

God's Faithfulness to Keep Me

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[0 : 01] The Bible tells us that he will keep you strong to the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

My goodness, how much the world has changed since I was born in 1949. Save you the maths, I'm 75.

Things have changed unimaginably, so much so that two sociologists, Alvin and Heidi Toffler, wrote a book which is called Future Shock.

And in that book, they argue that the pace of change is increasing and increasing and increasing. The longer we live on planet Earth, the greater the velocity of the change that we experience. And their conclusion was, such continuous and increasingly speedy change is likely to work out in neurotic human behaviour.

[1 : 07] Certainly, the world I was born into is very different. It was a world where I think you could argue, and probably many people would argue today, that we were kept less safe than our children today.

My childhood was throughout the 1950s. It seems unbelievable now that I can assert these things to you that marked out my childhood, which would be a million miles away, I think, from modern parents, not being critical of that at all.

I was allowed, from the age of six, to do something which we called playing out. That was, I could go with my friends. My parents seemed to have this unerring belief that the big boys would be a good influence on the little boys.

Wrong in every count. I was allowed to skate on frozen ponds. I was allowed with the big boys to get on a train, make a 35-minute journey to Old Trafford, and go and watch Manchester United win for a change.

And then come home. And there were some restrictions, however. I was mortified that my parents would not allow me to own a catapult.

[2 : 34] And I had strict times when I was supposed to be back at home with my granny and my parents. I think you'd agree with me, all this seems a very long way away from the health and safety culture we live in today.

Warnings abound everywhere. I was at a park in Keswick recently, up in the Lake District, and I read this.

It said, Beware, the grass can be wet. Our text tells us that God will keep us strong, and in that strength, he will keep his people.

The Bible has many explicit stories about the way God kept his people safe.

There is a story in the book of Exodus chapter 12, a story about the Passover and how that came about. Incidentally, were we having a communion service today, much of what we do in that communion service comes from the celebration of the Passover in Judaism.

[3 : 48] In Exodus 12, we're told that on the 14th day of Nisan, that's nothing to do with cars, it's a month in the Jewish calendar, that they were supposed to take a lamb without blemish, and at twilight, they were to kill it.

And then they were to take some of the blood and smear it on the doorways of their homes. So that when the Lord decided he'd had enough of the Egyptians and that he would wipe out their children, I know this is, you know, scary stuff in a way, that those lintels, door lintels, which had blood on them, would be overlooked by the angel of death.

God kept his people. In Numbers chapter 6 and verse 24, we read those wonderful words that very often occur in our contemporary church today as a blessing.

The Lord bless you and keep you. I imagine that you do want to be kept. I can't imagine there'll be anybody in here who doesn't want that.

But then there's our experience. One of the best-selling books ever was a book by Rabbi Harold Kushner. To be honest, I think the title sold the book rather than the content.

[5 : 22] It was called, What Happens When Bad Things Happen to Good People? I mean, that is such a great question, isn't it? Suffering is a mystery for us.

We don't understand why some stuff happens. And although we legitimately ask the question, sadly, there are some answers that are unavailable to us.

I'm imagining in a congregation this size, there are people here who have questions about what's happened to them in their life.

And might almost be offended by the very topic that the Lord will keep you. Some of you who think to yourselves, when things go bad in your life, why me?

How dare we assert that God will keep us strong and keep us when there's so much bad stuff going on in many people's lives?

[6 : 23] And maybe especially in the lives of committed disciples. Before I answer that question, I want to just tell you what this promise of God to keep us doesn't mean.

I want you to think for a moment about the insurance business. It's based on a very simple and interesting idea that risk can be assessed and then priced, monetized, and in return for the payment of a premium, which we all think is too much, obviously, in return for payment of a premium, we can have some kind of assurance that if something goes wrong with our car or with our washing machine or with our health, our costs will be covered.

You would be surprised, I think, to know about some of the risks that you can insure against these days. Let me tell you three.

One, you can insure against damage caused by a ghost. I'll say that again. You can insure against damage caused by a ghost.

I have to say, I think my children damaged far more when they were young than a ghost ever did. Second thing is, you can insure yourself against being hit by an asteroid.

[7 : 51] The third thing is, you can insure yourself against being kidnapped by extraterrestrials. I did actually sit next to a lady on a train once who told me that she had been abducted by extraterrestrials who had made her pregnant and she'd given birth to a child who was a genius.

The Lord's promise to keep us is not like an insurance policy. Let me say that again. The Lord's promise to keep us is not like an insurance policy.

In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus says this to the crowds, He causes His Son to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteousness.

Don't think that faith in God will keep you from anything going wrong in your life. In fact, if you read books about the history of the saints, you will find out that they had to endure the most horrific things and it was the fact that they prevailed despite the suffering in their lives that got them into stained glass windows.

I think that is an amazing truth. The truth is that God will not cover you in a sense that nothing will ever go wrong in your life, but when it goes wrong, He will give you the strength to prevail.

[9 : 36] Somebody once said that suffering does two things. It either makes you a stronger person or it destroys you. One of the things we can say is that God will keep His people from being destroyed by suffering.

And of course, come to this in a moment, God will also give us a life for eternity.

St. Paul understood all this only too well. I mean, St. Paul, you know, who we see in stained glass windows, great hero of the church.

When his apostleship was under threat in the Corinthian church, he wrote this. This is like Paul's vindication.

I always think it's a helpful thing for those who are Christians to establish where our security lies. I mean, Paul could have given you a great lecture on his academic background or his kind of cosmopolitan background.

[10 : 50] This is how he justifies his apostleship. Comparing himself with some of the Christians in the congregation in Corinth who doubted that Paul was a genuine apostle.

He says this, Are they servants of Christ? And then, as a kind of a side thought, he says, Am I out of my mind to talk like this? He goes on, I am more.

I have worked much harder, been imprisoned more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was pelted with stones. Three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a day and night in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move.

I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, and in danger from false believers.

[11 : 58] What an amazing way to claim your apostleship. He claimed his apostleship not on the basis of, I've absolutely cruised through life since I gave my life to Jesus Christ.

Quite the contrary. I mean, Paul might have said, actually, becoming a follower of Jesus was the start of my problems. Some of you all might be thinking that just now.

That would suggest to me, however, that when the Bible speaks of God keeping us, it can't mean that we should be shielded from any and everything that might go wrong in this life.

Let me remind you of our text. He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

See, what I think this keeping means is more like God prevailing or helping us to prevail in our lives irrespective of what happens to us.

[13 : 11] Scholars say the idea of God's keeping us is eschatological. Make sure you've got your teeth in firmly before you try and say that. Eschatology is the study of the end of times.

And I think what Paul is trying to reassure people is that whatever happens to you in this life, you will be kept for that time when the Lord returns, when you die or the Lord returns.

It's about God's ultimate purpose for you as his child and his disciple. You are being kept for eternity. How did Paul get perspective on all that went wrong in his life?

He wrote two things that are really important for us. Especially those, especially those of you who are going through a hard time right now.

Paul knew that God would give him the strength to prevail whatever happened to him. But secondly, Paul also believed in his heart that whatever happened in this life was always going to be a worse version of his life than the life he would receive in eternity by being a follower of Jesus.

[14 : 35] He wrote this in Romans chapter 18 in verse 8. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

Are you looking forward to that? Are you looking forward to that glory which Scripture says will be revealed in you if you trust Jesus Christ?

So what can we say about this keeping? the first thing is I'm sorry if this is a bit blunt but God will keep you from a Christless eternity if you are a disciple of his.

There's been much debate throughout the ages as to whether if you are a Christian whether you can ever forfeit your salvation. that's an interesting question it's a good question most of the scholars are agreed though sometimes for slightly different reasons that if you genuinely made a commitment to Jesus Christ you cannot forfeit your salvation.

in the book of Hebrews there's a very interesting passage which the scholars have gone to town on where the Lord says this it is impossible for those who have once been enlightened who have tasted the heavenly gift who have shared in the Holy Spirit who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age if they fall away to be brought back to repentance because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again.

[16 : 25] What that means is and this is a big problem for the Anglican church friends it means that those of you who sit in church Sunday by Sunday familiar with the title deeds of the Christian faith but actually haven't made that leap of faith Paul sorry the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews is asking a question about that.

A big problem in the church of England is cultural Christianity people who think they're showing up in church on a regular basis will see them home which is obviously logically not correct anybody can come into church as far as I know one of you might be one of the most articulate and great atheists that ever stalked the earth nobody checked out when you came in I hope no you will be saved from a Christless eternity if you accept Christ as Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead the big problem came up in some of the worship songs and hymns we sung this morning is that we always want to demote the concept of sin in our lives a great way of doing that is to

compare yourself with other people well I might not be perfect but I know somebody who's a lot worse than me of course you do

I mean you might have to drag the bottom of the barrel and come up with names like Adolf Hitler or my granny used to say comparisons are odious I have no idea whether it's God's plan this morning in this place to reveal himself to you in such a way that you make that step of faith that you repent of your sin because sin has terrible consequences you haven't got to open a newspaper to see that but it has destructive consequences in your life as well it creates a blockage in your relationship with God and it also very often creates terrible trouble here on earth in our relationships here what was it

Paul wrote the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in union with Christ Jesus you can't earn that salvation you can't buy it in fact there is nothing that you can do to save yourself I used to have a doctrine in the church of England which preachers preached on regularly I've done it myself it was called the doctrine of the total depravity of humanity I imagine if you put that you know today's sermon of depravity of humanity on the door I can't imagine there would be that many people packing the way in you cannot save yourself you can sit there for decades I inherited a church in Buckinghamshire which had a membership of 350 people

I reckon that a good many of them and the evidence for that was that many of them did make the leap of faith many of them were just cultural Christians generally assented to the moral truth that Jesus Christ taught but they're not in a relationship with him John Wesley when he was preaching about the almost Christian said the almost Christians got some wonderful aspects to their life they're pillars of the local community excellent people one thing they lack they don't love God I wonder John Wesley was standing here today I wish he could how many of us would be found out by that very simple idea and the thing is you can do something about that any time second thing is you will be kept from the consequences of your sin

[21 : 20] I think I said enough about that but the wages of sin is death if you do not come to Christ in faith if you do not accept his atoning work on the cross of Calvary if you do not believe that God raised him from the dead then death death my my friend will be for you a brick wall you will be kept from the consequences of your sin if you trust Christ and you will be kept for an existence that is way beyond anything that you could ever dare to ask or imagine it's what we call heaven very difficult for us to imagine what infinite happiness might look like it's even harder to believe isn't it what worshipping together might be like in heaven it's going to be a big row at the gate you know we're going to do the book of common prayer or shall we do common worship or shall we go Pentecost what

I have no idea but I know that it is a place where as the writer of the book of Revelation John the divine wrote he will wipe away every tear from our eyes there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away imagine there's going to be a place for those of you who hold on to Jesus that you cannot imagine how amazing it will be it will be a place where you will receive a resurrection body God knows I need that and you will live face to face with the living God for eternity I prepared this sermon with a note of personal potential tragedy that happened in the life of my family this last week my healthy son-in-law

Joel who's a minister in Bognor Regis suddenly became very very seriously ill it was scary how quickly it came upon him his blood saturation levels were dangerously low so he was blue lighted to St.

Richard's hospital in Chichester still there but he's getting better someone say praise God and he's no longer on oxygen and for a moment you kind of waver around that question what does it mean to say God will keep you well Joel knows and I know should know better that what God will keep Joel for whatever happens to him is he will be kept for eternity because he knows Jesus he will be kept from the consequences of his sin because he knows and loves Jesus and he will be saved for eternity friends it's a wonderful thing when I have to take a funeral and I can affirm because the person in the box is a Christian the faith that sustained them in this life will sustain them into eternity wouldn't you want that wouldn't you want to stop just sitting there warming the well we don't even have pews here warming the already warm seats here and just make that leap of faith trust Jesus Jesus who gave his life that you may get yours back Jesus who hung on a cross in abject pain that our sins might be atoned for Jesus who rose from the dead and is alive in the power of his Holy Spirit and right now is here in this church with us so I've said before from this very podium the Bible ultimately offers two kinds of life a worldly life or a heavenly life I can't make you choose either but I

pray maybe today you will choose the life of heaven because you can celebrate the fact that Paul in his epistle promises us promises you he'll keep you strong to the end if you trust him so that you will be blameless blameless on the day of our

[26 : 51] Lord Jesus Christ at the end of this service we have some prayer teams who will be around the front of the church and look here's the thing it is so not like us isn't it to kind of do that and come and pray and maybe other people we feel are looking at us in isn't it worth just swallowing your pride for one moment and taking a step a step of faith that you might know the assurance that you'll save for eternity John in his epistle said this chapter 5 these things are written that you may know that you have eternal life not that you may keep your fingers crossed and hope but that you may know it's what we call a doctrine of assurance

I would love that for every soul in this church let's pray our gracious father we thank you for the promise that you will keep us and we apologize for the way in which that can really affect our faith when bad things happen to good people and lord I want to pray for anybody in church this morning who is going through a really hard time please lord would you come to them afresh and help them to know that if they cling on to you they will prevail whatever the outcome they will hold together and lord we thank you that you keep us in the sense that nothing that this life can throw at us will stop us loving you and in the end receiving your amazing gift of eternal life lord I pray now that in the power of your holy spirit to anybody who doesn't have that assurance anybody who is worried about their salvation father god

I pray that you would reveal yourself afresh to them lord that they may know that they are saved and saved for eternity and lord we pray these things not because we have any great merit but because we bring them in the name of our lord jesus christ and the people who agreed said together amen