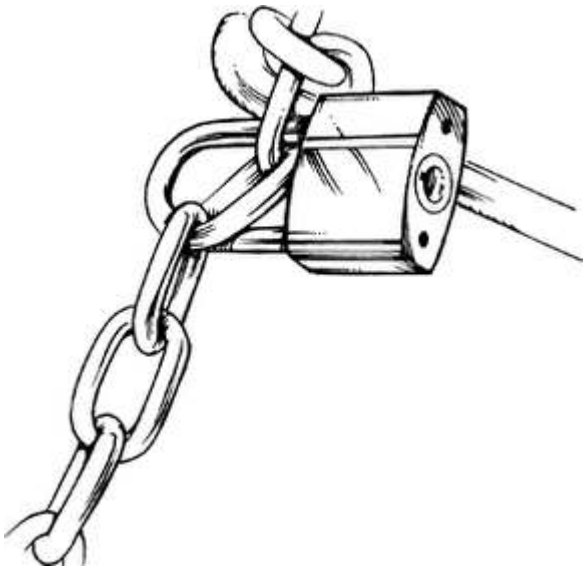
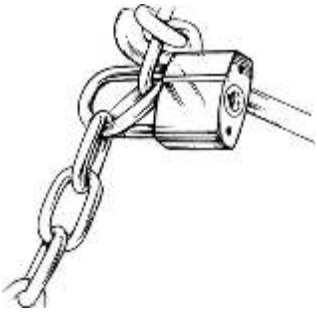
Once Saved, Always Saved

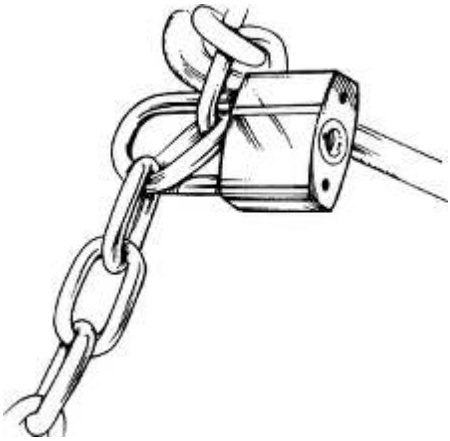


Once Saved, Always Saved

by Brian Johnston



1. The primary salvation decision is God's - not ours



This booklet is an exploration of the security of our salvation in Christ. We'll be looking at what, for some, is a controversial issue – as any internet search would show (not that I necessarily recommend it: it's not for the faint of heart!). The issue is: 'Does there come a point when a backslider loses the salvation he, or she, once had?' There are parts of the world where this teaching is so prevalent that you rarely hear teaching which says: 'once saved, always saved'. Which is correct? Which is biblical?

It's not a new assertion to say that a backslider may lose his or her salvation, for the Apostle Paul evidently debated with those who claimed just that. They raised the objection to Paul's preaching with which Romans chapter 6 opens. That's where Paul says:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? (Romans 6:1)

In other words, Paul must have been preaching 'once saved, always saved', because of the fact that some were clearly reacting against it back then. In essence, they were saying, "Come on, Paul. Do you really mean to say that a person (one who's known salvation by placing personal faith in Christ) can then go on to live carelessly and multiply many sins without any fear of losing his or her salvation? If that's the case," they argued, "we might as well all sin at every opportunity if that means it gives God more opportunities to be gracious in forgiving our many sins!"

In chapter six of Romans, Paul shows how wrong-headed is this point of view. He begins his reply by saying, *By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?* (Romans 6:2)

This is the basis of Paul's rejection of their 'we may as well live as we please' philosophy. He tells them that the reality is that the believer on the Lord Jesus Christ has in fact 'died to sin'. But what does this mean? Let's try to understand it from what follows. In Romans 6, Paul also tells us that 'Christ died to sin'. There must be a consistency between what it means for Christ to die to sin, and what it means for the believer on Christ to die to sin – since both these expressions are used in the same place in our Bible.

In Romans 6 Paul is writing about our identification with Christ. He reasons that, if Christ died to sin, and we're identified with Christ, then it follows that we, too, died to sin. As a practical consequence it would be out of place for us to now lead a life that was dominated by sinful practices. That's the sense of the flow of this paragraph in our Bibles. And to prove that we've been identified with Christ, Paul shares two things: a revelation of what happened at our conversion, and an explanation of the meaning of our water baptism. These two things are linked by this thought of our being identified with Christ. It's at salvation, when by God's grace we are saved through faith, that we're identified with the Christ of the cross in his death and resurrection. When we believe, it's as if Christ's death becomes our death and it's then that we receive new life in Christ. Later, in water baptism we demonstrate that fact by 'acting it out' – that is, being buried in water and rising again. Water baptism is only a symbolic witness to all who watch it happening that we're testifying to the faith which has already saved us. So our water baptism is in effect a drama about our previous identification with a crucified and resurrected saviour.

We repeat: Paul reasons here that, if Christ died to sin, and we're identified with Christ, then it follows that we, too, died to sin – and as a practical consequence it would be inappropriate for us to lead a life dominated by sinful practices now. The true preaching of salvation should never be misconstrued as a licence to keep on sinning. This is Paul's answer to those who found fault with his preaching of what amounted to 'once saved, always saved'.

But there are so many other ways of answering that objection – ways which we find elsewhere in Paul's writings and throughout the New Testament. Perhaps the one that I find to be the most

persuasive is the fact that the Bible teaches us that the primary salvation decision is God's, not ours. This means that any view which permits us to lose our salvation seriously underplays God's sovereignty.

Jesus invited people to come to him and to rest in the knowledge of sins forgiven. In itself, that famous invitation at the end of Matthew 11 invites people to stop relying on their own efforts to obtain salvation, and simply come and rest in the salvation which Christ is offering as a gift. But in John chapter 6, the Lord pulls back the curtain and reveals something of the bigger picture of what's involved in a sinner coming to Christ. He said:

"All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day … No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." (John 6:37-44)

This agrees with the emphasis he gives in John chapter fifteen, that famous chapter about the Vine and the branches. Jesus said to his disciples then:

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you." (John 15:16)

So, standing behind our coming to Christ in personal faith, is God's sovereign choice of each one of us who believes on the Lord Jesus. We find additional clarity on this point in the letter to the Ephesians, and its opening verses:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace. (Ephesians 1:3-7)

A moment's reflection ought to show us that if these things are so – if the matter of our salvation and eternal destiny has

been of concern to God from before the foundation of the world – then it's highly unlikely that we should be able to toss it away on a whim – or even by a quite deliberate rejection later. Loss of faith in a believer is tragic, and brings about a loss of enjoyment of the assurance of salvation, but salvation itself as God's sovereign gift remains, having been underwritten by God's own choice from before this universe came into being.

It's worth reading the ninth chapter to the Romans, and bowing our hearts in awe before God, and the majestic outworking of his sovereign purposes. We'll break into the section where the apostle Paul is countering the usual concerns which arise from our limited perspective of God's sovereignty:

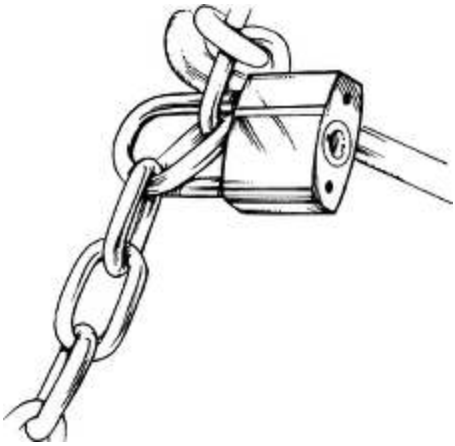
What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory (Romans 9:14-23).

God's sovereignty is very plainly taught in our Bibles in passages like that, but human responsibility is also taught in other places in the Bible. The one cannot deny the other; we have no alternative but to affirm both as biblical teachings. It's been simply put like this, that when a person comes to Christ for salvation, it's as if he or she approaches a doorway standing above which are the words 'whoever wills' or 'whosoever believes'. They take the step of faith, by receiving Christ as their personal Saviour, and so, as it were, pass through the door into life. Now, as a believer, they glance back and see the same doorway from the other side and on this side the lettering above the door reads 'chosen in Christ'.

That's a truth for the adoring believer.

So, to summarize what we're saying. The Bible teaches us that the primary salvation decision is God's not ours – which means that any view which permits that we can lose our salvation seriously underplays God's sovereignty. This is the first of many more biblical reasons we hope to share in this booklet. They're all aimed at showing that, for the Christian believer, it's a case of 'once saved, always saved'. I'd like us to enjoy biblical assurance of salvation.

2. The outcome is already finalised - it's too late to lose it!



Few things are as controversial in the world of sport as a goal being disallowed because the ball entered the goal half a second after the final whistle blew. Many football (soccer) referees will not blow the final whistle when there is an imminent chance of a goal. They wait and see. Conversely, some referees decide shortly before the end of regulation time to add a precise increment of time (e.g. 1 minute) and then blow the whistle when the clock strikes without any regard to what's happening. Both approaches are permitted under the laws of the game, and each reflect a different notion of time and the role of the referee. One referee who followed the second approach was Clive Thomas when Brazil were playing a World Cup match against Sweden in 1978. As that match drew to a close, Clive Thomas blew the final whistle seconds before Zico of Brazil scored what would have been the winning goal from a corner. Imagine the reaction of the players. In all the excitement of the action and the cauldron of noise in the stadium, it's possible that the players concerned at first think that the goal will count. The Brazilian players are overjoyed – and then so disappointed. But now think of the Swedish players. They have tried so hard to contain the talented Brazilians. They've done so well, but seem to have lost the match in the dying seconds of play. They are exhausted and devastated. The ball is in the back of their net, they've come so close, but they've lost. But no! They see the referee walking to the exit, and realize he's already

blown the whistle to end the match seconds before the ball ended up in their goal. What a relief for them to realize the game had been finalized before the winning move was completed. What had seemed like the winning goal was in fact too late to count. They had not lost after all!

This idea of something having been already finalized such that it's too late to lose it is an idea I want to come back to, but first let's turn to our Bibles. In the Philippines, one chapter they love to hear is from Ephesians chapter 2...

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:1-10)

The first thing which catches their attention is the opening statement that before a person receives Christ by faith, that person is dead in his or her sins. We often illustrate this by referring to a time in that country when there was a stay of execution for all drug-traffickers. For a while they remained imprisoned on death row, not knowing what would become of them. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* newspaper one morning described them as the 'living dead' of the Philippines. That description grabbed people's attention. It accurately described people who were still physically alive and breathing, but because of a death sentence hanging over them which could be carried out at any time, they were as good as dead. In a similar way, the Bible effectively describes sinners as the living dead of this world. In fact, they're in a worse state because many don't realize their desperate predicament. Many are still trying to enjoy life to the full

without realizing that *the wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23).

We then explain there's a fate worse than (physical) death. Physical death is the separation of the soul from the body; but spiritual death is the separation of the soul from God. And when we die in our sins, not having repented and received God's salvation in Christ, that separation becomes eternal and is known biblically as the 'second death.'

But how the faces of our friends in the Far East light up when they hear verses 8 and 9:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

All their lives, very often, they have been taught that salvation is a reward for their own good works. Traditional rituals and the influence of the cults have shaped their thinking. But then God's Spirit works through the preaching of God's Word – and very often it's this verse which unlocks their hearts. They learn for the first time that they could never earn God's salvation. It is by grace that they're saved, and not by anything of their own doing. That truth and indeed that verse become etched in their hearts and minds and they rush off to tell others this liberating news!

Having faithfully preached salvation as not being the result of good works, we next have to counter any suspicion that we're saying that good works are not at all important for the Christian. Of course, we can use the same set of Bible verses again. For Ephesians 2, which has already taught us that the unsaved sinner is dead in his or her sins, and gone on to so clearly teach that the only way of salvation from the punishment which our sins deserve is by receiving God's salvation as a free gift, ends up in verse 10 telling us that the Christian, that is, the now saved sinner, has been saved for a purpose – and that purpose is to do the good works which God has specially planned in advance for that person to do. Good works are important, but not as the method of obtaining salvation. Doing good works does not bring about our salvation; but our salvation should lead us to do those good works which God has already prepared in advance for us to do.

Even after setting this out in its careful biblical order, there can sometimes be lingering doubts. It's then we have to go back and read Ephesians 2 verses 4 to 7 again:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with

which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

This is often when the realization dawns that their salvation is totally secure in Christ. Not only has it been brought about by God's grace and not their own efforts, but from the time they first believed this good news message, they who were previously dead in their sins, have been already made alive – it's not a future promise; it's already actually happened! What's more, God has already raised them up with Christ and actually seated them with him in the heavenly realms.

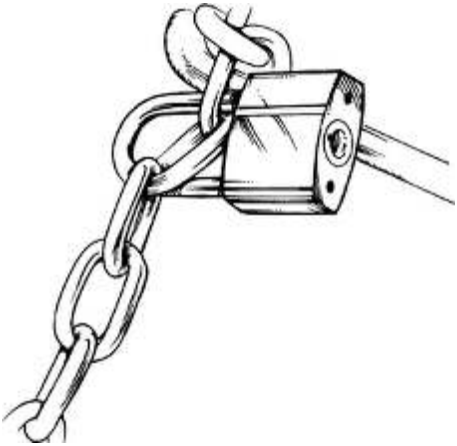
In other words, the outcome is already finalized in God's purpose (Ephesians 2:6; Romans 8:30). As far as God is concerned we're already seated and glorified with Christ!

Do you remember our opening illustration where Brazil were playing a World Cup soccer or football match against Sweden in 1978? As that match drew to a close, the referee blew the final whistle seconds before one of the Brazilian players scored what would have been the winning goal from a corner. The Swedish players saw the referee walking to the exit, and slowly it dawned on them that he'd already blown the whistle to end the match seconds before the ball ended up in their goal. The match had been already finalized so that it couldn't be lost.

And it's the same with our salvation. We may stumble and fall after our conversion, but it's too late to lose our salvation. We've already been raised to the heavenly realms! None of this is intended, we should emphasize, to give us the licence to live as we please. Ephesians chapter 2 has already ruled that out. God's purpose is that, now as a Christian, we should be careful to do good works.

The eighth chapter of Romans is one which begins by declaring 'no condemnation' for all who have trusted in Christ, and it ends just as emphatically by declaring there's 'no separation' ever from the love of Christ which brought us into that state of 'no condemnation'. In other words, we're secured by Christ's unconditional love, not our own. Praise God for that!

3. With God, there is no going back on his word



It has been said: "The person who won't change his mind to line up with the truth will change the truth to line up with his mind" (Kent Crockett). There's a Bible story about a man who tried to get God to change his mind in a way that lined up with what suited him.

The story goes back to the time when the children of Israel pitched their tents in the plains of Moab, and the Moabites did some kind of deal with the Midianites to combine forces against Israel. At the instigation of Balak, who was at that time the king of the Moabites, representatives of both nations were sent to someone called Balaam to basically bribe him to come and pronounce a curse on these advancing hosts of the Israelites. But, at first, and rightly, Balaam refused to go with them. But when even more impressive messengers came with still more tempting promises, Balaam was definitely interested in going, and so God allowed it to happen. When he arrived ...

Balaam said to Balak, "Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams." Balak did as Balaam had said. And Balak and Balaam offered on each altar a bull and a ram. And Balaam said to Balak, "Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go. Perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever he shows me I will tell you." And he went to a bare height, and God met Balaam. And Balaam said to him, "I have arranged the seven altars and I have offered on each

altar a bull and a ram." And the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak." And he returned to him, and behold, he and all the princes of Moab were standing beside his burnt offering. And Balaam took up his discourse and said,

"From Aram Balak has brought me, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains:

'Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!'

How can I curse whom God has not cursed?

How can I denounce whom the LORD has not denounced?

For from the top of the crags I see him, from the hills I behold him;

behold, a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations!

Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?

Let me die the death of the upright, and let my end be like his!"

And Balak said to Balaam, "What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and behold, you have done nothing but bless them." And he answered and said, "Must I not take care to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?"

And Balak said to him, "Please come with me to another place, from which you may see them. You shall see only a fraction of them and shall not see them all. Then curse them for me from there." And he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. Balaam said to Balak, "Stand here beside your burnt offering, while I meet the LORD over there." And the LORD met Balaam and put a word in his mouth and said, "Return to Balak, and thus shall you speak." And he came to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab with him. And Balak said to him, "What has the LORD spoken?"

And Balaam took up his discourse and said,

"Rise, Balak, and hear; give ear to me, O son of Zippor:

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind.

Has he said, and will he not do it?

Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Numbers 23:1-19)

What a tragic figure Balaam is! If only he'd known what someone has truly written: "It is better to be divided by truth than to be united in error. It is better to speak the truth that hurts, and

then heals, than [to speak] falsehood that comforts, then kills. It is not love, and it is not friendship, if we fail to declare the whole counsel of God. It is better to be hated for telling the truth than to be loved for telling a lie. It is impossible to find anyone in the Bible who was a power for God who did not have enemies and was not hated. It's better to stand alone with the truth than to be wrong with a multitude" (Adrian Rogers). That's true, is it not? Can you tell me anyone in the Bible whom God used mightily who was free of enemies and well-liked by everyone? We're a fool if we think there's long-term advantage in not standing four-square for the truth of God's Word.

Balaam was such a fool, and came to symbolise those who would be willing to corrupt the Word of God for personal gain. Balaam wanted to be popular; he wanted to be honoured. Truth, it seems, was something to be manipulated if it meant those personal goals could be reached. Anyone who has his heart set on the honour, power, fame and riches of this world will find himself, or herself, tempted to be economical with the truth. It would have suited Balaam for God to change his mind regarding Israel. Did he think for a while that he could deal with God as his colleagues dealt with their pagan deities? Could he manage after all to manipulate God with sacrifices – even seven of them on seven altars – so as to change his counsel just slightly concerning Israel? It was going to be to his advantage, so he thought, to at least give it a try. But he was forced to admit that he'd seriously underestimated God. He came to acknowledge:

> *God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind.*
>
> *Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?* (Numbers 23:19)

Balaam, influenced by Balak and his bribes, had tried to get God to change his mind concerning Israel. But God never will. The Apostle Paul makes that very clear in Romans chapter 11:

I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob; and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their

forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. (Romans 11:25-32)

I particularly wanted to pick up on verse 29 which said: *For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.*

Admittedly, the scriptural application of this text is in terms of God's as yet unfinished business with the nation of Israel, but this statement – being a communication of the character of God – bears application also to the gift of salvation to which by his grace God has called those of us who are believers in Christ.

This verse assures us that the character of the God of the Bible is such that he'll never give a gift, and then later demand that same gift back again. Never.

Some versions say: *the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance* – meaning God doesn't have second thoughts about them. This ties in with what we've already reviewed in this booklet regarding our salvation. It was something decided by God before the world began. And so he's not going to have second thoughts about it now. Our disappointing performance is no surprise to the God who knows the end of a thing from its beginning. Nothing, absolutely nothing, takes God by surprise. So if the God who knows all things in advance made a deliberate choice of each believer before the course of world history even began, what can possibly alter that sovereign decision?

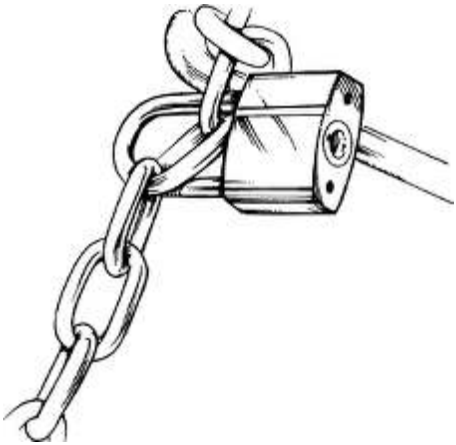
Already we've seen the example of Israel. As a nation they had failed, and God had dealt with them for that, but, as the Apostle Paul shows, God's wisdom is such that all of his dealings with Israel and the rest of the world fit together like pieces in a jigsaw. God doesn't ever have to 'eat his words'. Israel's future remains glorious in God's purposes. Paul says it very emphatically: God has not abandoned or thrown away Israel. Nor has the Church (that is, the Body: Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 12:13) taken Israel's place in the promises God once gave to Israel.

God's word, his promise to Abraham, will never fail – can never fail. God's Word cannot be broken. His plans cannot be moulded according to our wishes, if these run contrary to his will, and his purposes cannot be thwarted by our failures and even by our backsliding – much

as any backsliding is to be regretted.

So we say very clearly, that the free gift of God which is salvation to everyone who receives Jesus Christ, God's Son, by faith as his or her personal saviour, will never – can never – be withdrawn by God. Once saved; you're always saved! Praise God for that!

4. God's grace is emphasised - without qualification



Once there was a husband and wife who didn't really love each other. The man was very demanding, so much so that he prepared a list of rules and regulations for his wife to follow. He insisted that she read them over every day and obeyed them to the letter. Among other things, his "dos and don'ts" included such details as what time she had to get up in the morning, when his breakfast should be served, and how the housework should be done. After several long years, the husband died. As time passed, the woman fell in love with another man, one who really loved her. Soon they were married. This husband did everything he could to make his new wife happy, continually showering her with tokens of his appreciation. One day as she was cleaning the house, she found tucked away in a drawer the list of commands her first husband had drawn up for her. As she looked it over, it dawned on her that even though her present husband hadn't given her any kind of list, she was doing everything her first husband's list required anyway. She realized she was so devoted to this man that her deepest desire was to please him out of love, not obligation. Keep that in mind as we revisit:

... by grace [we] have been saved through faith. And this is not [our] own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.
(Ephesians 2:8-9)

It should be clear from these verses that neither the obtaining of salvation nor Christianity is focused on rules, on mere "dos

and don'ts". The very heart of Christianity is our relationship with God. We cannot – however hard we work – earn God's favour. But when we understand how God chooses us all by his grace, and through our faith alone, to give to us what we don't and never could deserve – a true appreciation of God's grace motivates us to live in a godly way, and to actually do all the things that are pleasing to God. As Paul said to Titus in chapter 2:

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness. (Titus 2:11-14)

As hard as it may be for us to accept that salvation is not based on our works, it was as hard if not harder for the early Christians who had come from a Jewish background. For a couple of thousand years, each new generation of males had been circumcised. This had previously been God's instruction for an age which was now past. The coming of Christ had brought a change-point, and the apostle had to lay it on the line:

Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. (Galatians 5:2-4)

These strong words are Paul's answer to those who'd been saved through faith, prior to wondering if they should then bolster it with circumcision. This passage is decisive as to the fact that there can be no mixture of any kind between grace and works. Works don't come into the obtaining of salvation; nor are they regarded as necessary for holding on to salvation afterwards.

But sometimes these verses have been distorted in their meaning and made to suggest the opposite of Paul's argument: that we can be severed from Christ and fall away from grace in the loss of our actual salvation! That's not at all what Paul's saying here. Instead, he says, pure reliance on Christ on the one hand, and the desire to depend in some way on human effort on the other, belong in totally different categories – such that seeking to even maintain our salvation by some effort of our own transfers us from the one 'camp' to the other. In that sense we're cut off from being

able to proclaim 'Christ alone.' We've fallen away from the advocacy of 'grace alone'. By no longer operating in the sphere of 'Christ alone' and 'grace alone', we lose all certainty and enjoyment of the salvation God's provided for us in the one finished work of his own Son upon the cross (see John 19:30).

Of course, this is what Paul consistently taught. He told the Philippian jailor, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." But just suppose for a moment that the gift of salvation is subsequently conditional upon our own good works – then we cannot possibly know if we have done well enough to still keep hold of it or not – and so Paul's note of confident assurance to the jailor ('you will be saved') would then ring false.

Similarly, Paul is at pains to make himself clear on this point throughout his letter to the Galatians. His detailed reasoning is against the Old Testament Law of Moses or equally against works which show the standard of the Law (see Romans 2:14-15). The argument is equally applicable whether such works are for obtaining or maintaining salvation. Let's just skim over a few of the many points he makes ...

He says that any salvation which is conditional upon works would demean Christ. Paul argues:

... we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! (Galatians 2:16-17)

A works-based salvation – one where we feel we need to endeavour to add to Christ's insufficient work either to become or to remain saved – such a view of salvation demeans Christ by making him a servant of sin.

Relying to some extent on our own efforts is also a view that nullifies grace, as Paul shows a few verses later, where he writes:

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. (Galatians 2:20-21)

If the doing of good works could in some way contribute to our salvation or to our keeping hold of it, then this makes God's grace of no account.

As if these consequences weren't bad enough, Paul shows next that a dependence on good works in relation to being saved involves a misunderstanding of role of God's Holy Spirit when Paul says:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Galatians 3:1-3)

As he says at the beginning of Ephesians: after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of our salvation, and after having believed, we were sealed in Christ with the Holy Spirit (see 1:13). In other words, the Spirit's work endorsed our faith, not our works.

Paul has yet more reasons to multiply against a works-based salvation. For example, in chapter 3 verse 10 he says: *For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse.*

Works are bound to a curse, not the blessing of salvation. What's more the Law, and the works of the Law, were like a prison warder, like the discipline imposed by a personal tutor, *Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.* (Galatians 3:23-26)

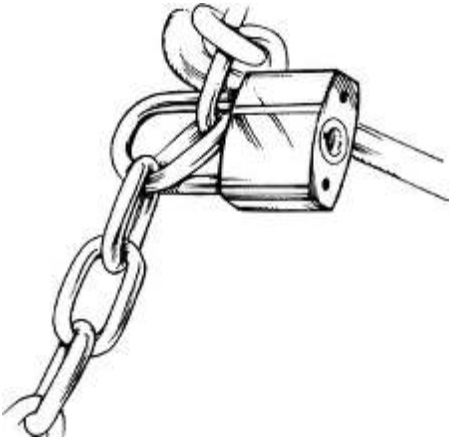
If we value what it means to be a son of God, through faith, then we will not attribute our salvation as having anything to do with works. Finally, Paul reminds us we are not under law. The good works which we do are an outward showing of the law written on our hearts. But Israel's experience should have proved to us that this is no defence against our own sinful nature with all its cravings. A sanctified life is impossible without the Holy Spirit. Paul says: *walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh … But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law* (Galatians 5:16-18).

A faith-plus-works formula is like trying to turn back from the Spirit to the Law as our sanctifier. Impossible! Someone confronted Martin Luther, upon the Reformer's rediscovery of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone: "If this is true, a person could simply live as he pleased!" "Indeed!" replied

Luther. “Now, what pleases you?”

Augustine's response on this point was similar to Luther’s. He said: “Love God and do as you please.” But don’t misunderstand – this touches on the motivation the Christian has for his or her actions. The person who has been justified by God’s grace has a new, higher and nobler motivation for holiness than the shallow, hypocritical self-righteousness or fear that seems to motivate so many rule-bound, works-based religious people today.

5. The biblical imagery is of irreversible processes



Not only was Benjamin Franklin a great statesman and inventor, but he was also a great correspondent who received letters from famous people from all over the world. One day he received what could well have been the most important letter ever to arrive on his desk. It was from the well-known British preacher George Whitefield. "I find that you grow more and more famous in the learned world," Whitefield wrote. "As you have made such progress in investigating the mysteries of electricity, I now humbly urge you to give diligent heed to the mystery of the new birth. It is a most important and interesting study and, when mastered, will richly repay you for your pains."

That, of course, was to understate matters, but no doubt the preacher was tempering his language so as to appeal to this man whom he may have suspected might have been otherwise dismissive. The topic of study the preacher was urging on Franklin was drawn from a famous conversation Jesus Christ had with a high-ranking religious leader – and recorded for us in John's Gospel. Here we have it:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is

born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." (John 3:1-8)

It's clear Jesus wasn't talking about someone becoming a reformed character or simply learning to mend his ways; far less merely turning over a new leaf. That's the best that human religion can do for a person. But this is so much more. Jesus is talking about a spiritual transformation – about becoming a new person. Only this can fit us for heaven. Nothing less can rescue us from the judgement which our sins demand. This is what it means to be born again, to be born of the Spirit of God, so becoming a new creation in Christ through faith alone, not by our own reforming efforts. When a person has become altogether new in this way by repenting and turning to Christ, this invisible spiritual and inward transformation should then become evident to others by the fact that they now want to live very differently from the life they lived before their conversion.

Soon after Augustine's conversion, he was walking down the street and passed by a prostitute whom he had known most intimately. She called but he wouldn't answer. He kept right on walking.

"Augustine," she called again. "It is I!"

Without missing a beat, and with the assurance of Christ in his heart, he replied, "Yes, but it is no longer I." Because of Christ and His Spirit, Augustine was a changed man. He was born again, a brand new creation. (Adrian Dieleman, Receive the Holy Spirit).

The Holy Spirit's transforming part in our new birth is vital. We are 'born of the Spirit.' Our part, under the action of the Spirit of God, is to receive Christ through faith, to believe in our saviour's name, as John's Gospel, chapter 1 makes clear:

He came to His own, and those who were His own did not

receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John1:11-13)

And of course, faith comes by hearing and that by the word of Christ, as Peter reminds us:

for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. (1 Peter 1:23)

God's Word is living and active (Hebrews 4:12) and so our new birth or regeneration is due to the exercise of its divine power under the operation of the divine Spirit. We become children of God by the work of God. Compare, for a moment, the ordinary kind of birth we're used to. Infants don't induce or even cooperate in their own birth. It's all of the parents' doing. No more can those who are dead in sins (Eph.2:1) prompt the life-giving operation of God's Spirit within them. It's all of God's doing. When Jesus used the expression 'to be born of the Spirit' he was stressing the truly supernatural nature of this profound change which God brings about in the repentant sinner who, in faith, comes to Christ alone for salvation. Such a change as is required cannot be our own work. The new birth is, in every sense, a miracle requiring divine power.

This being so, it should be at once obvious – as we've said – that we cannot even do so much as to maintain such a miraculous happening by our own strength of effort. But let's stress this point – in the overall context of our theme of study on eternal security – by further saying that we are just as powerless to terminate this new-birth relationship with God (either with or against our will) as we were powerless to initiate it in the first place. For, consider how a human parent may often be displeased by the behaviour of his or her offspring, but that same parent is quite powerless to alter the reality of their parenthood as would be readily confirmed by any genetic or biological test of their parentage. They may – in extreme cases – wish to disown their son or daughter, but nothing can change the stubborn biological fact that the child is theirs. The parents alone brought about this relationship, and neither parent nor child can alter it. The biblical imagery of new birth – as implying a persistent reality - is in this regard consistent with many of the plain Bible statements in connection with the truth of the security of our salvation (as no child – not even

a child of God - can ever be 'unborn').

Christ's own illustration of our salvation in terms of it being an irreversible new birth agrees perfectly, of course, with the plain and obvious sense of the words he spoke later in John's Gospel, in chapter 10 in fact – when he emphatically said:

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." (John 10:27-29)

Here, Jesus himself emphasizes that the believer (one of his sheep) will never perish. That security depends on him, not us; on the strength of his love, not ours. The matter of our eternal security is in his hands (and the Father's hands), and not in our hands. Nothing can slip between his 'fingers'. He simply cannot lose his grip. We are talking of the God who can boast the heavens – in all their stellar magnificence – as being his handiwork, the work of his fingers (Ps.8). That's a reference to Psalm 8, but it's actually Romans 8 that I want to impress upon you – and these words in particular:

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

For those whom He foreknew … and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. (Romans 8:1, 29-30)

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, then what we've just read from God's Word in Romans 8 are five undeniable truths about you! You are foreknown; predestined; called; justified; and glorified. Now listen out for the 5 unanswerable questions that follow:

[1] *… If God is for us, who is against us?*

[2] *He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?*

[3] *Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies;*

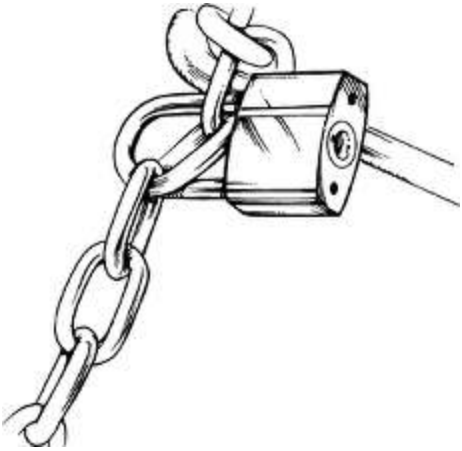
[4] *who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.*

[5] *Who will separate us from the love of Christ? ...*

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39)

The chapter that begins by saying that there is 'no condemnation' for those who are in Christ by faith, concludes by also saying that for them there can be 'no separation.' No separation from our Saviour is possible under any circumstance! You're secure! What's more, your security is in his hands! And, consistent with that, he's the one who pictured your salvation as the irreversible result of a new, spiritual birth!

6. We may lose our reward, but not the gift



I heard once about a cab driver who found a purse containing seven thousand dollars which was left by a woman passenger on the back seat—seven thousand dollars in one hundred dollar bills. He found her address in the purse, drove five miles to return it to her. The woman so graciously and generously gave him five dollars as a reward for his honesty!

On the other hand, God speaks of giving some great rewards for serving Christians. In this series of programmes we've already talked about good works only becoming relevant after salvation. We were at the time looking at Ephesians chapter 2 when we read in sequence about when we were sinners, when we were saved (those of us who have received God's grace in Christ through faith), and then when we began to walk in good works which God had long before planned for us to do as Christians. We were saying back then that our efforts don't bring about our salvation – only God's grace can accomplish that – but once we receive salvation as God's gift to repentant sinners, it's then that we're under obligation to perform good works in service for God. So, let's be clear: good works are after - not before - salvation.

But, it's certainly not the case that God is obliged to reward us for these good works which we're now called to do. In Luke chapter 17, the Lord tells this story:

"Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will

say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink'? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'" (Luke 17:7-10)

So, let's get this straight: we don't deserve salvation, we don't deserve to be delivered from the judgement which our sins truly deserve in the sight of an infinitely holy God, and nor do we deserve to be rewarded for anything we do in service for God after our salvation. If we do what's commanded of us as servants of the Lord, then we're really only doing what ought to be done. Nothing more.

But God is so gracious, that he'll even reward our service: the things we've truly done for him and for others during our lives as Christians! And his rewards will not be like the stingy five dollars which the taxi driver got in our opening story. No, the Bible talks about 'crowns.' Crowns! There's the 'crown of righteousness' (2 Timothy 4:8) for all who've looked for and loved Christ's appearing; there's the 'crown of glory' (2 Peter 5:4) for those who have been good shepherds of God's flock, of God's people; and there's the 'crown of life' (James 1:12) for those who show their love for the Lord by persevering under trials in this life.

These rewards are future when the Lord returns. We have to wait for them. He says in the Bible's last chapter: *'I am coming ... and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done'* (Revelation 22:12).

A newspaper article reminded me of the kind of "delayed returns" we should be living for. It told of a car dealer who went out of his way to give a foreign student an honest deal on a new car. Fifteen years later, that foreign student had become the sole purchasing agent for the Iranian Contractors Association. He showed his gratitude for the kindness he had received by placing a multimillion-dollar order with that same car dealer for 750 dump trucks and 350 pickups. "It's unbelievable!" exclaimed the car dealer. The good he had done was rewarded years later beyond his wildest imagination (M.R. Dehaan II).

Just as that car dealer's reward came later, so, too, the Lord will commend us when he returns. If we do good to others in order to have their immediate thanks, we already have our reward. But if we do it for God, the future return will be as sure and generous as he is.

But what if, instead of doing good deeds which please God, and for which one day he'll reward us – what if, instead, we backslide? That was the possibility of which the apostle Paul reminded his brothers and sisters in the Church of God at Corinth as he urged themto:

… have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. (2 Corinthians 5:9-10)

Let's be totally clear about what this is saying. If we've committed our life at some time to Christ, we'll never come into judgement. That's the Lord's own promise to each of us in John's Gospel chapter 5, verse 24: we've passed from death to life; we already have eternal life; and we'll never come into judgement or condemnation. When Jesus Christ returns as he has promised – first to the air for his Church, for all believers – both the living and the dead (1 Thes.4:13-18) – it's at that time that we'll all stand before his assessment tribunal (that's all we who are true believers). He'll not be judging us there as sinners – that was all dealt with at the cross – but he'll be judging or assessing us there as servants.

At that future, personal assessment of our life of Christian service there will be the possibility of reward or loss of reward depending on our performance. Listen to how the apostle Paul puts it in First Corinthians chapter 3:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it.

For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any

man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:6-15)

Each Christian is a builder. In terms of the figure of speech Paul's using here, we either build with incombustible materials or with combustible materials; that is, either with stuff that cannot burn or with stuff that can burn. The person building with stuff that burns is the backslider, the Christian who's not following God's plan or not doing the things God wants him or her to do – or who maybe is doing things that seem fine, but the motivation behind them is all wrong. At that future meeting which we'll each have with Christ, there'll be a fiery testing of our works – it'll be the flame test. If it burns, it wasn't any good.

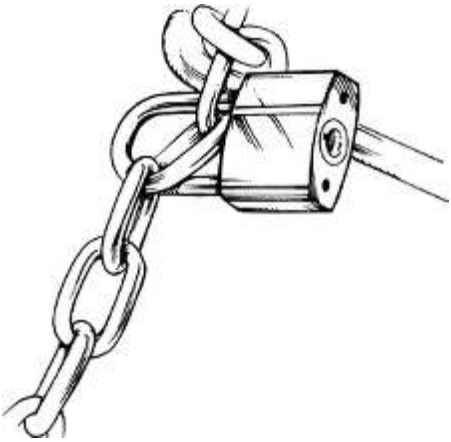
Imagine the worst then that could happen for a Christian. They watch all their life's works go up in smoke. They lose, therefore, all their potential reward – there's nothing left for which to be rewarded. Nothing has withstood the fire. But what about the individual concerned? Did you catch Paul's reassuring words in this baseline case?

1Co 3:15 *If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.*

Thank God for that! So then, here's what we are seeing from our Bibles: there are rewards for faithful service which we may fail to gain as distinct from the gift of salvation itself. Salvation itself is not a reward. It cannot be lost. But we may in some sense 'suffer loss.' That means the loss of potential rewards we may have gained if we'd lived a pleasing life to God's glory. I trust we've made that biblical distinction clear, as well as giving you the incentive to live well for the Lord – the greatest possible motivation is contained in the verse from First Corinthians 4:5 with which we conclude this chapter:

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and ***then each man's praise will come to him from God.***

7. Christ's body can never be dismembered



Do you remember as a child putting your face above a headless frame that was painted to represent a muscle man or a clown? Perhaps it was at some sea-side location, while you were on holiday with your parents? Many of us have had our pictures taken this way, and what makes the photos humorous is the fact that the head doesn't fit the body! Now, that's led someone to ask a rather thought-provoking question: 'If we picture Christ as the head of the body of believers, would the world laugh at the misfit? Or would it stand in awe of a human body so closely related to its divine head?'

Mmmm, well ... before we go any further, let's make sure we understand more accurately – and that means biblically - the terms we've already used somewhat loosely there in talking about the body of believers and Christ as its head. This is, after all, at root a biblical illustration or metaphor. Listen, for example, to what the Apostle Paul says right at the end of the first chapter of his letter to the Church of God at Ephesus:

Eph 1:22-23 And He [that's God] put all things in subjection under His [that's Christ's] feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body.

So here we have a church being described as being in some sense Christ's body. But you may well ask, which church are we talking about? We'll allow the Lord Jesus himself to clarify for us exactly to whom he applies this label of the

church which is his body – which as we've already seen is a direct biblical quotation. We'll pick up from Matthew's Gospel, chapter 16 some very famous words spoken by our Lord to the disciple Peter (along with the others):

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets."

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." (Matthew 16:13-18)

From that, as supported by other references to it in the Bible – one of which we'll come to shortly – from that, we understand that this Church which Christ calls his church – indeed you'll remember his words, 'I will build My Church' – this church has built into it every one who, like Peter, confesses Jesus as personal Saviour, being the Christ, the Son of the living God. All believers since the time of Christ, irrespective of whether they're now dead or still living, each who has professed Christ as God's Son and Saviour is a member of this Church.

This Church will be complete when Christ returns and takes it to himself (1 Thes.4:13-18). Earlier, we mentioned that any true believer on the Lord Jesus is a member of Christ's Church. And, I think, that talk of membership is common language, and is already understandable. But since this Church is the one which is being represented biblically as a body, the talk of us being members of it, takes on a heightened meaning, when the Apostle Paul begins to expand on it in First Corinthians chapter 12. He starts by talking about our human body as an analogy for Christ's Church, and says:

For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:12)

When he says 'so also is Christ,' we should be reading that as 'so also is Christ's Church' or 'so also

is Christ's body.' It's at that point Paul jumps across from dealing with our human body to talking in terms of the spiritual body of believers: in other words, Christ's Church – and we should say again that this is all true born-again Christian believers regardless of their denominational affiliation. Paul goes on to tell us how we become members. He says:

For [in] one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:13)

When we compare that with what we've already learnt, about being built into this Church, Christ's Church - which is at the time when we profess Christ like Peter - we see that many things happen when we believe in Christ as Saviour. It's then that the Lord Jesus in fact baptizes us (Mat.3:11) in the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ, that is, this Church, Christ's Church. Every believer, or every saved person, is a member of the Church which is Christ's Body. So, now Paul continues:

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. If they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. (1 Corinthians 12:14-27)

Interestingly, this section of the Bible is often quoted to emphasize the unity which should be seen to exist between believers, and to ward off any feelings of inferiority which some might entertain relative to other more prominent Christians who have more high-profile gifts. But actually, the apostle Paul is here emphasising diversity of function – albeit a diversity within an overall unity – and also he's reacting against the expressed superiority of some Corinthian believers. On that last point, perhaps a further illustration is helpful:

In March of 1981, President Reagan was shot by John Hinckley, Jr., and was hospitalized for several weeks. Although Reagan was the nation's chief executive, his hospitalization had little impact on the nation's activity. Government continued on. On the other hand, suppose the garbage collectors in that country went on strike, as they did not long ago in Philadelphia. That city was not only in a literal mess, the pile of decaying trash quickly became a health hazard. So, it seems, a three-week nationwide strike would paralyze the country. So, you could reasonably ask: who is more important – the President or a garbage collector? In the body of Christ, seemingly insignificant ones are needed. As Paul reminds us, "The head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:21-22) (David Parsons).

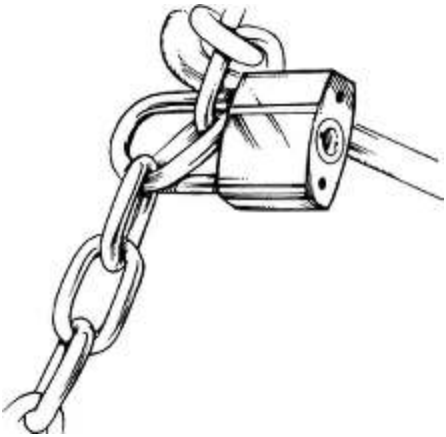
Now, let's sum up what we've been revising or perhaps learning for the first time. When a person professes faith in Christ (as Peter did) s/he is built by Christ into this Church and is in fact baptized by Christ in the Holy Spirit into that Church which is known biblically as Christ's Body. This is the Lord's action, and whatever God does remains for ever (according to Eccles.3:14), and in this case this is confirmed by the stated fact that the greatest known power could not overpower Christ's Church. We should check that again, it comes from the Lord's words in Matthew 16:18 – here they are once more:

I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

Did you get that? After confirming his identity to Peter while at Caesarea Philippi, Christ proceeded to state the glorious purpose he was about – namely building his Church, comprised of all true believers of this age of grace (from the cross to the so-called Rapture event). Then he added that nothing, no power,

not even the greatest power known to the ancient world, the power of death and the underworld, could defeat this great divine purpose. Psalm 16:10 prophesied that Christ's soul in death went down into Sheol or Hades, the realm of the dead. But the same disciple Peter says in his preaching to the Jews in Acts chapter 2 (v.24) that Jesus couldn't possibly be held there in death, but God raised him up. If God had not raised up Christ from the dead, if the gates of Hades had not been forced to yield for him, then this great church-building purpose of the ages would've been overpowered – but it wasn't, nor could it be! Praise God for that! Surely this fact of the gates of Hades and death not being able to overpower Christ's purpose in his Church precludes any such notion as the dismemberment of a single believer from that Body, that Church. Who's going to mutilate or maim Christ's Body?! And that, in turn, brings us to yet another way of saying 'once saved, always saved.' Our place in the Body of Christ is absolutely secured at conversion. Through the baptism in the Spirit which takes place automatically for each believer as they receive Christ, we are incorporated eternally into the Body of Christ which must ever remain without any defect whatsoever (Eph.5). So many lines of biblical teaching converge on this point of our security in Christ that we may have total assurance of it.

8. Navigating by recognized landmarks *(showing an aspect of salvation we can lose)*



In the same way that we might make use of recognized landmarks in giving someone directions, it's just as necessary to identify the Bible's main or landmark teachings and then navigate our way around individual and sometimes difficult verses in relation to them. If our understanding of a particular text seems to be at odds with one of the Bible's main teachings, it may indicate that the text should be related to a different teaching instead.

One such landmark teaching is that a truly born again person through faith in Jesus is secure in God's keeping so far as his salvation from eternal judgement is concerned. Such a person is seen as 'in Christ', a status granted when he or she first believed and was 'blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 1:3,4). As Christ himself confirmed: 'the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out ... this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing' (John 6:37-39).

But there's another equally clear landmark teaching which is that as the believer travels daily nearer his assured heavenly home he or she is accountable to the Lord Jesus for their response to the will of God. These two landmark biblical teachings are distinct but complementary. One line gives the believer utmost assurance of salvation from his deserved eternal judgement in the lake of fire; but the other establishes that such grace in salvation mustn't be lightly regarded. We need to add on our part all diligence, in our faith

supplying virtue, knowledge, self-control, patience, godliness and love of the brethren (2 Pet. 1:5-8).

With these two truths of Scripture as background, let's now consider some specific verses.

1 Timothy 1:19-20 talks about two persons being 'handed over to Satan'. This we may understand as the excommunication of these men from the churches of God. Thus de-barred from local church fellowship, they'd experience the effect of Satan's false teachings.

Then in 1 Cor. 9:27 Paul disciplined his body so that he wouldn't be disqualified, which means to 'fail the test', in this context that test being the test of faithfulness in ministry (as in 2 Cor.13:5). No thought of the preacher himself being disqualified from heaven, that's not in the context here.

Then there's Mat. 24:13 with its mention of enduring to the end and being saved. But read the surrounding verses which refer to the future period of the Great Tribulation. For future ones who come to know the Lord – not us – this text will assure them that God will intervene to bring the tribulation to an end, and that they'll be saved out of it.

In John's Gospel 15:6 Christ presents himself as the True Vine and describes believers in himself as the branches. It's an illustration of communion and fruitfulness, which makes the point that apart from him we can do nothing, for there will be no fruitfulness if the individual believer's link of communion with Christ is broken. A disciple who fails to maintain this communion becomes like a withered vine branch, fit only to be burned. But not the eternal burnings, the subject of eternal salvation is not under discussion here. The Lord, remember, was speaking to disciples about fruit-bearing: this is simply the case of no more fruit-bearing in the life of an unproductive backslider.

There are those who call upon the Lord in Matthew 7.15-23 and in his name perform miracles. But we have to distinguish these false professors from genuine believers because the Lord says to them 'I never knew you.' They did not lose salvation – they never at any time had it (cf Acts 19:13).

In Hebrews 10:38,39 we learn of believers returning to Judaism and in doing so would find their service as disciples ruined, and therefore they'd suffer loss of reward at the Judgement-seat of Christ, but they themselves would be saved, yet so as

through fire (1 Corinthians 3: 14, 15).

Then Peter, in 2 Peter 2:1-2 2, wrote of those who deny the Master that bought them (v.1) and so bring upon themselves swift destruction in this life, even a spiritual destruction. Verses 20-22 there refer to disciples who have made progress to the extent of escaping the defilements of the world, but then have turned back. Their present experience would now be worse for them than if they'd never known the way of righteousness. Troubled by a guilty conscience, tormented with remorse for such wasted opportunity, the backsliding believer often runs to greater excesses than someone who's not known the Lord.

And finally in this review of challenging Bible texts which we can navigate with reference to the landmark of our accountability in service and not with reference to our status in Christ, we perhaps ought to come to Matthew 12:31 with its mention of the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This has troubled many believers who've wondered if they've committed the unforgivable sin and lost their salvation. This verse, too, must be kept carefully in its special historical context. Jewish religious leaders were standing face to face with Christ. They'd witnessed his mighty miracles and good deeds, and yet very deliberately attributed the power of the Holy Spirit by which Christ performed his cures to the power of Satan himself. That was the defiant sin of the Christ-rejecter. There's no comparable situation today which a believer could face.

So, overall, we need to relate difficult verses to established landmark teachings, and we must also interpret difficult verses in the light of plainer ones. The difficult texts are often simplified once we observe key distinctions. One such distinction is between salvation that is from sin's penalty; salvation that's from sin's power, and finally, salvation that's from sin's presence. The first is once for all; the second is day by day; and the third is still awaited in the future. Let's explore then in order starting with salvation from sin's penalty in:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) ... and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus … For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not

of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:4-9)

When Ephesians 2:8 talks about how we can be saved by God's grace through faith and as a gift from God, not the result of our works - but only as a result of God's work – it's speaking about salvation from the judgement our sins deserve, which is the second death in the lake of fire (Revelation 21:8). Now we move on to a second aspect as we come to Philippians 2:

and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. (Philippians 2:11-13)

There in Phil.2:12, Paul writes about our need to work out our own salvation day by day, referring to something requiring our co-operation with the work of the Holy Spirit within us. This is talking about a different aspect of our salvation: about being saved from the power of sin in our daily life as Christians. Our sinful nature remains after we become a Christian and so we still sin (1 John 1:8 – in other words, sinless perfection here as Christians isn't possible). Sin's power is greater than us, but we have an advocate in Jesus Christ who pleads for us in God's presence (1 John 2:1). That's why the Bible (1 Cor.10:12,13) tells us that we don't need to fail, but if we do, we can know salvation from the power of sin by confessing our known sins to God (1 John 1:7-9). And now lastly, let's turn to Romans 13 ...

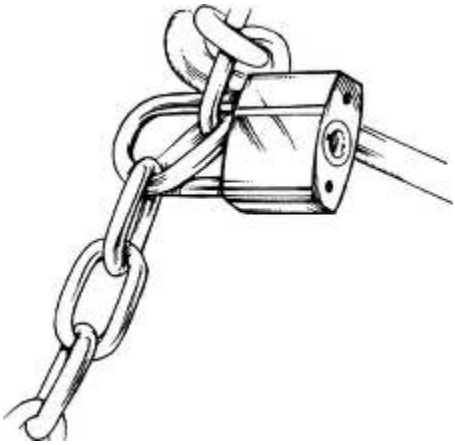
Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day … (Romans 13:10-13)

That's the third aspect of salvation mentioned there in Rom.13:11 - a future aspect: now nearer to us than when we first believed. This is salvation from the very presence of sin, to take place at Christ's return when he returns to take all Christian believers away from this sinful world. At that time in the future, our bodies will be made new (1 Thes.4:13-18),

never to be capable of sinning again.

It should now be clear that there really is an aspect of salvation which we can lose, and which is conditional – and that's salvation from the power of sin. This insight brings harmony to our understanding of God's Word concerning our salvation. Sadly, by not taking care to distinguish between these 3 aspects of salvation, some have wrongly taught that the believer's salvation from the penalty of his or her sins isn't secure or is a mixture of faith and works. Not so. God's promise to whoever believes in Jesus is eternal life (John 3:16; Romans 6:23). It's God's free gift to the believer.

9. Another helpful distinction



Last chapter, we were drawing a distinction between different aspects of our salvation – between being saved from sin's penalty, saved from its power and finally, from its presence. That's a really helpful distinction in relation to our theme, because it shows us there's an aspect of our salvation we are indeed in danger of losing –which is daily salvation from the power of our sins when we're overcome by temptations. But that's so different from saying that we can lose our salvation from the penalty of our sins; so different from saying we can ever bring our eternal destiny into jeopardy! When we fail to keep such biblical distinctions clear in our minds, we end up in confusion – where many indeed have ended up – and who, although very sincere, disturb others with their misguided teaching. But there's yet another key distinction that we can helpfully make in this connection, and that's the one I now want to share with you in this chapter.

And that other key distinction is that the Church the Body is distinct from local churches of God as we find them biblically interlinked in one overall New Testament fellowship of churches, and variously designated as being God's people, God's house, his kingdom, the holy and royal priesthood, and God's holy nation. Now, in a previous chapter we explained the Church which is Christ's Body as being all true believers of this present age of grace: the day of grace which began at the time of Acts chapter 2 with the coming of the Holy Spirit to permanently indwell believers for the first time in history.

We must acknowledge that the Bible talks of a 'falling away'

being possible, but the big question is: a falling away from what? To understand this in context, we have to distinguish between our salvation and our service for the Lord. If I can put it like this: as far as New Testament teaching is concerned, our salvation is to do with being in the Church which is Christ's Body; and our service is to do with being in a local church of God.

What's more, the Bible, when we understand it correctly, is saying that it's possible to fall away only from a position of responsibility in serving God. It's not at all saying that we can fall away from our eternally secure status as being forever saved from the penalty of our sins. For I want us to see that the theme of the letter to the Hebrews – and remember that's where we find this talk of falling away (Hebrews 4:11; 6:6; cf. 10:29-31) – I want us to see that the theme of the Hebrews' letter is our service, and not our salvation.

In its first century Jewish setting, the Hebrews' letter referred to the danger of early Jewish believers being drawn back into following the old ways of Judaism again. That's what's being referred to, for example, in the falling away that's mentioned in Hebrews 6:6. In that first century setting at least, there could be no recovery into church of God fellowship for anyone who renounced Jesus as Messiah and returned to the old ways of Judaism (such was the high profile damage to the testimony that it was in effect a re-crucifying of Christ, Heb.10:29-31). This was because this was a disastrous U-turn, after they'd first had the courage to publicly recognize Jesus as the true Messiah.

So the theme of Hebrews is not whether these wavering Jews maintained their salvation, but whether they maintained their place of privilege among God's worshiping people – or fell away from it. How can we be sure that this is what Hebrews is saying? Well, the letter itself – actually in chapter 3, verse 6 – describes them as being God's house (along with all the other New Testament believers in the churches of God in all the different localities we read about). So, the first place to start would seem to be by asking 'What exactly is God's House?' As we say, the writer tells the Hebrews, for whom the letter we have in our Bibles was originally intended, that they are God's house – in fact, linking himself with them, he says 'whose house we are' - and then he adds the condition: 'if we hold fast …'

Now that's the point I want you to especially notice with me. There's a condition here. The

writer addresses his readers and says: we are God's house, if we hold fast. 'If,'notice: that implies a condition, something that's not guaranteed. This condition is something he's going to say a lot about in the letter to the Hebrews, that is, to those first Jewish Christians. For, as we've said earlier in this series, the writer goes on to talk of the danger of 'falling away' – famously in, for example, Hebrews chapter 6, verse 6. Now, let me say this very carefully: if God's house is identified as being everyone who's known salvation through faith in Christ, then this 'falling away' would seem to be a falling away from salvation.

But the Bible does NOT teach that, once saved, we can be lost again. That has been the whole point of this book. From many different points of view, we've seen that the Bible very definitely maintains the line of teaching that says 'once saved, always saved.' Therefore, God's house – which Hebrews teaches is conditional – cannot be identified with the vast company of all those who've ever known salvation by God's grace through personal faith in Jesus Christ, and is in fact also to be distinguished even from all currently living believers – once again because of that stated condition.

All of this shows us that the defining issue for a place in God's house is not the possession of salvation, for although Hebrews tells us we can fall away from God's house, yet we can never be dispossessed of our salvation. There's no need whatsoever for us to hold fast to our salvation, for the Lord Jesus himself holds us fast, and assures us none can snatch us away from him. But, regarding what's called God's house, we evidently do need to hold fast, just as they did, to whom the author of Hebrews wrote some two thousand years ago.

All those who've ever at some point come to saving faith in Christ by this point in history include myriads of by now dead believers, but God's house at any time doesn't even include all true believers alive at that moment, for there is the condition applied: 'if we hold fast …'

The Hebrews' letter was written as its name implies, to early Jewish Christians – and the very first Christians were, of course, Jews. They'd left behind the ceremonial Law of Moses to embrace Jesus as the Messiah and follow the teaching of his apostles. By following the apostles' teaching they found themselves in the New Testament Churches of God. The Book of the Acts of the Apostles documents exactly how this

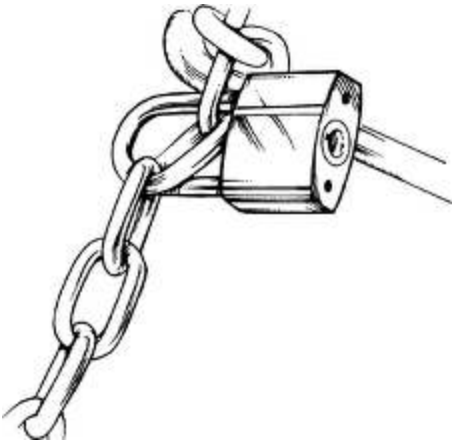
came about. The existence of these churches spread outwards from Jerusalem particularly as a result of the various missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul. Those who turned to the Lord in each place were subsequently numbered and identified with the church of God in that locality. Now, what's very significant is these local churches weren't just left to go their own way. They were linked by visits from the likes of Paul; they were addressed together in several of the Bible letters; they sent relief aid to one another as needs arose; and they were bound by a common adherence to the same understanding of the Lord's teaching – a point clearly demonstrated in the case of the Jerusalem Council of Acts chapter 15 (but see also 1 Corinthians 4:17; 7:17). In other words, they were an inter-linked community of disciples, maintained by the church elders in the different localities working in close fellowship with each other (1 Peter 1:1;5:1). There isn't the slightest evidence that some practised baptism while others didn't; no indication whatsoever that some churches had elders whereas others had a different form of government (Acts 14:22). They were united in belief and practice as a model community.

But just as in some parts of the world today, they were a persecuted community then. And some of them, by the time that the letter to the Hebrews came to be written, had come to feel life would be easier outside of this Messianic community, life would be simpler again if, as in the old days, they were just going along with the Law of Moses like the majority of folks around them, at least in Israel. To people just like that, to those who were wavering on the brink of leaving the community of churches of God, the writer of the Hebrews' letter makes his appeal by the Spirit of God: 'don't go back; don't fall away.' To quit their association with the practising Christian community would not mean the loss of their salvation, but – and this is the main point of the entire letter – they would miss out on everything that was special in serving God together in the biblical community of Churches of God: the very things the Old Testament had been pointing forward to! It would be a falling away in terms of their service – and from the privileges and responsibilities which attended it. In short, they'd lose their place in God's house – they wouldn't lose their salvation, remember – but they'd lose their place in God's house which was that clearly defined community of believers, described in the pages of the New Testament, where God lived by his Spirit, in a way that answered exactly to earlier

eras when the place where God lived on earth – his house – was known as Moses' Tabernacle or Solomon's Temple.

Let's sum it up again. As far as New Testament teaching is concerned, our service is to do with being in a local church of God; and our salvation is to do with being in the Church which is Christ's Body. From that last-mentioned Church we can never fall away - but we can fall away from local church of God fellowship (see 1 Corinthians 5:13). We've seen there are two distinct things namely Christ's Church and God's House which relate to our salvation and service respectively, and to fall away from God's house in service doesn't mean the loss of our salvation. There's a whole Bible-wide pattern of teaching in support of this which is given for our assurance.

10. Avoiding a contradiction in terms



As a final contribution to this book on the eternal security of our salvation in Christ, I'd like to ask a question. If the gift of life, once given, doesn't last forever then must we not say that it was never truly 'eternal life' in the first place – which would make it a contradiction in terms, wouldn't it? After all, the Bible in Romans 6:23 says:

The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

Having now viewed this matter of our secure status in Christ from as many angles as we have by now, I hope we've really come to be assured by the strength of the case against such a thing as falling away from salvation, as is taught by some. It's overwhelmingly the Bible's teaching that once saved from the penalty of our sins through believing in Christ, we are always saved.

Perhaps we should end our series by examining another couple of difficult verses like 1 John 3:15 and Hebrews 6:6. They're about the most common verses which trouble people on this issue. Before we tackle them, we've ensured that we've explored the New Testament's clear overall teaching on the relevant issue – that is, the security of our salvation. This was to follow our own counsel which was that we need to look at difficult verses in the light of easier, clearer ones – never vice versa. We need to understand things in the widest context possible. So now let's take the reading from John first:

By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we

should love one another; not as Cain, who was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. (1 John 3:10-16)

There are various wrong views about what these verses mean, for example: a true Christian cannot murder, or even hate, his brother; and no murderer can be saved. The first statement is simply not true to experience; and the latter is proved wrong by the dying thief who was crucified alongside Jesus. The best way to understand the meaning of the verse which says no murderer has eternal life abiding in him is to read it within the overall context of John's first letter. What was the apostle John's aim in writing it? It was to help believers on the Lord Jesus know they were indeed saved (see 1 John 5:13: that you may know that you have eternal life) – it wasn't about how to become a Christian. We've already seen works are not the basis of becoming a Christian. And John is talking here about works that we need to be doing – need to be doing if we wish to avoid doubting our salvation. We can't lose our salvation, but we can lose our confidence, our assurance of salvation. He gives us 3 ways whereby we can know that we're saved:

1. By maintaining our faith convictions (1 John 2:5)

2. By obeying God's Word & doing what's right (1 John 2:3,29; 3:7,10)

3. And, by loving others (1 John 3:10,14).

The last point refers to John's saying that by loving others we give evidence that we are Christians; and equally, that by hating others we give evidence which denies what we are because it's typically or characteristically non-Christian behaviour – behaviour which is incongruous for a believer. None of which means that Christians aren't capable of hating, nor are non-Christians incapable of loving. Not all followers of Christ obey God's Word and do what's right, by any means. But the point is this: if we are a Christian and wish to live with a level of assurance that we are, then that's what we should be doing: I mean loving our brothers and

doing what the Lord has commanded. If we hate our brother this will give us no reassurance at all that we're a Christian, for that was what typified the way of Cain, the way of the wicked. While someone is abiding in Christ, and Christ's words are abiding in them, that person will not be found hating their brothers. Therefore John is not saying that a believer who subsequently commits murder loses his or her salvation – for that was not his point at all. Remember, he's saying: act consistently with your salvation and your confidence will be maintained; act contrary to what it means to be a believer and you'll have no reassurance of salvation.

Now, I'd like us to have a look at Hebrews chapter six, where we find the expression 'to fall away.' But the key question is 'what from?' Let's refresh our memory of this difficult passage:

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned. (Hebrews 6:4-8)

I've written previously about the true meaning of 'falling away' in this context within the Hebrews' letter. However, since this matter of 'falling away' tends to cause so much confusion in the minds of sincere believers on the Lord Jesus, and since the letter to the Hebrews is often used to support a teaching it was never intended to give, I would like to refer you to a helpful treatment of this topic - one given by a previous contributor to Search For Truth radio programmes:

'And so we come in verses 4 to 8 of chapter 6 [of the letter to the Hebrews] to one of the solemn warning passages of Hebrews. We must be in no doubt that those seen here at great spiritual risk, are true believers, born again persons who have become the target of Satan's attack. For, we read, it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted ... the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for

themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. Clearly they were born again people, so what might they fall away from?

An illustration from nature follows, which provides an explanation. Sometimes, when rain falls on the earth, instead of yielding useful, nourishing plants, reflecting God's blessing, it brings forth thorns and briars, near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned (v.7,8). The words, 'whose end is to be burned' must have brought the readers of this letter up sharply. As with ourselves, it must have led them to ponder the meaning of such strong statements. We are dealing here with the horrifying possibility of believers openly and aggressively repudiating their faith and profession, so that they exclude themselves from the possibility of repentance. There is no prospect for them, but inevitable divine judgement. Is this the judgement of hell, as some might be inclined to assume, because of the analogy of the burning of the worthless thorns and briars? No! It is the burning of what the land produces, not of the land itself.

So the illustration helps us understand that’s what’s produced in a Christian's life that may be burned, his works, and not the believer himself. So the security of our salvation is not compromised here. We are safe in the Lord's keeping. We can also ask: do we have any other guidance in the New Testament which explains the fearful thought of destruction by burning? Yes, indeed, for in 1 Corinthians 3 we have a description of building for God in a believer's life, building on the foundation of Jesus Christ a life of service, the value of which may vary widely. Gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay and stubble are all mentioned. The descending order of value becomes steeper and steeper until we arrive at stubble in all its worthlessness. The analogy is with the life of a person whose service is described like this: if anyone's work is burned he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire (1 Corinthians 3:15). (Dr. J.D. Terrell).

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