

Protection

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening to you all. Glad to be here. We are beginning a new series this week, and a while ago we were asking ourselves what that series would be.

We were praying and thinking about our church, our community, the people we love, and trying to figure out what do we need to hear right now? Where do we need to go? And the word that kept coming to mind was the word comfort.

That I think, as I've talked to a lot of people and reflected in my own spiritual place right now, I have a hunger for comfort.

Because I think there's a lot of anxiety in the world, particularly in our country. And so as we began to think about that, we began to wonder, and I began to kind of reflect on this reality that we don't often talk about in the Christian life.

Normally when we talk about Jesus, and when we learn about Jesus, and we think about Jesus' ministry, we think about his earthly ministry. We think about the fact that he came 2,000 years ago, that he had about three years of active ministry as a young adult, and then his ultimate death and resurrection as the kind of climax of that time.

[1 : 16] So that's what Jesus did 2,000 years ago for us. But since then, for the last 2,000 years, he's been doing something else for us.

And the fact is, he's been praying for us. The Bible says in a couple of different places, in Romans and Hebrews, that Jesus now actively intercedes for us.

That right now, as we're sitting here, Jesus is praying for us. And that thought fascinated me. It's not something I've thought much about. And there's a place in John's Gospel, which we just heard Dan read in John chapter 17, where Jesus, in full view of his disciples, see normally he would go off and pray by himself, but this time he chooses to pray out loud in full view of his disciples, so that they can hear what he's praying.

It's as though Jesus wants his disciples to know his heart for them. That when he prays for us, these are the things that he asks on our behalf.

And so we're going to spend tonight and the next two weeks looking at John chapter 17, and Jesus' prayer for his disciples, and then it says, for all those who become disciples through their word, which includes us who came to faith through the scriptures.

[2 : 38] And so we're going to look at these themes, these petitions that Jesus prays on our behalf. And starting tonight, we'll look at the first theme, which you see in verses 11 and 12, and then in verses 14 and 15, that Jesus prays for our protection.

That he prays that we would be safe, that we would be strengthened, that we would be secure. He prays for our protection. And so we'll see a couple of things. We'll see why we need this protection. Why would Jesus find it necessary to pray to the Father that we would be protected. And then secondly, we'll see how do we get this protection. So why we need it and how to get it.

Let's pray. It's a mystifying, staggering thing to know that as we close our eyes here, and we turn our attention to you and we pray to you that you're praying on our behalf.

And so we simply ask tonight that as we open your word, that you would align our hearts, align our prayers, our imaginations, our longings with your prayers, which reflect your heart for us.

[3 : 47] And we pray this in your power, Lord, by the power of your spirit, in the name of your son Jesus. Amen. So why do we need protection?

Why for 2,000 years might Jesus, in the very throne of heaven, be interceding on our behalf and praying for our protection? And if you look at John chapter 17 and verse 8, it shows us this kind of pattern.

In verse 8 it says, The Father entrusts Jesus with his word. Right? Which is the message of salvation. This is God's great plan to rescue his people through Jesus.

So God entrusts Jesus with this message. And then it says that Jesus then entrusts his disciples with that word. And because of that, they come to have a relationship with God.

And then further down in verse 20, it says that his disciples, by definition as disciples, then take that same word that they received, and they pass that word on to other people.

[4 : 51] Who Jesus says will come to believe through their word. He's talking about us. Right? All those who over the generations have come to faith in Jesus through the written word of his disciples, which we call the Bible.

So this is a receiving and then a passing on of this word. But because this is happening, it plunges those of us who have received that word into peril.

And here's the peril in verse 14. It says, I have given them your word, them meaning us, and the world has hated them, because they're not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. So in other words, the moment we become disciples, the moment we receive the word of Jesus Christ, though we are saved from sin and death, we enter into a life that is fraught with peril.

In other words, we are confronted immediately by two daunting opponents that will challenge us for the rest of our life here.

[6 : 11] And this lays out those opponents, the world and the flesh, or I'm sorry, the world and the evil one. The world and the flesh sort of go together, and then the evil one.

And so what I want to do is just focus a little bit on what does it mean by world, what does Jesus mean by world, and what does he mean by evil one? And I want to clarify first the world, because by world, I want to make it clear that Jesus is not saying, he's not meaning by this the whole world and everybody in it, right?

In many other places in John's gospel, it makes it very clear that God loves this world, and he loves everybody that he's made. So that's not what Jesus is talking about. In this particular place, the world refers to a mindset.

It's a particular worldview. Being of the world is essentially living life in a way that denies the reality of God. It's denying or ignoring God in the world that he's made.

This is what it means to be of the world. So Blaise Pascal was a brilliant 17th century mathematician and physicist, and he had a kind of dramatic conversion to Christianity.

[7 : 21] And then he began to write his thoughts on various aspects of Christianity, and particularly focused time on reasons that people would reject Christianity or not believe it or be opposed to it.

And he reflects on this, and in these reflections, which came to be known as the *pensées*, he makes this fascinating observation. And Pascal actually contends that no one is neutral when it comes to God.

That no one is neutral. He says this, he says, men despise religion, and by that he means Christianity. They hate it and are afraid it may be true.

So he's saying, when it comes to Christianity, no one is neutral. So you can have, on the one hand, you can have the kind of outspoken critic who vilifies and caricatures Christianity and Christians at every turn.

Right? You can also have the very thoughtful agnostic who has really well-reasoned arguments against the Christian faith and has thought it through. And then you can have the person over here who says, you know, I am just not a religious person.

[8 : 33] I've never thought about it. It's never even crossed my mind. I'm not spiritual. And I've not ever spent a moment of my time thinking about this stuff. It just does not matter to me. I'm totally indifferent.

And what Pascal would say is that all of these people actually, deep down, despise God. They may not know it. They may not feel it.

But he says, deep down they do. And the reason he contends is because we know deep down that if there is a God that we cannot simply live as we choose.

Or if Christianity is true, it means ultimately that we're not the ones in control. And he says, knowing that, it fills us with fear. And that fear leads to our despising God.

Thomas Nagel, who's an atheist and a philosopher at NYU, practically admits this in his writing. He says, I want atheism to be true.

[9 : 38] I mean, think about that. Most of us like to think that we're detached, neutral, evaluating the evidence. He says, no, no, no. If I'm honest, I want atheism to be true. I want it to be true.

And he says, and I'm made terribly uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. So see, as much as we like to think we're detached, neutral observers of the evidence, Pascal would say, and Nagel would agree, that we are rooting for none of it to be true.

And I think that, you know, to give one more example, you see this very often in the scientific community. And those of you who are scientists know this. Now, that's not to say there aren't Christian scientists. There are many brilliant Christians who are scientists.

And my wife and I were just recently this week at an event with Dr. Francis Collins, who's the head of the NIH and one of the most brilliant scientists out there and an ardent and passionate follower of Jesus who led us in singing hymns playing his classical guitar.

And so there are scientists out there, many of them. But there does exist within the scientific community a subset of people who seem almost irrationally devoted to materialistic causality.

[10 : 54] In other words, they're devoted to explaining all of this in ways that do not necessitate God. And one in particular, I find this kind of a fascinating admission.

Richard Lewontin is a geneticist at Harvard and here's what he says. He says, it's not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but on the contrary, that we're forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations.

No matter how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated, moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a divine foot in the door. Now, in case you didn't catch what he's saying there, let me just tell you, what is he actually saying there?

He's saying there's nothing in science that compels us to reject God. Rather, it's because it's the opposite. It's because we start from a place of assuming there's no God.

And then that constrains our approach to science. Our entire approach to exploring and making sense of the world begins from a place that rejects the idea of God.

[12 : 17] In other words, the mentality that is, according to Jesus, of the world. Right? So this is a mindset and a worldview. And I do want to make the distinction here.

We're not just talking about the difference between Christians and non-Christians. Right? It's very common and very easy for all of us who are Christians, even those of us who have been Christians a long time, to claim faith and yet nevertheless live of the world.

In other words, live as functional atheists. Right? We claim faith, but when you look at our lives, there's essentially a functional atheism. Right? And so that would be of the world.

But the real concern in Jesus' prayer isn't just being of the world. As much as that is a concern, Jesus is actually equally, if not more, concerned about the second enemy or opponent in the Christian life.

The one who's actually behind all of this. And in verse 14, Jesus prays, I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

[13 : 28] You see what he's saying there? He's saying, the real problem, my real concern isn't that there are a lot of people who are of the world, who reject this idea of God. That's bad enough. He says, but the real concern and the real danger is the one who is behind that mentality.

And this is not something that we talk about a lot at Advent, but from time to time, I think it's important to come back to the fact that at the core of Christian faith, one of the things that we believe, because we see Jesus acknowledging it, is that behind all of the evil in the world, there is actually a personified being.

There is actually a personal entity. And that being is relentlessly opposed to God and all that God has made.

And the objective of this being, the evil one, is to rob God of glory. And he does that by destroying all that God has made, including us.

See, we're casualties. The real aim is to rob God of his glory. But we're the way that happens.

Right? And so Jesus is saying, my real concern is not just the mindset, it's the one who drives the mindset.

[14 : 43] The one who is literally hell-bent on robbing God of glory and destroying everything that he's made. And you see, since the beginning of time, since the beginning, since human beings first called out to God, Satan has been trying to convince us that we're better off without God.

You see that in Genesis chapter 3. You're better off without him. You will be more free. You will live a better life. You'll have more options. You'll have a greater array of possibilities, more fulfillment, if you can just do away with this antiquated notion of a higher power.

That's been happening ever since human beings have walked the earth. So this is the first thing Jesus' prayer teaches us. That there is a danger out there.

That the core problem in our lives, the core problem is actually a spiritual problem. And the true enemy is a spiritual enemy.

That that's the real problem with the world. Now I want to reflect on the implications of that before we move on to the next point. The real enemy is a spiritual enemy.

[15 : 53] What difference does that make for us? World War I broke out and when that happened the British Empire at that point in time was vast all around the world.

And when war broke out the British Empire, the war office sent a telegram to all of their outposts and it said war declared arrest all enemy aliens in your district.

And so a couple of days later they get a return telegram from this remote British outpost in Africa and it said have arrested ten Germans, six Belgians, four Frenchmen, two Italians, three Austrians and an American.

Please advise, who are we at war with? They just arrested everybody. But what's the point? The point is if we don't know who we are at war with we're going to waste all of our time and energy fighting the wrong enemies.

fighting the wrong battles. We have to know who the enemy really is. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood.

[17 : 08] Which means it's not ultimately against other people. So our struggle is not against Donald Trump, right? As many headlines as may claim it, he is not the evil one that is being talked about here.

Our struggle is not against his supporters or people who voted for him. Our struggle is not against Hillary Clinton or her supporters and people who voted for her, right? Our struggle is not against liberals or right-wing nuts or the alt-right or atheists, right?

Our struggle is not ultimately against flesh and blood. Now I'm not saying these differences aren't real and I'm not saying that they don't matter, but what I am saying is this. We need to face a fact here.

Satan is waging a spiritual proxy war against God. Do you understand that? It's like what's happening in Syria.

We're getting caught up in a conflict that is bigger than us. We're the means, we're the pawns on the board. We're being used. We're getting caught up in a spiritual proxy war that Satan has waged against God.

[18 : 26] He has no hope of victory. It's already certain that he's lost. But nevertheless, he fights and thus we fight. Right?

So when we obsess over the latest source of outrage or when we fire off a rant on social media, when we pass around inflammatory articles, when we wring our hands and when we roll our eyes with contempt, all of the while we are fighting this proxy war.

And don't you understand that Satan absolutely delights in our outrage and our political obsession and our fear and our division. He delights in it because that is his agenda.

That is robbing God of glory. It's tearing his creation apart. The point is, I think if we really believed that the real enemy was a spiritual enemy, we would spend our time very differently.

I'll just speak for myself. I think if I really believed this, if I have a hope of leaving here and actually believing and hearing what I've just said to you, I think I will change how I spend my time.

[19 : 36] I'll spend less time obsessing on social media, reading the news for the latest insane headline, and I'll spend more time on my knees.

Because that is how this battle is fought. That's what Jesus is doing. Right? So that's the first point. Why do we need God's divine protection?

Because we have a spiritual enemy who works unceasingly to tear us away from God. And a spiritual problem requires a spiritual solution. So that brings us to the next part of this, which is, if

that's the reason we need protection, then how do we get protection?

What kind of protection is Jesus praying for? And he says in verse 11, I'm no longer in the world, but they are in the world, meaning us. And I'm coming to you, Holy Father.

Comma. Keep them in your name. Keep them, you, me, all of us, keep them in your name. Now, what does it mean for God to keep us in his name?

[20 : 39] Well, it doesn't really make sense unless you know that God's name actually means his character. So think about, think about God's character, all that we know of him, all that he's revealed himself to be, all that he's done in history, his character.

That's his name. It's summative of his whole identity. And in the Bible, particularly in the Psalms, it talks a number of places about God's character being like a refuge, a source of protection, right, a place of safety.

Now, what does that mean? How does that actually work? And the only image I can really think of to convey this, with apologies, comes from this science fiction book that I read not too long ago.

And in this science fiction novel, there's this planet in a solar system, and the planet is very close to the sun. And in order to get to this planet, you have to fly very close to this really huge sun.

And the problem is is that most spaceships, when they, if they just try to fly directly to the planet, the cosmic rays from the sun will tear the ship apart.

[21 : 44] It'll, they'll rip it apart and disintegrate it in space. And so the only way to get to this planet is this giant shield ship that they've built.

And it's a shield that blocks the rays of the sun. And so the ship flies out to meet you. And that if you pull your ship alongside the shield ship, and you fly in the shadow of that ship, it escorts you safely to the planet.

In other words, you find safety in the shadow of this great shield that is blocking those rays that would otherwise tear you to bits. So Psalm 91, which we just read, says, he who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

So it's the same image. I would suggest it's a very similar image. That as we are moving along with God, allowing God's will to shape our decisions, to shape our priorities, to shape how we spend our time, we're allowing Him to guide and direct our steps.

And as we're doing that, we're moving, we're keeping in step with God and His will and His word that we are staying in His shadow. We are moving with Him through our lives from beginning to end.

[22 : 58] And as we do that and stay in His shadow, His character shields us from things that would otherwise tear us apart. Now you say, well, what does that mean?

Well, let me give you a couple of examples. We could go through dozens. I'll just give you two for the sake of time. Think about the struggle that many of us have with anxiety. Anxiety.

Right? Fears about the present. Fears about the future. Fears about all of the things that are uncertain in our lives and in our country. Fears about our health. Uncertainty about what news we might get the next day.

Right? Think about all of the ways that anxiety bombards us. And this anxiety can be like those cosmic rays. Right? It can beat down on us until it feels like it is tearing us apart.

And here's the thing you need to understand about anxiety is Satan can use anxiety to tear us apart from God. Can begin to use anxiety to convince us listen you're all alone.

[24 : 00] There's no God. He doesn't care about you. He threw in the towel a long time ago. You're on your own. And unless you take control of your life and make it happen for yourself you've got no hope.

So you better get going. And so what do you do? You begin to try to grab on to greater and greater control in your life. And here's the sick paradox with anxiety for those of you who struggle with it. The more you try to control your life the more it ramps up your anxiety.

It's a vicious cycle and all you do is drive yourself crazy. That's the cosmic rays tearing your ship apart. And the only hope is to turn to God and allow the shadow of the Almighty to be our refuge.

And what that means is we turn in our hearts and in our minds to the character of God. And we begin to preach the truth of who God is to our own hearts.

We remind ourselves that God is good. That God loves us. Right? That God is in control. And that as bad as things might get Jesus will one day crush Satan under his boot.

[25 : 08] And we preach these things to ourselves. So we say whatever comes it may not be easy it may not be what I would have chosen or what I would prefer it may not be the decision that I would have made but whatever comes I know that it's coming from the hand of a good God who loves me and who's promised himself to me and who will never let me go.

And whatever happens it will be exactly as he intended it. That's sheltering ourselves in the shadow of the Almighty so that the things that would otherwise tear us apart are deflected by a God who's greater than us.

Right? One more example would be the struggle that many of us have with inadequacy which is hard when you come to D.C. and you're all bright and brilliant and have done amazing things but you get to D.C.

and you feel like everybody else fits that description but not necessarily me. And it can breed this ongoing sense of inadequacy. I'm not good enough and people are smarter and more well read and more accomplished than I am.

And what that can do is it can drive us to constantly feel a kind of low grade despair like we're failing. You know, I turned 40 this year, right?

[26 : 19] What? Yeah, I turned 40. You know that? Dan groans. Yeah, I turned 40 and I'm thinking, man, so many people have done so much more than I have at age 40.

I can't believe I'm 40. That much of my life is gone. Inadequacy, right? And Satan can take that and he can begin to say, yeah, you better get on it.

You better start making things happen. You better start making a difference. All the things you wanted to do, if you don't do them now, you're never going to do them. You need to get on the stick and maybe you need a different job and maybe you need more education.

Maybe you need to start doing this. And all of a sudden you start doing more and more and more and your life can just become this churn of unceasing accomplishment trying to make sure that you're staying abreast or just ahead of everybody around you.

It'll tear you apart. But then again, you come into the shadow of the Almighty and you begin to trust God's character and you begin to preach to yourself and you begin to remind yourself that God's approval is the only approval that matters.

[27 : 17] And you begin to remind yourself the truth of the gospel that God is absolutely delighted in his children. He is delighted in you. He is delighted in you. And the reason is because he has done more for you.

He's done everything for you already in Jesus Christ. And there's nothing that you can do to add to that. You're never going to make yourself more impressive, more attractive, more anything to God. He's already done it all. He is crazy about you. And you preach to yourself, he's crazy about me. He loves me. Not only does he approve of me, he embraces me.

And you begin to remind yourself that there's nothing that I can do to change that. And you know, there are countless examples like resentment and anger and lust and greed and insecurity. All of these things that can be like those cosmic rays that will tear us apart in the sky unless we have a shield or a refuge.

The shadow of the Almighty, right, being kept in his name. So of course we see this is why things like prayer and scripture matter in the Christian life.

[28 : 28] Not because some pastor says you better be reading your Bible. But where do you think you get all of that stuff to preach to yourself about? We have to preach and to pray these truths into our hearts.

It's the only way it'll work. We have to all be amazing preachers. Every single one of you. You have to learn to preach and you have to preach to yourself every single day. So just to kind of draw all this together, Jesus knows, Jesus knows that the evil one will do everything in his power to convince you, to convince me that we are better off without God and that we need to do it on our own.

And because Jesus knows that Satan will never stop trying to convince us of that fact, Jesus will never stop praying for our protection.

and so that's what Jesus does. Before the Father on the throne of heaven, right now as we sit here, he is praying that we would find refuge in God, that we would find shelter in the shadow of his wings.

And I don't know what is bombarding you right now, I don't know what is hammering you and feels like it might tear you apart, but probably most of in this room have something like that. I do. And Jesus is praying that you take refuge in the character of God.

[29 : 52] And if you ever doubt that God hears and answers our prayer, remember that Jesus himself prays this for us. So whenever you pray for God's protection, you can know that that prayer has already been answered.

It's already been answered. Let's pray.