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ETERNAL SECURITY

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How safe am I? How safe is a man standing on top of a slippery cliff? If he is constantly in danger of falling, then it could never be said that he is safe at all. Actually, I am not safe at all spiritually if I can lose my salvation by sinning. In 1 John 1:8 we read, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Note the present tense “have,” not “have had.” John is not referring “to the past sinful life while unconverted, but to the present state wherein believers have sin even still” (A. R. Fausset). No one reaches a point in this life where he is free from sin. There is no such thing as a believer living in a sinless state, and, accordingly, no possible way for a believer to ever be safe at any time if sin forfeits his salvation.

We will examine this question, “How safe am I?” over the next several issues. We will analyze those texts often used by those who propose salvation can be lost. But we will also consider those texts that positively affirm the believer’s eternal security in Christ. One such positive text is in John 10. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand” (vv27, 28).



These Sheep Were Given

There are no conditions noted in this text, only statements of absolute fact. The sheep are Christ’s, they hear His voice, He knows them, they follow Him, He gives them eternal life, they will never perish, and no one will pluck them from His hand. He does not say, “If the sheep hear my voice, they are my sheep indeed.” He does not say, “If the sheep follow me, I will give them eternal life.” They do not become His sheep by hearing His voice, and they do not receive eternal life by following Him. A transaction occurred previously that made them His sheep already. The Lord Jesus said in verse 29 that the transaction took place when His Father “gave” (past tense) the sheep to Him.



These Sheep Will Follow

Now that they belong to Christ, it is to be expected that the sheep do what sheep generally do; they recognize their Shepherd's voice and follow His leading. They will not follow any other voice. He made this clear in verses 4-5 ("the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers." *ERV*). Some conditional security advocates (CSAs) will argue that we can follow the Lord today and follow someone else tomorrow. If so, we must repent and begin following the Lord again. The text argues against this possibility. Christ's sheep follow Him and Him only. They obey no other voice.



These Sheep Will Wander

Wandering is not dealt with in John 10. Christ's sheep follow Him. Yet no sheep does so perfectly. By their very nature, sheep wander. But wandering and following someone else's voice are two different things. What happens when sheep wander? What if they don't follow His leading at all times? Are they still the property of the Shepherd? Are they still His sheep? Are they still under His care? Yes! When they wander, the Shepherd actually prods them along with His staff to go in the right direction again. Even if they wander far away, He goes after the sheep because they are HIS sheep! But there is no suggestion in this text that we can wander and become lost and in need of salvation once again. That would imply that Christ is incapable of keeping those under His care.



These Sheep Are Known

We might have expected the Lord Jesus to say in verse 27, "My sheep hear my voice, and they know me." Instead, He says, "I know them." Because He is emphasizing the sheep's security, His knowledge of them is more important than their knowledge of Him. Because Christ knows His sheep, He will keep and protect us.



These Sheep Are Safe

The use of the word “hand” in the Lord’s statement, “neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand,” is not emphasizing so much a physical hand of five fingers which encloses the believer, but rather the fact that the sheep are in his careful custody. The sheep belong to Him. The fact that no one will pluck them out of His hand indicates at least two things. First, there is no one powerful enough to take His sheep away (unlike the hired hand of verses 12-13). This is why He can say, “they shall never perish” (v28). Second, the sheep will never become anyone else’s property, but will always belong to Him. CSAs have generally overlooked the emphasis of this passage on ownership (“My sheep ... My Father, which gave them Me”), and thus miss important details. Additionally, they often argue that, although no one else can take us away from Christ’s hand, we can remove ourselves voluntarily. This adds to the text what is not there. Jesus did not say, “no one else shall pluck them out of My hand.” He said, “no one,” including the one in Christ’s hand.

The bringing in of His Father in verse 29 is beautiful, and it provides a double security for the believer. The phrases which conclude both verses 28 and 29 are nearly identical. One difference is that He said no one “shall” pluck us from His hand (v 28). He adds that no one “can” pluck us from His Father’s hand in verse 29. Not one sheep shall be lost because not one sheep can be lost. He is so strong that the sheep never need to fear. We will never perish, we have been given eternal life, we are in divine Hands, because we belong to the Good Shepherd.

How safe am I? Using slightly different imagery, Mildred Leightner Dillon answered this question with a song recorded in her diary dated January 18, 1943:

*Safe am I, safe am I, In the hollow of His hand; Sheltered o’er, sheltered o’er
With His love forever more. No ill can harm me, no foe alarm me, For He keeps
both day and night. Safe am I, safe am I, In the hollow of His hand.*



Petterson, David

The God Who gave His Word, Who gave His only Son, Who gave us physical life and Who gives us every breath we breathe (Dan 5:23) has proven Himself to be a giving God. To believers living in this age of His grace, He has given even more.



The Gift of Eternal Life

God promised to give eternal life to those who believe in His Son, Christ Jesus. The most famous text containing this promise is John 3:16. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” If everlasting life indeed lasts forever, how could it ever end once it is received? God’s Word tells us it is received the moment we believe on the Lord Jesus. It is often argued by CSAs (Conditional Security Advocates) that the present tense of “believe” in John 3:16 (as well as in John 3:15,18; 5:24) indicates continuous, uninterrupted action. In other words, one must continue to believe on Christ in order to continue to have eternal life. The implication is that if one does not continue to believe, eternal life is lost.

First, if this could happen, it could never truly be called eternal life. Second, there are texts that use the verb “believe” in the *aorist* (point in time) tense providing similar promises. Paul and Silas told a troubled jailor, “Believe (*aorist* tense) on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” (Acts 16:31, *ESV*) They did not tell him to continue to believe (present tense) on Christ in order to keep his salvation. The use of the *aorist* tense is instructive in Mark 16:16-17. Jesus promised signs would follow those who believed (*aorist*), not those who continue to believe. Other insightful uses of the *aorist* tense of “believe” can be found in John 8:24, Rom 10:9, Gal 2:16, Heb 4:3, and 1 John 5:10. Third, this is an oversimplification of the meaning of the present tense. The use of it can mean continuous, uninterrupted action, but not exclusively. An example from ordinary

English should be enough to prove this. If I said, “I work (present tense) on a farm,” does the present tense imply that I am continuously working at the farm location 24 hours a day? No. I might even be vacationing in another country, yet I can still use the present tense to truthfully convey where I work. The reason why the New Testament writers preferred to use the present tense of “believe” (Greek, *pisteuo*) is that it is the normal practice of a genuine believer to manifest a living, active, ongoing faith (Greek, *pistis*).



The Gift of the Father to the Son

The Lord Jesus referred often to those whom the Father gave Him. In some instances, it appears that He is referring to at least the 12 disciples (John 17:11,12; 18:9). In other texts, believers in general seem to be in view (John 6:37,39; 10:29; 17:2). The number of believers given as a gift from the Father to the Son must indeed be staggering. A consideration of the last two millennia of history would indicate how great a number comprise those whom God has given to His Son. Yet scripture only indicates that one of that vast number has been lost. Jesus said in John 17:12, “those that Thou gavest Me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled.” The only person to have ever been lost was Judas, and that because scripture had prophesied it already. To argue that because this happened to Judas, it could happen to someone else is going beyond scripture. Additionally, Judas demonstrated by his actions that he was never truly regenerate to begin with. How wonderful to know that we are a gift from the Father to the Son and that He will keep us!



The Gift of the Holy Spirit

Before Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit had a temporary relationship with God’s people. The book of Judges records often that “the Spirit of the Lord came upon” certain individuals (Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 14:19). The Spirit indwelt King Saul, but then left him (1Sam 16:14). It was King David’s fear, after his sin with Bathsheba, that the Spirit would depart from him

(Psa 51:11). But since the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit began permanently indwelling believers.

The many NT references to the Spirit of God being given to us include Acts 5:32; 11:17; 15:8; Rom 5:5; 1 Thes 4:8; 1 John 3:24; 4:13. Especially helpful is the promise of the Lord Jesus in John 14:16-17. “And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever, Even the Spirit of truth....” Christ was only with them for a little while, but He promised that the coming Holy Spirit would be with them forever. This precious gift cannot be returned.



The Gifts (Plural) of the Holy Spirit

In addition to the gift of the Holy Spirit received at conversion, the New Testament believer also receives gifts of the Spirit (spiritual gifts) as indicated in Romans 12:6, 1 Corinthians 12:7, Ephesians 4:7, and 1 Peter 4:10. Some of these include teaching, evangelizing, serving, giving, mercy-showing, ruling and encouraging. The question must therefore be asked, “If a believer can lose the gift of salvation, then with it does he not also forfeit the gift and gifts of the Holy Spirit?” According to CSAs, one can repent and receive eternal life again. So, does the repentant person also receive the Holy Spirit again? Does that person receive the exact same spiritual gift(s) possessed before? Can someone have the gift of teaching and lose it in a moment of sin? Sadly, we have witnessed gifted men preaching effectively while at the same time they were involved in sinful activities. Why did God not revoke their spiritual gift? Gifts are given in grace. No works of ours could secure these gifts and no works of ours could surrender them either. In Romans 11:29 (*ESV*) we read, “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” Admittedly, this text is referring to Israel and God’s promised blessings, but the principle concerning His promises remains. God gives graciously, permanently, without conditions, and without accepting any returns! Enjoy His good gifts today.



Petterson, David

In John 10, Jesus emphasizes that it is both God the Son (v28) and God the Father (v29) keeping us safe. God the Holy Spirit is also involved in our eternal security. In Ephesians 1:13, Paul tells us we “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (ESV). It was the Lord Jesus who promised the coming of the Spirit (John 15:26; 16:7). Paul says we received the Spirit as a seal “when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him” God seals believers with none other than Himself! Why does He do this, and what is the purpose of such a seal?

Seals in New Testament times served at least three purposes, all of which can be applied to a believer in the Lord Jesus being sealed with the Holy Spirit.



A Seal Identified the Owner

God’s seal upon a believer is similar to a brand mark on cattle or a dye mark on sheep in the sense that these marks identify the owner. Christians are God’s property. We have been purchased by His Son (1Cor 6:20) and sealed by His Spirit, marking us out as His. This appears to be the emphasis in Ephesians 1:13-14 where the “purchased possession” refers to God’s people (i.e., those whom He has sealed). We will never become anyone else’s property. Paul makes this clear when he states that this seal of ownership lasts “unto the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30). There is no indication in these texts that His seal upon us can be removed. We are His and His forever.



A Seal Guaranteed Protection

The most common purpose of seals in Scripture was to give protection or security. The den of lions into which Daniel was cast had a seal upon it (Dan 6:17) to protect it from tampering, as did the tomb of our Lord Jesus for the same reason (Matt 27:66).

Documents were sealed (as in Rev 5-6) to protect their contents from being altered. Today we seal jars to protect the food they contain. We seal envelopes and packages to keep out anyone but the addressee. We seal basement walls to keep out moisture. Our doors and windows are sealed to protect from wind and rain.

The seal of the Holy Spirit provides spiritual protection for the believer. We see an example of God giving a physical seal to provide physical protection in Revelation 7. A group of 144,000 Jewish believers are sealed with a mark upon their foreheads as they go into the Tribulation period. These believers will witness the most awful catastrophes, marked by more bloodshed than in any other period of human history (Dan 12:1; Matt 24:21). Comparing the judgment of the 4th seal (Rev 6:8), where $\frac{1}{4}$ of the population perishes, with the judgment of the sixth trumpet (Rev 9:14-15), where $\frac{1}{3}$ is slain, means that at least $\frac{1}{2}$ of the world's population will have been destroyed at that point. This doesn't even include the seven bowl judgments which occur later in the Tribulation (Rev 16) and appear to be even more severe. Yet none of the 144,000 sealed believers die. When the seven-year Tribulation period concludes, all 144,000 of them are seen standing on the literal Mount Zion with Christ the King (Rev 14:1-5). Not one of them was killed. Not one was lost. Not even the antichrist himself was able to take them down. God's physical seal provided physical safety through the entire period. Again, there is no indication that this seal could ever be removed. Obviously, it was not removed, for all of them still have the seal when the Tribulation concludes (Rev 14:1).

The seal God has placed upon us is not physical, but spiritual. We have not been given a physical mark upon our foreheads, but we have been sealed with God's Spirit in order to spiritually preserve us. Just as God's seal upon the 144,000 physically protected them from evil forces seeking to destroy them, so God's seal of His Spirit preserves us from spiritual forces seeking to destroy us. Our "life is hid with Christ in God" (Col 3:3).



A Seal Proved Authenticity

A further purpose of seals in New Testament times was to show something as genuine. In order to avoid forgery, documents in the first century were “sealed” with a signet ring, pushing its unique imprint into soft clay which would later harden. With this seal upon it, the document was considered to be authentically “signed.” Today, we place our ink signatures on important documents, making them official and giving them validity. The New Testament uses the word “seal” to indicate authenticity in John 3:33 and 1 Corinthians 9:2.

As believers sealed with the Holy Spirit, God’s mark of authenticity is upon us. People should be able to conclude by our behavior that we genuinely belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. Every Christian has the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9) and every Christian will give evidence of divine life (1John 3:10; 5:18). This is not to say that every Christian is perfect. The great blessing of our eternal security in Christ should never be an excuse to sin or to live as we please. If someone claims to be a believer in the Lord Jesus, yet gives zero evidence of it, that claim is invalid, and the person is not a genuine believer. Paul said, ““The Lord knows those who are His,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity” (2Tim 2:19, ESV).

John Baptiste Calkin (1827-1905) is most known for composing the music to “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” But a lesser known accomplishment is this hymn that he wrote which summarizes our subject like this:

*The Holy Spirit is the seal,
The foretaste, earnest, and the pledge.
He designates us as God’s own
And guarantees our heritage.*

*’Twas after we believed in Christ,
The Word of Truth, the gospel, heard,
The Holy Spirit us did seal
To show that we belong to God.*

*This Spirit as the living seal,
To us God's image now imparts;
Conforming us unto the Son,
He stamps His image in our hearts.*

Let us rejoice that we are sealed ... sanctified ... and safe.

Studies on Eternal Security (4): When Two Negatives Make a Positive



Petterson, David

See if you can determine what is wrong with this sentence. “You are not never going to finish this article with atrocious grammar like this.” I’m sure you noticed what was wrong. In basic math, when two negative numbers are multiplied, the end result is a positive number. But in basic English, when two negative words are put together, a grammatical blunder has just occurred.

The use of double negatives is frowned upon in the English language but was entirely acceptable in Koine Greek. In the New Testament, the expression *ou me* (which *Strong’s Dictionary* puts into a single entry #3364) occurs nearly 100 times. Both *ou* and *me* are words meaning “not, no, none, never, etc.” When these two negative words are put together, the result is an intensified form of the negative.

Thayer states that when *ou* and *me* are used in combination, the meaning is “not at all, in no wise, by no means.” Some of the most relevant uses of this double negative pertaining to our subject of eternal security are found on the lips of the Lord Jesus in John’s gospel. Many Bible versions translate the little phrase as, “shall never.” This is how we will use the phrase in examining three passages from John’s gospel where Jesus uses this double negative and affirms a very positive truth.



Shall Never Thirst

The Lord Jesus said to the Samaritan woman in John 4:13,14:

“Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never (*ou me*) thirst.”

First, notice that He is contrasting physical water with spiritual water (which He identifies as “everlasting life” at the end of v14).

Second, notice the change of tenses with the same verb in back-to-back verses. There must be a reason why Jesus made this change. The present tense of the verb “drinketh” is used in verse 13 when referring to physical water. Often (but not always) this tense depicts continuous action, which makes sense here. A person must drink physical water on a continual basis to quench physical thirst. However, the tense of the verb “drinketh” in verse 14 when referring to a spiritual drink is *aorist*, which emphasizes a past, single act of drinking. What accounts for this change of tenses?

When a person turns to Christ for salvation and takes in the “living water” He offers, something permanent happens. That individual has now found satisfaction alone in Christ, needs nothing more, and will never have spiritual thirst again. Third, there is a significant Greek word following our double negative. It is the word *aion* (often translated “forever”). Putting these words together led Darby to accurately translate the verse as: “but whosoever drinks of the water which I shall give him shall never thirst forever.” This drink of everlasting life is taken once, satisfies once for all, and never needs to be repeated.

Shall Never Hunger

The Lord Jesus used the double negative twice in John 6:35 where He said, “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never (*ou me*) hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never (*ou me*) thirst.” It has been pointed out by Conditional Security Advocates (CSAs) that the verb tense for “believeth” here, and in other relevant texts, is present, implying continuing action. They argue that we must continue to believe in order to experience the blessings of salvation. However, the tense for “cometh” here is also present. Does this mean we must continually come to Christ for salvation? Also, in verse 51, within this same discussion, the tense of the verb “eat” is *aorist* in Jesus’ words. “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever.”

Additionally, in verse 53, there are two more relevant *aorist* tenses. The Savior says there, “Except ye eat (*aorist*) the flesh of the Son of man, and drink (*aorist*) His blood, ye have no life in you.” These all

imply a past, single action which results in receiving eternal life. As pointed out in a previous article, the reason why the New Testament writers preferred to use the present tense of “believe” is that it is the normal practice of a genuine believer to manifest a living, active, ongoing faith. However, there are a number of texts which use “believe” in the *aorist* tense (John 20:31; Acts 16:31; Rom 10:9), thus disproving the notion that belief must be continual in order to continue to possess eternal life. Also, there are occasions when a present tense verb is used to refer to a one-time event, such as the incarnation of Christ (John 6:33, “cometh down”). The present tense is even used of actions that have ceased (Matt 2:20 – “sought”; John 9:8 – “sat and begged”; Gal 1:23 – “persecuted”). The reality is that once we have received Christ, taking in “the living bread,” our spiritual hunger is forever satisfied and will never return again.



Shall Never Die

In John 11:26, the Lord Jesus said to Martha, “whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never (*ou me*) die.” It appears that the word “liveth” here refers to spiritual or eternal life, not physical life. D. A. Carson says, “The verb ‘lives’ cannot simply mean ‘is alive,’ (physically) as the triteness would be unbearable; obviously only those who are alive can believe!”

John uses both verb and noun forms of the word “life” (Greek, *zoe*) in his writings some 98 times. At least 92 of them are references to spiritual life, eternal life or the life of God. Scant, if any, are John’s uses of “life” to emphasize mere physical existence. It should be apparent that the word “die” in our text cannot refer to physical death. Believers in the Lord Jesus do experience physical death, thus, the Lord’s words here indicate that, once we have eternal life, there is no possible way (*ou me*) we can ever spiritually die. The fact that He adds, “and believeth in me,” to “whosoever liveth” is not something that must be done to continue having eternal life. We are told repeatedly in John’s gospel that the way to receive this life is to simply believe on Him (3:15-16, 36; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 20:31). “Whosoever liveth” emphasizes the change brought about by God’s power, while “believeth in me” emphasizes the way the change was

accomplished. Jesus' double negative here is once again declaring a positive truth. As believers in the Lord Jesus, we shall never, never die! We are safe in Him, and safe forever.



Petterson, David

Chances are that if you've ever had someone tell you, "I know a good lawyer," then you're in trouble! When we break the law and face indictment, the need of the moment is good legal representation.

We have been arguing for the believer's eternal security in Christ, no matter what we do. But, what happens when we sin and break God's law? The answer is in 1 John 2:1 – "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous." First, notice that God's desire for His people is that we "sin not." He does not merely want us to sin less, but not to sin at all. A holy God could not say anything less. Second, notice that John does not say, "if any man sin, we have a Savior, Jesus Christ the Righteous." He is writing to people already saved, calling them "little children" in our text. If sin in a believer's life causes him to lose salvation, then why are we pointed to an Advocate instead of to a Savior? Third, John does not write, "if any man repent, we have an Advocate." Repentance is not what guarantees the presence of our Advocate, our sin does.

So, what is an advocate? The word (Greek, *parakletos*) literally means "one called to another's side." The implication is that, when we sin, we need someone to come to our side, to plead our cause and to give needed help. This is what a defense attorney does in court for a client. The lawyer stands to represent the client who has been indicted. The goal is to see the charges dropped and to ensure the client faces no penalty. There are a number of good qualities you expect when searching for a good defense lawyer.



Fitting Representation

If you are facing a malpractice indictment, you probably wouldn't hire a lawyer specializing in bankruptcy cases. You want someone who knows the subject at hand to properly represent you. The Lord

Jesus knows the subject at hand. Although He is the sinless One, He fully knows the seriousness of sin, the damage it causes, the rebellion against God it demonstrates, and the pain He Himself endured because of sin. There is no one Who understands the subject better, not because He sinned Himself, but because He “bore our sins in His body on the tree.” (1Peter 2:24, *ESV*)

Our Advocate is not only fit to represent us because of what He knows, but because of Who He is. He is fit to stand for us because of His humanity (John uses His human name, “Jesus”). He is fit to stand before the Father because He is without sin (John called Him “Jesus Christ the Righteous”). When we sin, our Advocate stands for us before the Father, and can plead the merits of His own sacrifice for sin on our behalf. John assures us in verse 2 that He is “the propitiation (satisfaction) for our sins.” David Smith wrote: “Our Advocate does not plead that we are innocent or adduce extenuating circumstances. He acknowledges our guilt and presents His vicarious work as the ground of our acquittal.” The term “righteous” also emphasizes His character. As D. Edmond Hiebert said, “He never resorts to anything crooked or unworthy to get His client ‘off the hook’ with the Judge.”

Notice also that, when we sin, God is still called our Father. Although sin harms our relationship, it does not destroy it. Thankfully, sin does not break the relationship, although it most definitely breaks our fellowship.



Diligent Defense

There is a great deal of frustration when an attorney is not diligent to defend the client. Laziness or lack of interest in the client is often the cause. We can be thankful that our Advocate is always there for us. He is there before we sin, when we sin and after we sin. He is continually pleading our cause. And He is there for us because He cares for us. Laziness and apathy are never charges that could be brought against our Attorney.



Reasonable Fees

Good lawyers are worthy to receive reasonable fees for their work. But often the best attorneys are those we can least afford. Who could afford a lawyer who will represent and work tirelessly for the client every hour of the day and night? Yet this is the work of our Advocate who represents us continually before the Father. We receive this great blessing as part of the gift of salvation. We have a Savior Who paid the full price for sin and is our Advocate, Who freely stands in to represent us at all times.



Client Confidentiality

No one would willingly hire an attorney with the reputation for abusing disclosures made by his clients. It is assumed that what you state to your attorney will remain in confidence. In our case, our Advocate already knows what wrongs we have done before we even speak to Him. Yet, He desires our full confession in order for our relationship with God to be restored. And even though He knows our sins, His desire is to present Himself FOR us, not AGAINST us. The work of accusation and attack is that of Satan (Zech 3:1; Rev 12:10), not that of our Advocate.

So, when we sin, we are not condemned, nor do we lose our salvation. Our Advocate comes to our side and does what only He can do—He represents us before the Father.

*He lives—the great Redeemer lives;
What joy the blest assurance gives!
And now before His Father, God,
Pleads the full merit of His blood.*

*Great Advocate, Almighty Friend!
On Thee do all our hopes depend:
Our cause can never, never fail,
For Thou dost plead, and must prevail.*

*In every dark, distressing hour,
When sin and Satan join their power,
Let this blest truth repel each dart,
That Thou dost bear us on Thy heart.*



Petterson, David

Perhaps one of the most quoted verses by those who teach believers are not eternally safe is John 15:6. Jesus said, “If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.” What is Jesus teaching here? To whom is He speaking? What does it mean to “abide in Him”? And what does it mean to be “burned”?

“Forbidden fruit” is spoken of in Genesis 2:17 when God said, “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it.” There, the eating of the fruit was forbidden; in this text, the production of fruit is forbidden. Not that God did not grant sufficient opportunity for fruitfulness. After all, this is the Vinedresser’s desire. But after persistent refusal to abide in Christ, is it possible that a believer can reach a point where fruit can no longer be expected? We will work through this interpretation of an admittedly difficult text after first examining a few necessary details.



Branch Identification

Thankfully, Jesus tells us who the branches are. He says, “I am the vine, ye are the branches” (v5). The branches are true followers of Christ, not mere professors. Judas was not here (he left in 13:30). The 11 to whom He was speaking were genuine believers in the Lord Jesus. In verse 3, He tells them they are clean, without adding, “but not all” (since Judas was not present; 13:30).



Obedient Fellowship

What does it mean to “abide in Him”? Some teach that all true believers will abide in Christ, proving their genuineness. If that is so, why would Jesus exhort His true followers to do something they would do anyway? The implication is that a follower of Christ can fail to abide in Him. In 1 John 3:24 it says, “he that keepeth His

commandments dwelleth (same word as “abideth”) in Him.” Thus, to abide in Christ means to obey His commandments. Obedience is a subject within our text (15:10,12,14,17). If abiding in Christ means obeying Him, then it is clear that a believer can fail to abide in Christ.



Needed Encouragement

The Lord Jesus said, “Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away” (v2). This is also a difficult statement to interpret. The phrase “in me,” used 16 times in John’s gospel, refers in each case to true fellowship with Christ, not mere professed fellowship. Jesus does not say that the branch only appears to be “in me.”

Also, the word “beareth” (v2) is a present participle and can be translated “not bearing” (*Darby, YLT*) or “is not bearing.” The text does not say the branch never bore fruit.

The word translated “taketh away” is *airo* (used 26 times in this gospel) and is translated “to lift or take up” (5:8-9, 11-12; 8:59). R. K. Harrison notes in the *New International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* that it was a common practice to lift with meticulous care vine branches that had fallen to allow them to heal and eventually produce fruit. Admittedly, there are more occasions when *airo* is translated “to take away or remove.” But considering the context here, what is the need of the day for Christ’s disciples? He had just told them in 14:28 that He was leaving them to go to the Father. Within days, they would lose their leader and their world would be turned upside down. Their need was encouragement, not threats of condemnation.

What kind of encouragement was He giving them? The promise to them was that the Father, the Vinedresser, would lift up (encourage) any non-fruit bearing disciple in order to give further opportunity to bear fruit. Jesus said He does this for “every branch in me” (v2). What sort of vinedresser would remove every single branch that is lacking fruit? Is it not more likely knowing the character of our Father that, instead of removing every branch, He would first lift them up to encourage fruitfulness? Over the next few weeks, the disciples would certainly be discouraged, but encouragement was

coming. They would see their risen Lord and fruit in their lives would then abound!



Lost Opportunity

The most difficult text is verse 6. The branch here is specifically said to be a branch that does not “abide in me.” I believe Christ is contrasting this to the branch of verse 2 which was a “branch in me.” He is speaking of two different branches with two different outcomes. The branch of verse 2 was one in fellowship with Christ, but not necessarily producing fruit at the time. Encouragement would be given in order to grant further opportunity for fruit production. The branch of verse 6 is a believer who is not living in fellowship with Christ and is “cast forth” and “burned” as opposed to being “lifted up.” The first branch is given further opportunity to produce fruit, while the last branch is now losing that opportunity.

If abiding in Christ means obedient fellowship, failing to abide in Him (the branch of v6) means disobedience and lack of fellowship with Him. What is clearly implied by this graphic imagery is that a disobedient believer can reach a point in life where opportunity to produce fruit for the Father is forfeited. Only our Vinedresser, who knows the branches better than anyone, knows when this occurs.

This interpretation fits the purpose of the overall vine. If our Vinedresser sees branches continually lacking in fruit, wasting the nutrients fed to them, it would make sense to remove these branches to allow those same nutrients to travel to branches that are being productive. The net result would be that the Vinedresser would receive even more fruit. A branch not abiding in Christ is fruitless and useless to the Vinedresser.

The statement that these branches are “burned” sounds, on the surface, like these believers are being cast into hell. However, the subject in the text is sanctification, not salvation. So why does He refer to the branches being “burned”? A broken, discarded branch, one “cast forth,” could still be grafted back in and possibly bear fruit, but a branch thrown into the fire and burned would mean that opportunity for fruit-bearing was lost. How this is accomplished in a

believer's life is not specifically stated. Our Father may take us home by death (1Cor 11:30) or He may allow us to live unproductive, self-centered lives for the rest of our days. This interpretation may also make sense of true believers we have known that gave definite evidence of conversion, resisted God's chastening hand, and afterwards lived among the unconverted with little or no distinction. It is unconvincing to state in each of these cases that these individuals were never saved to begin with. Fruit bearing is not just our Father's desire, but a privilege that perhaps can be lost.

May our desire match that of our Lord Jesus: "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples" (John 15:8).



Petterson, David

Life in first-century Palestine had its drawbacks for the Christian. Opposition was real and persecution intense, but another type of “drawback” was occurring. How do we explain those who left Judaism, embraced Christianity, and then returned? Is it fair to conclude that every person who returned to Judaism was never saved? Or did these “drawbacks” lose their salvation? Is there another possible explanation?



Context Consideration

The epistle addresses a distinct group of Hebrew believers (3:1; 6:10, *ESV*) who are being tempted to return to Judaism because of persecution (Heb 10:32-34; 13:3). Christians faced suffering and possible death, but at least Judaism was legal and somewhat safe to practice. The writer is urging his readers to remain faithful to Christ, warning of the consequences of returning to a previously abandoned system. Going back to Judaism would not cause them to lose their salvation but advancing in the Christian life would become impossible. Loss of reward would be another tragic consequence.

The immediate context is observed from the end of chapter 5. These believers are described as “dull of hearing” (5:11), “unskillful in the word,” and “babes” (5:13) in “need of milk” (5:12). Chapter 6 continues this theme using the connective “Therefore” (6:1). The writer’s desire is that they “go on to maturity” (6:1, *ESV*).



Divine Denial

“And this will we do” (v3). To what does “this” refer? The immediate antecedent is “going on to maturity” (v1). They are to advance toward maturity as long as God permits them. How could He not? The next section (vv4-6) gives an example of people God

will not permit to “go on to maturity.” God did not allow the Hebrews, after the Exodus, to advance into their inheritance because of their failure (Heb 3-4), and it is implied that He will not permit these Hebrews a similar blessing because of their failure. If they go back (i.e., return to Judaism), they will not go forward (i.e., spiritually mature).



Disappointing “Drawbacks”

In verse 4, there is no hint that the writer is now describing an unregenerate group of people. Rather, he is establishing a link between the Exodus generation and the group he now describes. First, they are referred to as “once enlightened.” The only other use of “enlightened” in Hebrews (10:32) points to those who have had a definite conversion experience. The word for “once” (*hapax*) often means “once for all.” It emphasizes the finality of Christ’s sacrifice (9:26), the finality of death (9:27) and of Christ’s offering for sin (9:28).

Second, they “tasted of the heavenly gift.” Perhaps this gift refers to regeneration itself. Some contend they only “tasted” (“sampled”) this gift. However, the same verb (*geuomai*) is used in 2:9 about Christ “tasting” death for every man. Christ did not “sample” death but experienced it to the fullest extent.

Third, these individuals “were made partakers of the Holy Spirit.” The word “partakers” means “partners” (A. T. Robertson). It is hard to see how someone who is in partnership (or in spiritual fellowship) with the Holy Spirit is not a true believer.

Fourth, they “tasted the good Word of God, and the powers of the age to come.” Taking the word “tasting” to mean what it did in verse 4, we conclude that these individuals fully took in (i.e., received) the Word of God and made it part of their diet. They also embraced the significance of witnessing “the powers of the coming age.” This phrase likely refers to the miracles of the NT era, which were a foretaste of the miraculous future millennial age.

Why did the writer use these phrases to describe them? Randall Gleason suggests these descriptions correspond to the blessings experienced by the redeemed Exodus generation. They received the pillar of light (Exo 13:21), tasted the manna from heaven, the 70 elders were partakers of the Holy Spirit (Num 11:16-30), the Word of God was given through Moses (Exo 4:28-30), and they witnessed miraculous signs which Moses performed.

The fifth statement is: “If they shall fall away” (v6). “If they” is the connective *kai* (usually translated “and”). There is nothing conditional here. The phrase is a participle, just like the previous four, and could be translated, “and have fallen away.” So, this group has already fallen away. The word here is *parapipto* (not *apostasia*). Believers can “fall” (1Cor 10:12; Heb 4:11), but in what sense have they fallen? Contextually, it appears to mean the opposite of “going on to maturity” (v1). The writer is not talking about falling away from salvation, but about wandering from the path that leads to spiritual maturity and entrance into rest (4:11) by going back to Judaism. However, just as the Hebrews’ wilderness failure to persevere did not result in the loss of salvation of millions of Jews, neither would the failure of these Hebrews result in the loss of their salvation. What is in danger is their own spiritual growth as well as loss of reward in the coming kingdom of Christ.

Incidentally, another proof that these are genuine believers is found in the phrase “renew them again” (v6). If these are unbelievers, how is it possible for them to be “renewed” to repentance when they have yet to repent in the first place? Also, implicit in the word “renew” is the fact of previous repentance. Notice, too, that it is “repentance” to which they cannot be restored, not salvation.



Restricted Recovery

The words “crucify” and “put” in verse 6 are present participles and could be rendered “while crucifying” and “while putting.” “The writer did not say that these people could not be brought to repentance. He said that they could not be brought to repentance while they were treating Jesus Christ in such a shameful way” (W. Wiersbe). God would not permit them to repent as long as they

persisted in going back to the temple to participate in the defunct sacrificial system. To revert to these pictures and shadows when the reality in Christ had come would be putting their Savior to an open shame (v6). By returning to a system of animal sacrifices, they were stating to all the insufficiency of the blood of Christ. Restoration to fellowship with God is only possible through the finished work and shed blood of the Lord Jesus (John 1:9).



Fiery Finish

If believers drink in the rain of God's many blessings, the result will be growth and fruit (v7). However, if the soil is hardened, the rain runs off and there is no fruit. All that springs up are "thorns and briers ... whose end is to be burned" (v8). The disobedient believer's works (i.e., thorns and briers) are burned up at the Judgment Seat of Christ (1Cor 3:15).

Does Hebrews 6 teach that a believer can lose his salvation? No! But it does indicate that there were "Drawbacks." Some believers returned, probably because of persecution, to Judaism and its rituals, but with heartbreaking consequences.



Petterson, David

Ignoring the context, Hebrews 10 has been interpreted to teach the possibility of losing one's salvation. No sacrifice for sins? Fiery judgment? What and who are threatened in this text?



The Audience Addressed

A number of details in the chapter point to a genuine Christian audience for the warning given. First, the author includes himself within the warning ("if we sin willfully," v26). Second, they "received the knowledge of the truth" (v26). The similar phrase in 1 Timothy 2:4 seems to equate this with salvation. Third, the blood of Christ "sanctified" them (v29). The use of the word "sanctified" in verses 10 and 14 also points to an audience comprised of genuine believers. Fourth, verse 30 says, "the Lord shall judge His people." Fifth, they were "illuminated" (v32), implying a conversion experience. Sixth, they had endured persecution for their faith in Christ (vv32-34). Seventh, the writer says in verse 34 that "a better and an enduring substance" was awaiting them "in heaven." Eighth, verse 35 also describes a "reward" reserved for them. Finally, verse 19 tells us that the writer's "brethren" had access "into the holiest by the blood of Jesus," something not available to unbelievers.



The Sin Described

What sin committed by believers is the author describing? We must point out that the sin was willful. It was not done in ignorance, but deliberately. It was also continual. The verb is a present tense participle and rendered as: "if we go on sinning deliberately" (*ESV*). The sin was also shameful, in that it involved trampling "under foot the Son of God" and treating "the blood of the covenant" (v29) as "common" (*Darby*). It is possible that the writer is referring again (as he did in the previous warning passages) to the sin of returning to Judaism after embracing Christ as personal Savior. Perhaps many or

all that returned thought they could do so quietly and without significant consequences. If so, the writer is about to show them how wrong they were.

This sin was willful; a definite choice was made to go back. Those who returned did not do so unknowingly, but deliberately. Their sin was continual; it involved regular attendance, offering of sacrifices and keeping of rituals within Judaism. Verse 29 tells us their sin was shameful. Believers who had trusted alone in Christ as the final and only sacrifice for sins were now declaring the exact opposite by their actions. By engaging in temple sacrifices once more, they were demonstrating to those around them that Christ's blood, the very blood which "sanctified" them at conversion, must have been "common," and they were certainly taking God's grace for granted. By doing this, the writer warns them that "there no longer remains any sacrifice for sins" (v26, *Darby*). Does not the blood of Jesus Christ "cleanse us from all sin" (1John 1:7)? Yes, but the writer is making an excellent point. This same chapter has plainly declared that Christ's sacrifice was the last sacrifice for sins (vv10, 12, 14). To go back to a system of sacrifices leaves no basis for cleansing between God and the sinning believer. How can they ask for cleansing from daily sin when the basis for that cleansing is the sacrifice they are now trampling upon? They therefore cannot be in a right relationship with God if they go back to Judaism. In fact, if they go back, they can expect frightening consequences.



The Judgment Expected

Those who believe this text is teaching the loss of a believer's salvation should note that the word "eternal," used often in Hebrews (5:9; 6:2; 9:12,14-15; 13:20) is never found in connection with judgment in this book, nor is it used within the warning passages.

In chapter 6, it was pointed out that one consequence of returning to Judaism would be failure to "go on to maturity" (6:1). Now, something more serious is introduced. For a number of reasons, it appears that the judgment threatened in this warning is physical death. First, the only other NT passage that speaks of judgment due to a mistreatment of the blood of the covenant is 1 Corinthians

11:25-34. The behavior in Corinth resulted in physical illness and death (v30). Second, verse 28 speaks about those who experienced physical death under Moses' law. Why would we make the assumption that it is eternal death referred to in verse 29? Just because the punishment is more severe does not necessarily mean it is eternal. Third, fire "devouring" (v29) is more consistent with physical punishment than eternal punishment, for this would imply annihilation.

It is also possible that the writer is foretelling a particular event about to unfold that would involve physical death for those who return to Judaism. Many writers believe the date of this epistle is a few years prior to AD 70. In that year, the future Roman Emperor, Titus, would conquer Jerusalem, burn down the Temple and within a short span of time, kill over one million Jews (according to Josephus). At a time when prophecy was still functioning in the early NT era, it is almost inconceivable that some reference to this coming catastrophe would not be alluded to in a letter addressed to Hebrews. The Messiah Himself predicted it (Luke 19:41-44; 21:20-24).

There are a few clues within the epistle that may point to this coming event. First, the writer refers to them seeing "the day approaching" (v25). Ominous signs were already visible to the readers. Second, the coming fire was meant to devour "the adversaries" (v27), a reference to the unbelieving nation. The writer makes a distinction between his audience (which includes himself – "we," v26) and these adversaries. But if these Jewish believers went back to the Temple, they could only expect to share in its coming demise. Third, they are exhorted to go "outside the camp" (13:13), a possible hint to get away from the city of Jerusalem and the coming catastrophe. If they remain there, the "sorer punishment" (v29) may be that which is detailed by Josephus (starvation, mothers eating their children, mass crucifixions, etc.). It's interesting that Eusebius wrote about Christians in Jerusalem who were warned in an "oracle" to leave the city before its destruction.



The Confidence Conveyed

Having said all this, the writer believes his audience will remain faithful to Christ. In verse 38, the words “any man” are not in the original. He is not implying two different companies (saved or lost), but two different responses within the saved company (faithfulness or unfaithfulness). As indicated in chapter 6:9, his confidence in them is clear: “We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls” (v39, *ESV*).



Petterson, David

Galatians 5:4

The sensation to some is exhilarating; to others terrifying. If you have ever been pushed out of a plane into a freefall, it's hard to know which way is up or which way is down, and you can't wait until your feet are on solid ground again. The subjects of our text had been pushed away from Paul's clear teaching about freedom in Christ and found themselves in a spiritual freefall. Much of his letter to the Galatians was written to put these believers' feet back upon solid ground once more.

The verses surrounding our text indicate a saved audience. They are referred to as “brothers” (4:28, 31; 5:11,13, *ESV*) and are told that “Christ has set us free” (5:1). It is quite evident in 5:4 that Paul is clearly addressing those already saved. They could not be “fallen from grace” if they never initially embraced God's grace. This helps to explain the word “justified” in our text. These believers were justified by God's grace at the moment of conversion but were now attempting to keep themselves justified by the works of the law. They had received erroneous teaching pressuring them to be circumcised (5:2-3) in order to attain a higher spiritual level (5:6). Those who acted upon this false doctrine found themselves in a disorienting “free” fall.



Fallen From What?

Paul never says that these believers had fallen from salvation. In fact, none of the word forms of “salvation” (Greek, *soteria*) are to be found in this entire epistle! This is unusual, given that in most of Paul's letters, he uses some form of *soteria* many times. The fact is that we cannot fall from salvation either by what we do or fail to do. Our best efforts could not save us to begin with; neither can our best

efforts “keep us saved” now. We are saved by grace alone (Eph 2:8-9).

Speaking of grace, it is important to emphasize that we are not only saved by grace but sanctified by grace. Works cannot save the sinner (2:16), nor sanctify the saint (3:1-5). The law stands absolutely powerless to sanctify us as it did to save us; it was given to show us our need of a Savior. That sanctification, not salvation, is the main subject of our text is apparent from 5:7 (“You were running the race beautifully. Who cut in on you and stopped you from obeying the truth?” *ISV*).

These believers had not fallen from salvation, yet Paul does write that they had “fallen from grace.” What does he mean? Perhaps the best way to seek an answer to this question is to ask another one.



Fallen To What?

First, Paul does not say they had fallen into a state of being lost. Norman Geisler writes, “If falling from grace means the loss of salvation, why does Paul not refer to hell? The only threat mentioned is that of eventuating in the ‘yoke of slavery’ (5:1), not in eternal torment.”

Second, Paul does not tell them they had fallen into sin. Neither salvation nor sin is in the context of this section. Circumcision is not a sin; neither is keeping the law.

What these believers are in danger of losing is their freedom: “Be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (5:1). The issue is not about falling from the position of being saved to being lost. The danger is about falling from grace to law. And since the context is sanctification, not salvation, these Galatians were attempting to achieve sanctification by works of the law. When Paul says, “Christ is become of no effect unto you” (5:4), sanctification is the “effect” they will not receive because they are seeking to achieve it on their own. It’s not that we needed grace for salvation and afterwards need it no more. It is within the realm of grace that we grow as believers and become more like the Lord Jesus. Apart from the Holy Spirit

(whom we received by grace) at work in our lives, we could not produce the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23). Here we agree with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* which says, “Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ.” Obviously, we must cooperate with the Spirit in order to do what is right and good, but ultimately, we owe our sanctification to the grace of God who freely gave us His Spirit.



Freefall Fallout

While we may never in our assembly circles have to deal with leaders who would put us under Jewish law to be sanctified, we need to be on guard for the rise of legalistic teachers among us. Those who teach the keeping of man-made rules in order to attain a certain “sanctifying” status are to be noted and rebuked, so as not to bring believers into “the yoke of bondage” once more. The history of assemblies has been scarred by the devastating fallout of legalism. Some have taught and pressured believers to adhere to certain unscriptural standards, invading nearly every realm of life. Sadly, some assemblies have had to witness the fallout, seeing many believers leave because they have grown weary of this “yoke of bondage.” We need to be careful in our day to recognize legalism where it raises its head and “stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free” (5:1). Paul concludes this section with these words: “But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another” (5:15). Rules and laws as means of sanctification tend to tear people apart rather than build people up. Let us never be guilty of causing a modern-day “freefall” but stand firm on the solid ground of Scripture.

Does Galatians 5:4 teach that a believer can fall from salvation and ultimately be lost? Although it is possible to fall from grace to law (by choice) as an attempt at sanctification, it is impossible for anything or anyone to cause us to fall from God’s great salvation in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:38-39).

Studies on Eternal Security (10): The Unpardonable Sin



Petterson, David

Should a Christian fear the possibility of committing the “unpardonable sin” and ultimately of being lost forever? Among certain groups, we hear warnings against so-called “mortal sins” which are unforgivable. Other groups label sins such as adultery, murder or abortion as “unpardonable,” yet Jesus states that “every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people” (Matt 12:31, ESV) and only makes an exception for one very specific sin addressed to a specific group of people.



The People Warned

Matthew tells us that the Pharisees were the main subjects of the warning (12:24) while Mark adds that scribes were also there (3:22). These were men who knew the Old Testament Scriptures and were familiar with the many prophecies concerning their coming Messiah. Christ stood right before them, proved His Messianic claims by His miracles, and even cast out a demon in their presence with many witnesses. The Pharisees and scribes did not deny the miracle. Yet their conclusion was, “It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons that this man casts out demons” (Matt 12:24). It is clear from their words that these men were unbelievers. They had never been saved. The sin Jesus goes on to describe does not cause anyone to lose salvation, because it can only be committed by those who have never had salvation.



The Sin Described

After Jesus points out how contradictory their conclusion is, He tells them how dangerous it is. “Therefore, I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven” (Matt 12:31, ESV). There are two features

of this sin. First, it is referred to as “blasphemy.” The word means to “revile” or to “slander.” Second, it is blasphemy “against the Spirit.” All other blasphemy can be forgiven, but not this type. Why not? Mark adds that these men “were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit’” (3:30). The Lord Jesus said He did this work “by the Spirit of God” (Matt 12:28). They were slanderously attributing the work of God’s Spirit to an unclean, demonic spirit. Thus, it was possible for these men to sin in such a way making forgiveness and salvation impossible. This makes sense logically. What more could God do to draw these Pharisees and scribes to Himself? They saw the Lord Jesus, heard His teachings, witnessed His signs performed by the power of the Spirit, watched His dominion over the forces of evil, and observed firsthand the fulfillment of Scripture. They had sinned against the brightest light possible. If they refused to acknowledge Him in the brightest of light, how could they ever expect to receive Him?

Some feel that the sin being committed here is a national sin, the Pharisees and scribes representing the nation of Israel as its leaders. They believe that this chapter brought the nation to the point of no return and that they must now face the future judgment (brought upon the nation in 70AD). However, Jesus refers to it, not as a national sin, but as an individual sin (“whoever” in Matt 12:32 and “everyone” in Luke 12:10).

Others interpret this sin as the rejection of Christ. However, would we not honestly admit that all of us rejected the Son, yet God continued to speak to us in His grace until we finally embraced His Son? Still others teach that this sin is the final rejection of Christ, which cannot be forgiven. Yet it would be unnecessary to state that a final choice is a final choice.

From the context of Matthew 12, it seems that this sin involves personally witnessing the work of God’s Spirit (performed by His Son while on earth), watching His power demonstrated over Satan, and slanderously attributing that power to the demonic realm. If this is the case, we conclude no one can commit the “unpardonable sin” today, for these conditions do not presently exist. Neither did the conditions exist in the book of Acts. Nowhere in Acts do we read

about the possibility of committing the “unpardonable sin.” But will these conditions exist in the future?



The Age to Come

What did Jesus mean when He said that this sin would not be forgiven “either in this age or in the age to come” (Matt 12:32)? There are three occasions in the NT where “this age” (touto aion or touto kairos) is contrasted with “the age to come” (aion erchomai or mello). All three (Matt 12:32; Luke 18:30; Eph 1:21) point forward to the Kingdom Age when Christ will reign upon the earth. Conditions in the future Kingdom Age (“the age to come”) will be similar to those which existed when Christ was here the first time (“this age”). Of course, the Kingdom Age will be far more glorious, because He will actually reign as King. But in both “ages” Christ is physically present on earth, has the Spirit coming upon Him, announcements are made beforehand concerning His Kingdom, He performs signs demonstrating His Messiahship and shows His power over Satan. These similarities can be seen in the table below.

It is therefore possible that the “unpardonable sin” could be committed by unbelievers during Christ’s millennial reign, since the conditions will be so similar. We know from Revelation 20:7-9 that a vast company of unbelievers on earth will rise up against Christ at the conclusion of His 1000-year reign. A believer in the Lord Jesus never needs to fear committing this sin. Believers can grieve the Spirit (Eph.4:30), or even quench the Spirit (1Thes 5:19), but nowhere do we find a believer blaspheming the Spirit, thereby committing the “unpardonable sin.” Our security is found in Christ alone, not in what we do or fail to do (Eph 2:8, 9).

Studies on Eternal Security (11): Sin that Leads to Death



Petterson, David

Those who deny the eternal security of the believer (Conditional Security Advocates or CSAs) will inevitably point to 1 John 5:16 to support their view. John writes, “If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life – to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that.” (*ESV*) Some CSAs teach that “death” in this text is eternal death which the believer can experience if guilty of committing a certain sin. We will examine two possible interpretations of John’s words, both of which defend the truth of the believer’s eternal security.



Possible Interpretation #1

John uses the term “brother” as merely a professing brother, but not a true believer (3:15 is used as support: “Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him”).

In this interpretation, “death” means eternal death and the “sin that leads to death” is the sin of anti-christianity that John describes in earlier chapters. Thus, a person who is guilty of committing this sin is hopelessly lost and praying for them is pointless (“I do not say that one should pray for that”). On the other hand, those who are guilty of “sinning sin (literal rendering) not leading to death,” prove by their habitual sinning that they are truly unregenerate and need spiritual life. Thus, the man who sees this professing brother continuing in this course of sin “shall ask, and God will give him (the professing brother who is actually unregenerate) life (eternal life).”

The strength of this view is that in interpreting both “death” and “life” as spiritual, the terms are allowed to be true contrasts. Also,

these words are used elsewhere in the epistle to refer to spiritual death and spiritual life.



Possible Interpretation #2

John uses the term “brother” to mean a genuine brother, as he does elsewhere in the epistle. In this interpretation, “death” means physical death and there are sins which believers can commit or continue to commit that will lead to a premature home-call. In light of this John says, “There is sin that leads to death: I do not say that one should pray for that.” When John says not to pray for “that,” he means praying that physical death be the end result of such sinful behavior. John is not admonishing his readers to refuse prayer for people, but to refuse to pray vindictively. On the other hand, believers that are guilty of “sinning sin not leading to death” are clearly disobedient and in need of restoration. Thus, fellow believers “shall ask, and God will give him (the sinning believer) life (restoration of abundant life, life as God intends it to be lived).” The purpose of the passage, therefore, is not to identify the unstated “sin that leads to death,” nor to determine who has committed it. The purpose is to give direction in prayer for sinning believers. John tells us whom to pray for (a sinning brother), and what not to pray for (God acting vindictively). The work of chastisement should be left in the Lord’s hands.

This interpretation has the following strengths. First, it allows “brother” to mean “brother.” John gives no indication that he is only a professing brother. Second, it harmonizes with other judgment passages in the NT. Acts 5 describes the premature death of Ananias and Sapphira, who were both among the believing community. Peter does not imply that they had lost their salvation because they had “lied to the Holy Spirit.” Also, 1 Corinthians 11:30 tells us that in Corinth, many were sick, and many died because of their sinful behavior. Paul does not even hint that any of these had lost their salvation. Third, this view harmonizes with James’ similar text (5:19-20). The context of both passages is prayer. Both James and John conclude their epistles with this subject. The guilty person is a “brother” in both cases, and death is the end result because of sin. James even refers to those who are physically sick and implies the

sickness is because of sin (5:15). Fourth, this interpretation places a high value on the effectiveness of prayer for disobedient believers.

Both interpretations reflect Biblical truth and strongly support the doctrine of eternal security.

Weaknesses of the CSA Interpretation

First, the CSA interpretation is in conflict with John's other texts, which affirm the believer's eternal security in Christ (John 3:18; 5:24; 6:37,39-40; 10:27-29; 17:2; 1John 5:18). Second, John never tells us which sin (or sins) will bring about the eternal death threatened. This has led to some unscriptural conclusions, and to lists of "mortal" or "venial" sins being compiled. Also, since John has not named any sin(s), we would have no way of knowing if we were irrecoverably doomed to eternal death. Third, CSAs are left to tell us what "life" means in this text. If "spiritual life" is meant, the verse is nonsensical, for how can God be asked to give life to someone whose sins do not lead to spiritual death?

In order to preserve us from an attitude of ranking and sorting sin in order of its seriousness, John adds, "All unrighteousness is sin" (5:17). Our goal as believers should not merely be to avoid committing the sins we may deem as "serious," but to avoid sinning, period. Such holy living is expected of God's people, people He has set apart, people His word describes as eternally secure. And although we may strive for holiness, God has still left us with the flesh, and we will still sin. Yet no sin should make us fear eternal separation from our God. J. Denham Smith wrote these comforting lyrics:

*God's almighty arms are 'round me,
Peace, peace, is mine!
Judgment scenes need not confound me,
Peace, peace, is mine!
Death and hell cannot appall me,
Safe in Christ whate'er befall me,
Calmly wait I, till He call me,
Peace, peace, is mine!*

Studies on Eternal Security (12): Kept by the Power of God



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The issue of a believer's security would plague us to our final breath if that security depended on us in any way. We might fear failing to "endure to the end." What if we falter in our faith just before dying? What if we slip up in our final moments without any opportunity to repent? Would we then miss heaven and plunge into hell? If salvation depended on us, we would have every right to be concerned. We would, in fact, be hopeless. However, Peter tells us that we are "kept by the power of God." (1Peter 1:5) We are not instructed to do what will keep us safe, but rather encouraged to know Who it is that is keeping us safe.



The Keeper

Scripture tells us God's power is so great that a word from His lips called the created order into existence. Genesis 1 contains the refrain, "And God said, let there be ... and it was so." God's power was displayed in the judgment of the great flood in Noah's day, at the Red Sea in Moses' day, even making the sun stand still in Joshua's day. The God who can stop lions' mouths, turn water into blood, still violent storms, and raise the dead to life again is truly unlimited in His power. Indeed, there is no power greater than His. How encouraging to realize that we, as believers, are kept by the power of our omnipotent God. Neither human will (including our own personal will) nor Satan's power can overcome the One who keeps His own safe!



The Kept

The first word of the verse is "who" and points back to those who have been "born again to a living hope" (v3, *ESV*). Those who are born again also have an imperishable, undefiled and unfading

inheritance that is kept for them (v4). Thus, the inheritance is “kept” for the heirs and the heirs are “kept” in order to obtain this inheritance.

How did we become heirs? How were we born again? What occurred so that it could now be said that we are kept by the power of God? Peter says it was “through faith” (v5). We are not kept by our faith, we are kept by God’s power, a blessing received when we were born again “through faith.” Faith in Christ brought salvation, so that now we are under God’s protective hand and have an inheritance waiting for us.

There are those who teach that the phrase “through faith” means that the believer must continue to exercise faith in order to be kept by God’s power. If that were true, in what way is God’s keeping power beneficial at all? How are we being kept and from what? If God’s salvation does not include being saved from myself, what good is it at all? It is either God or us, not both. If we have to keep ourselves safe by our faith, we are hopeless, for our flesh is weak and our enemies (Satan and this world) are powerful.

The Keeping

What does it mean to be “kept”? The Greek word *phroureo* is a military term for being guarded or protected. The way it is used in Galatians 3:23 and Philippians 4:7 led commentator Wayne Grudem to conclude, “The contexts show that the word can mean both ‘kept from escaping’ and ‘protected from attack,’ and perhaps both kinds of guarding are intended here: God is preserving believers from escaping out of His kingdom, and He is protecting them from external attacks.” Thus, no outside force can take us away from God’s protective hand, nor can any personal failure cause God to drop His guard.

Additionally, the word “kept” is a present participle giving the sense that we are “continually being guarded.” There is never a moment when God lets His guard down, but we are always kept by Him. Peter adds that this guarding takes us all the way to our final salvation (“for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time,” Darby). Final

salvation refers to “the whole sum of what God has in store for us, the enjoyment of our inheritance” (C.E.B. Cranfield). Thus, it is impossible to see how God’s keeping activity can ever cease.

I love the words of William Blane’s outstanding hymn:

*Kept, safely kept;
My fears away are swept.
In weakness to my God I cling,
Though foes be strong I calmly sing,
Kept, safely kept.*

*Kept by His power,
Whatever dangers lower
The strength of God’s almighty arm
Doth shield my soul from every harm,
Kept by His power.*

*Kept all the way,
E’en to salvation’s day,
His mighty love ne’er cold shall wax,
Nor shall His powerful grasp relax,
Through all the way.*

What should our reaction be to the truth of being kept eternally secure? The answer is certainly not with a determination to sin. We ought to respond with praise (“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” v1). It’s not surprising we should respond with joy (“you greatly rejoice in this,” v6, *ISV*). How appropriate to respond, as well, with love for the Savior Himself (“Whom having not seen, ye love” v8).

We conclude this series on eternal security by asking the question once more, “Just how safe am I?” I am as safe as my God is strong. I am as safe as His promises are sure. I am safe because He is faithful (2Tim 2:13), even when I am not. The only way I can be sure of salvation is when it is obtained by grace and maintained by grace. Otherwise, I can never have any assurance at any time. By God’s grace, I am safe. Are you?