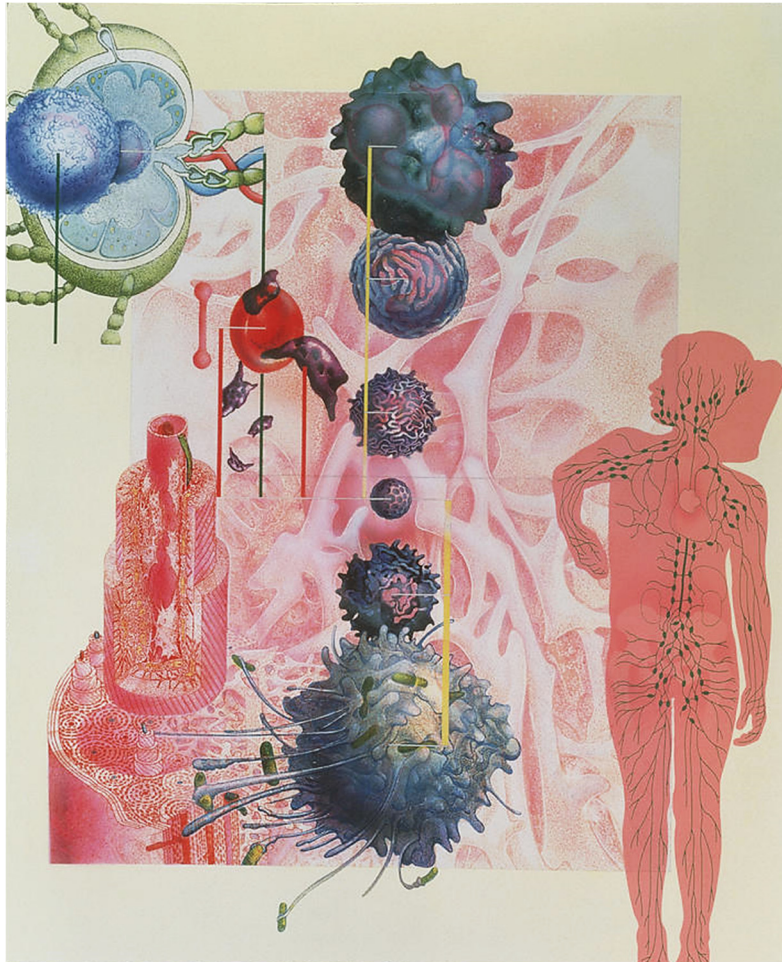


# The Immune System – Protected by God

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*“Collage Artwork of the Immune System”*

## Prayer of Illumination

God of light,  
By your Word you give light to the soul.  
Pour out upon us the spirit of wisdom and understanding  
that being taught by you in your Holy Scripture,  
Our hearts and minds may be opened to know the things  
that pertain to life and holiness,  
through Jesus Christ our crucified, risen, and reigning Lord.  
Amen.

## Background

Michael Kinch, professor and author of books on science and medicine, states that:

*"The immune system is the most interesting organ in the body."*

Our immune system is big, a bit messy yet elegantly complex, and rather mysterious. Believe it or not, the immune system involves skin, tears, and earwax. There are also the lymph nodes, bone marrow, spleen, and thymus that churn out immune cells. Lots of chemistry is involved too with antibodies and other chemicals too long for me to pronounce. We have at the least 300 different kinds of immune cells, but likely countless more. Every person's immune system is unique.

This is the mission statement of the immune system:

Identify what is not supposed to be in the body and if necessary, alleviate it.

If the immune system were a human and they had a job, it would be as a TSA security person scanning luggage at an airport. The immune system has a tough job: it's barraged by things it has never seen before—like viruses and variants to viruses like COVID-19. At the heart of the immune system are five kinds of white blood cells. Of special interest are the lymphocytes which have been dubbed "the cleverest little cells in the whole body" because of their ability to detect and respond—almost like an internal SWAT team. It's truly a wonder that we don't get sick more often.

Inflammation is the heat of battle as our body defends itself against damage. It isn't the infection that makes you feel sick, it's your body defending itself. And so inflammation is a balancing act—you don't want too much or too little of it. Faulty inflammation will lead to some serious health problems linked to diabetes, Alzheimer's, heart attacks, and strokes.

The immune system doesn't just fight germs, it also responds to toxins, drugs, cancers, foreign objects, and even your own state of mind. We can help out the immune system with preventative care. Stress and exhaustion weaken your immune system, so exercise and good sleep strengthen it. A healthy diet and dietary supplements help your immune system too:

The sunshine Vitamin D strengthens it.

Also good are Vitamins C and A.

Minerals such as iron, magnesium, and zinc are vital as well.

There are some fifty (and counting) types of autoimmune diseases that inflict about 5% of the population. Women are particularly prone suffering 80% of these diseases. Autoimmune diseases can be extremely challenging to live with: multiple sclerosis, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn's disease, and many others.

The largest category of immune disorders are allergies, with roughly 50% of the population allergic to at least one thing. Immunotherapy is one of the most promising areas of medicine. Which leads us to our Scripture reading from 1 Peter 1:3-7 where we read about how we're protected by the power of God.

One of my favorite Bible scholars, William Barclay, says that these verses are some of the richest in all of the Scriptures. In a sense, God guards us—like an immune system.

Jesus is later described in the letter as the Guardian of our souls. There's a reason Peter uses this language. The Christian community is under attack and they're suffering. Not from a disease, but various fiery trials. Peter doesn't answer why they are suffering, but he does help them to make sense of their suffering. Peter's words are a celebration of God's gracious character and God's activity in our lives to help guard and guide us through the puzzling challenges and fiery trials thrown our way.

We are encouraged to bolster our spiritual immune system by standing firm in hardship and difficulty. Partnering with the God who protects us by trusting, praying, supporting one another, and imitating Christ's example of endurance in the face of suffering.

*So let's hear now God's word to us from...*

### **Scripture: 1 Peter 1:3-7 (NRSV)**

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

### **SERMON: *The Immune System – Protected by God***

In Leonard Sweet's book "*Soul Salsa*" he tells about a unique practice Native Americans had for training young braves. On the evening of a boy's thirteenth birthday, after they'd been trained in the art and skill of hunting, scouting, and fishing, he was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. In a sense they were thrown to the wolves. Until that point, the young man had never been away from the security of his family or tribe. But on this night he was blindfolded and taken several miles away. When he took off the blindfold, he found himself in a dark wood, entirely alone—all night long. Every time a twig snapped, he imagined a wild animal ready to pounce. Each howl led him to believe he would be surrounded by a pack of wolves. Every time the wind blew, he wondered what sinister force it masked. It was a terrifying night. But dawn finally broke the seemingly eternal darkness. Rays of sunlight pierced the interior of the forest.

Looking around him, the boy spotted flowers, trees, and the outline of a path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld a figure of a man, standing just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It was the boy's father. He'd been there with him all night long. The child was protected by the power of his father. He was not alone. So too it is for us. We're protected by the power of God, guarded by the unseen God as he shields and protects his children—keeping watch over us in the shadows.

Like the young brave, we've been trained and disciplined by Christ to give an account for the hope we have. Through the challenges and opposition, we have been guarded and garrisoned by an unseen, but very real presence. As we know all too well this last year, protection is a dance of—

- Avoidance: physical-distancing, washing hands, wearing masks, and
- Exposure: vaccination and needing to, well, get out and live life—to take precautions and necessary risks.

So it is spiritually, living in the world and out in the elements. We pray that we would be delivered from evil and led not into temptation. But that we go into the darkness with this marvelous light given to us by Christ Jesus.

Life isn't safe. In fact, it's risky, but God is with us. Peter tells us we can exclaim, "Blessed be God," even in the midst of suffering and hardship. Praises can be on our lips, even in pandemics. Why? God is merciful.

In fact, God shows great mercy, not only in his disposition towards us, but his compassionate acts towards us. Our God is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, meaning that the God we pray to is like Jesus. Now that's a beautiful thing. Just as God spoke his creative word in Genesis 1 bringing order to the chaos, so Jesus speaks his word of life over us, creating new life out of the muck of our existence. And we find ourselves changed and recreated—marked by love and empowered to live victoriously, able to overcome the hardships that come against us.

God takes initiative and graciously acts on our behalf by giving us new birth into a living hope. Our imagination and perception have been regenerated, converted even, being born anew, becoming a new creation—*behold, the old is gone, the new is here*.

Our merciful God has given us the gift of a whole new life, a whole new way of life, with a bright future. We've been graced with a rebirth and re-creation—a spiritual renaissance. We're born again into a living hope. Not a dead hope, not mere wishful thinking, but a new and living hope, an eternal inheritance.

This is no "pie in the sky in the by in by." Rather, we see reality clearly: Suffering, violence, hatred, trials. We see it, experience it, and address it, but very differently. What's different is that our lives and our patterns of thought have undergone a divine transformation. The impossible is made possible by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Being born anew into a living hope means that our lives, our relationships, and our view of the world has been spiritually renovated and reconstructed. Christ has altered our dispositions and attitudes towards God, the world, and ourselves. Christ is born in us. Christ is being formed in us. The good news of being born again as children of God is that we're summoned to not stay in infancy. We are called to growth and maturity. To retain childlike wonder, but release our childish ways. To move forward, to develop, to form and reform. This is a miracle. It's a game changer. We couldn't pull this off on our own. It has been made possible by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Resurrection is a powerful thing. It's the divine inauguration of a new way of life—abundant life. With resurrection, death is not the end, but the beginning. Resurrection is a living, breathing hope that wrongs will be righted and life will prevail over death.

If the suffering of Jesus didn't disqualify his status as God's Son and our Lord, then neither does the misery of life we undergo disqualify us as God's children.

And here's the paradoxology of it all:

Affliction brands us as faithful followers of the Christ who suffered. It comes with the territory. Jesus is the Suffering Servant and the Man of Sorrows. The cross is our primary symbol.

So just as we share in Christ's suffering, we will share in his glory. Just as we share in his crucifixion, we will share in his resurrection. And so our hope survives death—outlives it.

Following the crucified Christ will put us at odds with society. I am not sanctioning us to be rude or obnoxious here, or to have a martyr complex. What I'm saying is that when we say, "Christ is Lord," we bow our knee to him and him alone. We tear ourselves away from lesser lords and idols others follow. We will get some flak for this. Christ marks us, seals us, and sets us apart from the world's values. We will be scoffed at for this. It's to be expected. Look what happened to Jesus. Our ultimate value is the genuineness and preciousness of our faith. Our hope is not in striking it rich, but in the priceless inheritance of future glory—an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. An inheritance in heaven that can't be spoiled, soiled, or foiled. It's solid and secure. Put another way, it's permanent, pure, and lasts into perpetuity.

We have a windfall of the Spirit coming our way—blessing, promise, salvation, hope, and joy. It's reserved in heaven for us. Guaranteed. Not by the Federal Reserve, but by our Father in Heaven—and God won't cut us out of his will or run out of cash.

Jesus reminds us of what this life is all about:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,  
where moth and rust consume  
and where thieves break in and steal;  
but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." KJV (*Matt. 6:19-20*)

Gold was first mined over 4500 years ago—and we've been entranced by it ever since. Wars have been fought over gold mines in Africa. People have dedicated their lives to searching for sunken treasures. Thousands of prospectors spent their life's savings to search for gold in the California and Alaskan Gold Rush. We talk about the Golden Mean, Gold Standard, Good as Gold, a Gold Mine, and something worth its weight in gold. Peter is telling us how much more valuable faith is than gold. "In God We Trust" not in Money We Trust.

And just like gold, our faith is purified by the fires of testing. Job knew about this quite well when he exclaimed:

Let the Lord test me in the crucible:  
I shall come out pure gold.  
My footsteps have followed close in his,  
I have walked in his way without swerving. (*Job 23:10-11*)

You see, as a resurrection people, we trust the great mystery that God doesn't waste the suffering that comes our way. God doesn't create it but God uses it. In faith, we believe in our heart of hearts that somehow, some way, our trials don't take strength out of us but put strength into us, that our manifold trials are more than matched by the manifold grace of God to overcome them. And so, protected by the power of God through faith, we live in the present courageously and purposefully. Even in suffering, we can anticipate that God won't disappoint in the end. We can laugh at the days to come, rather than being uptight, paranoid, withdrawn, or jaded.

Living into this new birth results in praise, glory, and honor. And then we can point back to God who made this living hope possible. The resurrection is the antidote to death. In dying we live. Totally counterintuitive. As Peter says, we rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (*1 Peter 1:8-9*) And by the grace of God, we can display courage under fire, and stand the test time... and eternity.

Though you have not seen Christ, you love him. Trusting in the unseen Christ, may he be revealed to you, in you, and through you. And may we all be filled with a glorious joy too great for words, now and forever more.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *"Collage Artwork of the Immune System"* by Hans-Ulrich Osterwalder (2013)

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