

And so, the odds were completely against them. There was no logical way they could possibly succeed. When you looked at their opponent - the opponent was smarter, stronger. The opponent had been in these kinds of contests before and had won every single time. They were the underdogs.

Can you picture them in the tunnel, getting ready to face the opponent? You always see videos of football teams running through a tunnel out onto a field, or a baseball or basketball team walking through a tunnel under the stadium right before the big game. But I'm not talking about sports. I'm talking about something way bigger.

I'm talking about the Christians, getting ready to face the Devil and face the world. In John chapter 17, the disciples were the underdogs. Today it's you. It's young Christians leaving the shelter of their Christian schools during this month of May. It's each one of us as we take shelter here for a little while here on a Wednesday evening, where we enjoy Christian fellowship and ponder God's Word. But then we all have to leave, and face the Devil and face the world. And you are the underdog, or at least it seems that way. The odds are completely stacked against you, just as they were stacked against the disciples.

But there is hope, there is a reason to feel confident and even joyful, and Jesus gives that joy and confidence to us as we look at his words in John chapter 17 this evening. Before we look at Jesus' words, let's consider the setting. The disciples were like that team in the tunnel, getting ready to go out onto the field. John 17 is Jesus praying for his disciples on Maundy Thursday, the night he is betrayed. Now Jesus is done being their teacher, their coach. Yes, Jesus did tell them that he would be with them, to the very end of the age - but not in a way that they could see anymore. Things were going to be different - "I will remain in the world no longer," Jesus said. No more sermons or Bible classes or parables or miracles with Jesus, right there in front of you, doing all these things - that was all done.

The disciples knew that something was changing - Jesus had been telling them that he was leaving them, and now it seemed like the time had come. The disciples were concerned, maybe worried, scared, confused, not confident. They knew that the odds were against them, if they were supposed to go out into the world. The world was smarter than they were, and more powerful. And so was the Devil, who was also trying to get them to fail. How in the world could they succeed against the Devil, and the world? How could they even keep their faith, if Jesus was going to leave them? They were the underdogs.

Things haven't changed over the last two thousand years. How in the world are you going to stay a Christian, keep your faith, when you have the Devil scheming, the Bible says, to tempt you and cause you to lose your faith? How in the world are you going to stay a Christian, or even grow in your faith or share your faith, in a world that is becoming more and more hostile to anything Christian? You are the underdog, the modern day disciple of Jesus. Those of you who are parents - do you ever wonder about your children? How are they going to stay in their faith? You've done all you can to teach them. Many of you are parents of students who are in this choir today - you've given them this Christian education - but now it's time - especially for the seniors - it's time for the modern day disciples to leave the shelter that you give them and to face the Devil who is very wise. It's time to face the world, which is very hostile. Will your children keep their faith? Will you? Do you ever worry? Do you ever feel insecure? Or afraid, not confident, like those disciples on the night Jesus spoke these words?

Look at the comfort and the confidence Jesus gives us in John 17: "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name." Jesus was praying that the Father would use his power to keep the disciples safe. "While I was with them, Jesus said, I protected them and kept them safe by the name you gave me." Jesus had protected his disciples from earthly danger, and from spiritual attacks from the Devil and the world.

Later Jesus said, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world even as I am not of it." How did God the Father answer this prayer? When you read the book of Acts, you can see the many times God rescued the disciples from prison, from harm. What's interesting, though, is that most of them did die a martyr's death. Did God forget to protect them? No, he took care of their souls. Even as they experienced physical hardship, he took care of them, and kept them in the one true faith through his Word: "Sanctify them by the truth, your word is truth." Where are those disciples now? They were most certainly the underdogs - but now they are in heaven, victorious and safe with God the Father.

God has answered this prayer of Jesus throughout the history of the Christian church. There is no way these followers of Jesus should have succeeded in spreading Christianity to the ends of the earth. They were less educated, less powerful, less influential. Satan throughout history has done possible to destroy Christianity. And the world has been his best friend - both the Jewish and the Roman world tried to exterminate the Christians for many years. And yet, 2000 years later, Christianity has spread to the ends of the earth, all the way to you. How is that possible? God was with the underdogs. He answered this prayer of Jesus: "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world... Holy Father, protect them."

Do you realize that Jesus still does this today - he still talks to his Heavenly Father, about the underdogs, about you? This is not something I fully understand, but it's very clear in the Bible - for example from Romans 8:34: "Christ Jesus, who died, more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." From Hebrews 7: "He always lives to intercede" for us. Can you picture it - God the Father is on his awesome throne in heaven - he controls everything - nothing happens, without his permission. And standing next to him is Jesus, your Savior from sin. Jesus is talking to God the Father. About what? About you: "he's interceding for you" that God would protect you and keep your faith alive and your soul safe.

And God has answered that prayer. Think about it - you should have lost your faith a long long time ago - the Devil who is very wise has been after you since the day you were born. The world which is very powerful has been trying to convince you to follow its messed up ways every single day of your life. The odds are completely against you, and yet, you still believe. God has kept your soul safe. Jesus talks about you when he says "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one."

Spiritual security - it's the best kind of security you can have in this world. We all want security - but nothing is guaranteed. Emotional security means that you feel that people love you and care about you, that you belong - that's nice to have - but it's not guaranteed. Financial security means that you have enough money to pay for everything - nice to have, but not guaranteed.

Here's what's guaranteed - God will keep you safe. Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for your sins and more than that, was raised to life he stands next to God the Father every day of

your life, and every day he tells the Father - protect that person I died for. Take care of that person's soul. And every day, God answers yes.

How in the world are you going to stay a Christian? God will keep you in the faith. And he'll do that through his Word: "Sanctify them by the truth, Jesus says, your Word is truth." To sanctify means to set something aside for special use, something special for God. To illustrate let me hold up a silver knife from a set of silver utensils given to us after Susan's mom passed away. We use these utensils on special occasions such a Thanksgiving or Christmas. You would not think of using a knife like this to dig weeds out of the yard. Because Jesus has redeemed you by his precious blood, you are now saints of God. You are special to the Lord, set aside to serve him in special ways before he calls you home to heaven. 1 Peter 2 says this of us: "But you also are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." God's Word keeps sanctifying you and telling you how special you are to the Lord. It sets you apart from the world. No matter what the Devil throws at you, God is faithful - he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear, but when you are tempted, he will provide a way out, and he does all that, through his Word. The Devil is smart. But God's Word is smarter. And you have that.

Yes, the world hates the Christians - you are definitely the underdog. But Jesus has given you his Word. It is the one thing that has proven to be more powerful than the Roman empire in the first few centuries that tried to destroy it. It has proven to be more powerful than all the people over history, very smart people, who have tried to get rid of it - you have the Word. And as Jesus says, the gates of hell will not overcome it.

Are you really the underdog? Not with Jesus interceding for you at the right hand of God. Not with the Word of God in your hand and in your heart and in your mind and mouth. You're not the underdog when God the Father is protecting you with his power. Really, if you think about it, the world doesn't stand a chance, and neither does the Devil. God is with you and for you, and Jesus says, "I say these things...that they may have the full measure of my joy within them." May God fill you with joy and confidence as you live your faith in this world.