

The Perseverance of the Saints (Remaining a Christian)

*Can true Christians lose their salvation?
How can we know if we are truly born again?*

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

Our previous discussion has dealt with many aspects of the full salvation that Christ has earned for us and that the Holy Spirit now applies to us. But how do we know that we shall continue to be Christians throughout our lives? Is there anything that will keep us from falling away from Christ, anything to guarantee that we will remain Christians until we die and that we will in fact live with God in heaven forever? Or might it be that we will turn away from Christ and lose the blessings of our salvation? The topic of the perseverance of the saints speaks to these questions. *The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God's power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again.*

This definition has two parts to it. It indicates first that there is assurance to be given to those who are truly born again, for it reminds them that God's power will keep them as Christians until they die, and they will surely live with Christ in heaven forever. On the other hand, the second half of the definition makes it clear that continuing in the Christian life is one of the evidences that a person is truly born again. It is important to keep this aspect of the doctrine in mind as well, lest false assurance be given to people who were never really believers in the first place.

It should be noted that this question is one on which evangelical Christians have long had significant disagreement. Many within the Wesleyan/Arminian tradition have held that it is possible for someone who is truly born again to lose his or her salvation, while Reformed Christians have held that that is not possible for someone who is *truly* born again.

1. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is represented by "P" in the acronym TULIP, which is often used

to summarize the "five points of Calvinism." (See full list at p. 828n12.)

Most Baptists have followed the Reformed tradition at this point; however, they have frequently used the term *eternal security* or *eternal security of the believer* rather than *perseverance of the saints*.

A. ALL WHO ARE TRULY BORN AGAIN WILL PERSEVERE TO THE END

There are many passages that teach that those who are truly born again, who are genuinely Christians, will continue in the Christian life until death and will then go to be with Christ in heaven. Jesus says,

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. (John 6:38–40)

Here Jesus says that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. He says that he will raise that person up at the last day—which, in this context of believing in the Son and having eternal life, clearly means that Jesus will raise that person up to eternal life with him (not just raise him up to be judged and condemned). It seems hard to avoid the conclusion that everyone who truly believes in Christ will remain a Christian up to the day of final resurrection into the blessings of life in the presence of God.² Moreover, this text emphasizes that Jesus does the will of the Father, which is that he should "*lose nothing of all that he has given me*" (John 6:39). Once again, those given to the Son by the Father will not be lost.

Another passage emphasizing this truth is John 10:27–29, in which Jesus says:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, 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.

2. Grant R. Osborne, "Exegetical Notes on Calvinist Texts," in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975), 170–71, does not give an alternative explanation for Jesus' statement, "I will raise him up at the last day," when he deals with this passage. But he does say that in this context v. 35 emphasizes the fact that eternal life is dependent on the individual person "coming and believing" in Christ (p. 171) and that the present tense verbs used for "believe" in these passages imply not merely an initial decision of faith but rather continuing in that state.

I regret having to differ with my friend and colleague on this question, but there is something to be said in response: while no one would deny that it is necessary for people

themselves to believe in Christ for eternal life, and while it is also true that Jesus here speaks not just of initial saving faith but of a faith that continues over time, the verse does not go so far as to specify that "everyone who believes continuously *until his or her death* will have eternal life," but rather simply says that "he who is *presently in a state of believing* in Christ" will have eternal life and Jesus will raise him up at the last day. The verse speaks about all who presently are in a state of believing in Christ, and it says that all of them will be raised up by Christ at the last day. No further objections to this specific verse are given in Osborne's second essay, "Soteriology in the Gospel of John," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 248.

Here Jesus says that those who follow him, those who are his sheep, are given eternal life. He further says that “no one will snatch them out of my hand” (v. 28). Now some have objected to this that even though no one else can take Christians out of Christ’s hand, we might remove ourselves from Christ’s hand. But that seems to be pedantic quibbling over words—does not “no one” also include the person who is in Christ’s hand? Moreover, we know that our hearts are far from trustworthy. Therefore, if the possibility remained that we could remove ourselves from Christ’s hand, the passage would hardly give the assurance that Jesus intends by it.

But more importantly, the most forceful phrase in the passage is “*they will never perish*” (v. 28). The Greek construction (*ou mē* plus aorist subjunctive) is especially emphatic and might be translated more explicitly, “and they shall certainly not perish forever.” This emphasizes that those who are Jesus’ “sheep” and who follow him, and to whom he has given eternal life, shall never lose their salvation or be separated from Christ—they shall “never perish.”³

There are several other passages that say those who believe have “eternal life.” One example is John 3:36: “Whoever believes in the Son *has eternal life*” (cf. also John 5:24; 6:47; 10:28; 1 John 5:13). Now if this is truly eternal life that believers have, then it is life that lasts forever with God. It is a gift of God that comes with salvation (it is put in contrast to condemnation and eternal judgment in John 3:16–17, 36; 10:28). Arminians have objected that “eternal life” is simply a quality of life, a type of life in relationship with God, which one can have for a time and then lose. But this objection does not seem to be convincing in view of the clear nuance of unending time involved in the adjective *eternal* (Gk. *aiōnios*, “eternal, without end”).⁴ Certainly there is a special quality about this life, but the emphasis in the adjective *eternal* is on the fact that it is the opposite of death; it is the opposite of judgment and separation from God; it is life that goes on forever in the presence of God. And he who believes in the Son has this “*eternal life*” (John 3:36).

Evidence in Paul’s writings and the other New Testament Epistles also indicates that those who are truly born again will persevere to the end. There remains “no

3. The Greek word used here for “perish” is *apollymi*, the same term John uses in John 3:16 to say that “whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Grant Osborne, in “Exegetical Notes on Calvinist Texts,” 172, says that this verse must not be interpreted apart from the teaching about the vine and the branches in John 15:1–7, but he gives no alternative explanation for the phrase “they shall never perish,” and gives no reason why we should fail to understand it to mean that these people will certainly have life with God forever in heaven. In his subsequent article, “Soteriology in the Gospel of John,” Osborne again mentions John 10:28, but gives no alternative explanation for it other than to say that this passage emphasizes God’s sovereignty, but other passages in John emphasize the faith-response that works together with God’s sovereignty.

These articles do not seem to provide a reason why we should not understand these words in an ordinary sense, indicating that one who believes in Christ will certainly never fall away.

Of course, those who believe in the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints (such as myself) would affirm that the way God keeps us safe is by causing us to continue to believe in Christ (see discussion below), so to say that Scripture also emphasizes the necessity of continuing in faith is not to object to the doctrine of perseverance of the saints as it has been expressed by Reformed theologians frequently in the history of the church. In other words, there is a way to believe in both sets of texts without concluding that people who are truly born again can lose their salvation.

4. BAGD, 28.

condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1); therefore, it would be unjust for God to give any kind of eternal punishment to those who are Christians—no condemnation remains for them, for the entire penalty for their sins has been paid.

Then in Romans 8:30, Paul emphasizes the clear connection between God’s eternal purposes in predestination and his working out of those purposes in life, together with his final realization of those purposes in “glorifying” or giving final resurrection bodies to those whom he has brought into union with Christ: “Those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” Here Paul sees the future event of glorification as such a certainty in God’s settled purpose that he can speak of it as if it were already accomplished (“he also glorified”). This is true of all those who are called and justified—that is, all those who truly become Christians.

Further evidence that God keeps those who are born again safe for eternity is the “seal” that God places upon us. This “seal” is the Holy Spirit within us, who also acts as God’s “guarantee” that we will receive the inheritance promised to us: “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:13–14). The Greek word translated “guarantee” in this passage (*arrabōn*) is a legal and commercial term that means “first installment, deposit, down payment, pledge” and represents “a payment which obligates the contracting party to make further payments.”⁵ When God gave us the Holy Spirit within, he committed himself to give all the further blessings of eternal life and a great reward in heaven with him. This is why Paul can say that the Holy Spirit is the “guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it” (Eph. 1:14). All who have the Holy Spirit within them, all who are truly born again, have God’s unchanging promise and guarantee that the inheritance of eternal life in heaven will certainly be theirs. God’s own faithfulness is pledged to bring it about.⁶

Another example of assurance that believers will persevere to the end is found in Paul’s statement to the Philippians: “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). It is true that

5. *Ibid.*, 109.

6. Osborne, “Exegetical Notes on Calvinist Texts,” 181, answers this verse by saying that Paul also teaches personal responsibility, since “the Christian is warned not to ‘grieve’ the Spirit (cf. 1 Thess. 4:8)” and “the danger of apostasy is real, and he dare not ‘grieve’ the Spirit.” But once again this objection provides no alternative interpretation to the verse at hand, but simply refers to other verses that teach personal responsibility, a fact that a Reformed theologian would also be eager to affirm.

Arminian theologians frequently assume that if they affirm human responsibility and the need for continuing in faith, they have thereby negated the idea that God’s sovereign keeping and

protection is absolutely certain and eternal life is guaranteed. But they often do this without providing any other convincing interpretations for the texts cited to demonstrate the doctrine of perseverance of the saints, or any explanation that would show why we should not take these words as absolute guarantees that those who are born again will certainly persevere to the end. Rather than assuming that passages on human responsibility negate the idea of God’s sovereign protection, it seems better to adopt the Reformed position that says that God’s sovereign protection is consistent with human responsibility, because it works through human responsibility and guarantees that we will respond by maintaining the faith that is necessary to persevere.

the word *you* here is plural (Gk. *hymas*), and thus Paul is referring to Christians in the Philippian church generally, but he is still talking about the specific believers to whom he is writing and saying that God's good work that began in them will continue and will be completed at the day Christ returns.⁷ Peter tells his readers that they are those "who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5). The word *guarded* (Gk. *phroureō*) can mean both "kept from escaping" and "protected from attack," and perhaps both kinds of guarding are intended here: God is preserving believers from escaping out of his kingdom, and he is protecting them from external attacks.

The present participle that Peter uses gives the sense "You are continually being guarded."⁸ He stresses that this is by God's power. Yet God's power does not work apart from the personal faith of those being guarded, but through their faith. ("Faith," *pistis*, is regularly a personal activity of individual believers in Peter's epistles; see 1 Peter 1:7, 9, 21; 5:9; 2 Peter 1:1, 5; and commonly in the New Testament.) The parallel examples of God working "through" someone or something in Peter's writings (1 Peter 1:3, 23; 2 Peter 1:4; and probably also 1 Peter 1:12; 2:14; 3:1) suggest that the believer's personal faith or trust in God is the means God uses to guard his people. Thus we might give the sense of the verse by saying that "God is continually using his power to guard his people by means of their faith," a statement that seems to imply that God's power in fact energizes and continually sustains individual, personal faith.⁹

This guarding is not for a temporary goal but for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. *Salvation* is used here not of past justification or of present sanctification (speaking in theological categories) but of the future full possession of all the blessings of our redemption—of the final, complete fulfillment of our salvation (cf. Rom. 13:11; 1 Peter 2:2). Though already prepared or "ready," it will not be "revealed" by God to mankind generally until the "last time," the time of final judgment.

This last phrase makes it difficult if not impossible to see any end to God's guarding activity. If God's guarding has as its purpose the preservation of believers until they receive their full, heavenly salvation, then it is safe to conclude that God will accomplish that purpose, and they will in fact attain that final salvation. Ultimately their attainment of final salvation depends on God's power. Nevertheless, God's power continually works "through" their faith. Do they wish to know whether God is guarding them?

7. Osborne rightly rejects the idea that this refers only to the fact that the church will continue. He says, "Paul does intend that the promise extend to the individual. He will be kept by God with a view to the final salvation, but this does not obviate the need for perseverance" ("Exegetical Notes on Calvinist Texts," 182).

8. The following three paragraphs are taken from Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 58–59.

9. The translation by J. N. D. Kelly, "as a result of . . . faith," is an extremely unlikely rendering of the very common construction *dia* with the genitive (the few examples of this construction meaning "as a result of," which are suggested in BAGD, 180, IV, are all ambiguous, and Kelly himself gives no examples; see J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, Black's New Testament Commentaries [London: Black, 1969], 52).

If they continue to trust God through Christ, God is working and guarding them, and he should be thanked.

This emphasis on God's guarding in combination with our faith provides a natural transition to the second half of the doctrine of perseverance.

B. ONLY THOSE WHO PERSEVERE TO THE END HAVE BEEN TRULY BORN AGAIN

While Scripture repeatedly emphasizes that those who are truly born again will persevere to the end and will certainly have eternal life in heaven with God, there are other passages that speak of the necessity of continuing in faith throughout life. They make us realize that what Peter said in 1 Peter 1:5 is true, namely, that God does not guard us *apart from* our faith but only by working *through* our faith so that he enables us to continue to believe in him. In this way, those who continue to trust in Christ gain assurance that God is working in them and guarding them.

One example of this kind of passage is John 8:31–32: "Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'" Jesus is here giving a warning that one evidence of genuine faith is continuing in his word, that is, continuing to believe what he says and living a life of obedience to his commands. Similarly, Jesus says, "The one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matt. 10:22), as a means of warning people not to fall away in times of persecution.

Paul says to the Colossian Christians that Christ has reconciled them to God, "in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, *if indeed you continue in the faith*, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard" (Col. 1:22–23). It is only natural that Paul and the other New Testament writers would speak this way, for they are addressing groups of people who profess to be Christians, without being able to know the actual state of every person's heart. There may have been people at Colossae who had joined in the fellowship of the church, and perhaps even professed that they had faith in Christ and had been baptized into membership of the church, but who never had true saving faith. How is Paul to distinguish such people from true believers? How can he avoid giving them false assurance, assurance that they will be saved eternally when in fact they will not, unless they come to true repentance and faith? Paul knows that those whose faith is not real will eventually fall away from participation in the fellowship of the church. Therefore, he tells his readers that they will ultimately be saved "*if indeed you continue in the faith*" (Col. 1:23). Those who continue show thereby that they are genuine believers. But those who do not continue in the faith show that there was no genuine faith in their hearts in the first place.

A similar emphasis is seen in Hebrews 3:14: "For we have come to share in Christ, *if indeed* we hold our original confidence firm to the end." This verse provides an excellent perspective on the doctrine of perseverance. How do we know if "we have come to share in Christ"? How do we know if this being joined to Christ has happened to us at some

time in the past?¹⁰ One way in which we know that we have come to genuine faith in Christ is if we continue in faith until the end of our lives.

Attention to the context of Hebrews 3:14 will keep us from using this and other similar passages in a pastorally inappropriate way. We must remember that there are other evidences elsewhere in Scripture that give Christians assurance of salvation,¹¹ so we should not think that assurance that we belong to Christ is impossible until we die. However, continuing in faith is the one means of assurance that is named here by the author of Hebrews. He mentions this to warn his readers that they should not fall away from Christ because he is writing to a situation where such a warning is needed. The beginning of that section, just two verses earlier, said, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God" (Heb. 3:12). In fact, in all of the passages where continuing to believe in Christ to the end of our lives is mentioned as one indication of genuine faith, the purpose is never to make those who are presently trusting in Christ worry that sometime in the future they might fall away (and we should never use these passages that way either, for that would be to give wrongful cause for worry in a way that Scripture does not intend). Rather, the purpose is always to warn those who are thinking of falling away or have fallen away that if they do this it is a strong indication that they were never saved in the first place. Thus the necessity for continuing in faith should just be used as a warning against falling away, a warning that those who fall away give evidence that their faith was never real.

John clearly states that when people fall away from fellowship with the church and from belief in Christ they thereby show that their faith was not real in the first place and that they were never part of the true body of Christ. Speaking of people who have left the fellowship of believers, John says, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). John says that those who have departed showed by their actions that they "were not of us"—that they were not truly born again.

C. THOSE WHO FINALLY FALL AWAY MAY GIVE MANY EXTERNAL SIGNS OF CONVERSION

1. Some Who Regularly Associate with the Church Are Not True Believers

It is not always clear which people in the church have genuine saving faith and which have only an intellectual persuasion of the truth of the gospel but no genuine faith in their hearts. Scripture mentions in several places that *unbelievers* in fellowship with the visible church can give some external signs or indications that make them look or sound like genuine believers. For example, Judas, who betrayed Christ, must have acted almost

10. The author uses the perfect tense verb *gegonamen*, "we have become" (at some time in the past, with results that continue into the present).

11. See the list of evidences of salvation given in section D, pp. 986–93, below.

exactly like the other disciples during the three years he was with Jesus. So convincing was his conformity to the behavior pattern of the other disciples, that at the end of three years of Jesus' ministry, when he said that one of his disciples would betray him, they did not all turn and suspect Judas, but they rather "began to say to him one after another, 'Is it I?'" (Matt. 26:22; cf. Mark 14:19; Luke 22:23; John 13:22). However, Jesus himself knew that there was no genuine faith in Judas' heart because Jesus said at one point, "Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil" (John 6:70). John later wrote in his gospel that "Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him" (John 6:64). But the disciples themselves did not know.

Paul also speaks of "*false brothers* secretly brought in" (Gal. 2:4) and says that in his journeys he has been in "danger from *false brothers*" (2 Cor. 11:26). He also says that the servants of Satan "*disguise themselves* as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:15). This does not mean that all unbelievers in the church who nevertheless give some signs of true conversion are servants of Satan secretly undermining the work of the church, for some may be in process of considering the claims of the gospel and moving toward real faith, others may have heard only an inadequate explanation of the gospel message, and others may not have come under genuine conviction of the Holy Spirit yet. But Paul's statements do mean that some unbelievers in the church will be false brothers and sisters sent to disrupt the fellowship, while others will simply be unbelievers who will eventually come to genuine saving faith. In both cases, however, they give several external signs that make them look like genuine believers.

We can see this also in Jesus' statement about what will happen at the last judgment:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." (Matt. 7:21–23)

Although these people prophesied, cast out demons, and did "many mighty works" in Jesus' name, the ability to do such works did not guarantee that they were Christians. Jesus says, "I never knew you." He does not say, "I knew you at one time but I no longer know you," nor "I knew you at one time but you strayed away from me," but rather, "I never knew you." They never were genuine believers.

A similar teaching is found in the parable of the sower. Jesus says, "Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away" (Mark 4:5–6). Jesus explains that the seed sown upon rocky ground represents people who "when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And

they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away" (Mark 4:16-17). The fact that they "have no root in themselves" indicates that there is no source of life within these plants; similarly, the people represented by them have no genuine life of their own within. They have an appearance of conversion, and they apparently have become Christians because they receive the word "with joy," but when difficulty comes, they are nowhere to be found—their apparent conversion was not genuine and there was no real saving faith in their hearts.

2. John 15:1-7: The Vine and the Branches

The importance of continuing in faith is also affirmed in the parable of Jesus as the vine, in which Christians are portrayed as branches (John 15:1-7). Jesus says,

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. . . . If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. (John 15:1-2, 6)

Arminians have argued that the branches that do not bear fruit are still true branches on the vine—Jesus refers to "Every branch *in me* that does not bear fruit" (v. 2). Therefore, the branches that are gathered and thrown into the fire and burned must refer to true believers that were once part of the vine but fell away and became subject to eternal judgment. But that is not a necessary implication of Jesus' teaching at this point. The imagery of the vine used in this parable is limited in how much detail it can teach. In fact, if Jesus had wanted to teach that there were true and false believers associated with him, and if he wanted to use the analogy of a vine and branches, then the only way he could refer to people who do not have genuine life in themselves would be to speak of branches that bear no fruit (somewhat after the analogy of the seeds that fell on rocky ground and had "no root in themselves" in Mark 4:17). Here in John 15 the branches that do not bear fruit, though they are in some way connected to Jesus and give an outward appearance of being genuine branches, nonetheless give indication of their true state by the fact that they bear no fruit. This is similarly indicated by the fact that the person "does not abide" in Christ (John 15:6) and is cast off as a branch and withers. If we try to press the analogy any further, by saying, for example, that all branches on a vine really are alive or they would not be there in the first place, then we are simply trying to press the imagery beyond what it is able to teach—and in that case there would be nothing in the analogy that could represent false believers in any case. The point of the imagery is simply that those who bear fruit thereby give evidence that they are abiding in Christ; those who do not, are not abiding in him.

3. Hebrews 6:4-8: People Whose Lives Produce Only "Thorns and Thistles"

Finally, there are two passages in Hebrews that also affirm that those who finally fall away may give many external signs of conversion and may look in many ways like Christians. The first of these, Hebrews 6:4-6, has frequently been used by Arminians as proof that believers can lose their salvation. But on closer inspection such an interpretation is not convincing. The author writes,

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been *enlightened*, who have *tasted* the heavenly gift, and have *shared* in the Holy Spirit, and have *tasted* the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to *repentance*, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. (Heb. 6:4-6)

If we are going to understand this passage correctly, it is absolutely crucial that we give close attention to the context, especially the following three verses (Heb. 6:7-9). First, the author gives an example from agriculture:

For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. (Heb. 6:7-8)

In this agricultural metaphor, those who receive final judgment are compared to land that bears no vegetation or useful fruit but rather bears thorns and thistles. When we recall the other metaphors in Scripture where good fruit is a sign of true spiritual life and fruitlessness is a sign of false believers (for example, Matt. 3:8-10; 7:15-20; 12:33-35), we already have an indication that the author is speaking of people whose most trustworthy evidence of their spiritual condition (the fruit they bear) is negative ("thorns and thistles," v. 8), which would indicate that the author is talking about people who are not genuinely Christians.

This metaphor bluntly indicates that those who fall away are like the crop that is brought forth on land that has no worthwhile life growing on it, even though rain "often falls on it" (such land is like a life that receives repeated blessings from God but bears no good fruit). We should notice here that people who commit apostasy are not compared to a field that once bore good fruit and now does not, but that they are like *land that never bore good fruit*, but only thorns and thistles. The land may look good before the crops start to come up, but the fruit gives the genuine evidence, and it is bad.

Then, strong support for this interpretation of Hebrews 6:4-8 is found in verse 9, which is the verse immediately following. Though the author has been speaking harshly about the possibility of falling away, he then returns to speak to the situation of the great

majority of the hearers, whom he thinks to be genuine Christians. He says, "Though we speak in this way, *yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation*" (Heb. 6:9). The question is, "better things" than what? The plural "better things" forms an appropriate contrast to the *good* things that have been mentioned in verses 4–6: the author is convinced that most of his readers have experienced better things than simply the partial and temporary influences of the Holy Spirit and the church talked about in verses 4–6.

In fact, the author talks about these things by saying (literally) that they are "better things, *also belonging to salvation*" (Gk. *kai echomena sōtērias*).¹² These are not only the temporary blessings talked about in verses 4–6, but these are better things, things having not only temporary influence, but "also belonging to salvation." In this way the Greek word *kai* ("also") shows that *salvation is something that was not part of the things mentioned in verses 4–6 above*. Therefore, this word *kai* provides a crucial key for understanding the passage. If the author had meant to say that the people mentioned in verses 4–6 were truly saved, then it is very difficult to understand why he would say in verse 9 that he is convinced of *better things* for them, things that belong to salvation, or that have salvation *in addition to* those things mentioned above. He thus shows that he can use a brief phrase to say that people "have salvation" if he wishes to do so (he does not need to pile up many phrases), and he shows, moreover, that the people whom he speaks of in verses 4–6 are not saved.¹³

What exactly are these "better things"? In addition to salvation mentioned in verse 9, they are things that give real evidence of salvation—genuine fruit in their lives (v. 10), full assurance of hope (v. 11), and saving faith of the type exhibited by those who inherit the promises (v. 12). In this way he reassures those who are genuine believers—those who show fruit in their lives and show love for other Christians, who show hope and genuine faith that is continuing at the present time, and who are not about to fall away. He wants to reassure these readers (who are certainly the great majority of the ones to whom he writes) while still issuing a strong warning to those among them who may be in danger of falling away.

After this examination of the immediate context, we are better able to understand the experiences described in verses 4–6. Some have objected that the long description of things that have happened to these people who fall away means that they must have

12. *BDAG*, 422, meaning 11, translates the middle participle of *echō* as "hold fast, cling to," and lists Heb. 6:9 as the only New Testament example of this form used "of inner belonging," and thus the ESV rendering says, "things that *belong to* salvation." But even if we translated the middle voice of *echō* in the same way as the active, the phrase would mean, "things also *having* salvation," and my argument in this section would not be affected.

13. Someone might object that the phrase "better things" does not contrast with the temporary blessings in vv. 4–6, but

with the judgment mentioned that is coming to the thorns and thistles who are about to be "burned" in v. 8. But it is unlikely that the author would refer to not being cursed simply as "better things." The comparative "better" (*kreissonkreisson*) is used thirteen times in Hebrews, and it regularly contrasts something *better* with something *good* (better covenant, better sacrifice, etc.); similarly, here it suggests a comparison with things that are already good (such as the blessings in vv. 4–6), much more than it suggests a contrast with the horrible fate of eternal judgment in v. 8.

been genuinely born again. But that is not a convincing objection when we look at the individual terms used. The author says they have "once been *enlightened*" (Heb. 6:4). But this enlightening simply means that they came to *understand* the truths of the gospel, not that they responded to those truths with genuine saving faith.¹⁴

Similarly, the word *once* that is used to speak of those who "have once been enlightened" is the Greek term *hapax*, which is used, for example, in Philippians 4:16 of the Philippians' sending Paul a gift "once and again" and in Hebrews 9:7 of entrance in the Holy of Holies "once a year." Therefore, this word does not mean that something happened "once" and can never be repeated, but simply that it happened once, without specifying whether it will be repeated or not.¹⁵

The text further says that these people "have *tasted* the heavenly gift" and that they "have *tasted* the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6:4–5). Inherent in the idea of tasting is the fact that the tasting is temporary and one might or might not decide to accept the thing that is tasted. For example, the same Greek word (*geuomai*) is used in Matthew 27:34 to say that those crucifying Jesus "offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he *tasted* it, he would not drink it." The word is also used in a figurative sense meaning "come to know something."¹⁶ If we understand it in this figurative sense, as it must be understood here since the passage is not talking about tasting literal food, then it means that these people have come to understand the heavenly gift (which probably means here that they had experienced some of the power of the Holy Spirit at work, perhaps when Christian friends had prayed for them about specific needs) and to know something of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come. It does not necessarily mean that they had (or did not have) genuine saving faith but may simply mean that they came to understand it and have some experience of spiritual power.¹⁷

14. The word *enlightened* translates the Greek term *phōtizō*, which refers to learning in general, not necessarily a learning that results in salvation—it is used in John 1:9 of "giving light to" everyone that comes into the world, in 1 Cor. 4:5 of the enlightening that comes at the final judgment, and in Eph. 1:18 of the enlightening that accompanies growth in the Christian life. The word is not a "technical term" that means that the people in question were saved.

After completing the following discussion of Hebrews 6:4–6, I wrote a much more extensive study, with additional analysis, supporting data, and interaction with other literature; see Wayne Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study From Heb. 6:4–6 and the Other Warning Passages of Hebrews," in *Still Sovereign*, ed. Tom Schreiner and Bruce Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

15. This is not the same word as *ephapax*, which is more regularly used in the New Testament of nonrepeatable events (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10).

16. *BAGD*, 157. They mention other examples of *geuomai* ("taste"), such as Herodotus 6.5, where the people of Miletus had "tasted of freedom," but it was certainly not their own

possession. They also cite Dio Chrysostom, 32.72, where he speaks of the people of Alexandria in a time when they "had a taste of warfare" in an encounter with Roman troops who were simply harassing them and not actually engaging in genuine war. Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 2.158, speaks about the theological views of the Essenes "whereby they irresistibly attract all who have once *tasted* their philosophy." Here again Josephus makes it clear that those who have "once tasted" have not yet made the Essene philosophy their own but are simply very strongly attracted to it. By analogy, in Heb. 6 those who have "tasted" the heavenly gift and the word of God and the powers of the age to come may be strongly attracted to these things, or they may not be, but mere tasting does not mean that they have made it their own—quite the contrary, if all the author can say of them is that they have "tasted" these things, it suggests that they have not fully participated in what they tasted.

17. The word *tasted* is also used in Heb. 2:9 to say that Jesus "tasted death," indicating that he came to know it by experience (but "tasted" is an apt word because he did not remain dead). The same could be true of those who had some experience of heavenly gifts, as can be true even of unbelievers (cf. Matt. 7:22;

The text also further says that these people “have *shared in* the Holy Spirit” (Heb. 6:4). The question here is the exact meaning of the word *metochos*, which is here translated “shared in.” It is not always clear to English-speaking readers that this term has a range of meaning and may imply very close participation and attachment or may only imply a loose association with the other person or persons named. For example, the context shows that in Hebrews 3:14 to “share in” Christ means to have a very close participation with him in a saving relationship.¹⁸ On the other hand, *metochos* can also be used in a much looser sense, simply to refer to associates or companions. We read that when the disciples took in a great catch of fish so that their nets were breaking, “they signaled to their *partners* in the other boat to come and help them” (Luke 5:7). Here it simply refers to those who were companions or partners with Peter and the other disciples in their fishing work.¹⁹ Ephesians 5:7 uses a closely related word (*symmetochos*, a compound of *metochos* and the preposition *syn* [“with”]) when Paul warns Christians about the sinful acts of unbelievers and says, “Do not become *partners* with them” (Eph. 5:7). He is not concerned that their total nature will be transformed by the unbelievers but simply that they will associate with them and have their own witness compromised and their own lives influenced to some degree by them.

By analogy, Hebrews 6:4–6 speaks of people who have been “*associated with*” the Holy Spirit and thereby had their lives influenced by him, but it need not imply that they had a redeeming work of the Holy Spirit in their lives or that they were regenerated. By similar analogy with the example of the fishing companions in Luke 5:7, Peter and the disciples could be *associated with* them and even to some degree influenced by them without having a thoroughgoing change of life caused by that association. The very word *metochos* allows for a range of influence from fairly weak to fairly strong, for it only means “one who participates with or shares with or accompanies in some activity.” This was apparently what had happened to these people spoken of in Hebrews 6, who had been associated with the church and as such associated with the work of the Holy Spirit, and no doubt had been influenced by him in some ways in their lives.²⁰

1 Cor. 7:14; 2 Peter 2:20–22). In Heb. 6:4–5 these people’s experience of the Holy Spirit’s power and of the Word of God was of course a *genuine experience* (just as Jesus *genuinely* died), but that by itself does not show that the people had an experience of regeneration.

18. The same Greek word *metochos* is used in Heb. 3:14, even though the English text of the ESV says “We have come to share in Christ.”

19. Heb. 1:9 also uses the same word to speak of “companions” (ESV, NIV, NASB).

20. The other uses of *metochos* in Hebrews (3:1 and 12:8) do suggest closer association or participation, but the small number of examples are not numerous enough to show that the author of Hebrews used this word as a “technical term” that always referred to a saving kind of participation (it did not in

Heb. 1:9 and 12:8). The wide range of meaning *metochos* can take is evident from the Greek literature of the New Testament and in other literature that shares a similar vocabulary with the writers of the New Testament.

The usage of the Septuagint is also instructive with respect to this word, since in several instances it only refers to companionship, not any kind of regenerating or life-changing experience with God or with the Holy Spirit. For instance, in 1 Sam. 20:30, Saul accuses Jonathan of being a “partner” with David. In Ps. 119:63, the psalmist says he is a “companion” of all those who fear God. Eccl. 4:10 says that two are better than one, for if they fall, the one will lift up his “partner.” Prov. 28:24, in the translations of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotian, uses this word to say that a man who rejects his father or mother is a “companion” of ungodly men. Examples of somewhat stronger

Finally, the text says that it is impossible “to restore again to *repentance*” those who have experienced these things and have then fallen away. Some have argued that if this is a repentance to which they need to be restored again, then it must be genuine repentance. But this is not necessarily the case. First, we must realize that *repentance* (Gk. *metanoia*) does not need to refer to inward heart repentance unto salvation. For example, Hebrews 12:17 uses this word to speak of a change of mind that Esau sought concerning the sale of his birthright and refers to it as repentance (*metanoia*). This would not have been a repentance for salvation, but simply a change of mind and an undoing of the transaction regarding his birthright. (Note also the example of Judas’ repentance in Matt. 27:3—howbeit with a different Greek word.)

The cognate verb *to repent* (Gk. *metanoēō*) is sometimes used to refer not to saving repentance but to sorrow for individual offenses in Luke 17:3–4: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and *if he repents*, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.” We conclude that *repentance* simply means a sorrow for actions that have been done or for sins that have been committed. Whether or not it is a genuine saving repentance, a “repentance unto salvation,” may not be always evident right away. The author of Hebrews is not concerned to specify whether it is a genuine repentance or not. He is simply saying that if someone has a sorrow for sin and comes to understand the gospel and experiences these various blessings of the Holy Spirit’s work (no doubt in fellowship with the church) and then turns away, it will not be possible to restore such a person again to a place of sorrow for sin. But this does not necessarily imply that the repentance was genuine saving repentance in the first place.

At this point we may ask what kind of person is described by all of these terms. These are no doubt people who have been affiliated closely with the fellowship of the church. They have had some measure of sorrow for sin (repentance). They have understood the gospel (they have been enlightened). They have come to appreciate the attractiveness of the Christian life and the change that comes about in people’s lives because of becoming a Christian, and they have probably had answers to prayer in their own lives and felt the power of the Holy Spirit at work, perhaps even using some spiritual gifts in the manner of the unbelievers in Matthew 7:22 (they have become “associated with” the work of the Holy Spirit or have “shared in” the Holy Spirit and have “tasted” the heavenly gift and the powers of the age of come). They have been exposed to the true preaching of the

association are seen in Esth. 8:13; Prov. 29:10; Hos. 4:17; 3 Macc. 3:21. The conclusion of this examination of the term *metochos* is that, while it can be used of very close association with saving results in a person’s life, it can also be used simply of associating or participating with someone else. Therefore the term itself does not require that the people in Heb. 6:4–6 had saving participation with the Holy Spirit or had been

regenerated. It simply means they had in some ways been associated with and *influenced by the Holy Spirit*.

The people who prophesied and cast out demons and did many mighty works in Jesus’ name in Matt. 7:22 are good examples of people who in some way had “shared in” the work of the Holy Spirit but had not been saved: Jesus says, “I never knew you” (Matt. 7:23).

Word and have appreciated much of its teachings (they have "tasted" the goodness of the Word of God).

But then in spite of all this, if they "fall away" and are "crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt" (Heb. 6:6), then *they are willfully rejecting all of these blessings* and turning decidedly against them. Perhaps all of us have known in our churches people who (sometimes by their profession) have long been affiliated with the fellowship of the church but are not themselves born-again Christians. They have thought about the gospel for years and have continued to resist the wooing of the Holy Spirit in their lives, perhaps through an unwillingness to give up lordship of their lives to Jesus and preferring to cling to it themselves.

Now the author tells us that *if these people willfully turn away from all of these temporary blessings*, then it will be impossible to restore them again to any kind of repentance or sorrow for sin. Their hearts will be hardened and their consciences calloused. What more could be done to bring them to salvation? If we tell them Scripture is true, they will say that they know it but they have decided to reject it. If we tell them God answers prayer and changes lives, they will respond that they know that as well, but they want nothing of it. If we tell them that the Holy Spirit is powerful to work in people's lives and that the gift of eternal life is good beyond description, they will say that they understand that but want nothing of it. Their repeated familiarity with the things of God and their experience of many influences of the Holy Spirit has simply served to harden them against conversion.

Now the author of Hebrews knows that there are some in the community to which he writes who are in danger of falling away in just this way (see Heb. 2:3; 3:8, 12, 14–15; 4:1, 7, 11; 10:26, 29, 35–36, 38–39; 12:3, 15–17). He wants to warn them that, though they have *participated in the fellowship of the church and experienced a number of God's blessings* in their lives, yet if they fall away after all that, there is no salvation for them. This does not imply that he thinks that true Christians could fall away—Hebrews 3:14 implies quite the opposite. But he wants them to gain assurance of salvation through their continuing in faith and thereby implies that if they fall away it would show that they were never Christ's people in the first place (see Heb. 3:6: "We are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope").

Therefore the author wants to give a severe warning to those in danger of slipping away from their Christian profession. He wants to use the strongest language possible to say, "Here is how far a person can come in experiencing *temporary blessings* and still not really be saved." He is warning them to watch out because depending on temporary blessings and experiences is not enough. To do this, he talks not of any true change of heart or any good fruit produced but about the temporary blessings and experiences that have come to these persons and have given them some understanding of Christianity. But their lives had produced only thorns and thistles, and no spiritually good fruit.

4. Hebrews 10:26–31: People Who Deliberately Keep on Sinning

A similar teaching is found in Hebrews 10:26–31. There the author says, "If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins" (Heb. 10:26). Also, a person who rejects Christ's salvation and "has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace" (Heb. 10:29) deserves eternal punishment. This again is a strong warning against falling away, but it should not be taken as proof that someone who has truly been born again can lose his or her salvation. When the author talks about the blood of the covenant "that sanctified him," the word *sanctified* is used simply to refer to "external sanctification, like that of the ancient Israelites, by outward connection with God's people."²¹ The passage does not talk about someone who is genuinely saved, but someone who has received some beneficial moral influence through contact with the church.²²

5. Revelation 3:5: Names in the Book of Life

One other passage in John's writings has been claimed to teach the possibility of loss of salvation. In Revelation 3:5, Jesus says, "The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and *I will never blot his name out of the book of life.*" Some have claimed that when Jesus says this he implies that it is possible that he would blot out the names of some people from the book of life, people who had already had their names written in it and were thus already saved. But the fact that Jesus emphatically states that he will *not* do something should not be taken as teaching that he will do that same thing in other cases! The same kind of Greek construction²³ is used to give an emphatic negation in John 10:28, where Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and *they will never perish.*" This does not mean that there are some of Jesus' sheep who do not hear his voice and follow him and who will perish; it is simply affirming that his sheep certainly will not perish. Similarly, when God says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5), it does not imply that he will leave or forsake others; it just emphatically states that he will not leave nor forsake his people. Or, in even a closer parallel, in Matthew 12:32, Jesus says, "Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit *will not be forgiven*, either in this age or in the age to come." This does not imply that some sins will be forgiven in the age to come (as Roman Catholics claim in support for the doctrine of purgatory)²⁴—that is simply an error in reasoning: to say that something will not happen in the age to come does not

21. A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), 884. Strong mentions an appropriate parallel use of the verb *sanctify* in 1 Cor. 7:14, which speaks about the unbelieving husband being sanctified by the believing wife (1 Cor. 7:14, where the same Greek word, *hagiazō*, is used). Outward ceremonial sanctification is also referred in Heb. 9:13; cf. Matt. 23:17, 19.

22. Ex. 24:7–8 speaks of the blood of the covenant that set apart the people as God's people even though not all were

truly born again. In the context of Heb. 10, such imagery, taken from the Old Testament process of sanctifying a people so that they could come before God to worship, is an appropriate background.

23. The construction uses *ou mē* plus the aorist subjunctive to express emphatic negation.

24. See discussion of the doctrine of purgatory in chapter 41, pp. 1006–8.

imply that it might happen in the age to come! In the same way, Revelation 3:5 is just a strong assurance that those who are clad in the white garments and who have remained faithful to Christ will not have their names blotted out of the book of life.²⁵

6. 1 Samuel 16:14: The Spirit of the Lord Departed from Saul

Finally, one passage from the Old Testament is sometimes used to argue that people can lose their salvation: the story of the Holy Spirit departing from King Saul. But Saul should not be taken as an example of someone who lost his salvation, for when the text says that "the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul" (1 Sam. 16:14), it reports this immediately after it says that Samuel anointed David king and "the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward" (1 Sam. 16:13). This close connection in the text (the immediately preceding verse) leads us to think that Scripture is not here talking about a total loss of all work of the Holy Spirit in Saul's life but simply about the withdrawing of *the Holy Spirit's function of empowering Saul as king*.²⁶ But that does not mean that Saul was eternally condemned. It is simply very hard to tell from the pages of the Old Testament whether Saul, throughout his life, was (a) an unregenerate man who had leadership capabilities and was used by God as a demonstration of the fact that someone worthy to be king in the eyes of the world was not thereby suited to be king over the Lord's people or (b) a regenerate man with poor understanding and a life that increasingly strayed from the Lord.

D. WHAT CAN GIVE A BELIEVER GENUINE ASSURANCE?

If it is true, as explained in the previous section, that some people who are unbelievers and who finally fall away may give many external signs of conversion, then what will serve as evidence of genuine conversion? What can give real assurance to a real believer? We can list three categories of questions that a person could ask of himself or herself.

1. Do I Have a Present Trust in Christ for Salvation?

Paul tells the Colossians that they will be saved on the last day, "if indeed you *continue in the faith*, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard" (Col. 1:23). The author of Hebrews says, "We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end" (Heb. 3:14), and encourages his readers to be imitators of those "who *through faith* and patience inherit the promises" (Heb. 6:12).

25. A different kind of book is probably in view in Ex. 32:33, where God says to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book." Here the New Testament idea of the "book of life" is not mentioned. Rather, the image is one of God keeping a record of those currently dwelling among his people, much as an earthly king would do. To "blot out" someone's name from such a book would imply that the person had died. Using this imagery, Ex. 32:33 is best understood to mean

that God will take the life of anyone who sins against him (see v. 35). Eternal destiny is not in view in this passage.

26. We should give a similar interpretation to David's prayer in Ps. 51:11: "Take not your Holy Spirit from me." David is praying that the Holy Spirit's anointing for kingship would not be removed from him and that the presence and power of God on his life would not depart; he is not praying against a loss of eternal salvation.

In fact, the most famous verse in the entire Bible uses a present tense verb that may be translated, "whoever continues believing in him" may have eternal life (see John 3:16).

Therefore, a person should ask himself or herself, "Do I *today* have trust in Christ to forgive my sins and take me without blame into heaven forever? Do I have confidence in my heart that he has saved me? If I were to die tonight and stand before God's judgment seat, and if he were to ask me why he should let me into heaven, would I begin to think of my good deeds and depend on them, or would I without hesitation say that I am depending on the merits of Christ and am confident that he is a sufficient Savior?"

This emphasis on *present* faith in Christ stands in contrast to the practice of some church "testimonies" where people repeatedly recite details of a conversion experience that may have happened twenty or thirty years ago. If a testimony of saving faith is genuine, it should also be a testimony of faith that is active this very day.

2. Is There Current Evidence of a Regenerating Work of the Holy Spirit in My Heart?

The evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts comes in many different forms. Although we should not put confidence in the demonstration of miraculous works (Matt. 7:22) or long hours and years of work at some local church (which may simply be building with "wood, hay, straw" [in terms of 1 Cor. 3:12] to further one's ego or power over others or to attempt to earn merit with God), there are many other evidences of a real work of the Holy Spirit in one's heart.

First, there is (1) a subjective testimony of the Holy Spirit within our hearts bearing witness that we are God's children (Rom. 8:15-16; 1 John 4:13). This testimony will usually be accompanied by (2) a sense of being led by the Holy Spirit in paths of obedience to God's will (Rom. 8:14).

In addition, if the Holy Spirit is genuinely at work in our lives, he will be producing the kind of (3) character traits that Paul calls "the fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22). He lists several attitudes and character traits that are produced by the Holy Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). Of course, the question is not "Do I perfectly exemplify all of these characteristics in my life?" but rather "Are these things a general characteristic of my life? Do I sense these attitudes in my heart? Do others (especially those closest to me) see these traits exhibited in my life? Have I been growing in them over a period of years?" There is no suggestion in the New Testament that any non-Christian, any unregenerate person, can convincingly fake these character traits, especially for those who know the person most closely.

Related to this kind of fruit is another kind of fruit: (4) the results of one's life and ministry as they have influence on others and on the church. There are some people who profess to be Christians but whose influence on others is to discourage them, to drag them down, to injure their faith, and to provoke controversy and divisiveness. The result of their life and ministry is not to build up others and to build up the church

but to tear it down. On the other hand, there are those who seem to edify others in every conversation, every prayer, and every work of ministry they put their hand to. Jesus said, regarding false prophets, "You will recognize them by their fruits. . . . Every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. . . . Thus you will recognize them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16–20).

Another evidence of work of the Holy Spirit is (5) continuing to believe and accept the sound teaching of the church. Those who begin to deny major doctrines of the faith give serious negative indications concerning their salvation: "No one who denies the Son has the Father. . . . If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father" (1 John 2:23–24). John also says, "Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us" (1 John 4:6). Since the New Testament writings are the current replacement for the apostles like John, we might also say that whoever knows God will continue to read and to delight in God's Word and will continue to believe it fully. Those who do not believe and delight in God's Word give evidence that they are not "from God."

Yet another evidence of genuine salvation is (6) a continuing present relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus says, "Abide in me, and I in you," and "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:4, 7). This abiding in Christ will include not only day-by-day trust in him in various situations but also regular fellowship with him in prayer and worship.

Finally, a major area of evidence that we are genuine believers is found in (7) a life of obedience to God's commands. John says, "Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (1 John 2:4–6). A perfect life is not necessary, of course. Instead, John is saying that in general our lives ought to be ones of imitation of Christ and likeness to him in what we do and say. If we have genuine saving faith, there will be clear results in obedience in our lives (see also 1 John 3:9–10, 24; 5:18). Thus James can say, "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead," and "I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:17–18). One large area of obedience to God includes love for fellow Christians: "Whoever loves his brother abides in the light" (1 John 2:10), and "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death" (1 John 3:14; cf. 3:17; 4:7). One evidence of this love is continuing in Christian fellowship (1 John 2:19), and another is giving to a brother in need (1 John 3:17; cf. Matt. 25:31–46).

3. Do I See a Long-Term Pattern of Growth in My Christian Life?

The first two areas of assurance dealt with present faith and present evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. But Peter gives one more kind of test that we can use to ask whether we are genuinely believers. He tells us that there are some character

traits which, if we keep on increasing in them, will guarantee that we will "never fall" (2 Peter 1:10). He tells his readers to add to their faith "virtue . . . knowledge . . . self-control . . . steadfastness . . . godliness . . . brotherly affection . . . love" (2 Peter 1:5–7). Then he says that these things are to belong to his readers and should be "increasing" continually in their lives (2 Peter 1:8). He adds that they are to "be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election" and says then that "if you practice these qualities (the character traits mentioned in vv. 5–7) you will never fall" (2 Peter 1:10).

The way that we confirm our call and election, then, is to continue to grow in "these qualities." This implies that our assurance of salvation can be something that increases over time in our lives. Every year that we add to these character traits in our lives, we gain greater and greater assurance of our salvation. Though young believers can have a quite strong confidence in their salvation, that assurance can increase to even deeper certainty over the years in which they grow toward Christian maturity. If they continue to add these qualities, they will confirm their call and election and will "never fall."

The result of these three questions that we can ask ourselves should be to give strong assurance to those who are genuinely believers. In this way the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints will be a tremendously comforting doctrine. No one who has such assurance should wonder, "Will I be able to persevere to the end of my life and therefore be saved?" Everyone who gains assurance through such a self-examination should rather think, "I am truly born again; therefore, I will certainly persevere to the end, because I am being guarded 'by God's power' working through my faith. Therefore, I will never be lost. Jesus will raise me up at the last day and I will enter into his kingdom forever" (see 1 Peter 1:5; John 6:40).

On the other hand, this doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, if rightly understood, should cause genuine worry, and even fear, in the hearts of any who are "backsliding" or straying from Christ. Such persons must clearly be warned that only those who persevere to the end have been truly born again. If they fall away from their profession of faith in Christ and life of obedience to him, they may not really be saved—in fact, the *evidence* that they are giving is that they are not saved, and they never really were saved. Once they stop trusting in Christ and obeying him (I am speaking in terms of outward evidence), they have no genuine assurance of salvation, and they should consider themselves unsaved, and turn to Christ in repentance and ask him for forgiveness of their sins.

4. How Much Change of Life Is Needed to Have Assurance of Salvation?

As I already mentioned in chapter 35 (see pages 871–78), there is an evangelical Protestant viewpoint called Free Grace theology whose supporters strongly disagree with the perspective on assurance of salvation that I have been presenting here.²⁷ One of

27. The following section has been abbreviated and adapted from Wayne Grudem, *Free Grace Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 89–97

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its advocates, Joseph Dillow, says that a lack of fruit in a person's life cannot provide a basis for denying the validity of the person's faith: "Just as the presence of fruit cannot prove whether a person is a Christian, *neither can its absence deny it.*"²⁸

In order to show that evidence of a change in life should not be used as a basis for assurance, Free Grace advocates sometimes ask, "How many good works does one have to do in order to be assured of salvation?" or "How much evidence of a changed life is necessary for assurance?" For example, David Anderson says that if someone has "a list of ways to test your experience to see if you have the necessary proof to be assured of your salvation," that "such tests only stir up doubt, confusion, or self-deception." He goes on to say,

If keeping His commandments is the test, then I must ask:

1. How many do I have to keep?
2. How long do I have to keep them?
3. Do I have to keep them perfectly?
4. Are some more important than others?
5. Will He grade on a curve?

The believer quickly becomes disoriented on a sea of subjectivity.²⁹

But these questions fail to understand how the Bible talks about assurance. In response to the question, "How many good works does one have to do in order to be assured of salvation?" the proper answer is "Some." To be more specific, *some* change of life gives a basis for *some* measure of assurance, and a greater change of life gives a basis for a stronger assurance. Scripture does not encourage us to demand more specificity than that.

A simple diagram might help to clarify the question of assurance:

Strong evidence of unbelief	Weak evidence of unbelief	Mixed evidence	Weak evidence of belief	Strong evidence of belief
		Unsure about salvation	Weak assurance of salvation	Strong assurance of salvation
Unsaved				Saved

As this diagram indicates, the evidence that a person has actually believed in Christ falls along a spectrum from weak to strong. God alone knows with absolute certainty everyone who is saved and everyone who is lost, for "the Lord knows those who are his"

28. Joseph Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of The Servant Kings* (Monument, CO: Grace Theology Press, 2018), 684. Emphasis in original.

29. David Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology* ([Conroe, TX]: Grace Theology Press, 2012), 216.

(2 Tim. 2:19), but we can perceive stronger or weaker outward indications of what is actually in someone's heart, both our hearts and those of others.

In the shaded middle of the spectrum, where people give mixed evidence in their profession of faith and in their conduct of life, we simply have to say that we do not know whether the person is saved or not—the evidence is mixed. One example would be a young man who had understood the gospel clearly and had made a convincing profession of faith in Christ as a teenager but now in his twenties has no affiliation with Christians or with any church. He might say he is unsure if he ever really trusted in Christ, but he gives no strong evidence of unbelief in his personal conduct. A Free Grace supporter would not hesitate to say that this person is clearly saved, based on his earlier profession of faith,³⁰ but I would say that the New Testament does not allow us to give any assurance of salvation to this person, for we simply do not have adequate evidence to indicate if such a person is a believer or not.

If such a person came to me and asked if I thought he was saved, I would say that I don't know but that he should seriously consider some of the warning passages in the New Testament, such as, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God" (Heb. 3:12), and "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:19–20). His failure to seek any affiliation with other Christians also gives reason to soberly consider this verse: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). I would tell him that I do not know if he is truly born again or not, but his present pattern of life gives me no reason to give him assurance of salvation.

But at the right hand side of the spectrum, where people give strong evidence of belief by their personal testimony and by the conduct of their lives, they should have strong assurance that they are truly saved, and we should readily encourage them in that assurance.

30. Joseph Dillow quotes this sentence from my 2016 book *Free Grace Theology* and then responds, "Personally, after involvement in the so-called 'Free Grace' movement for twenty-six years, I have never met anyone who believes this or would do this" (Joseph Dillow, "Finding Assurance," in *A Defense of Free Grace Theology: With Respect to Saving Faith, Perseverance, and Assurance*, ed. Fred Chay [The Woodlands, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2017], 235–36). But Dillow has not quoted me accurately. The example I gave specified "a young man who had understood the gospel clearly and had made a convincing profession of faith in Christ as a teenager but now in his twenties has no affiliation with Christians or with any church and says he is unsure if he ever really trusted in Christ. But he also gives no strong evidence of unbelief in his personal conduct"

(Grudem, *Free Grace Theology*, 91). However, Dillow doesn't quote these words but instead summarizes my hypothetical case as follows: "If all a person must do is check a box on a revival card and can then live any kind of life he desires and still go to heaven" (Dillow, "Finding Assurance," 235). Dillow removed the part where I said the man had "understood the gospel clearly and made a convincing profession of faith in Christ," and these are qualifications that, in the eyes of Free Grace supporters, would be sufficient reason for telling the person that he is assured of his salvation. I stand by my statement that, with respect to my specific example, "a Free Grace supporter would not hesitate to say that this person is clearly saved, based on his earlier profession of faith."

Supporters of Free Grace theology would object to a diagram like this. They would say that our assurance of salvation should be *based solely on Scripture*, not on our subjective evaluations of such evidence in our lives. In order to address this objection, it is important to be clear on the question, "Assurance about what?"

The question is not about the truthfulness of Christ's redemptive work. All Protestant theologians would agree that our assurance *that Christ's work has earned salvation for sinners and that all who trust in Christ will be saved* should be based fully and entirely on the testimony of God in Scripture and what Scripture teaches us about the finished atoning work of Christ. That is how we are to learn about something that has happened outside of us, long before we ever lived: Christ died and paid the penalty for our sins.

But that is not the question here. The question is not: How do I know that Christ has died for people's sins and that he will save all who believe in him? The question is rather: How do I know *that I have truly believed*?

Reading and agreeing with Bible verses about the atoning work of Christ tells me nothing about *whether I have truly trusted in the person of Christ or not*. Therefore, saying that assurance of my salvation must be based *only* on Scripture and the finished work of Christ is simply a category mistake. It does not address the category of personal belief: How do I know that *I personally have believed in Christ*? The response to this question from some Free Grace advocates has been simply to dismiss it.³¹

Another Free Grace response is to portray saving faith as no different from intellectual agreement with a truthful mathematical equation. Charles Bing writes, "The faith I have in Jesus Christ is the same as the faith I have that $1 + 1 = 2$."³² But saving faith is more than intellectual assent, for it must include a personal trust in the living person of Jesus Christ, not merely assent to statements about his saving work.³³

The New Testament gives several verses telling me about *various evidences that I have believed*, verses that talk about how I can know that I have come to know God, that I am born of God, that I have faith, that I have passed from death to life, and so forth. (I discussed these verses earlier in this chapter.)

Such evaluation of evidences of salvation can and should lead a person to a solid assurance of his or her salvation. Peter tells his hearers "to *confirm* your calling and election" (2 Peter 1:10), and John says that "if we keep his commandments," then "we *know* that we have come to know him" (1 John 2:3). He also says, "By this we may *know* that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (1 John 2:5-6).

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1643-46) speaks of believers obtaining an "infallible assurance":

31. Zane Hodges refuses to address the question and simply asserts, "People know whether they believe something or not." Rather than explain more deeply what it means to believe in Christ, he dismisses the question as a waste of time: "It is an unproductive waste of time to employ the popular categories—intellect, emotion, or will—as a way of analyzing the mechanics

of faith" (Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989], 31).

32. Charles C. Bing, "Full Assurance Produces Godly Living," in *Free Grace Theology: 5 Ways It Magnifies the Gospel*, ed. Grant Hawley (Allen, TX: Bold Grace Ministries, 2016), 62.

33. See discussion in chapter 35, pp. 861-79.

Such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, *may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace*. . . . This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion . . . but *an infallible assurance of faith* founded upon the *divine truth* of the promises of salvation, the *inward evidences* of those graces unto which these promises are made, the *testimony of the Spirit* of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God. (18:1-2)

By contrast, the Free Grace movement gives false assurance of eternal life to many unsaved people who have never genuinely repented of their sins, who show no evidence of regeneration in their daily lives, and who perhaps even profess to be complete unbelievers. The tragic result of this mistaken Free Grace teaching is that many people who are unsaved for eternity have been wrongly assured they are saved.

5. Practical Pastoral Application

At this point, in terms of pastoral care with those who have strayed away from their Christian profession, we should realize that *Calvinists* (those who believe in the perseverance of the saints) and *Arminians* (those who think that Christians can lose their salvation) *will both counsel a "backslider" in the same way*. According to the Arminian, this person was a Christian at one time but is no longer a Christian. According to the Calvinist, such a person never really was a Christian in the first place and is not one now. But in both cases the biblical counsel given would be the same: "You do not appear to be a Christian now—you must repent of your sins and trust in Christ for your salvation!" Though the Calvinist and Arminian would differ on their interpretation of the previous history, they would agree on what should be done in the present.³⁴

But here we see why the phrase "eternal security" can be misleading. In some evangelical churches, instead of teaching the full and balanced presentation of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, pastors have sometimes taught a watered-down version, which in effect tells people that all who have once made a profession of faith and been baptized are "eternally secure." The result is that some people who are not genuinely converted at all may "come forward" at the end of an evangelistic sermon to profess faith in Christ and may be baptized shortly after that, but then they leave the fellowship of the church and live a life no different from the one they lived before they gained this "eternal security." In this way people are given false assurance and are being cruelly deceived into thinking they are going to heaven when in fact they are not.³⁵

34. Of course, both the Calvinist and the Arminian would allow for the possibility that the "backslidden" person is truly born again and had just fallen into sin and doubt. But both would agree that it is pastorally wise to assume that the person is not a Christian until some evidence of present faith is forthcoming.

35. Of course, not all who use the phrase *eternal security* make mistakes of this sort, but the phrase is certainly open to such misunderstanding.