

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Prayer for Protection

John 17:6-19

About a year ago, LifeWay Research publicized the findings of a study it conducted on prayer. Participants in the poll were asked about how often they pray each day and how frequently they believe their prayers are answered. They were also asked about the kinds of things they pray for. The results revealed that among Americans who pray, they typically pray for family and friends, as well as for their own personal problems and difficulties. They also pray with thanks for God's greatness and for good things that have recently occurred. Praying about their own sins also made the list, as did interceding for government officials, people affected by natural disasters, people of other faiths or no faith, and celebrities or other people in the public eye.

When asked if they had ever prayed for their enemies or for people who mistreat them, a significant number of participants said they had. A smaller percentage of respondents acknowledged praying for bad things to happen to a bad person, or for God to avenge someone who had hurt them or a loved one. On the lighter side, going further down the list, some folks said there have been times when they prayed to win the lottery or for their favorite team to win the game. Some prayed to not get caught speeding or to find a good parking spot. I suppose that overall, responses to this prayer survey give us some hopeful reasons to be encouraged, but also some reasons to question and to wonder about what's on people's minds as they prayerfully enter the Lord's presence.

Interestingly, one of the things that didn't seem to show up a lot in this particular survey, at least in the numbers I saw, was prayer for safety. After all, this seems to be one of the most common things that we regularly ask God for. In most worship services, small group gatherings, or moments of private reflection and devotion, there's a good chance that when someone prays, they're going to make some reference to a desire for God's protection.

Prayer for safety gets expressed in various ways. Sometimes we pray for others to have a safe trip. This type of prayer becomes even more common during this time of the year when more people are on the road or in the air coming and going from summer vacations. Sometimes we ask God to guard those who are in dangerous or extremely risky circumstances, such as someone in the military. Sometimes we pray for God to protect those who are exposed to harm and danger, such as people who are vulnerable to a natural disaster. Sometimes we ask God to watch over those who are sick, or to keep those who are near death. We could also include the practice of praying a "hedge of protection" around family members, friends, or other loved ones. This approach to prayer has become widespread among lots of Christians.

One of the reasons that prayers for protection are so common is that our daily lives are so geared toward safety, in one form or another. We live in homes equipped with security systems. We ride in cars that surround us with airbags. We insure our homes, our health, our possessions, and sometimes even our pets. We make sure that our immunizations are current. We insist that our children wear helmets and kneepads. We keep a bottle of hand

sanitizer within reach at all times. We make sure that our computer's antivirus software is up to date and that all our files are backed up. We pass through checkpoints as we enter our places of work. In an atmosphere where safety and security are top priorities, woven into so many dimensions of our daily existence, it's no wonder that our prayers also take on a deeper and deeper concern for divine protection.

The subject of divine protection even comes up in Jesus' prayer in this morning's Scripture passage from John. Remember that John 17 is Jesus' prayer to God on the eve of his death. Every prayer is important. But when Jesus is praying on the verge of being arrested, tortured, and executed, then it's even more important for us to listen carefully to what Jesus says to God.

In the opening section, Jesus prays for himself and his work. He prays that God will glorify him, and that he will glorify God. "Glorify" is basically about how God's identity and presence are revealed, or made visible, in Jesus. So Jesus begins his prayer by praying for himself, that God will finish the work he has started through him.

Then we come to this morning's focal passage, where Jesus shifts to praying for the future life of his followers. He intercedes for his first disciples, asking God to protect them and keep them unified. He prays that they will have his joy within them, and that they will grow in holiness through God's word. Jesus' disciples have been set apart from the world, but they haven't been removed from the world. They're in the world, where they need to be, where Jesus intends them to be, so that God's love for the world can be known and received and lived.

Jesus says, "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one" (v. 11). Notice how Jesus asks God to protect the community of his followers, and to do so "by the power of your name." In this case, Jesus isn't using the word "name" in a narrow sense to refer to a particular name of God, such as "Father" or "Lord," as if just invoking one of the names of God brings with it a wall of security that can't be breached. No, when Jesus says that he has revealed God's name, he means that he has made known God's character and identity. In fact, that's what Jesus' whole ministry has been about, to make known the Father's saving love for the world. It's on that basis that Jesus asks God to protect his followers.

It's also important to reflect on what Jesus means when he prays that God will protect or safeguard the community of believers. I don't believe that Jesus means protection in the sense of being kept free from all harm or shielded from any and every potential danger. No, in this case, in this prayer, protection has more to do with keeping the community of believers grounded in what Jesus has shown them about God. In other words, when Jesus asks God to protect his followers, he's not only asking God to watch over them but most of all to enable them to stay true to what they have seen about God in Jesus. As they do that, they'll remain united, and their own unity will reflect the unity between God and Jesus.

One of the big reasons that Jesus prays the way he does in this passage is because during his ministry, he has been responsible for forming and safeguarding this community of believers. And now, as he prepares to depart, he takes the life of this community and entrusts it to God. Through prayer, Jesus takes the future of his followers and hands it over to the Father, with faith and confidence that God will complete the work of salvation that he has begun by sending Jesus into the world.

This means that all of our prayers, including our prayers for safety and protection, are offered in light of what God has already done by sending Jesus, and in anticipation of what God will do when Jesus comes again. If Jesus has already taken our lives and our future as believers, and placed these things securely in the hands of God, then we can pray with assurance and confidence in our union with God and with each other.

We can still pray for safety and protection, and that God will guard and watch over us and others. The Bible is filled with these kinds of prayers, and they still have a legitimate place in our own prayer lives. But these kinds of requests shouldn't dominate our prayers. Look at the life and ministry of Jesus, and the lives of his followers in the early church, and you'll see that they don't spend the bulk of their prayer lives asking God to protect them. Physical safety isn't their top priority. Yes, it's on their radar. But their primary focus is on the saving, sovereign presence of God, and the mission of God's kingdom given to them.

As I mentioned earlier, the intense focus on security and safety in our own culture has some influence on the way that we pray. But in other parts of the world, where being a Christian brings even greater risks, including physical harm, worship and prayer can take on a different tone. Brothers and sisters in Christ around the globe no doubt join us in praying for God's protection. But lots of our fellow disciples pray for even more pressing things, like boldness, courage, and obedience. One author highlights a set of questions used by Asian Access, a Christian missions agency in South Asia. These are some of the questions asked to determine a new convert's readiness to follow Christ: Are you willing to leave home and lose the blessing of your father? Are you willing to lose your job? Are you willing to go to the village and those who persecute you, and forgive them, and share the love of Christ with them? Are you willing to give an offering to the Lord? Are you willing to be beaten rather than deny your faith? Are you willing to go to prison? Are you willing to die for Jesus?¹

These are the kinds of questions that arise when following Jesus is about seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, rather than using Jesus and his gospel as a way to enhance our own personal safety and security. Remember that in today's text, Jesus' prayer for God to protect the community of believers is a prayer offered on the eve of our Lord's own death. Arrest and suffering and pain are near. The cross is heavy on Jesus' heart and mind. True, the other Gospel accounts of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane show us that Jesus was prepared to ask God to remove this suffering. But ultimately, Jesus' praying on the way to his death was less about his own safety and more about his faithfulness to God's will, with all the costs and dangers that involved.

Paul Knight, a pastor from Grand Forks, North Dakota, tells about visiting Fiche, Ethiopia, where he had the chance to meet the little girl that his family had been sponsoring through Compassion International. Part of the purpose of Knight's visit was to bring gifts to the girl and her mother, a single mom who lived and worked in a one-room home that also basically functioned as the local bar. During Knight's visit, the place slowly started filling with rowdy men from the community. Suddenly, Knight's guide and translator took him by the arm and said, "We have to go now." Knight looked back at his sponsor child, a ten-year-old girl, and asked for more time. But the crowd was getting louder, and his guide said firmly, "It's not safe for you. You must leave *now*."

Knight started to move, but then he pointed to his sponsor child and said, "But what about my little girl?" "Well, this is her home," the guide said. As he reluctantly started moving to the street, Knight asked, "But will she be safe?" "It's not really safe, but this is her home," said the guide. At that point, Knight was indignant. "What does *that* mean," he asked, "that 'it's not really safe'?" "Most likely everything you think it means," the guide said.

Knight fought back tears, and asked, "What can she do?" Gently grabbing his arm, the guide said, "We teach the girls to do this: scream and run to the church. When you get to the church, you will find love and safety. The church will shelter you. So when they feel threatened or vulnerable, they scream and run to the church."²

The church as a place of safety and security. I believe that's part of why so many of us, in our own experience, have had such a deep sense of connection to the life of the church. But these days, even that aspect of the church seems to be in increasing jeopardy, what with this summer's shooting at the church in Charleston, South Carolina, or incidents of sexual abuse within congregations, or vandalism to church property. Insurance companies that specialize in the unique needs and circumstances of churches are even beginning to emphasize the need for congregations to start what's sometime called a "safety ministry," in order to enhance security and properly manage risk.

Now, more than ever, the church needs prayer, including the prayers of Jesus, who continually intercedes for us with the Father. No doubt, Jesus is still faithfully asking God to protect us, not just in the sense of keeping us safe from harm, but most of all in the sense of sustaining us and preserving our bond with him and with one another, so that we'll stay true to who God is and who we are, and to what God has sent us to do. Remember that God's protection, in the deepest sense, isn't about being free from all pain, sheltered from all risks, or shielded from all suffering. No, God's protection means that the threats of this present life, the forces of evil, even the very power of hell itself, cannot sever the relationship between God and those who receive the Son by faith. God's protection is about living boldly for Christ in a dangerous world that resists the way and will of Christ, all the while abiding in the love of God, and trusting that love to keep us united with Christ and with each other, no matter what happens.

¹ Drew Dyck, *Yawning at Tigers: You Can't Tame God, So Stop Trying* (Nashville: Nelson, 2014) 63.

² Matt Woodley, "Church2Church," *Leadership Journal* (Spring 2011).