this true story before you blame your woes on your circumstances. Jimmy Anderson is a quadriplegic who lives in Madison, Wisconsin with his wife. He is the founder of the Victims of Impaired Driving project. Now, quadriplegia is a condition of paralysis in which a person loses complete or partial use of all limbs and the torso. He wrote:

"This Is What It Feels Like To Be A Quadriplegic."

It's terrible not being able to stand, to walk, to run, to go for a hike in the woods, to walk down the stadium steps and be part of the home team.

I hate being the reason your plane or bus are late. Trust me, I feel awful about that. I miss stretching my legs after a hard day or dancing at a wedding (badly).

Most of all, I hate how restricted the world feels. I have to meet my friend's new baby in the front yard because I can't get into their house without my legs. The world feels like a series of obstacles and barriers. It makes me feel like I can't be a part of regular life. It's isolating.

Not being able to use your hands is even worse. I would be happy to never walk again if I could have my hands back just to open the door, to crack my knuckles, to stretch, to scratch my dog, or make her leg kick.

To be able to hold my wife. I never realized how appropriate it is that we use the word feel for both emotion and sensation until I lost it. It sometimes feels like I am numb to the world around me.

I miss cooking and mowing the lawn. I miss being bad at golf and worse at basketball. I miss nature, off the trail nature. I miss driving. I miss rolling down windows and fiddling with radio dials.

When you become disabled later in life, your memories torment you. They taunt you. Beauty in life is experiential. When you're disabled, it's hard not to see only ugliness in the world.

When I was in rehabilitation, local news ran a story about a quadriplegic who killed himself late one evening. He drove his power wheelchair into this lake and it dragged him under. Watching I started to cry. I was terrified. Was it really so bleak for people like me? Was there really so little hope?

I understand why that poor guy took his life. But almost three years later, despite all of the pain, I've found new beauty in the world. I found goodness in people that I was too cynical to see before my accident.

On Sunday morning, my wife and I got up early and went for breakfast around the corner. It had snowed overnight and our walkway was blocked. I didn't know how deep it was and I got stuck. My wife pushed me but the chair wouldn't budge. We contemplated calling emergency services.

And then someone pulled over to help, dressed in his Sunday best. He got on his hands and knees in the dirtiest of the gutter snow and dug me out. This guy didn't care who I was. He didn't care if I was

rich or poor, who I voted for, who I prayed to, or if I prayed at all. He saw that I was in need and helped me without question, much to the detriment of his suit pants.

It was an act of kindness and this act of kindness gave me hope for the future. It's hard to live my life, but I'm lucky to have the opportunity to keep living, to be a part of the goodness of this world, to pay forward the kindness I have received. And maybe to stop others in my position from losing hope, to help them see the beauty in this world.

To help them want to live.

So let me say something about circumstances which we often think are so bad. Circumstances refer to the things that are without. The word itself is based on two Latin words, *circum*, which means "around" (as in the word *circumference*), and *stare*, which means "to stand." So circumstances are the things that are standing around us, they are external.

But where is God in this picture? Is He without? No, He is within. So why worry about what is without if Christ is within? And to know that He is within and that He is directing us is the secret of that spiritual joy that is our rightful birthmark as God's spiritual children.

Now, the second remedy for a lack of joy in the believer's life is fellowship, and that is in two dimensions. There is a vertical fellowship, you might call it fellowship with God. And there is a horizontal fellowship, fellowship with one another. Jesus is the pattern for us in both cases.

Jesus is the pattern for each one of the qualities of the church and that is certainly the case here because He was joyful even though we call Him rightly, but perhaps one-sidedly, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He speaks here not just of joy, but of *My* joy. It is this that He holds out to us.

What was His joy? Well, there was a future joy centered in the completion of His work upon the cross, because we are told that Jesus, for the joy set

before Him, endured the cross. That is not the joy referred to here. Instead, it is the joy of moment-by-moment fellowship with the Father. And this is what sustained Christ in His prayer and on the cross.

It will sustain us as well, if we will submit to Him and work to actively fellowship with Him. As sons of God, we have access to Him through Christ. And Jesus taught that we could be born into God's Family and that God could become our Father. Paul who knew this truth well, which he declared forcefully.

Galatians 4:6 And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!"

Since we are sons of God, we can enter into the joy of Christ even as He entered into joy by constant fellowship with the Father. In addition, we can enjoy it on the horizontal level also. In fact, we *must* enjoy it on the horizontal level because fellowship with the Father and with one another always go together. We remember how John stated the relationship in the preface to his first letter.

I John 1:3-4 That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.

These verses indicate that fellowship with the Father and fellowship with other Christians go together. So if you are not joyful, it may be that you have cut yourself off from other Christians, maybe even with the thought of establishing your own private fellowship with God. It does not work that way. You need other believers and they need you and without them, your fellowship with God will be diminished and your joy will not be full.

Now, there is one more part to God's remedy for lack of joy. It is that we must live righteous lives, because if not, sin will keep us from God and the fellowship with Him that we need will be broken. The apostle Paul emphasizes a needed combination of righteousness and peace and joy.

Romans 14:17 For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking [it is not physical things], but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Many Christians lack the joy that they should have because they do not have the peace about which Paul speaks. That is, they are not resting in God. We must have our thoughts established in Him. But it is also true that often they do not have joy because they do not have righteousness and they go their way rather than God's. They disobey His commandments. They have their own way up to a point, but the Spirit's fruit evaporates.

The fruit of the Spirit cannot be sown unless there is peace. It is sown in *peace*. How much better to go God's way in holiness, to rest in Him, and consequently allow Him to fill you with complete joy and peace as you trust in Him.

Romans 15:13 Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So if we are faithful, God provides joy and peace to us by way of His Spirit.

Now, the second quality (joy was the first quality that I mentioned about the church), of the church is holiness. Holiness is the characteristic of God most mentioned in the pages of the Word of God, and therefore it must characterize God's church. We are a holy people.

I Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Turn back back over to John 17 once again. We are to follow after and pursue holiness. Hebrews 12: 14 warns us that without holiness no one will see the Lord. Jesus speaks of this characteristic of the church in John 17 by praying that God would keep them from the evil one.

John 17:14-17 "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth."

What is holiness? Some people have wrongly identified it with a culturally determined behavioral pattern, so have identified as holy those who do not do certain bad cultural things like gambling or drugs or smoking or any number of such things as that. But this approach exposes a basic misconception and it is the misconception that mainstream Christianity has, which I call the secular church or the worldly church.

Although it may be the case that holiness in a particular Christian may result in abstinence from one or more of these things, the essence of holiness is not found there. People are not justified before God based on some ethical behavior. The apostle Paul distinguished clearly between what the world calls holiness (the term he uses is righteousness) and true holiness, which comes from God and is always God oriented.

Romans 10:3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

Now, the biblical idea of holiness becomes clear when we consider words that are synonyms for it in the English language; namely saint and sanctify. Christ uses the second one in John 17:17, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth."

What is a saint? A saint is not a person who has achieved a certain level of goodness, which is nevertheless what most people think, but rather one who has been set apart by God. And it follows from this that, in the Bible, the word saint is therefore not restricted to a special class of Christians, still less a class that is established by the official action of an earthly ecclesiastical body like Catholicism. Rather, saint is used of all true Christians, as is clear from Paul's use of the word in his epistles.

I Corinthians 1:2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.

The saints are the called-out ones who make up God's church.

The same idea is also present when, as in Exodus 40, the Bible refers to the sanctification of objects. In that chapter, Moses is instructed to sanctify the altar and the laver in the midst of the Tabernacle. In a sense, you could say he was to make saints of them. The chapter does not refer to any intrinsic change in the nature of the stones. Obviously, they are not made righteous. It merely indicates that they were to be set apart for special use by God.

In the same way, Jesus prays for His disciples in John 17:19, "And for their sakes, I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth." So the verse does not mean that Jesus makes Himself more righteous, because He already was righteous. Instead, it means that He separated Himself for a special task, the task of providing salvation for all mankind by His death. So holiness must be understood in this framework.

Now, we need to ask this question: if holiness has to do with separation (or better yet, consecration), and if believers are already holy by virtue of their being set apart by God by Himself, why does Christ pray for our sanctification? Why pray for that which we already have? The answer is obviously that although we have been set apart to God, we often clearly fail to live up to that calling. We are certainly separated by and for God, but we are still somewhat worldly in the sense that the worldly values often remain our values and the world's priorities continue to be our priorities.

The impact of the world's system on the church may be seen in four crucial areas. The areas of the world's wisdom, the areas of the world's theology, the area of the world's agenda, and the world's methods. Each is easily observable.

First of all, there is the matter of the world's wisdom. The original wisdom of the church, in every age, was the wisdom of the Scriptures. Christians stood before the Word of God and confessed their own ignorance in spiritual

things. They even confessed their inability to understand what is written in the Scriptures except by the grace of God who opens the Scriptures to us through His Spirit. Christians confessed their resistance to spiritual things and the fact that if left to ourselves, we always go our own way.

But what has happened in our time is that this original wisdom, the strength of the church, has been set aside for other sources of wisdom with the result that the authoritative and renewing voice of God through the Scriptures is ignored.

Now Peter warned long ago that in the last days or last time scoffers would come saying all things continue as they were from the beginning.

II Peter 3:1-4 Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words that were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation."

Peter encourages us to continue in the things we have learned. The problem we have is worldliness, secularism in the area of the church's wisdom. Even the churches of God today are watering down doctrines, slackening the application of God's righteous standards.

The rejection of the Scriptures as the wisdom of God has serious consequences. One result is that another authority, a poorer one, inevitably comes to take the Scripture's place. People cannot operate without authority, so if you put out one authority, another will come in. And if you reject the authority of God, human authority will emerge. The authority in the large church groups today is the authority of the consensus of the people who make up that particular body. In other words, it is the authority of the 51% vote.

A second result of the church's abandonment of God's wisdom is that the church becomes irrelevant to life. This is seen widely, and not just by

mainstream Christians. It is not only in the area of the world's wisdom that we are faced with secularism. We are also faced with it in the area of the world's theology.

Christianity in the world has been feminized and that is why it mainly attracts women. Mainstream Christianity is loaded with women and hardly any men attend. (Some do.) The world's theology is easy to define. It is the view that man is naturally good, that no one is really lost, and that belief in Jesus is not necessary for salvation. It includes the once saved, always saved theology.

One consequence is that the theological terms that we have always used that come from Scripture and that are biblical and which the church continues to use (because they are part of its heritage), are redefined. And we still find people speaking of sin and salvation and faith and many other biblical terms.

But having adopted the world's theology, they no longer mean the same thing as the original meanings of the biblical terms. And thus sin no longer means rebellion against God and His righteous law, for which we are held accountable, but instead means ignorance or the kind of oppression that is accused of residing in manmade social structures and cultures.

The world's theology teaches that sin is determined by human social systems, that the way to overcome it is clearly not by Jesus' death, but rather by changing the human social structures through revolution. In a similar way, they teach that Jesus is not the incarnate God who came to die to make our salvation possible, but rather merely the pattern for creative living. We are to look to Jesus as an example, but not as the Savior. They say in some forms of this theology He is even considered to be what we might call the evolutionary peak of the race. A peak that we are all supposed to attain.

"Salvation" is defined not as the original theology would say, as, "being made right with God" or even "God moving to redeem us in Christ," but rather liberation from the oppression of traditional Christian structures. Faith is no longer believing God and taking His Word as truth because His Word is not believed or taken at face value, but rather awareness of the situation as

we see it. This approach is closely related to Marxism because Marxists say that commitment to communism arises from becoming aware of oppression and beginning to do something about it.

The commission of Christian churches is also redefined. It no longer means carrying the gospel of Jesus Christ to a perishing world, but rather working to overthrow social injustice.

The second result of adopting the world's theology is a tendency to ignore theology entirely and this is seen primarily in mainstream Christianity's preoccupation with the world's agenda. In the third century of the Christian church this meant the concerns of the Roman Empire under Constantine. In the Middle Ages it meant the crusades in which religious zeal was exploited on behalf of political expansionism.

In the world today, what is the world interested in? We are told that the world is concerned with problems of hunger; therefore, that it should be a major concern of the church too. The world is interested in the problems of the Third World, underdeveloped countries that we are told should therefore be one of our primary concerns. The world is concerned with racism, poverty, and social injustice. We are told so should we be. The world is involved with elevating the environment to supreme status. We are told we must protect it at all costs, even at the cost of human life.

Of course, these may be legitimate concerns on a social level. But should they be the primary concerns of the church? What happens when the church makes these items its primary concerns? Besides becoming Marxist, it means we totally remove ourselves and separate ourselves from God because they are not God's agenda at this time. In emphasizing these other items as priorities, the church inevitably neglects its God-given spiritual duties, namely preparing the bride of Christ, guarding the truth, and preaching the gospel to the world.

Jesus makes it clear in His prayer by saying at the beginning of this section in John 17.

John 17:14 "I have given them Your word."

John 17:17 "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth."

That it is by means of the Bible, by the Word of God, that we are to become increasingly separated to God—separated to God, not from God—where we grow in righteousness because we are a holy church.

By means of the Word of God, God's people are the opposite of the secular church, because since the secular mainstream Christian church employs the world's wisdom, the world's theology, the world's agenda, and the world's methods, God's true church must resist and overcome its influence. Sadly, the greater churches of God are increasingly looking like the secular church. They are looking more Protestant by the day. Even their definition of love is turning Protestant.

God's church employs the wisdom of God, the theology of the Scriptures, the agenda of God's written revelation, and the methods that have been given to us for our keeping fit in the church until Jesus Christ comes again.

We must always remember that God has chosen us out and dedicated us for His special service. That special service is that we should love and obey Him and should teach others to do the same. And God has not left us to carry out that great task in our own strength, but out of His grace He fits us for our task, if we place our lives in His hands.

God perseveres with His saints and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it!