

Sermon Series: “Good News for Life”
“A Petition for Protection”
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We all have something in common: we have a second-hand nature to protect those whom we love. This happens with the laws and rules we set. E.g., Pan Am Flight 759 crashed on July 9, 1982 in Kenner, killing 153 people because of an inadequate system in the plane to detect wind shear, and as a result of this flight and others, I heard on the news, there are now much better protections onboard planes to deal with wind shear. We see the desire to protect others not only through laws and rules, but also in inter-personal relationships. E.g., I recall a friend I had in the sixth grade named Danny, and he told me about once when he was in the car with his Mom when his Mom was driving, and all of a sudden they almost got into an accident, and she flung herself across the seat to protect him. Fortunately, they were able to avoid an accident, but that stuck out in his mind about what his Mom did in showing concern for him and trying to protect him. The desire to protect those we love is very strong in us, and we can see that Jesus shared that desire, and by example shows us how to protect that which is precious.

READ John 17:6-19 (p. 111)

CONTEXT: Jesus is giving the “High Priestly Prayer” over His disciples before He is arrested and sent to the cross. He begins this prayer by reviewing the glory of the gospel— that eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ whom God sent.

READ vv 6-8. “Jesus prayed to the Father that He has given the Father’s message of salvation to His disciples, and the disciples have kept/protected it. Cf. 14:15.” The idea of keeping/protecting is an important one in our passage, as the verb τηρέω and φυλάσσω (v 12), i.e., to keep and to guard—i.e., to protect, are used four times and one time, respectively, in our 13 verses. Here Jesus says His disciples in v 6 have kept/protected the message He has given them. It is interesting that it is the same verb for “to keep” (τηρέω) that is used in John 14:15, where we read Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments”. The same is true today. There are not only challenges to the truth of Christianity from the secular world, but some of the most damaging critiques and most pernicious, damaging attacks on Christianity are from those who claim to be within the Christian Church. E.g., I was reminded about that recently when reading our book for the Addressing the Skeptics group, the book by Alvin Plantinga called *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*, there is a quote from the extremely influential New Testament scholar out of Germany, Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann was very skeptical about the historical reliability of the New Testament, and believed the stories needed to be de-mythologized, or re-interpreted, so we can make use of them today. One of his most noteworthy sayings was: “it is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles” (from Plantinga, p. 71, from Bultmann’s *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, p. 4). We know of such skepticism by those outside the church, unbelievers, but to hear that from someone who considers himself in some sense a

believer is quite confusing and disappointing. E.g., this reminds me of a conversation I once had with a woman who was a regular church goer, and she told me she did not believe in miracles; I asked her whether she believed in God, and she said yes; I then said if she believed in God she would logically have to hold miracles as a possibility, since God can do what he wants; but she held firmly to her conviction, like Bultmann, that miracles were impossible. Another troubling word from someone within the church is Marcus Borg, a New Testament scholar who was Episcopalian (he died in 2015). He was one of the leading scholars of the infamous Jesus Seminar. He wrote that the particular understanding of the Christian message is wrongheaded which is focused on the death of Jesus for our sins in our behalf and His resurrection allowing us to be reconciled to God for eternal life. Borg wrote, “The notion that God’s only son came to this planet to offer his life as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, and that God could not forgive us without that having happened, and that we are saved by believing this story, is simple incredible. Taken metaphorically, this story can be very powerful. But taken literally, it is a profound obstacle to accepting the Christian message. To many people, it simply makes no sense, and I think we need to be straightforward about that” (*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 131). How do we respond to this statement? To do what Jesus here, to be able to protect God’s message of salvation, we need to be able to defend it. In response to Borg, I would invite him to return to Jesus’ teaching, where He begins His ministry by saying, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near” (Matthew 4:17). So, repentance of sins was a vital part of His message. We recall also Jesus told the reason why He came— it was to die for us. “. . . the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). If that makes no sense to people outside the Church, then the solution is not to abandon this message and give a more palatable metaphorical understanding— such as “new beginnings are possible” or “we do not need to be

held in bondage by the burden of our past” (Borg, p. 130), as Borg would have us do, but to explain better the Christian message— we have all sinned and fallen short of God’s character (Romans 3:23), and the consequence of that is a broken, separated relationship with God, spiritual death, but God wants to give us eternal life with Him which begins today (Romans 6:23). Jesus took that spiritual death on the cross in our place so we would not have to experience that, and if we accept what He did for us and repent and turn away from our disobedience to Him we will be saved from spiritual death. The Church back in its beginning, and the Church today, needs to protect the message of salvation.

READ vv 13-14. “Jesus wanted His disciples to have His joy, even though the world hated them because they were not in line with it. Cf. 15:11,18-25.” Jesus’ words here are amplifying what He has already said earlier in John 15; READ vv 11, 18-19. Christianity is a message of joy, but this does not mean Christians are always on a “mountain top” emotional high. It means we have a steady inner peace and assurance and joy that is not based on emotion but on the *truth* of the gospel. Cf. John 10:10. In fact, in our passage some form of the word for truth— ἀλήθεια, three times in vv 17,19 and ἀληθῶς, v 8)— as well as v 3, ἀληθινός, “one *true* God” is quite significant. It reminds me of marriage. E.g., I have noticed in couples that the very fact that a spouse will be there for the other in thick and thin is a great comfort and source of joy— like I know a guy who had a surgery and wanted his wife to be there with him, and really no one else; when I have had surgeries on my shoulder and knee, it was a great comfort to know Elena was there with me both before the surgery and I could look forward to her being there after the surgery. The truth and integrity of the marriage relationship is a tremendous source of joy. And yet we know that at times the world will not be friendly to the Christian faith as it is presented biblically. Yet, surprisingly, many Christians don’t really believe there exists this antagonism. E.g., I recall talking to a United Methodist pastor whom I would consider conservative, yet he has no

desire to address anything controversial in his sermons or teaching at the church; I asked him about this, and he basically said he did not want to take any stands; he told me a couple co-habiting together wanted him to have a service blessing the relationship as is— they had no intention of marrying— and he said he would have to think about it— which is a tragedy for his witness as a pastor, a very weak witness. E.g., I have found a lot of Christians who express to me their complete love for the world and an allegiance to it and all the fun things in it, and no concern to say anything that would be unpopular, and they are mystified that there is a culture war going on. We need a fresh reminder of what the modern world really thinks. In his wonderful book called *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*, psychiatrist Jeffrey Satinover, who is Jewish, states what he sees in the modern mind: “Modern man reflexively revolts against the assertion that God’s morality stands in opposition to his own natural self, and he gladly abandons such conceptions as archaic. . . . To the modern mind, as to the ancient pagans, our bodies are to do with as we please so long as we feel we harm no one else” (pp. 160-161). I will remind us of what first one must understand before going into battle: we are at war. If we are to be in the world but not of the world, we must understand there is, and always will be, a natural antagonism to the gospel, whether that be such things as racism, human sexuality, materialism, gossip, pride, laziness, gluttony, and so on.

READ vv 11-12,15-16. “Jesus prayed for protection of His disciples, not that they would be removed/rescued from it, but that they would be protected from Satan. Cf. Matthew 6:13.” Has God ever protected you? E.g., this week I sensed God’s protection; I was running down the sidewalk along Marconi Drive, basically the same route I usually take, when all of a sudden I heard a bird chirping a lot, and then that chirping came nearer and nearer, until out of the corner of my eye I saw a bird going after my head! I immediately tried to dart away in different directions, and without thinking I went straight out into

Marconi! By God's grace, there was no car coming, but if there had been I would have been hit! You probably have had something similar happen to you—I recall Eddie was almost killed in a bike accident. That is God's protection—it was not time to go home. There are accidents where Christians do die, and even in those situations I believe God's hand of protection was on them in some way. But we also need God's spiritual protection. Have you ever seen that? E.g., I recall hearing about a Christian guy at LSU who was dating a girl who went to church, but the more he got to know her the more he could see she in her beliefs and her life she was not walking with the Lord; this surprised her, yet he could not date her—and God's hand of protection was on him, because she was not the wife God wanted for him; and because of this guy's faithfulness in following the Lord, she started to wake up to where she was faltering spiritually, and started seeking God out on her own in Christian groups, and slowly, she surrendered her life to the Lord; and the story gets better—after a few years she ran across this same guy again, and he was not dating anyone, and she was not either, and so they started talking, then dating, and now they are married!! Beloved, Satan would love to destroy us. Jesus knew this, so He taught His disciples to pray in Matthew 6:13, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One”. We are in a spiritual battle, and we need the Holy Spirit. We have God's protection when we are obedient to Him. The safest place we can be is when we are walking in the center of His will.

“How can we be in the world *but at the same time not of it?*” First, we need to protect God's message of salvation, and obey it. Second, we need to ask Him for His protection from Satan—it is a spiritual battle that the Holy Spirit helps us to win.