

Ben Franklin and the Apostle Paul

Psalm 16:1; "Preserve me, O God:"

By Brian L. Coatney

The cry of the Psalmist calls for God to keep him: "Preserve me, O God, for I take refuge in thee" (16:1 All citations from the NASB unless KJV indicated). This verse serves as a springboard to look first at what the word preserve means, and then at what the Apostle Paul gives as the full light in Christ on the meaning of this beautiful prayer of an Old Testament saint. Paul does this nowhere more clearly than in Romans Chapters Six and Seven, where he preaches that we are dead to sin and dead to the law and may therefore live free from their dominion, having attained this privilege through our crucifixion with Christ. In contrast, human idealism seeks perfection through self-improvement, by a plan to develop virtues in the self, such as typified by Benjamin Franklin's efforts to achieve moral perfection. The contrast of these two opposing plans will hopefully leave the reader no doubt that perfection comes only by union with Christ.

The appeal of Psalm 16:1 shifts trust away from the human self: the Psalmist abandons self-reliance for the keeping power of God. Everyone, under the constant pressures of life, asks the

question, "How will I get through life without wilting, falling apart, or self-destructing?" Even steel parts in an engine, heated and stressed by contact, lose their integrity without oil, eventually wearing out. The burgundy leather cover of my Bible eventually loses its integrity and fades in color if left in the back seat of the car too long. Similarly, hurts from others threaten to turn love for them into resentment.

Love, however, never fails (1 Cor. 13:8), meaning that love never ceases to act as love, regardless of what tempts it to hatred. William Law wrote, "Persons, Things, and outward Occurrences may strike our instruments improperly, and variously, but as we are in ourselves, such is our outward Sound, whatever strikes us" (Law 213). Love, then, is like a bell; no matter what strikes it, it can only make the sound of a bell. Similarly, with love, no offense draws forth a response not according to love.

God must keep us, however, for sooner or later all efforts to conform the self to love fail under the withering pressures of life: if health maintains, money fails; if money maintains, family disputes bring turmoil; if none of the aforementioned occur, bosses turn ugly, lovers turn cold, rivals outdistance us, or some disappointment sours our enthusiasm. If we cannot preserve these externals of life, something must preserve the inner self—what Paul calls "the spirit of a man" (1 Cor. 2:11 KJV). The will

may break, but if the spirit of a man breaks, preservation gives way to disorder and confusion.

In the face of this threat the Psalmist refuses to trust in himself, but takes refuge in God, bringing to mind Paul's cry of "who will deliver me?" in Romans 7:24 (KJV). This puts us off of ourselves and onto Him, surprisingly then to find the true self He made us to be. No wonder Paul uses the short phrase "in Christ" so often in his letters, for the self can only find preservation by risking the leap into another—one greater than ourselves.

One fear holding people back from this leap comes from previous disappointments from looking for refuge in others. We have tried to be masters at one or both of two roles: preserving others or finding others to preserve and take care of us. Not surprisingly, the Psalmist concludes, "for vain is the help of man" (60:11 KJV). We cannot help ourselves; others cannot help us, so finally only God is left if we honestly press on to perfection.

Not everybody does press on to perfection however, and Benjamin Franklin provides a prime example of trusting in self even after obvious failure. In his autobiography, he writes, "It was about this time I conceiv'd the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wish'd to live without committing any fault at any time [...]" (Franklin 63). Franklin, therefore, catalogued thirteen virtues with a brief definition of each and then set up a plan to work on each virtue: "My intention being to

acquire the *habitude* of all these virtues, I judg'd it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one at a time {...}" (65).

He planned to work on one virtue a week, making a notebook with the thirteen virtues listed down the left hand side of the page correlated to seven columns running across the page, one for each day of the week. To dedicate this project, he wrote, "And conceiving God to be the fountain of wisdom, I thought it right and necessary to solicit his assistance for obtaining it {...}" praying, "O powerful Goodness! Bountiful Father! Merciful Guide! Increase in me that wisdom which discovers my truest interest. Strengthen my resolutions to perform what that wisdom dictates" (67).

Franklin discovered what we might expect—that perfection eluded him. His project reminds me of the one I optimistically thought up as a 23-year-old seeker: having counted the verses in the New Testament, I decided that by memorizing three verses a day for seven years, I would become perfect; after all, perfection by age 30 sounded reasonable enough to work toward.

Two years of that project satisfied me that perfection would never come that way. The more scripture I learned, the more I appeared to myself unlike what I strived for: surprisingly, scripture, instead of buttressing me toward perfection, acted as a mirror exposing an inability I had not imagined; every standard of

scripture towered out of my reach, leaving me frustrated and condemned. Every time I heard the words of Romans 7:21, “I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good,” I recognized my misery.

It comes as a shock when we learn that God intends this very process: “And the law came in that the transgression might increase” (Rom. 5:20). Paul puts it well when he describes his awareness of himself prior to the clamps of the law: “I was alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died” (Rom. 7:9). I do not want to over-parse this verse, but Paul was *not* alive before the law came; he merely *felt* alive and lived in self-exuberance before the law exposed his besetting sin—covetousness. He had only thought himself alive apart from the law because he had see his “I” as living and not as crucified with Christ.

The law shows us our sins: how do we deal with the frustration of learning that we will never be what we had hoped in our idealism? Two responses confront us: we can decide like Ben Franklin to accept partial victories, or we can press on like Paul to insistence on a total victory.

Franklin chose to accept partial victory (so he thought), concluding, “In reality, there is, perhaps, no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as *pride*. Disguise, it, struggle with it,

beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself" (72).

Paul, on the other hand, after crying out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24) declares his deliverance and goes on to walk in the Spirit. Franklin says, "For even if I could conceive that I had compleatly (sic) overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility" (72), whereas Paul sees his deliverance not in a conquest he brings about, but in deliverance by one other than himself. Paul, determined for perfection, found it in union with the life of God, the only perfect person, whereas Franklin lived in the delusion of having at least partially perfected himself, excusing himself by lowering the bar.

Whereas Benjamin Franklin narrowed his battle down to pride, Paul gives his besetting sin as covetousness, not naming a particular sin such as alcoholism, sexual lust, anger, or stealing. Had he named a particular sin, many readers might say, "That's not *my* problem; mine is such and such." Covetousness, however, covers everything, for sin means the choice for self of something the self cannot legitimately have. All sins go through the door of covetousness; perhaps even pride goes through that door, for pride means coveting a separate self—a self apart from union with God. Can someone know pride before coveting? Either way, covetousness and pride both lie only a step away from the genesis of sin—the deceit of independent self.

In discussing sin, I often draw an upside down triangle and point out that most sins we think of lie along the transverse line at the top. With the upside down triangle, everything moves to one point at the bottom, the lie of independent self—the lie that the self can have a life of its own apart from union with God. Paul, therefore, instead of talking about a particular sin of the body or an attitude such as fear, anger, etc., moves down near the point of the triangle. Paul discovers his freedom not to sin, whereas Benjamin Franklin never arrives at this victory. The “I will always sin” outlook only works for people with little sins they do not really mind committing—sins they do not see as destroying themselves or others. For a time, Benjamin Franklin probably experienced deep distress over his pride, but then decided that if he could not eradicate it, he might as well accept occasional outbursts of it, commending himself for the progress he had made, especially when so many did not even care to try.

Benjamin Franklin’s thinking carries on today everywhere that people idealize and strive for self-improvement. Recently, as I taught Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography to a literature class, I looked over on the wall in my classroom and saw the ten character qualities (from the district’s Character Education Program) posted on the bulletin board. They included loyalty, honesty, perseverance, and responsibility, along with six other qualities, each with a short definition. I thought, “The spirit of Ben Franklin lives on wherever someone looks at character

qualities like these and thinks, "I can be like that; I can work to achieve that."

These qualities then communicate subtly as a law: "I should be like that." Yet these qualities only reside in and express the nature of one person—God. Not even Jesus possessed these qualities in his earthly life apart from union with his Father, for he said, "I can of mine own self do nothing" (John. 5:30 KJV). Though he was God come in the flesh, he demonstrated God's intent for human life by living as a vessel to contain and express the life of life of his Father. The apostle Peter, before listing qualities such as moral excellence, knowledge, self control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love, prefaces these qualities by exhorting us to "become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4 KJV).

Benjamin Franklin never mentions this all-important distinctive in attaining these qualities, but calls on God only to help *him* attain them. Failing to reach the summit in his quest, Franklin repels condemnation for his pride by saying, "even if I could conceive that I had compleatly (sic) overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility" (72). This acceptance of failure with upbeat resignation only pushes away a sense of condemnation by weakening the law so much that we never need to die to the law, only dilute the law.

Paul takes a radically different approach to living without condemnation: he sees that he cannot eradicate his pride at all; every effort finally leads to a condition out of control. Franklin's view that he can achieve partial victory approaches sin like a fire that he cannot put out, but which he can contain and keep from spreading beyond a certain perimeter: some trees will burn down, but the forest will survive in tact: it will be preserved. For Paul, anything short of total deliverance means "the body of this death" (Rom. 7:24).

Paul's recognition that no effort on his part will bring success leads him to look outside of himself for deliverance, leading to his cry, "Who will set me free?" (Rom. 7:24). Once he learns that he can never obey God's laws, he opens himself up to the consideration of God's plan to bring about perfection. Paul finds good news: his failure leads him to the life of the Holy Spirit in him, the union of the self with the one perfect person in the universe. Paul henceforth lives life by trusting Christ to live perfectly through him. Franklin's plan never leads him to union with God; only to a deceived state of self-satisfaction.

Paul never says, however, that he cannot commit a sin, but that he is dead to sin: he never *has* to sin; the option of walking in the Spirit by faith exists every moment of every day. This is different from the usual evangelical heresies posited at two opposing extremes. One heresy proclaims sinless perfection as if the one in that state no longer knows the possibility of falling into

a sin; the other heresy always mumbles the prayer, "Father forgive us of our many sins." Neither recognizes the truth of what Paul means in Romans Chapter Six when he says that we are dead to sin through baptism into Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

I illustrate "dead to sin" with the example of a street person in poverty scavenging and panhandling to stay alive. Suppose a rich uncle dies and leaves the street person, call him Joe, a million dollars, but Joe knows nothing about this newly inherited wealth, and so continues to live in his poverty. Is Joe rich? Yes, of course he is, because the money belongs to him; it sits securely in an account waiting for him to discover and spend from: Joe merely needs to know of his wealth and start spending.

In the same way, Jesus Christ died and rose, leaving us a perfect life to live from—His life! Paul gives us the mechanics of that transaction in Romans Chapter Six, beginning with the question, "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3). "Do you not know?" he says, meaning that knowing produces freedom from sin's dominion.

A lot of people fuss about baptism, arguing about how to apply the water, when God does not care about water, He cares about us knowing we are in Christ and Christ is in us—as well as how that came about. Paul tells us how that came about: God

made Christ die to sin even though Christ never committed a sin (Rom. 6:10).

I always found that amazing, before I understood Romans Chapter Six, because I saw it seemed incongruous to say that Christ died to sin. Only when I learned that Christ became all of Satan-indwelled humanity on the Cross did I realize that he became me, he became you—he became everyone born from the first Adam. Just as everyone born of the first Adam lives under the dominion of sin because of sin's indwelling—meaning of course Satan's indwelling—everyone born of the last Adam is dead to sin because of what happened to Jesus during those vital three days of Easter.

He became our sin-indwelled humanity on the Cross, cutting us off from Satan's power through his body death. When a body dies, the spirit goes out, so when Jesus died, Satan had no vessel to live through. A dead body, however, cannot live, so for us to live, the Holy Spirit had to raise him up—meaning also us in him. Paul sums this truth up in Galatians 2:20 by saying, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

Just as the street person, Joe, never has to live impoverished again, but can spend liberally from his wealth at all times, we—now dead to sin—never have to give in to sin's allure again—its lie that we cannot hold out against it—but can respond

in faith every time, preserved by Christ's full perfection lived out through us. Can we sin? Yes, but do we ever have to? No! Anything short of this outlook undermines the completeness of God's work in Christ on our behalf.

The apostle John tells us the same thing in different words, though many miss his real point. Because he says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins," many interpret this as an inevitable cycle of sin and repentance in the Christian. John also says, however, "I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if any one sins, we have an advocate with the father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). He does not say *when* anyone sins, but *if* anyone sins. One might as well say to Joe, "I write this will for you to see that you might live as a wealthy man; but if you lapse into thinking yourself poor and commit an act of poverty, I forgive you."

The knowledge that in Christ we are dead to sin represents one side of a coin; on the other side we find inscribed, "dead to the law," for sin gets its power through the law: "for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and thorough it killed me" (Rom. 7:11). The last stronghold of deception falls away when we recognize the voice of Satan behind the admonition, "You can keep the law." This differs from God's command for us to keep the law, for God does not say that we can keep it, only that we should keep it. Satan lies to us about how to keep the law, hiding behind the holiness of God's law

with his deceptive assertion that we can keep it—blinding us to the righteousness that comes by faith.

Not only does Satan hide from us that God must keep the law in us as we walk by faith, he hides his role as the spirit of error (1 John. 4:6) and the generating nature behind all sin—indwelling the non Christian (Eph. 2:1-3) and invading the Christian who still trusts in self. Little did Benjamin Franklin suspect, and little did I expect as a 23-year-old, that Satan promotes the lie of self-improvement using God's holy law. Only the New Testament clarifies this deception, throwing open a full view of what the Psalmist knew in part when he cried, "Preserve me, O God, for I take refuge in Thee."

The Psalmist knew one thing unknown to Benjamin Franklin—what it means to arrive in desperation at the end of self and appeal by faith to God's keeping. The Psalmist knew the leap outside of himself into God as the fulfillment of the law. At this point he did not make a list of qualities to practice for the improvement of his character; he flung himself into God and found his refuge. Paul fully explicates the mystery of Christ behind our call to abandon self-reliance, leaving no doubt that the totality of our perfection comes from Christ himself—who is our perfection through union with him. To God be the glory.

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