

The Faith Once Delivered to the Saints

by John Nelson Darby

John Nelson Darby's sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding our faith and position in light of God's unchanging principles amidst a changing world.

Topics: "Faithfulness", "Spiritual Discernment"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the necessity of understanding our current spiritual state and the unchanging principles of God as we navigate through varying circumstances. He illustrates how God's relationship with His people remains constant, even as their conduct may change in different times of judgment. Darby warns against the dangers of complacency within the Church, urging believers to contend for the faith that was once delivered to the saints, recognizing the need for spiritual discernment in the face of growing corruption. He reassures that despite the Church's failures, Christ remains sufficient and powerful, calling for a return to the Word of God as the ultimate authority. The sermon serves as a reminder of the importance of individual faith and the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding believers amidst the challenges of the last days.

Transcript

Jude 3

It is a great thing for us, beloved friends, in all our path to know where we are, and then to know the mind of God, not only as to where we are, but as to our place in the path in which we find ourselves.

Not only has God visited us in grace, but we have to take into our minds what the actual present result of that grace is, so that we hold fast the great principles under which God has set us as Christians; and at the same time be able to apply those principles to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. These circumstances may vary according to our position, but the principles never vary.

Their application to the path of faith may vary and does. I mean such a thing as this: in Hezekiah's time they were told, "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength", and the Assyrian should not even cast a bank before Jerusalem. They were to stay perfectly calm and firm; and the host of Assyria was destroyed. But when a certain time of judgment was come, in Jeremiah's time, then he that went out of the city to the Chaldeans, their enemies, should save himself.

They were still God's people as much as before, though He was saying for the time in judgment - "not my people", and that made the difference. It was not that God's mind was altered or His relationship to His people changed - that never will be. Yet the conduct of the people was to be exactly the opposite. Under Hezekiah they were protected; under Zedekiah they were to bow to the judgment.

I refer to these circumstances as a testimony, to show that while the relationship of God with Israel is immutable in this world, yet their conduct at one time had to be the opposite to that at another.

Look at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, as regards the Church, God's assembly in the world. There I find the full display of power; all had one heart and one mind and they had all things in common; the very place was shaken where they were. But suppose I take the Church now, including the Roman Catholic system and all, if we look at all that and own it, we bow down to everything that is evil at once.

While God's thoughts do not change and He knows His people and so on, yet we need spiritual discernment to see where we are, and what the ways of God are in the circumstances, while never departing from the first great principles which He has laid down for us in His Word. Another thing, too, we have to take account of as a fact of Scripture, is that wherever God has set man, the first thing man has done has been to spoil the position; we must ever take that into account.

Look at Adam, Noah, Aaron, Solomon and Nebuchadnezzar. God goes on in patient mercy, yet the uniform way of man, as we read in Scripture, has been at once to upset and destroy the thing which God set up good.

Consequently, there cannot be any walking with a true knowledge of our position if this is not considered. But God is faithful and goes on in patient love. Thus in Isaiah 6 we find "Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes" and so on, but it was not fulfilled for 800 years, and when Christ came they rejected Him.

Patience went on in that way, individual souls were converted, there were various testimonies by the prophets and a remnant was preserved still. But if we should plead the faithfulness of God, which is invariable, to put a positive sanction upon the evil which man has brought in, our whole principle is false.

That would be exactly what they did in Jeremiah's time when judgment was coming, and what Christendom is doing now; they said, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, are these", and "The law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise," when they were all going to Babylon. The faithfulness of God was invariable, but the moment they applied that to sustain them in the place of evil, it became the very ground of their ruin. The same principles which would be our security become, if we leave out the sense of where we are, our ruin.

We get the Word, "look to the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged. Look to Abraham your father and unto Sarah that bare you; "for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him", Isaiah 51: 1; a passage constantly misapplied. God is saying there, Abraham was alone and I called him. Israel, to whom God spake this, was then but a little remnant - Do not let that make you uneasy, I called Abraham alone.

Their being little was of no consequence - God could bless them alone as well as Abraham.

Now in Ezekiel, a similar statement by the people in different circumstances, is denounced as iniquity. They said there, "we are many", "Abraham was one and he inherited the land", Ezekiel 33: 24; God

blessed him and so He will bless us still more. From want of conscience, really, they misapprehended the condition in which they were, and with which God was dealing. So now, if we leave out the sense of our condition - I mean that of the whole professing Church in the midst of which we stand - we shall be utterly wanting in spiritual intelligence.

We are in the last days, but sometimes I think people do not weigh the full force of that. I think I can show you from Scripture that, the Church as a responsible system down here was, from the very outset, that which had got into the condition of judgment, and the state of it was such as to require individual faith to judge it.

The great thought that is current among hundreds and thousands is to get away from the present confusion to a kind of resource, that the Church teaches and judges and does this and that; but, on the contrary, God is judging the Church. Patience He does show and grace, calling souls to Himself as He did in Israel; but what we have to look in the face is that the Church has not escaped the effect of that principle in poor human nature, that the first thing it does is to depart from God, and ruin what He has set up.

When we speak of the last times it is not a new thing, but one which we have in Scripture, one which God in sovereign goodness has given us before the closing of the canon of Scripture. He allowed the evil to come up so that He could give us the judgment of Scripture upon it. If you look at Jude - and I take now merely some of those principles which the Church of God wants - he says, "Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints". The faith was in danger already, they were obliged to contend for that which was slipping from them, so to say, for there were "certain men crept in unawares", etc., so that you must look at judgment now. God saved the people out of Egypt and afterwards had to destroy them that believed not. So, too, with the angels in like manner.

Then again Enoch prophesied of those of whom Jude speaks, the ungodly, on whom the Lord will execute judgment when He comes again. These were then, and the starting point of it in the Apostles' days was sufficient to give the revelation of God's mind by His Word. The ground of judgment when the Lord comes again was there present already.

If you take John's first epistle, chapter 2: 18, he says, "Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists, whereby we know that it is the last time". So that it is not a new thing that is developed, but it began at the first, just as in Israel they made the calf at the outset, yet God bore with them for centuries,

but the state of the people was that which a spiritual man judged. John says, "we know that it is the last time". I suppose the Church of God has hardly improved since then. In verse 20 he adds, "But ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things" - you have that which will enable you to judge in these circumstances.

Again, take the practical state of the Church as seen by Paul in Philippians 2: 20-21, "I have no man like-minded, who will naturally care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ's". That was in his day. What a testimony! It was not that they had given up being Christians.

He tells Timothy, "At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me; I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge", 2 Timothy 4: 16. Not one stayed by him! Peter tells us that "the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God", 1 Peter 4: 17. I name these as the authority of the Word of

God, showing even then, at the very beginning, there was that going on outwardly which the Spirit of God could discern and testify to as being the ground of final judgment, but already manifest in the Church of God.

There is another thing that shows this principle strongly, and that is the ground of action, under the circumstances disclosed in the seven churches in Asia; Revelation 2 and 3. I do not doubt but that it is the history of the Church of God, but the point is, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches". The churches could neither guide nor have authority, nor anything else of the kind but whoever had an ear to hear God's Word had to judge their state. That very evidently is an important principle, and a very solemn thing it is. Christ is speaking to the churches, not as Head of the body, though He is that for ever and ever, but they are being looked at as responsible down here on the earth. It is not the Father sending messages to the Church, as in the different epistles; it is not that, but it is Christ walking in the midst of them to judge them. He is here, therefore, neither the Head of the body, nor the Servant. He has His garment down to the feet - I tuck it up if I want to serve. He is walking in the midst to judge their state. That is a new thing.

It is a question of responsibility, and so you find some approved and some disapproved. Their condition is the subject of judgment on the part of Christ, and they are here called to listen to what He has to say. It is not the blessing of God properly, which you get in the churches, though they had many blessings, but the condition of these churches when these blessings had been put into their hands. What use had they made of them?

Look at the Thessalonians in their freshness - the work of faith, labour of love and patience of hope are manifest. But in the first epistle to the churches, that to Ephesus, we read, "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience". Where were the faith and the love? The spring was wanting. The Lord had to say "I will ... remove thy candlestick ... except thou repent". They were put in a place of responsibility and He deals with them according to it. The first thing is, "thou hast left thy first love"; so the time was come when judgment should begin at the house of God.

Peter's words allude to Ezekiel, when he says, "begin at my sanctuary", Ezekiel 9: 6; God's house at Jerusalem, for that is where God looks first for what is right - to His own house. I feel it is an exceedingly solemn thing, and one that should bow our hearts before God. The Church has failed in being the epistle of Christ - it was set as such in the world - but now is it anything like it at all? Can a heathen - that is the way to look at it - see anything of it? Individuals may be walking blessedly; yet where do we get faith like Elijah's, though he knew no one in Israel who was true, while God knew seven thousand. Blessed man he was, but even his faith failed and God asks him, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" This should not be discouragement either, for Christ is sufficient for us. Nothing reaches the full perfect faithfulness of God's own grace, and our hearts ought to be thoroughly bowed as to that.

Neither is it the thought of attacking or blaming, for we are all in it in one sense, but our hearts should take notice, that what was set up so beautiful in the power of God's Spirit - what has it all come to? It casts us on the strength that can never fail!

When the spies returned to Israel, the faith of ten gave way. Caleb and Joshua say, "neither fear ye the people of the land for they are bread for us". It is the same for us in view of difficulty and opposition now. We are called to see where we are, and what the path and the place are, in which we have to walk, and to have a consciousness of the state all is in around us. Yet if the Church has utterly failed, the Head can

never fail. Christ is just as sufficient for us now, in the state of things in which we find ourselves, as at the first when He set up the Church in beauty and blessedness. It may require us to look at His Word and see what His mind is, but we are not to hide our eyes from what the state is in which we are.

In reading the Acts it is most striking to see that there is power in the midst of evil. When we get to heaven there will be no evil at all, we shall not want faith or conscience in exercise then, but now we do, and the only thing we have is the power of the Spirit of God where evil is dominant, and by it we should be dominant over the evil in our path.

It does not say that every Christian will be persecuted, but it says, "all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution", 2 Timothy 3: 12. If a man show the power of the Spirit of God, the world will not stand it; that is the principle. In the Acts, when we get the power of the Spirit shown in miracles, as in Christ before, what did it draw out? The enmity which crucified the Lord. What we have now is good in the midst of evil - that is what Christ was, perfect good in the midst of evil;

but the effect of the display of God in Him - inasmuch as the carnal mind is enmity against God - was that it drew out hostility, and the more the display, the more the hostility drawn out; and so for His love He had hatred. As yet we have not come to the time when evil is removed - that will be when Christ comes again - and that is the difference between that time and this time; that time will be the coming in of good in power, so as to bind Satan and put down evil. But Christ being in this world, and afterwards His saints, is on the contrary, good in the midst of evil, while Satan is the god of this world.

When once these became mixed up, the good was swamped and all floated on together. Take the wise virgins and the foolish; while they are asleep they can all stay together - Why should they not? But the moment they trim their lamps comes the question of the oil, and they do not go together any more. And we shall find it the same. Again in Joshua it was a time of power. True they fail at Jericho and get beaten at Ai, but the general character is power. Enemies were subdued and cities walled up to heaven were taken, faith overcame all, and that is a blessed picture - good in the midst of evil and power carrying on the good and putting down enemies. In Judges it is the contrary; God's power was there, but power was manifested by the evil because the people were not faithful. They got at once to Bochim - Judges 2: 1-5 - i.e., tears, weeping, while in Joshua they went to Gilgal, where the total separation of Israel from the world had taken place; they had crossed Jordan and that was death, and then the reproach of Egypt was rolled away. But the Angel of the Lord went to Bochim; He did not give up Israel though they had left Gilgal. It was grace going after them. And on our part, if we do not go to Gilgal, if we do not go back to the utter humiliation of self in God's presence, we cannot come out in power.

If a servant's intercourse with God does not surmount his testimony to men, he will break down and fail. He must renew his strength. The great secret of Christian life is that our intercourse with God should make nothing of ourselves. God, however, did not give up Israel, and they built an altar to the Lord, but they were weeping at the altar; they were not in triumph, but were constantly being triumphed over.

Then God sent them judges and He was with the judges, though the people had lost their place. That is what we have to consider in the same way. "All seek their own, not the things that are Jesus Christ's". Was not that losing their place? - not that they had ceased to be the Church of God, I do not mean that. Unless we consider this, we, too, shall get to Bochim, the place of tears. The whole state of the Church of God has to be judged, only the Head can never lose His power, and there is a grace that fits the condition, too.

What I see in the beginning of the history of the Church is first this blessed power converting 3,000 souls in one day. Then came opposition; the world put them into prison, but God shows His power against that, and I do not doubt that if now we were more faithful there would be a great deal more of the intervention of God. But the power of the Spirit of God was there, and they were walking in a blessed unity, showing that power, and that in the midst of the power of evil, though we do not leave that scene until we find, alas, evil working within, as seen in Ananias and Sapphira. They got credit for giving up their goods falsely. The Spirit of God was there, and they fell dead and fear came upon all, both inside and outside. Then, before the history of Scripture closes, the time has come that judgment must begin at the house of God. It is a most solemn thing characterising the present time until Christ comes, and then His power will put down evil - a very different thing.

Next we get the testimony to the gross evil where good ought to be: "in the last days perilous times shall come; for men shall be lovers of their own selves" and so on; 2 Timothy 3: 1-2. There the professing Church - for such it is - has the same description as is given of the heathen in the beginning of the epistle to the Romans.

It is a positive declaration that such times should come, and that the state of things would return to what it had been in heathendom. It goes on to say that "evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived", 2 Timothy 3: 13. But Paul tells Timothy to continue in the things he had learned.

People say now the Church teaches these things, but I ask, Who is that? The Church? What do they mean? It is all something in the air - there is no inspired person in the Church now to teach. I must go to Paul and Peter and then I know from whom I learn. Just as he said to the elders from Ephesus, "I commend you to God and to the Word of his grace". Evil men and seducers had waxed worse and worse, but the apostle casts Timothy on the certainty of the knowledge he had received from particular persons; to us now, it is, "the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation". We have to learn all this, when the professing Church is a judged thing, and the mere form of godliness characterises it. Here we get, I think, what Christians must look in the face. Do we not see men now turning away who were once called Christians; such turning infidels?

Mere formality is turning into open infidelity or open superstition. It is notorious, even in an outward way, how things are going. In itself, Christianity is Christianity as God gave it, but outwardly, as seen around us, it is gone. It is Christianity that we want, as it is in the Word of God. Not that there is anything to fear - it is a blessed time in a sense, casting us upon God, only we must look at these things simply and steadily.

There is not a more blessed picture of lovely faith and godliness, before the gospel came in, than you find in the first two chapters of Luke.

Amidst all the iniquity of the Jews, we see Zacharias, Mary, Simeon, Anna and other like minded ones. And they knew each other, and Anna "spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem"; just as we ought to be in another way.

But as to the present state of things - taking the side of man's responsibility - man departs at once from what God sets up, and then comes in a growing corruption, till judgment is necessary. John spoke of the last days being come in, because there were then already many antichrists; but God's patience has been going on, until at the close perilous times have come.

Now I add a Word as to how we are to walk in the midst of such a state of things. It is clearly by the Word of God - by immediate reference to it. Not that God does not use ministry - ministry is His own ordinance - but for authority we must turn to the Word of God itself. There is the direct authority of God, as determining everything; and we have the activity of His Spirit to communicate things. Yet it is an unhappy thing if a person goes only to Scripture, refusing help from others, or looks at men as direct guides and denies the Spirit's place.

A mother ought to be blessed in the care of her children, and so should a minister among saints; that is the activity of the Spirit of God in an individual - he is an instrument of God. But while owning that fully, we must go to the Word of God and that directly, and that is what we have to insist upon. We all say that the Word of God is the authority, but we have to insist that God speaks by the Word. A mother is not inspired and no man is, but the Word of God is, and it is direct, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches". I never get the Church teaching - the Church is taught and does not teach; individuals teach. But the apostles and others whom God used in that way, were the instruments of God, to communicate directly from God to the saints, so it is, I adjure you by the Lord that the letter be read to all the holy brethren", 1 Thessalonians 5: 27. This is of all importance, because it is God's title to speak to souls directly. He may use any instrument He pleases, and you cannot object - "the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee", 1 Corinthians 12: 21; but when you come to direct authority, it is a most solemn thing to touch that. Neither do I talk of private judgment in the things of God, I do not admit it as a principle. You have to discern about other things, but the moment I get into divine things am I going to talk of judging the Word of God? That is one sign of the evil of the times that are come in.

When I own the Word of God, brought by His Spirit, I sit down to hear what God will say to me, and then it judges me, not I judge it. It is the divine Word brought to my conscience and heart, and am I to judge God when God is speaking to me? It would be denying that He is speaking to me. To have real power it must be the Word of God to my soul, and then I do not think of judging it, but I sit down before it to have my heart drawn out and my conscience exercised. Then I must take it up, as that which gives me what was from the beginning. Why? because God gave that.

At the beginning we have not the thing as it was spoiled, but that which God set up.

It will not do to bring me the primitive Church; I must have that which was from the beginning. I then get the inspired Word and the unity of the body. But after the beginning, the very next thing in ecclesiastical history was all wretched division. John says, "If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son and in the Father", 1 John 2: 24. You lose your place in the Son and in the Father if you go away from that which was from the beginning. It is evident, then, in applying this, that I must take notice of the circumstances we are in, for in them I get, not what was from the beginning, but what man has made of what God set up at the beginning. People say the Church is this and that, but if I take what God set up, I see the unity of the body, and Christ the Head, and that is what the Church was manifested to be on earth. But do we get it now?

On the contrary we get warned. Paul, as a wise masterbuilder, laid the foundation, and when others build he warns them not to build with wrong materials - wood, hay, stubble - which will be destroyed; 1 Corinthians 3: 12. The building work was put upon man's responsibility, and as such became the subject of judgment. "Upon this rock I will build my Church", Matthew 16: 18, gives me Christ's building, and that is going on; it is not finished yet. Again in Peter, "To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God and precious, ye also as lively stones are built up a spiritual house", 1 Peter 2:

4-5. There, too, it is seen as still being built up; then in Ephesians 2: 21, Paul says the building "fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord". Now all that is Christ's work, what men call the invisible Church, and so it is. But on the other hand, "Let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon", 1 Corinthians 3: 10, i.e., upon the foundation laid by Paul; there you have man's work as a responsible instrument.

Now men confound these two things; they go on building in wood, hay and stubble, and then they speak of the gates of hell not prevailing against that, because they do not give heed to the Word of God. We have to look at God's principles and the power of the Spirit of God, to hear what the Spirit saith to the churches, and to discover truly where we are, so finding the path which God has marked out and in which we are distinctly to walk and I add, faith in the presence of the Spirit of God.

That Spirit will use the Word and make us take notice of the state of things, not confounding God's faithfulness with man's responsibility - what the superstitious world is doing -but owning that there is a living God and that that living God is amongst us in the Person and power of the Holy Ghost. All is founded on the cross, surely, but the Comforter did come, and by one Spirit they were all baptised into one body.

Whether I take the individual or the Church, I find this is the secret of power for all the good against the evil, outside or inside, this fact - the Word being the guide - of the presence of the Spirit of God. "Know ye not", Paul said, to people going on very badly, in order to correct them, "that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God", 1 Corinthians 6: 19. Do you believe, beloved friends, that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Ghost? Then what kind of persons ought we to be?

In 1 Corinthians 3: 16, we get the same thing said of the Church, "know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?" The presence of the Spirit gives power, and practical power, too, for blessing, whether in the Church or in the individual, and He alone can do anything for real blessing.

Again, it is only on the footing of redemption that God dwells with man. He did not dwell with Adam innocent, though He came down to him. He did not dwell with Abraham, though He visited him and ate with him. But when Israel came out of Egypt, God said He brought them to Himself "that I may dwell among them". And at once the tabernacle was built, and there was God's presence in the midst of His people.

Of course, now, we have true and full redemption, and the Holy Ghost has come down to dwell in those that believe, that they might be the expression of what Christ was Himself when He was down here. "Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him and he in God", 1 John 4: 15; and "Hereby know we that we dwell in him and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit", 1 John 4: 13. Where a person is really a Christian, God dwells in him; it is not merely that he has life, but he is sealed with the Holy Ghost who is the power for all moral conduct. If we but believed that the Spirit of God dwells in us, what subjection there would be, and what manner of persons would we be, not grieving that Spirit!

Further, in 1 Corinthians 2: 9, I find, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him, but God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit" - "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God". The Spirit of God and of the world are always in contrast. But then I find the revelation is in contrast with what is our state. We have to say, "Eye hath not seen"; these things are so great we cannot conceive them, but God

has revealed them by His Spirit. The Old Testament saints could not find out or know these things, but with us it is the opposite; we do know them, and He has given us His Spirit "that we might know the things".

In this passage the Holy Ghost is seen in three distinct steps; first, these things are revealed by the Spirit; then, they are communicated by words the Spirit taught; and then, they are received by the power of the Spirit - are "spiritually discerned";

all three are the operation of the power of the Spirit of God.

If I were to take the Word of God by itself and say I can judge of it and understand it, then I am a rationalist; it is man's mind judging the revelation of God. But where we get God's mind communicated by the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost the power to receive it, then I get God's mind. There is just as much wisdom and power from God for us to meet the state of ruin in which we now are, as there was at the first when He set up the Church; and that is what we have to lean upon

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-nelson-darby/the-faith-once-delivered-to-the-saints/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net