
God's Heavenly Preservative

by Laura Beth Arnett

Text: Jude 17-25

Purpose: To explore the meaning of keeping ourselves in the love of God

Are you a label-reader? If you aren't one yourself, you probably know at least one or two persons who are. Some of your best friends might be label-readers. You can usually spot these people whenever you go to the grocery store. You will find them gazing fixedly at a loaf of bread. They are looking for the magic words, "No additives or preservatives." Many feel that additives and preservatives, if used over prolonged periods of time, may be detrimental to their health. In the spiritual realm, however, God has for us a harmless preservative. His heavenly preservative is found in Jude 21: "Keep yourselves in the love of God."

Jude plainly presents this divine preservative in its two-fold aspect — two sides of the same coin. On one side of our biblical coin, found in verses 1 and 24, we have, "God keeps us." On the other side, we see the thought, "We keep ourselves." This is a similar dynamic to that expressed in Philemon 2:12, 13: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Both of these examples portray the dual responsibility shared by God and man for man's salvation. It is ever and always true that salvation is a free gift of God's grace. Man does nothing to earn this. But God's grace is thwarted without man's reception of it, and God's keeping power requires man's responsive and responsible cooperation. *The Interpreter's Bible* expresses it this way: "... for the outcome God desires, he is dependent on man just as man is on him. God's loving vigilance must be matched by man's vigilant efforts."

We need concrete suggestions for channeling this effort, and Jude

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does not fail us. As Christians, we keep ourselves in the love of God by building ourselves up in our most holy faith. This is not a building made with human hands. It is a spiritual concept, a picture of the union and interdependence of the followers of Christ. We are “living stones,” as Peter terms us. Imagine with me the following cartoon picture: Sam, the foreman, and Mr. Harris, the head architect, are standing beside a strange looking ten story high rise. Sam says, “Your plans were great, sir, just great! But I ran out of materials, so I left out the second floor!” Ridiculous picture — but are you missing a second floor? Or are you someone’s missing second floor? Christians are inevitably involved in the lives of other Christians. We are to bear one another’s burdens, we are to encourage, exhort, and build one another up in the faith. It is impossible to solo glide past the “Pearly Gates.” St. Peter is much more likely to ask, “Whom did you bring with you?” As living stones, we must be equally able to support someone on our shoulders and to rest our weight on someone else’s. The need to give and the grace to receive should be joyfully, frequently practiced by Christians.

Apart from one’s communal role, a Christian can individually work at building up herself/ himself in the faith. This is done through remembering. We remember — objectively — sound Christian doctrine, and — subjectively — God’s personalized, redemptive acts in our history. In the Old Testament, to remember was God’s oft-repeated command to Israel through His messengers. “Remember that once you were a stranger” (Ex. 22:20); “Remember how God led you out of Egypt” (Deut. 16:3); “Remember things long past” (Is. 46:9).

Jesus knew the importance of remembering. We read this in John’s gospel record of the closing hours of Jesus’ life: “Jesus, knowing . . . that he was come from God” (13:3), girded himself with a towel; in another place: “The word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father’s which sent me” (14:24). Jesus remembered his divine origin as he looked toward the cross.

The French expression, *retirer pour mieux sauter* — meaning, “to step back in order to jump farther” — is another way of saying that true progress begins with remembering. The gift of memory is our own personal instant replay mechanism. We can use this device whenever we want to recall our past encounters with God. These remembrances remind us of who God is, how He acts, and of our covenant with Him.

Not only does Jude remind us to build up ourselves in the faith, but

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he also recommends that we keep ourselves in the love of God by praying in the Holy Spirit. Prayer is the essential recognition that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, and we draw our spiritual life from him. Prayer is seeking to dwell in the secret place of the Most High. When we pray, the masks should come off, and we should become totally honest with God.

Moishe Rosen, chairman of Jews for Jesus, an evangelistic effort directed toward the Jewish people, tells this story:

A man who was an unbeliever stood at the edge of a cliff, admiring the scenery below. He got too close to the edge. Suddenly the ground under his feet gave way, and he found himself plummeting downward. But he broke his fall by grabbing onto a branch. Though it strained precariously under his weight, the branch held and the man was safe — at least for the moment or for as long as he could hold on. But already his arms were growing tired and weak. He look downward and saw certain death if he fell. He looked upward and saw no way to climb back up. He knew no one was around to hear his shouts for help. All he could do was to hang onto that branch until it broke under his weight or until his strength gave out. Either way, he was doomed.

In desperation he shouted upward to heaven, “Almighty God! If you are there, *if* there really is a God, save me! Save me!” Then he paused and added, “If you save from this peril, I’ll worship you and preach about you all the rest of my life!”

Much to his surprise, a voice came from heaven: “Let go of the branch. You will not fall. I will life you to the top of the cliff and you will be saved.”

The cliffhanger paused for a moment, and shouted back up: “Is there anyone else I can talk to?”

This man was definitely being honest with God about his need, but he lacked the willingness to be obedient. The attitude of “Thy will be done” is essential to praying in the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that we negate or wipe out our personal desires. We do not serve a God who seeks to absorb us, so that we cease being who we are, to become Bible-trumpeting robots. Rather, as we pray with “Thy will be done” in our hearts, we accept our limitations and celebrate His power. We seek and ask and knock, that He may give and answer and

open His way and will before us.

Henri Nouwen, in his book *The Living Reminder*, refers to prayer as the essence of spirituality. He writes, “Spirituality is attention to the life of the spirit in us; it is going out to the desert or up to the mountain to pray; it is standing before the Lord with open heart and open mind; it is crying out, ‘Abba, Father’; it is contemplating the unspeakable beauty of our loving God.”

Jude’s final guideline for keeping ourselves in God’s love is “to wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.” It is impossible to live without hope. This is our present hope that some day we will be forever with the Lord.

The New Testament is liberally laced with promises concerning eternal life. In John 10 Jesus promises his sheep eternal life. In the famous John 14 passage, as Jesus speaks of leaving the disciples to return to heaven, He promises to prepare a place for them that where He is, they may be also. Paul writes in Romans 5 that we believers “rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.”

Eternal life is hard to fathom. We cannot know now exactly what it will be like. Of two truths we are certain: We shall be with Him, and we shall be like Him.

I have a friend who has recently fallen in love with a brown-eyed Alabama beauty, and she with him. He was describing to me how well they get along and how time seems to speed by when they are together. He enthused, “I’ve dated other girls, and we would go out to concerts and shows. But Sally simply wants to be with me and would rather stay home. We enjoy each other’s company.” How much greater our joy will be in the presence of Jesus! As the song goes, “I shall know Him! I shall know Him, when redeemed by His side I shall stand. I shall know Him! I shall know Him — by the print of the nails in His hands.”

Now, on the anticipation side of heaven, keeping ourselves in the love of God is achievable, for God’s commands imply the possibility of fulfillment. Jude points the way by encouraging us to build up ourselves in the faith; to pray in the Holy Spirit; and to wait for Jesus’ promise of eternal life. As we look toward that future in our heavenly home, as we struggle with present doubts, fears and burdens, God is at work on our behalf to encourage us by His love.

We do not walk alone, for He has promised to never leave us. We do not walk in darkness, for His Spirit-breathed word lights our way. We do not walk in vain, for the crown of life awaits us.