1000100Jude 20-25 *Christmas Presence: God’s Presence Keeps*

***Christmas Presents***I made some reference to this on Christmas Eve, but I didn’t really tell the story: I believe this year I bought the most expensive Christmas Present I have ever gotten. This year for Christmas, I bought Beth a car.

It wasn’t the plan. Last Wednesday Jason Warren and I went to a UNI basketball game. A few weeks earlier, Beth and Ellie and I had been in Cedar Falls and we had looked at Target at bikes. Ellie picked out one she liked. But we had my car, and we couldn’t take it home. So I told Jason that I would drive to this game, and I would take Beth’s van, so we could take the bike home.

So Jason and I drive to the game in the van. And as we were going, he even asked me how much longer we thought we’d keep the van. It was 12 years old and had quite a few miles and was showing some rust; but it was reliable and I told him we were hoping to get a few more years out of it. We got the bike, went to the game (Panthers lost), and then headed for home.

When we got to Webster City I noticed the American Flag by the RV dealership was hanging perfectly still. I pointed it out to Jason, and said we had the perfect night for travelling. The skies were clear, there was no wind, it was easy drive.

Not two minutes after that, it felt like the van hit a cinder block on the road. There was thumb and a bounce. Jason said: “OH!” I waited a beat, and then I screamed. A deep, manly scream. But the van didn’t slow down, and when I checked the steering, it seemed to handle O.K. Obviously, we had hit something, but maybe it wasn’t that bad.

So we kept going until we got to the next exit. Then we pulled over to assess the damage. When Jason couldn’t open his door, I had a pretty good idea things were not going to be O.K. The passenger side headlight was gone, so was most of the front grill, there was a dent in the hood and the right quarter panel was jammed into the passenger door. There was blood and fur matted to the bumper. Obviously, we had been run into by a deer. (I didn’t hit the deer, the deer hit me.)

Most concerning of all, however, was that there was fluid dripping out the bottom of the van. Now, neither Jason nor I is an automotive genius, but it was pretty clear to us that the leaking fluid was a problem. At the same time, we didn’t have a lot of options. It was 11:00 at night. If we went back to Webster City and found a car shop, they weren’t going to do anything until morning and we’d have to get a hotel or get somebody to come get us. So we decided to keep going. We figured if worse came to worse, and we got stranded on the side of the road, we always had the bike. I could pedal and Jason could ride on the **handlebars like E.T.**

The van made it. We lost heat around Ayershire, which is when we figure we lost the last of the radiator fluid. But we got to Spencer, parked in a car dealership lot, and got a friend to come pick us up.

But the next morning the car body guy confirmed what I already suspected. The cost of repairing the damage was going to be more than the old van was worth. It was totaled. And that’s how Beth got a **car for Christmas.**

***Kept***Anyway, our series of sermons leading up to Christmas this year was *Christmas Presence*. It’s a play on words. It sounds like we’re talking about the gifts under the tree. Like Beth’s Jeep. But what we were actually talking about was the Presence of God here on earth. **The greatest Christmas present is the presence of God in His Son Jesus Christ.**

The series, then, asked the question: What happens when God’s presence shows up? We looked at passages, mostly in the Old Testament, that talked about the presence of God.

And so, I told you, the way we picked the passages for this series was pretty simple. We just searched the Bible for the words “God” and “presence.” And we found one passage, near the end of the New Testament, that we thought would make a pretty good end to the series. It’s the final two verses of Jude, the second to last book of the Bible. Jude 24 and 25. **Here’s what it says:**

**24**To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— **25**to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

This verse is talking about our final goal, our ultimate hope. This is what every Christian is aiming for: our final homegoing when we stand before God’s glorious presence.

On Christmas Eve, I briefly described what the angels saw before Jesus came to earth. We glimpsed at Isaiah’s vision of the throne room of heaven when God’s glory filled the temple and angels called to each other in thundering voices. We heard the heavenly anthem: “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD Almighty.”

That picture of awe-inspiring, heavenly worship is what this verse is talking about: for us to be presented before God’s glorious grace without fault and with great joy. That’s the ultimate goal of the Christian life. That we can come to the throne room of heaven and stand without fear. That we can know that we are accepted, and that we can rejoice in the presence of his majesty, power and authority.

And how do we get there? How do we travel from this moment in time, when we are loving Jesus, to that moment in time when we are standing in His heavenly presence? How do we know that we’ll be able to finish the journey?

The answer is at the beginning of the verse: “To him who is able to keep you from stumbling.” The key is that God will keep us. God promises that if you are His He will carry you through to the end. He will preserve His saints.

This is the God who keeps. This is the God who has a hold on us. It is a dangerous journey. We are at risk of falling. There are people who have fallen away, Israelites who have stumbled in the desert. And you wonder: will I make it?

And the answer is yes. And it is due to Him, who is able to keep us from falling. His love and my love are different. His love is fixed, He has set His love upon me. My love fluctuates. Because of sin, my love waxes and wanes. I wish it weren’t so, but it is. But when my love fluctuates I must never assume that His love fluctuates as well. When my grip is lessened, His remains strong, and never relaxes.

God’s presence keeps. That’s the conclusion I draw from this passage. When we are in the presence of God, He promises to keep us from stumbling.

***We Keep***But now, I want to show you something interesting, and perhaps a little confusing. We need to back up a few verses, and we’ll discover that while God’s promise keeps us, we are also commanded to keep ourselves. **Verses 20-23**:

**20**But you, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, **21**keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.

**22**Be merciful to those who doubt; **23**save others by snatching them from the fire; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

There are some grammatical details that I won’t get too far into, but let me point out that in our English translations there are five verbs in verses 20-22: building, praying, keep, wait, and be merciful. It’s not clear in English, but in the original language (Greek) only one of these verbs is written as what I’ll call a “full-strength” verb. The others are participles, that is to say, they get their strength from the main verb. Or, to put it another way, one of these phrases is the main clause, while the others are dependent.

And the main clause is the one that reads: “keep yourselves in God’s love.” That’s an imperative verb, a command. And the other verbs--build, pray, wait, and be merciful—are participles. They read as commands as well, but they get their strength from the main verb.

That’s some grammatical detail you probably aren’t all that interested in, but my point is this: the key word here is the word “keep.” And that’s exactly the word from verse 24 where we are told that God is able to “keep us from stumbling.”

So here’s the interesting thing, and the thing that is perhaps a little confusing. We’re told to keep ourselves in God’s love; and then, almost immediately after, we are promised that God will keep us. Jude wants us to fight to keep ourselves in God’s love. But at the same time, He wants us to know that it is God who is keeping us.

This is the intersection of God’s initiative and human responsibility. If you were to ask Jude: “Which is it? Are we supposed to keep ourselves in God’s love? Or is it God who is keeping us in his love?” Jude’s answer would be: “Yes!” It’s both. Because I am kept, I can keep. Because God preserves, I can persevere.

Richard Sibbes was a Christian writer about 300 years ago. **He wrote this:**

As we say of the mother and the child, both hold but the safety of the child is that the mother holds him.

It’s a great picture. A 1 year old wraps her arms around her mother and clings tightly. She grips mom’s sweater with her tiny little fingers and holds tight, because mommy is tall and she doesn’t want to fall. But at the same time, Mom has her arms wrapped around her little girl, and she’s not letting go. The baby won’t fall, and the primary reason is because Mom won’t drop her.

And that’s the idea that I believe Jude is conveying here. God has a hold on us. He will keep us. He won’t let us go. And so, because of that, we should strive to keep ourselves in His love. We should hold on tight. We should do all that we can to reach our final goal. John Piper writes this:

Over and over in the Bible we see this: God's action is decisive; our action is dependent. And both actions are essential. So I urge you again to resist the mindset that cynically says, "If God is the decisive keeper of my soul for eternal life (verses 1, 24), then I don't need to 'keep myself in the love of God'" (verse 20). That would be like saying, since God is the decisive giver of life, then I don't need to breathe. (“Learning to Pray in the Spirit and the Word, Part 1” December 31, 2000)

No. No. No. Breathing is the means that God uses to preserve life in us. In the same way, the commands given here in Jude are the means God uses to preserve us in His love.

And so, understanding that it is God who keeps us from falling and who will present us blameless in the final day, what can we do to keep ourselves in His love? I’d like to go back to the four dependent clauses of verses 20-23 and suggest that there are four things we can work on in 2019 to keep ourselves in God’s love.

***Build***First, **build yourselves up in your most holy faith**. Verse 20, the first phrase.

As Christians, we should be educating ourselves in the faith. We should be learning the core truths of what we believe. We should be familiar with the Bible. We should be growing in our knowledge of Jesus Christ.

This is something I need to be careful with, because I am academically inclined. I like to learn things just for the sake of learning them. I enjoy listening to a good lecture on who wrote the different books of the New Testament; or, as you’ve just seen, I can get pretty pumped up about the intricacies of Greek grammar. I realize that not everybody is wired that way. And Christianity is certainly about more than being able to sweep the Bible categories on Jeopardy!

But, at the same time, growth in knowledge of the faith and understanding of what we believe is something that is commanded of Christians. You cannot contend for the faith if you don’t understand it. You cannot recognize error unless you are learning the truth.

Jerry Bridges talks about the importance of preaching the gospel to yourself every day. As Christians, we should be constantly reminding ourselves of what Jesus has done for us. We should be rehearsing the truths outlined in the Heidelberg Catechism: our guilt, God’s grace, and our response of gratitude.

So, the question is: how much time are you giving to building yourself up in the faith? What are you doing to help yourself rehearse the gospel every day? Do you have a plan for regular Bible reading? A devotional plan that you follow? What are you doing to take scripture in?

We’ve got a very good library here at Hope Church, and a team that does a good job of keeping quality, current books on the shelves. Do you take advantage of the library? Have you picked up a book that will help you build yourself up in the faith? The library is a part of our strategy as a church for growing in our faith. It’s not there just because it’s nice to have some books in the building. Using that library is one of the ways we follow the Biblical exhortation to build ourselves up in the most holy faith.

If books aren’t really your thing, what do you listen to? With the technology we have available to us today, there are all kinds of ways to take in God’s truth. Podcasts, Youtube, streaming services… you can listen to the best preachers in the world whenever you want.

Plus, this command in Jude is written in the plural. That is, building yourself up isn’t meant to be just a solitary activity. It’s corporate. We are supposed to encourage one another, learn together. Get in a small group. Join a Sunday School class.

That’s the first thing we’re told to do to keep ourselves in God’s love: Build ourselves up in the faith.

***Pray***Second, **we’re told to pray in the Holy Spirit**. The second phrase in verse 20.

“An awareness of the love of God cannot be sustained without prayer, and a relationship with God cannot be maintained or cultivated apart from prayer.” (CJ Mahaney) So what does Jude say? Pray! Pray. In dependence upon the Holy Spirit pray to God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. Pray.

Pray at set times during the day, and pray spontaneously throughout the day. Pray individually and privately, and pray in the company of others. Pray written and scripture-based prayers, and pray off-the-cuff conversational prayers. Pray.

Think about how you maintain a relationship with the people closest to you: you talk to them. You email them or you text them. You talk on the phone. You talk over a cup of coffee. Somehow or another you communicate with them. How are you going to maintain a relationship with God unless you communicate with Him? How are you going to keep an awareness of His love for you if you are not interacting with Him?

Jude says that we should “pray in the Holy Spirit.” What does that mean? I think it means that our prayers will be *empowered* b*y* the Spirit. That is to say, our prayers will be born out of an awareness of what God has done for us in Christ at the cross--an awareness that we, in our own power, are incapable of achieving spiritual good in this world. And also, our prayers will be *guided* by the Spirit. That is, our prayers will be in accord with God’s nature and His Word. We will not pray with wrong motives or according to our own pleasures (cf. James 4:3), but as nearly as possible our prayers will align with God’s will.

So, in both cases you can see the importance of knowing God’s Word and building yourself up in the faith. The more we preach the gospel to ourselves and the better we know our Bibles, the more our prayers will be “in the Holy Spirit.”

Pray. Charles Spurgeon said he tried to put a few words of prayer in between everything he did. What a wonderful picture. What if, every time you changed tasks during the course of your day, you paused to say a few words of prayer? Why? For lots of reasons, but none less then to help keep yourself aware of God’s love.

Imagine having coffee with Jude. Imagine yourself saying to Jude: “I’m just having a hard time feeling like God loves me.”

Do you know what Jude would say? Jude would say: “What are you doing to build yourself up in the faith? When’s the last time you preached the gospel to yourself? When’s the last time you reflected on what Christ did for you at the cross?” That’s the first question he would ask.

And then, the second would be: “How’s your prayer life? When’s the last time you stopped and really focused on prayer?” If you are having a hard time keeping yourself in God’s love, you need to do those things.

***Wait***And then, third, Jude would say: Wait. **Wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life.** The second phrase in verse 21. Jude would say wait.

That’s probably not a word most of us are glad to hear. Wait. We get frustrated when it takes more than 30 seconds for a website to load. I mean, I can remember, not too many years ago when my internet connection was still dial up. I had to tell the computer to dial and then I’d hear that weird beeping and bopping of computers talking to each other, and then I would be connected. It used to be that I’d check my email, and then I could walk into the other room and brew a pot of coffee while it was downloading onto my computer. It used to take minutes to go from one webpage to another.

Now? I think I would die if I had to wait that long to navigate the internet. I mean, I’m click, click, clicking on that mouse repeatedly if it takes more than a fraction of a second to go where I want it. Waiting is not something that I’m good at.

And yet, waiting is something the Bible calls us to do repeatedly. Wait upon the Lord. (Isa. 40:31) Be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord (Psalm 27:14) Wait for me, declares the Lord. (Zeph, 3:8)

Waiting is something the Bible calls us to do repeatedly, but waiting is not something we’re very good at. But here’s the thing: what you are waiting for can transform the experience of waiting. It’s one thing to wait at the dentist office, when you’re about to get a cavity filled. It’s another thing to wait for a table at your favorite restaurant with a person you love. Waiting for something unpleasant is not fun, waiting for something pleasurable fills you with expectation.

So look at what Jude says we are waiting for: “the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring [us] to eternal life.” We’re talking about our blessed hope here. We’re talking about being in the presence of God, gathered around the throne with he chorus of angels. We’re waiting for mercy. Aren’t you glad we’re not waiting for judgment? Aren’t you glad we’re not waiting for condemnation? Aren’t you glad we’re not waiting for the righteous wrath we so richly deserve because of our sins?

So, Jude, how do we keep ourselves in the love of God? Here’s what you do: build, pray, and wait.

***Be Merciful***And then, fourth, be merciful. Show mercy. **Verses 22 and 23**:

22Be merciful to those who doubt; 23snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear--hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

Last summer I did a series I called “Christian-sims”. I looked at phrases that people think are in the Bible but are not. And one phrase I could have preached on but didn’t is “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” That’s not a Bible verse, but a lot of people think it is. What Jude says here is as close as the Bible gets to that phrase, but I think the idea is pretty much the same. “Be merciful…hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.”

Hate the actions of those who are far from God. Hate the way they are hurting themselves and hurting others. Don’t soft-pedal sin as no big deal.

But never forget you are dealing with a person loved by God. Never forget this is a person Jesus gave His life for. Never stop seeking to win them over to Christ, to snatch from the fire, and help them experience the mercy of Jesus. Be merciful.

Bishop Desmond Tutu was appointed by Nelson Mandela to lead the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa as that nation attempted to heal the wounds caused by racial discrimination and Apartheid. Over the years, South Africa had seen many atrocities perpetrated by human beings on another because of differences in skin color. Now, Tutu heard day after day of eyewitness testimony to the vicious assaults perpetrated by both sides. As he listened, Tutu realized that his Christian beliefs affected what he heard. He wrote:

Theology reminded me that, however diabolical the act, it did not turn the perpetrator into a demon. We had to distinguish between the deed and the perpetrator, between the sinner and the sin, to hate and condemn the sin wile being filled with compassion for the sinner. The point is that, if perpetrators were to be despaired of as monsters and demons, then we were thereby letting accountability go out the window because we were then declaring that they were not moral agents to be held responsible for the deeds they had committed. Much more importantly, it meant that we abandoned all hope of their being able to change for the better. Theology said that they still, despite the awfulness of their deeds, remained children of God with the capacity to repent, to be able to change. Otherwise we should, as a commission, have had to shut up shop…

In the end, the commission reasserted the need for people to be held accountable for their actions, and judged perpetrators accordingly. There was, however, this twist: those who “repented” by honestly admitting their crimes and apologizing to their victims were set free. (quoted by Philip Yancey, *Vanishing Grace,* p. 233-234)

As Christians, we are called to show mercy. Hate the clothing stained by corrupted flesh, but show mercy to those who are sinning.

Let those be your goals for 2019: Keep yourself in God’s love by building yourself up in the faith, by praying in the Holy Spirit, by waiting for the mercy of our Lord, and by being merciful to those around you.

***Zechariah 3***Finally, let me close with this. The language Jude uses here—the image of “clothing stained by corrupted flesh”—is drawn from a prophecy in the book of Zechariah. **Zechariah 3.** I’d like to finish this message by quickly considering that story.

1Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. 2The Lord said to Satan, “The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?” [you see this language in Jude, saved from the fire.]

3Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel.

It’s a court room scene. Zechariah sees a vision of the angel of the LORD, seated in the Judge’s chair. And before him is the current high priest, named Joshua. Joshua represents all the people of God. As high priest, he’s the one who goes into the Lord’s presence on the Day of Atonement to pay for all of Israel’s sins.

And if you know much about the Old Testament rules in Exodus and Leviticus, you know that the high priest’s clothing is usually immaculate. There are all sorts rules for how the high priest should be dressed.

But in Zechariah’s vision, Joshua’s clothes are filthy. In fact, that word, “filthy”, is the strongest word available in Hebrew for describing all manner of foulness. The idea is that Joshua is covered with dirt and blood and human waste. It is clothing stained by corrupted flesh.

And standing with Joshua before the angel of the LORD is Satan, acting like a prosecuting attorney. It’s his job to accuse Joshua, to convict him and the people of sin. And all Satan has to do is point at the dirty clothes, to point out how filthy they are, to make his case: “These people are sinful, they deserve punishment. Just look at them!”

But the LORD (and that’s who this angel is) doesn’t agree with Satan. Instead, He rebukes Satan. Joshua is His chosen servant, Israel is His chosen people, they are sticks saved from the fire. So, instead of convicting Joshua on the basis of his dirty clothes, God changes his wardrobe. **Verses 4 and 5:**

4The angel said to those who were standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes.”

Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.”

5Then I said, “Put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the Lord stood by.

Isn’t that a beautiful picture of the mercy Jesus has shown to us? Shouldn’t we be seeking to share that same mercy with others?

That’s how we will one day be able to stand before God’s glorious presence without fault and with great joy. Because Jesus has cleaned us up. Because He has replaced our dirty rags with fine garments. Jesus has done what is needed, so that we can follow Him with confidence.

God keeps. So keep yourself in God’s love.

In 2019 continue to cling, like a toddler, to the Father whose strong arms will not let you go.