

## **Self-preservation**

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In one episode of *Foyle's War*, a TV series set in Great Britain during the early part of World War II, the Nazis had already defeated France and an invasion of Great Britain seemed imminent. The uncertainty, fear, and instinct to take care of themselves and their own led some people to show less concern for others than they would in normal circumstances. Many hoarded. Others stole. Some even committed murder.

But some people, in contrast, reacted in a completely different manner. They were heroic, not by dint of performing great deeds, but because they performed small deeds selflessly. They faced their difficulties with dignity. They helped one another. They looked out for the welfare of their neighbors and shared what they had.

Seeing the contrast between the two types of responses brought home the challenges we face when we find ourselves in uncertain, difficult circumstances. In times of economic or social turmoil, when the status quo changes, when everything seems topsy-turvy, it's natural for people to feel concerned for themselves first and foremost. Not everyone will respond in the same way, of course; the human instinct of self-preservation takes a more prominent role for some than for others.

When all around us is unstable, we become destabilized too. When what we thought to be solid ground begins to feel like shifting sand, fear can grip us—fear of the future and fear of the changes being thrust upon us. If we allow that fear to overpower our faith, our trust in God's care diminishes and we feel that *we* must take control of events by taking matters into our own hands. This isn't necessarily bad, since the "fight or flight" instinct is built into our nature; we automatically respond to perceived danger with moves to protect ourselves and our loved ones.

The challenge we face, though, is finding the right balance between our human nature and our *spiritual* nature. As Christians, we are "new creations" who possess more than human nature alone. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."<sup>1</sup> We have God's Spirit dwelling within us. "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"<sup>2</sup> We abide in Jesus and He abides in us. "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me."<sup>3</sup>

Our responses to circumstances and events should be influenced by Christ's presence in us. While we feel naturally driven toward self-preservation, the Spirit of God can temper that reaction and help us find a balanced response—one which is compatible with Christ's nature. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."<sup>4</sup>

Such a response isn't easy, because our human nature is so, well, human. It's our default setting. Being concerned for others or their need, situation, or struggle isn't naturally our first priority. Because of this, there is the danger that we will minimize or even ignore someone else's needs in favor of our own.

If we plow forward with our self-serving plans without consideration for those around us, chances are we will make decisions that will hurt others. Promises and commitments that we've

previously made will take a back seat, and we'll gravitate toward what is best for *us*. This can cause disillusionment, resentment, and bitterness—any of which will damage friendships. Those left in the wake of our selfishness will suffer, because we allowed our human nature to override the Spirit of God within us.

When this happens, we suffer as well. It may not come in ways we can see, at least not immediately, but it invariably does us harm. We undermine God's blessing, and we lose the respect of others. I read somewhere that in business, if someone is displeased with a certain product, as a rule they will tell about 50 other people about it in their lifetime. If we have damaged someone's faith in us by harming them with our self-preserving acts, they may never fully trust us again. And it's possible, even likely, that they will convey that mistrust to others. It hurts them, and it hurts us.

Taking care of your own needs and the needs of your loved ones isn't wrong, but as followers of Jesus, filled with the Spirit of God, we should step back from focusing only on our own needs in order to see the needs of others also. "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."<sup>5</sup> Finding the proper balance in that should be our goal.

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1. 2 Corinthians 5:17

2. 1 Corinthians 3:16

3. John 15:4

4. Galatians 5:22-23

5. Philippians 2:4 NIV