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Miscellaneous Biblical Texts relating to the Subject of Eternal Security vs. Apostasy

In our series on the eternal security of the believer we have looked closely at a variety of texts such as Matthew 7:21-23; 12:22-32; Mark 4:1-20; John 6:37-44; 8:31-32, 42-47; 10: 28-30; 15:1-6; Romans 5:6-11; 8:1, 28-39; 1 Corinthians 11:27-33; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22; 13:5; Ephesians 1:13-14; Hebrews 3:14; 6:1-12; and 1 John 2:19.

There are quite a few other texts that contain warnings and statements that have led some to believe that it is possible for a Christian to apostatize and lose their salvation. I've addressed them below. As you study these passages, also keep in mind *numerous other passages that affirm the security of the believer and the commitment of God to preserve them in and through their faith in Christ*. Here are a few of those texts.

“I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. . . . Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:9-15, 24).

“And 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” (Philippians 1:6).

“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

“Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ” (2 Thessalonians 3:1-5).

“So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 6:17-20).

“The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he

is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:23-25).

“Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”” (Hebrews 13:5-6).

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:3-5).

“Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, to those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ” (Jude 1:1).

“Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 1:24-25).

As for those other so-called “problem passages,” I provide the following interpretation.

Romans 11:22

Here Paul is warning his readers that “if Jews who fell prey to unbelief were not spared God’s judgment, then neither will Gentiles who succumb to unbelief escape his wrath” (Schreiner, 607).

“Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.”

Does this imply that genuine believers can lose their salvation? Three views are possible.

(1) It may be that Paul is echoing a theme found elsewhere in his letters and throughout the NT, namely, *that ultimate salvation is dependent on perseverance in faith* (cf. Rom. 8:13; Col. 1:23; Heb. 3:6,14; 1 Peter 1:5; 1 John 2:19), a faith which God graciously preserves and sustains within us.

(2) Others have suggested that Paul's discussion here is about Gentiles as a class, considered collectively, and Israel as a class, considered collectively. In other words, just as "Israel" was cut off because of unbelief, so also "Gentiles" may be if they do not believe. On this view, those who were “cut off” were not born-again believers but were Jews who, by virtue of their ethnicity, were members of the covenant community of Israel. Their “unbelief” was their rejection of Jesus as Messiah. Thus they were members of the one “olive tree” but did not experience saving faith. The “breaking off” of such branches was the corporate rejection of Israel. Could it be, then, that the threatened breaking off of Gentile branches should likewise be viewed as a corporate judgment?

(3) Doug Moo has another, far more probable, explanation: "While the olive tree represents the true, spiritual people of God, those who are said to belong to this tree are not only those who, through their faith, are actually part of the tree but also those who only appear to belong to that tree. This is evident from the fact that Paul speaks of unbelieving Jews as having been 'cut off' from the tree (v. 17). In reality, these Jews had never been part of the tree at all; yet to preserve the metaphor he is using, Paul presents them as if they had been. In the same way, then, those Gentiles within the church at Rome – and elsewhere – who appear to be part of God's people, yet do not continue in faith, may never have been part of that tree at all" (707).

In a sermon on Romans 11 (“You Stand Fast Through Faith, So Do Not Become Proud, But Fear,” February 8, 2004; www.desiringgod.org), John Piper agrees: Paul “means that, on the one hand, *there are*

real, genuine, spiritual, inward attachments to the tree —the covenant of grace and salvation; and, on the other hand, *there are unreal, counterfeit, unspiritual, outward attachments to the covenant.*” Failure or refusal to “continue in his [God’s] kindness” (Rom. 11:22b) shows “that their attachment is merely external and unspiritual and non-transforming, and they will be cut off.”

The future tense “will” be cut off likely points to the day of final judgment, much in the way Jesus referred to this in Matthew 7:22-23 – “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.’” In that declaration, “depart from me,” says Piper, “we hear the terrible squeezing of the omnipotent clippers lopping a fruitless, unspiritual, hypocritical church-going Christian from all attachment to the family of God.” So, “listen carefully and lay this to heart: Just as in the Old Testament you could be a circumcised, sacrifice-offering, outwardly law-abiding, physical child of Abraham and not a spiritual child of Abraham (John 8:39-44; Romans 9:8), so in the New Testament church . . . you can be a baptized, communion-taking, worship-attending, tithe-giving, doctrine-affirming church member and not be a child of God.”

Thus, Views (1) and (3) may be combined. Those who have truly believed **will** continue in God’s kindness (Heb. 3:6,14). Those who do not continue in God’s kindness show thereby that they were only superficially, but not savingly, part of the tree (on this, see esp. 1 John 2:19). Failure to persevere does not mean that one who was truly saved becomes truly lost. Rather, perseverance is itself the proof that one was truly saved. If one does not persevere, one has always been lost and never saved. As Schreiner notes, “no one can presume upon God’s grace and imagine that blessing will be theirs regardless of their continuance in faith” (607).

Romans 14:15

In this text Paul talks about a “strong” Christian *destroying* a “weaker” Christian through the unloving exercise of freedom.

Paul refers to a *stumbling block* in v. 13 and again in v. 15 to *hurting* and *destroying* one’s brother. What does he mean? Certainly it is more than distress or pain or annoyance that the weak brother feels on seeing a strong brother partake of food or drink which he believes is unclean and forbidden. Rather, Paul envisions a situation in which a strong Christian, in the exercise of his liberty, causes a weak Christian to sin. *The weak brother sins when he is influenced by the strong brother’s behavior to act contrary to his conscience.* Paul envisions the grievous vexation of conscience that afflicts a believer when he violates what for him is the moral will of God. Paul’s advice to the strong is simple: when the exercise of your *legitimate* liberty emboldens the weak to violate his conscience, you must defer to his interests and refrain from what would otherwise be permissible for you to do.

Paul’s appeal to the death of Christ is penetrating:

“If Christ loved the weak believer to the extent of laying down his life for his salvation, how alien to the demands of this love is the refusal on the part of the strong to forego the use of a certain article of food when the religious interests of the one for whom Christ died are thereby imperiled! It is the contrast between what the extreme sacrifice of Christ exemplified and the paltry demand devolving upon us that accentuates the meanness of our attitude when we discard the interests of a weak brother. And since the death of Christ as the price of redemption for all believers is the bond uniting them in fellowship, how contradictory is any behaviour that is not patterned after the love which Christ’s death exhibited!” (Murray, 191).

If you are convinced that the request that you suspend the exercise of your freedom for the sake of your brother is a great and unjust imposition, think of what Christ did!

Our primary concern is whether or not the *destruction* here is eternal. There are several reasons why I believe it is *not eternal destruction or loss of salvation* that Paul has in view.

First, "are we really to believe that a Christian brother's single act against his own conscience -- which in any case is not his fault but the fault of the strong who have misled him, and which is therefore an unintentional mistake, not a deliberate disobedience -- merits eternal condemnation? No, hell is reserved only for the stubborn, the impenitent, those who willfully persist in wrongdoing" (Stott, 365-66).

Second, Paul just affirmed in unequivocal terms the eternal security of the believer (Rom. 8:28-39). If nothing in all creation can separate one from the love of Christ, then surely another believer's callous disregard for a weak brother's religious scruples cannot do so!

Third, Paul says in v. 15 that a Christian can "destroy" another Christian. This cannot refer to eternal destruction because Jesus said that God alone destroys body and soul in hell (Mt. 10:28).

Fourth, Jesus said explicitly in John 10:28 that his sheep will "*never perish*". Clearly, then, the "destruction" in Rom. 14:14 must refer to something less than and different from the loss of eternal salvation.

Fifth, the context provides a perfectly reasonable explanation of Paul's words. He envisions serious damage to both the conscience of the weak believer (cf. v. 15) and to his growth as a disciple of Jesus. Judith Gundry-Volf identifies two forms of damage incurred by the weak:

"a subjective form consisting in grief and deep self-deprecation, and an objective form consisting in concrete sin, resultant guilt and possible incapacitation to behave consistently with one's beliefs. None of Paul's descriptions of the negative consequences born by the weak when they follow the example of the strong -- stumbling, sinning, sorrow, defiling and wounding of the conscience [cf. 1 Cor. 8:7], self-condemnation -- necessarily entails loss of salvation or complete dissolution of a relationship to God" (*Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away* [Louisville: Westminster, 1990], 95).

The "destruction", therefore, presents an obstacle to one's *sanctification*, not to one's *justification*.

1 Corinthians 9:27

The apostle Paul describes how he is careful to be self-disciplined and to bring his body into subjection "lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified." Does this word translated "disqualified" (NASB) suggest that Paul feared losing his salvation? Once again, as we see also in Rom. 11:22, it may be that Paul is echoing a theme found elsewhere in his letters and throughout the NT, namely, *that ultimate salvation is dependent on perseverance in faith* (cf. Rom. 8:13; Col. 1:23; Heb. 3:6,14; 1 Peter 1:5; 1 John 2:19), a faith which Paul believes God graciously preserves and sustains within us (see, e.g., Phil. 2:12-13).

More likely, however, is Paul's concern that he not become slack or indifferent in his ministry *lest he forfeit God's approval on his apostolic endeavors* (and perhaps the power of the Holy Spirit that energized his work). He fears not hearing God say: "Well done, good and faithful servant," and thereby forfeiting the divine blessings and rewards he otherwise would receive (a theme he earlier addressed in 1 Cor. 3:10-15). The Greek word *adokimos* (translated "disqualified") does not pertain to the test of faith but to the test of apostleship. In 2 Corinthians Paul applies the terminology of testing (*adokimos* and its cognates) to himself *as an apostle*, not as a professing Christian (see 13:6-7; cf. 1 Thess. 2:4; 2 Tim. 2:15. Gundry-Volf concludes:

"The fact that no instance of the use of *adokimos* or a cognate referring to Paul relates to the test of faith or salvation, rather, that every instance has to do with his fitness as an apostle raises doubts about the view that *adokimos* in 1 Cor. 9:27 means rejected from salvation and suggests instead that it means rejected as an apostle" (236-37).

2 Corinthians 6:1-2

What does Paul mean when he refers to the possibility of receiving the grace of God "in vain"? See also Gal. 2:2; Phil. 2:16; 1 Thess. 3:5 (cf. 1 Cor. 15:2). Some suggested answers:

1. Perhaps he is urging them not to forfeit the grace of salvation which they had earlier received. In other words, it is an exhortation to persevere, to avoid apostasy. On this view, Paul would be implying that a born-again believer can lose or forfeit his/her salvation.

2. Some suggest the exhortation in vv. 1-2 is not directed to those Corinthians who are already born-again, but to those in Corinth who had repeatedly heard the gospel but had made no decision. Paul was not so naive to think that everyone in the *professing* church was necessarily truly converted. Therefore, his command not to receive the grace of God in vain is equivalent to an exhortation to all men not to reject the gospel of Jesus Christ. But is "to receive in vain" really the same as "reject"?

3. God's grace may be received in vain when it is received superficially or externally, as in the parable of the soils (Luke 8:4-15; Matt. 13:18-23). There the seed (gospel) falls upon rocky ground or among thorns, to be snatched away or choked by the temptations of this world. This view is similar to the previous one, insofar as the people in view are unbelievers. The difference is that, according to this interpretation, people don't explicitly reject the gospel but "receive" and "believe" it, but only in a superficial way. Their so-called "faith" is spurious and therefore temporary.

4. Perhaps receiving the grace of God in vain pertains not so much to salvation per se, or its forfeiture, but to the loss of potential blessings related to spiritual growth, knowledge, and joy that they would suffer by rejecting Paul as their apostle. In other words, the people are truly saved. They have genuinely received the gospel and believed it, but they have failed to progress in their Christian growth and stand in danger of losing those spiritual blessings and rewards they otherwise might have obtained.

5. Philip Hughes suggests that "for them to receive the grace of God in vain meant that their practice did not measure up to their profession as Christians, that their lives were so inconsistent as to constitute a denial of the logical implications of the gospel, namely, and in particular, that Christ died for them so that they might no longer live to themselves but to His glory" (218-19). In other words, the passionate conviction which accompanied their salvation had not as yet performed its transforming work in their lives. It is to that progressive transformation of their daily experience that Paul is urging and exhorting them. In the final analysis, this view differs very little from number 4.

6. Judith Gundry-Volf suggests that to receive the grace of God in vain may be referring to their opposition to the apostle himself. The context surrounding this statement is Paul's description of his ministry on their behalf and his attempt to restore good relations with the Corinthians (5:13-14; 5:18-6:1; see especially his impassioned appeal in 6:11-13). In Paul's opinion, to reject *him* is to reject the gospel of salvation of which he is a minister. If the Corinthians receive the grace of God in vain, it is not because of ethical/moral failure/rebellion, but rather rejection of the gospel as a consequence of rejection of the apostle and the apostolic message. Gundry-Volf then argues that Paul's appeal is simply "*for the sake of argument only*" (280). I.e., he does *not* believe they *will* reject or deny him, but if they were to do so it would be tantamount to receiving the grace of God, which was his message to them, in vain.

Galatians 5:2-4

Here the apostle refers to some in the church at Galatia who were considering submitting to circumcision, having believed the Judaizers heretical doctrine that such "works" were necessary to bring their salvation in Christ to its proper and full consummation. If a person were to embrace this doctrine, says Paul, "Christ will be of no benefit" to him/her (v. 2). Furthermore, to submit to circumcision is to submit to the obligation "to keep the whole Law" (v. 3). Those who do this "have been severed from Christ" (v. 4). Those who seek to be justified by law "have fallen from grace" (v. 4).

The Arminian interpretation of this passage is that Paul envisions true Christians apostatizing from the faith and being cut off from the saving grace of God which they once genuinely experienced. They once were saved. Now they are lost.

The Calvinist alternative would recognize three possibilities.

First, some insist that these whom Paul describes are not, in point of fact, real Christians. They are professing believers who have identified externally with the church in Galatia (not an uncommon phenomenon in the first century, or any century). Their lack of true saving faith in Jesus is demonstrated by their desire to be justified in God's sight through works, circumcision in particular. Christ cannot be of any saving benefit to someone who refuses to submit to him and to the way of salvation he has ordained: by grace alone through faith alone. To seek justification by obedience to the law ("you who are seeking to be justified by law," v. 4) is to be cut off from the saving work of Christ. It is to fall from that principle of divine grace by which one may alone be saved. It is an issue of which way or path or means of acceptance with God you choose: grace or law.

Such people fall "from grace" and "into legalism," not from salvation into condemnation. Advocates of this view would quickly point out the contrast Paul draws between people who pursue acceptance with God by such legal means and "we" (true believers), in v. 5, who "by faith" are waiting for the consummation of our salvation.

Second, others concede that those Paul describes are genuine Christians but that what they "lose" isn't salvation but the experiential blessings of intimacy with God that are grounded on and flow from the reliance of the soul on grace alone. Thus, being "severed" from Christ and falling "from grace" refer to the loss of joy, fellowship, reward, blessing, etc., but not the loss of one's place in the kingdom of God.

Third, the most likely interpretation is that Paul is addressing genuine, but immature, believers who, in the words of Demarest, were about "to defect from a *theology* of justification by grace to a theology of justification by law-keeping. They were running the race well until the Judaizers caused them to turn aside" (456). Paul has confidence "in the Lord," i.e., because of who Christ is and because of his commitment to his people, that "the erring saints would soon return to the truth" (v. 10) of the principle of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (456).

Gundry-Volf, on the other hand, believes that it is from more than a principle of grace that they stand to fall: it is from grace itself. In other words, they abandon and are severed from the very foundation of their salvation. But she agrees with Demarest that such will *not*, in point of fact, ever happen. Paul's declaration of confidence in v. 10 is crucial to this understanding. Notwithstanding this severe warning (vv. 2-4), there Paul writes:

"I have confidence in you in the Lord, that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you [a collective allusion to the Judaizers] shall bear his judgment, whoever he is."

Says Gundry-Volf:

"Paul not only *hopes* that his warnings and pleadings will evoke the desired response. He claims to 'have been persuaded in the Lord concerning you that you will think nothing other' than the truth (5:10). Though he anathematizes the perpetrators of the 'other gospel' (1:8,9) and consigns them to 'judgment' (5:10), regarding them as 'false brethren' (cf. 2:4), he has confidence that his Galatian converts will reaffirm their acceptance of the gospel he preached to them" (214).

The key to Paul's confidence is found in the words, "in the Lord." In other words,

"after all Paul's efforts to mend the situation, he acknowledges that the Galatians' destiny does not lie in his hands but the Lord's. And the Lord's faithfulness guarantees the final outcome. . . . Paul's own intervention in the matter is not thereby rendered superfluous, however. For God's faithfulness can manifest itself precisely in the effect the apostle's warning and wooing has in the Galatian churches. . . . From the perspective of God's faithfulness, Paul is certain that the Galatians will not finally turn away from the gospel" (215).

Thus Paul envisions the faithfulness of God to his people as being greater and more powerful than the threat to their salvation. Paul's confidence is in the God who works and sustains and preserves in spite of human failure. As F. F. Bruce puts it, Paul "knows how the logic of the gospel works, and if they have really received the gospel (as he is convinced they have), they must accept the same logic and think no differently" (235).

In sum, the threat is real. True Christians are often tempted to turn away from the grace by which they are saved. To do so would be eternally disastrous. But God is faithful to sustain and preserve us. Therefore, in the words of the apostle Peter, we "are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5). It is ultimately *God's* "power", not ours, that ever energizes and upholds our faith in Christ.

Colossians 1:23

Here Paul seems rather clearly to say that if you don't persevere by continuing in "the faith" you will not be presented before God holy and blameless and without reproach. Whether "the faith" is a reference to one's personal trust in Jesus or the objective body of truths we call "the Christian faith", the fact remains: if you don't continue in it you will not experience the inestimable joy of standing forever in the presence of God.

So, yes, there is truly a conditional element involved ("if indeed"). The condition for final presentation is faithful perseverance. The notion espoused by some that one "act of faith" in Jesus Christ eternally secures final salvation irrespective of how one lives is unbiblical. But that's for another day.

Having said this, there appear to be three options worthy of our consideration. There are probably others, but I want to focus on three.

First, the Arminian view says it is possible for the truly regenerated (born again) soul to fail to meet the condition and thereby fail to be presented holy and blameless and without reproach before God. The salvation once gained by faith alone may be forfeited and lost by the disappearance and death of said faith.

Second, some Calvinists read Colossians 1:23 as saying that perseverance is the proof that one's "act of faith" in Jesus Christ was genuine. Perseverance, or continuing stable and steadfast in the faith, not shifting from the hope of the gospel, is evidence of the authenticity of one's initial conversion and commitment to Christ. Likewise, the failure to persevere, or the decision to shift from the hope of the gospel and abandon one's "commitment" to it, is proof that one's profession of faith in Jesus was spurious and false, an act of self-delusion.

This concept is undoubtedly true, in my opinion, and other biblical texts affirm it. The passage in 1 John 2:19 clearly speaks to this scenario. There John writes, "They [i.e., the false teachers] 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."

The phrase "they went out from us" most likely points to their willful and voluntary separation. In spite of their external membership or alliance with us, says John, they did not share the inner life or spiritual bond of the body of Christ. "For if they had been of us they would have continued with us." If they had truly and authentically shared our unity and life in Christ, it would have displayed itself in fruitful perseverance. "But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." This is to say that there was a divine purpose in their secession, namely, exposure of those who are merely professors, not genuine possessors, of spiritual life. Their departure was their unmasking (cf. 1 Cor. 11:18-19)

So again, abiding or continuance or endurance is the sign of the saved, just as apostasy reveals the counterfeit character of one's initial profession of faith. Note the emphasis of the phrase: "for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us" (cf. Heb. 3:6,14). The presence of saving faith ("of us") implies (necessitates) perseverance.

Third, the other Calvinist option interprets Paul's purpose in Colossians 1:23 somewhat differently. All Calvinists believe that the elect will fully and finally persevere and thus be eternally saved (in fact, some "Arminians" believe this too). They will not fail to fulfill the condition of Colossians 1:23.

According to this third option, God preserves us in faith and holiness of life by stirring our hearts to avail ourselves of his sustaining grace. One way he does this is *by means of the warning implicit in the condition*. What is the warning? Simply this: no continuation, no presentation. In other words, God preserves and keeps us safe, and thus we persevere, by heeding the warning that, if we don't, we will not be presented blameless and without reproach before God.

On both Calvinist options, the elect will persevere. According to the first, Colossians 1:23 is backwards looking. As we consider whether or not a person continues in the faith we are directed to draw one of two conclusions concerning the authenticity of their initial profession of trust in Jesus.

According to the second, Colossians 1:23 is forward looking. "Christian, take heed to this undeniable fact: if you don't persevere by continuing in the faith you won't be presented before God. Christian, take heart in knowing that God will work in you 'that which is pleasing in his sight' (Heb. 13:21). Be encouraged with the assurance that 'he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ' (Phil. 1:6), so that you will persevere and not shift from the hope of the gospel which you believed."

Some people insist that the idea that God will preserve us undermines and vitiates the urgency to make certain that we continue in our faith. I would argue precisely the opposite. The reason I commit myself fervently to the pursuit of holiness of life is because God has assured me that he will be ever present to energize my heart "to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). Praise God for his preserving presence and power!

If you are inclined to indulge in unrepentant sin and then justify your licentiousness on the grounds that God has promised to preserve you, there is a strong likelihood that your alleged "faith" in Christ is not saving. Given what Paul says in Colossians 1:23, it would be irresponsible of me to assure you that following such a life you will, nevertheless, be presented before him holy and blameless and without reproach. Remember: no continuation, no presentation.

1 Timothy 1:18-20

A number of people have read this text and concluded that it teaches a true believer can apostatize and lose or forfeit his/her salvation. Is that what it really says?

We must first ask the question: Were Hymenaeus and Alexander saved? It's difficult to say. There is no way of knowing whether their presence in the church at Ephesus was an external association based on their verbal profession of faith or an internal, spiritual union with the body of Christ. We are told that they "rejected" a "good conscience" and as a result suffered "shipwreck in regard to the faith" (v. 19). As Stott has said, "if we disregard the voice of conscience, allowing sin to remain unconfessed and unforsaken, our faith will not long survive" (57).

Paul took disciplinary action by delivering them "over to Satan". His purpose in doing so was in order that "they may be taught not to blaspheme" (v. 20). Were they Christians? Certainly believers are capable of backsliding and doing serious damage to their fellowship and intimacy with Christ. Believers are capable of falling into serious doctrinal error and are subject to being excommunicated. The imagery of a "shipwreck" suggests serious damage but need not imply, and certainly does not require, the notion of a loss of salvation. The pedagogical purpose in Paul's action, to teach them not to blaspheme, would be consistent with how a believer who had fallen into doctrinal error should be viewed. Paul's disciplinary action would thus have as its purpose the restoration of a wayward brother.

On the other hand, they may well have been non-believers from the beginning. In rejecting a good conscience they made shipwreck of, literally, "the" faith, i.e., the truths of Christianity objectively considered. That is to say, this may be a description of their willful abandonment or repudiation of the truth

of the gospel, resulting in their expulsion from the church. The theological bottom line, however, is that nothing in the passage demands that we conclude these men were born-again believers who lost their salvation.

2 Timothy 2:11-13

Paul declares: “If we deny Him, He also will deny us” (v. 12). Paul is simply echoing the statement of Jesus in Matthew 10:32-33 – “Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.” Make no mistake about it: to deny Jesus, to repudiate him, to declare that he is not the Son of God incarnate and that he did not die for sinners and that he did not rise from the dead and that he is not the only way to the Father results in eternal death. Anyone and everyone who denies the Son shall himself/herself be denied.

Paul’s use of the first person plural “we” is simply a standard conversational convention or literary form found throughout the NT and used by everyone, even today. It is what might be called the “preacher’s ‘we’” in which the speaker or writer addresses everyone in his audience as a group. Jesus used the words “everyone” and “whoever” because he was himself the object of either the affirmation or denial under consideration. Paul does not have that luxury and thus makes use of a literary custom to drive home his point. *Whoever* denies the Son, regardless of their *prior profession* of faith, is lost. If someone has earlier professed faith in Jesus only later to blatantly and persistently deny him only proves that his earlier profession was that and no more. For other examples of the “preacher’s ‘we’” in a warning passage, see Heb. 2:3 and 12:25.

The preacher’s “we” is used frequently in our preaching and writing today. If I am speaking to an audience in which I suspect are both Christians and non-Christians (and most likely *all* audiences contain both), I would say something like this: “People, hear me well. If we believe in Jesus we will be saved. However, if we turn our back on him and the offer of life that is based on his atoning sacrifice we will be forever lost.” In using such terms (“if” and “we”) I’m not suggesting that I don’t already believe in Jesus nor that I might deny him in the future. It is an appeal and a warning to *anyone and everyone* in which fundamental truths and their consequences are stated.

Be it also noted that Paul does not have in mind the kind of “denial” into which Peter fell. In Peter’s case, the “denial” was momentary and was followed by great remorse and repentance. The “denial” Paul has in view in 2 Timothy is both persistent and final, an utter and absolute repudiation of Jesus. Says Knight:

“The statement in the saying that we are now considering does not mean that Christ is not faithful to his promise to us, nor does it mean that our fall into a denial even as grave as Peter’s is unforgivable or that it from that time henceforth forever and ever seals our doom. The denial in view in the saying which calls forth Christ’s denial is not like that of Peter’s who later sought forgiveness but rather is a situation of hardness and permanence” (*Sayings*, 126).

Hebrews 10:26-31

Here our author describes someone as continuing in willful sin after having “received the knowledge of the truth.” The latter need mean no more than that they have heard and understood the gospel and have given mental assent or agreement to it. Tragically, many people hear the good news and commit themselves to shape their lives by the ethics of Jesus and in accordance with the standards and life of a local church while never experiencing regeneration and placing their personal trust in Christ for salvation. They then turn from what they have heard and understood and openly and defiantly repudiate it as false. There are unsaved theologians and biblical commentators whose “knowledge of the truth” of Christianity, at least in terms of objective data, is more extensive and insightful than that held by some true believers. In this regard, see 2 Peter 2:20-21.

But the troubling phrase in this passage is in v. 29 where this person is said to have regarded as unclean “the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified.” Does this mean a genuine Christian is in view? Those who affirm eternal security have pointed to one of two possible interpretations:

First, some have suggested that the “he” who is sanctified is actually Jesus Christ, not the apostate. This is grammatically possible. It is also theologically possible, as John 17:19 speaks of Jesus “sanctifying” himself. We must remember that “to sanctify” can mean “to set apart for a special purpose or use” without the notion of sin being involved. See also similar language and thought in Heb. 2:10; 5:7,9; and 9:11-12. Noel Weeks argues that

“the whole point of the author has been to emphasize that Jesus has fulfilled the requirements of a High Priest. There is an analogy between the Aaronic ordinances and the sacrifice of Christ. So it is reasonable to suggest that as Aaron was consecrated by the blood of the sacrifice (Ex. 29), so Jesus was consecrated as High Priest through the offering of His own blood” (*WTJ*, 39 [Fall 1976], 80).

Second, Wayne Grudem and others contend that “the word *sanctified* need not refer to the internal moral purification that comes with salvation, for the term *hagiazō* has a broader range than that, both in Hebrews and in the New Testament generally” (177). Grudem points to Heb. 9:13 as an example where the word refers to rendering someone ceremonially clean but not necessarily spiritually (or savingly) clean. See also 1 Cor. 7:14; Matthew 23:17,19; 1 Timothy 4:5. The context in Hebrews 10 appears to support this view, as our author is concerned with parallels between the OT Levitical sacrifice and the better new covenant sacrifice of Christ. Says Grudem:

“the author of Hebrews knows that some may fall away, even though *they assemble with the congregation of believers* and so share in this great privilege of coming before God [see 10:19-22]. So he says, ‘not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another’ (10:25). The reason to encourage one another is the warning in 10:26, ‘For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth.’ In such a context, it is appropriate to understand ‘profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was *sanctified*’ to mean ‘*by which he was given the privilege of coming before God with the congregation of God’s people.*’ In this sense, the blood of Christ opened up a new way of access to God for the congregation – it ‘sanctified’ them in a parallel to the Old Testament ceremonial sense – and this person, by associating with the congregation, was also ‘sanctified’ in that sense: He or she had the privilege of coming before God in worship” (178).

Someone who has experienced that awesome opportunity and privilege only then to willfully repudiate the person and work of Christ through whom it was made possible can expect only judgment. Consistent with this, our author then proceeds to distinguish between two groups in 10:39. There are, on the one hand, those who do not have saving faith and thus eventually fall away (“shrink back”) into destruction. On the other hand, there are those who have saving faith and thus persevere to the preserving of the soul. He doesn’t envision a third group: those who have saving faith and later fall away.

James 5:19-20

In this passage James envisions a believer intervening in the life of another, wayward, believer. The result is that you will “save his soul from death” and will “cover a multitude of sins.” Does this mean there is the potential for a Christian to sin so severely that if someone doesn’t intervene to restore him/her that this person might “lose” their soul to “death,” i.e., lose their salvation? No. Several points need to be made.

First, to “stray from the truth” (v. 19) refers to any form of departure from biblical standards, whether in thought (belief) or conduct. James probably has in mind someone who is rebellious and disobedient to the truths that he has set forth in this epistle.

Second, to “turn him back” means to restore him/her to the path of obedience and truth. James envisions one believer, any believer, helping another believer get back on the track of repentance and obedience.

Third, whose “soul” is “saved” and whose “sins” are covered? Options:

- Many say that the soul saved and the sins covered are both those of the sinner who is being restored.
- Some contend that both these clauses refer not to the restored sinner but to the Christian who is the means of the restoration. In other words, the salvation of his soul and the covering of his sins are in some sense a *reward* to the Christian for his work of restoring a wayward brother/sister.
- Others separate the two clauses: the one whose soul is saved is the restored sinner, but the one whose sins are covered is the Christian who has been the means of his recovery.

It is unlikely James is telling us that if we will help restore a wayward brother that *our* soul will be saved from death. After all, *we* are not straying from the truth and hence are not in danger of death! Most, then, agree that the one whose soul is saved is the brother who formerly strayed. Also, since it is a “sinner” (v. 20) who has strayed and is now restored it seems only reasonable that the sins which are covered are *his*. It doesn’t make much sense that James would encourage the good work of restoring an erring brother in order that we might obtain forgiveness of our own sins. Therefore, the first view above is the most likely: the soul saved and the sins covered are both of the wayward/restored brother.

Fourth, the term “save” referred to in v. 20 and the “death” from which he is delivered must be identified. Just a few verses earlier in 5:15 James used the term “save” to describe *physical restoration from illness*. The “death” here, therefore, is most likely physical death, not spiritual death. Again, in vv. 14-15 it is deliverance from or the prevention of a premature physical death that is in view. See also 5:12. Thus, James is here encouraging us to be diligent to restore to repentance any brother or sister who has strayed from the truth. In doing so, we will have been instrumental in delivering or saving them from premature physical death (under the discipline of the Lord; cf. 1 Cor. 11:30-32; Acts 5). There is nothing in this passage that might lead us to believe a true Christian could lose his or her salvation.

2 Peter 2:20-22

2 Peter 2 is a graphic portrayal of the moral corruption and destructive influence of false teachers in the church. The problem for the doctrine of eternal security is the description in vv. 20-22 of what appears to be irremediable apostasy. Peter speaks of people who

“if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them: ‘The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.’”

The first thing to know is that the terms used here *appear* to describe genuine conversion. 2 Peter 1:4 refers to the salvation experience as one in which people “escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.” Likewise, they are said to have escaped the defilements of the world through the “knowledge” of Jesus Christ, a term Peter uses in 2 Peter 1:2, 3, and 8 of those truly saved. Yet now we are told that they become “entangled” and “overcome” yet again by the defilements of the world and have “turned back” from the holy commandment delivered to them. Thus, their “last state has become worse for them than the first” (v. 20b). The “first” state refers to their condition when they were in bondage to the defilements of the world. The “last” state points to their recent rejection of the faith. If one asks why the last state is worse than the first, it would appear to be “because those who had experienced the Christian faith and then rejected it were unlikely to return to it again. They would not grant a fresh hearing to the gospel, concluding that they had already been through ‘that phase’” (Schreiner, 361).

Thus Schreiner's explanation is that "the language in 2 Peter is *phenomenological* [emphasis mine]. In other words, Peter used the language of 'Christians' to describe those who fell away because they gave every appearance of being Christians. They confessed Christ as Lord and Savior, were baptized, and joined the church" (364). Thus Peter portrays them as if they were Christians "precisely because of their participation in the church, because they gave some evidence initially of genuine faith" (365).

Douglas Moo, citing D. A. Carson, also suggests that "the New Testament consistently recognizes a class of people who are not simply pagans (that is, they are part of the church and have come to experience the blessings of Christ), but who are not yet regenerate Christians either (that is, the Holy Spirit has not yet brought them to faith). Such people are difficult to recognize, and they may, indeed, only be known by their perseverance to the end. In other words, New Testament writers sometimes use the language of Christian conversion for such people on the basis of their appearance" (154).

That these false teachers are not now and never were truly converted is confirmed by the proverb Peter cites (see Prov. 26:11). It's important to remember that among the Jews both dogs and pigs were unclean animals. The former were not cute and loveable household pets but typically roamed in packs, scavenging from garbage and filth. The status of pigs in Jewish culture was anathema and hardly needs to be explained. One does immediately think of both animals in the words of Jesus: "Do not give dogs what is holy and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you" (Matthew 7:6). Clearly in this text "dogs" and "pigs" symbolize the unconverted who are hostile to the gospel.

Thus the point of the proverb may well be to remind us that these people, analogous to such animals, never truly experienced an inward change of nature. Notwithstanding the clean-up on the outside, on the inside they are still dogs and pigs (i.e., unregenerate). "In other words, they were always unclean; they only seemed to have changed. Perseverance, therefore, is the test of authenticity" (Schreiner, 365). Had these "dogs" and "pigs" been genuinely transformed on the inside, it would have revealed itself on the outside, in terms of their behavior. That they returned to their "vomit" and "mire" simply proves that they all the while remained dogs and pigs. No one has explained this more clearly than John Piper. He writes:

"Peter is not teaching that God's elect can lose their salvation. He is most definitely teaching that church members can be lost, and people who make outward professions of faith and even begin to clean up their lives can turn away from Christ and be lost. But in verse 22 he explains to us in a proverb that we should not be overly surprised at this: dogs characteristically return to their vomit; and no matter how clean you make a pig on the outside, if it is still a pig, it will return to the mire. In other words, those who leave the way of righteousness, never to return, simply show that their inner nature had never been changed. This was Peter's way of saying what 1 John 2:19 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 be plain that they are all not of us.' Or as Jesus said, 'He who endures to the end will be saved' (Matthew 10:22). Or as Hebrews puts it, 'We share in Christ if we hold our first confidence firm to the end' (Hebrews 3:14). Or as Paul says, 'I preached to you the gospel which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, *if you hold it fast*' (1 Corinthians 15:1, 2). The whole New Testament is agreed: there is no salvation apart from persevering faith. And persevering faith always works itself out in the way of righteousness. Therefore, to abandon the way of righteousness is to exclude oneself from salvation" ("Better Never to Have Known the Way," sermon delivered on May 30, 1982, www.desiringgod.org).

Make no mistake: this passage is a problem for the doctrine of eternal security. But is it insurmountable? Is it so unmistakable and clear that it overturns the weight of evidence from such texts as John 6:37-44; 8:31-32, 42-47; 10:28-30; 17:9-15, 24; Romans 5:6-11; 8:1, 28-39; 1 Corinthians 1:4-9; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22; 13:5; Ephesians 1:13-14; Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5; Hebrews 3:14; 7:23-25; 13:5-6, 20-21; 1 Peter 1:3-5; 1 John 2:19; Jude 1 and 24-25? In other words, we must read 2 Peter 2 in the wider context of all of the New Testament and ask the question: "Which view best accounts for all the biblical evidence? Which view best explains those passages that seem to teach a different perspective?" Once again, I'm left with the conclusion that the NT teaches, to a high degree of probability, the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer.

1 John 3:9

One thing John emphasizes in his first epistle is the reality and gravity of sin. In 1:8 he forcefully labels those who say they have no sin as self-deceived and void of the truth. In 1:10 the claim not to have committed sin is tantamount to calling God a liar, and in 2:1 John clearly implies that Christians will sin (although he writes to help them avoid it). How then do we understand the statement in 3:9 that the one who is begotten of God "**does not do sin**" (lit.) and in fact "**is not able to sin**"?

Following are the major interpretative options (excluding the suggestion of some that John simply contradicts himself):

(1) To avoid the difficulty some have narrowed the definition of "sin" to notorious crimes or offences against love (this was the view of both Augustine and Luther).

(2) It has been suggested that what John means is that a Christian cannot sin because what is sin in the life of an unbeliever is not regarded as such by God when committed by a believer. This is contrary to both John and the rest of the NT.

(3) One interpretation draws a distinction between the "old" nature in the Christian and the "new" nature. The "old" nature may continue to sin but the "new" cannot. But how do we isolate a "nature" from the "individual" himself/herself? We may speak of "flesh" and "spirit" in a person, but it is always the *person* who sins or does not sin, not merely a "nature".

(4) Others say John is speaking about the *ideal* and not reality. The argument is: Since all anticipate that sinlessness will be characteristic in the age to come, and since John believed that the age to come had come (2:8), he naturally asserted the sinlessness of Christians!

(5) Some say that John, in the heat of controversial circumstances, breaks forth in holy passion and speaks with apparent exaggeration and over-emphasis.

(6) One view stresses 1 John 3:6 where it is stated that the one who "abides" in him does not sin. They contend that this "abiding" in Christ is not descriptive of all Christians but is a condition which only some (those "in fellowship") believers fulfill. The degree of a believer's holiness, then, and his ability to sin or not sin are dependent on whether or not he "abides". When one is abiding in Christ he cannot sin. When one does not abide, one does sin. But 3:9 makes it clear why a Christian doesn't practice sin, indeed, is unable to sin, and it has nothing to do with abiding. It is because he/she "*is born of God*".

(7) Others say that the sin of which John speaks in 3:9 is willful and deliberate sin. The Christian, so they say, cannot commit such deliberate sin in the face of the Lord. Oh, really? What of David?

(8) A few take John quite literally. Hence they believe he is teaching perfectionism. 1 John 3:9 proves that sinlessness *is* attainable in this life. The statements in 1:8,10 and especially 2:1 are describing the immature believer who although not yet sinless may still become such through diligent activity and love.

[I personally find either of the next two options to be the most likely.]

(9) Some argue that the "sin" which a believer does not and cannot commit is the "sin that leads to death" in 1 John 5:16, namely, hatred of believers and denial of Jesus. I address this view in great detail in my discussion of the sin unto death.

(10) The view adopted by most commentators is that the sin a Christian does not and cannot commit is *habitual, persistent, unrepentant sin*. John is not concerned so much with the momentary, individual acts of sin as he is with the overall characteristic tendencies and inclinations of a person's life. John is looking at the *pervasive temper* of one's *overall experience in life*, not at the singular incidents individually. John is not taking a snapshot, but a moving picture. His repeated use of the Greek present tense appears to bear this out. He focuses on the habitual character of the activity in view.

In 3:6 John says that the believer who abides in Christ "sins not" (present tense). Also, the one who "does sin" (present tense) shows that he has neither seen nor known Him. John nowhere denies that a Christian commits acts of sin. He does deny, however, that the Christian sins persistently, habitually as a reflection of the characteristic inclination of his soul.

Note that in 3:9a he says the one begotten of God "does not *do* sin." "Again," notes Stott, "it is not the isolated act of sin which is envisaged, but the settled habit of it, indicated by the verb *poiein*, to do or to practice, which is used of 'doing' sin in 3:4a, 3:8 and 3:9, of 'doing' lawlessness in 3:4b, and of 'doing' righteousness in 2:29, 3:7 and 3:10a" (126).

John also says the one begotten of God "*is not able to sin*". But again notice that "to sin" is not an aorist infinitive but a *present* infinitive. If the infinitive had been aorist John would be contradicting what he said in 2:1. The present infinitive again indicates that he has in mind the inability of the born-again believer to habitually live in sin as if it were the prevailing temper of his soul.

If the Christian "does not" practice sin, indeed, "cannot" practice sin, wherein lies this "impossibility"? That is to say, *how* does a believer avoid the life of persistent sin so characteristic of the non-believer? Stott's answer is excellent:

"Wherein lies this 'impossibility'? John's answer is given in two phrases: *for his seed remaineth in him* and *because he is born of God*. . . . *his seed* is accurately rendered in the RSV text 'God's nature', or 'the divine seed' (NEB), and . . . *in him* refers to the child of God. In this way the two parts of verse 9 become exactly parallel, each part consisting of a statement that the Christian does not or cannot sin, to which is added the reason for such an assertion. The implication will then be this: the new birth involves the acquisition of a new nature through the implanting within us of the very seed or life-giving power of God. Birth of God is a deep, radical, inward transformation. Moreover, the new nature received at the new birth remains. It exerts a strong internal pressure towards holiness. It is the abiding influence of *his seed* within everyone who is *born of God*, which enables John to affirm without fear of contradiction that *he cannot* go on living in sin. . . . Indeed, if he should thus continue in sin, it would indicate that he has never been born again" (127).

When those born of God do sin, conviction, grief, brokenness, misery, sorrow, discontent, all of which lead to repentance, will occur.

1 John 5:16-17

(1) This first interpretation of the passage is one proposed by many Arminians, those who believe a Christian can apostatize from the faith (i.e., fall from grace) and lose his/her salvation. I. Howard Marshall represents this position. The principal elements in his explanation of the text are these.

The "brother" about whom John speaks is a genuine, born-again believer, as the usage of the term brother in 1 John would appear to demand (see 1 John 2:9;10,11; 3:10,12[twice],13,14,15,16,17; 4:20[twice],21; 5:16). The kind of "death" John has in mind is spiritual, eternal death, even as the "life" with which it is contrasted is spiritual and eternal.

That "sin" which leads to death or results in death is any sin that is incompatible with being a child of God. What sins qualify? According to 1 John, "Sin that leads to death is deliberate refusal to believe in Jesus Christ, to follow God's commands, and to love one's brothers. It leads to death because it includes a deliberate refusal to believe in the One who alone can give life, Jesus Christ, the Son of God."¹

On the other hand, sin or sins that do not lead to death "are those which are committed unwittingly and which do not involve rejection of God and his way of salvation. The sinner is overcome by temptation

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 248.

against his will; he still wants to love God and his neighbor, he still believes in Jesus Christ, he still longs to be freed from sin."² Marshall makes this distinction between deliberate apostasy ("sin that leads to death") and unwitting transgression ("sin that does not lead to death") on the basis of the Old Testament distinction between "unintentional" or "unwitting" sins, for which atonement was possible, and "deliberate" or "high-handed" sins, for which the Levitical sacrificial system provided no forgiveness (see Lev. 4:2,13,22,27; 5:15,17-18; Num. 15:27-31; Deut. 17:12).

Christians can commit both types of sin. If someone sees a brother committing sin that does not lead to death, one should pray for him and God will use the prayer to give him life. However, if someone sees a Christian brother engaged in open refusal to repent and believe, he is on his way to death. John did not require (but neither does he forbid) that anyone pray for him. Consequently, some Christians may in fact apostatize from the faith by committing sin that leads to their eternal death. The doctrine of eternal security is obviously incompatible with this view.

Several comments should be made about this interpretation. First, the text does not say that the "brother" commits sin that leads to death. John refers to a brother only with regard to sin that is not to death. Second, if the sin of the Christian brother is not the kind that leads to death, why must we pray that God would give him life? Marshall's answer is that "there is always the danger that a person who sins unconsciously or unwittingly may move to the point of sinning deliberately and then of turning his back completely on God and the way of forgiveness. Because of this danger, it is essential that Christians pray for one another lest any of their number cross the line that leads to open and deliberate rejection of the way of life. No sin is of such a kind as to prevent forgiveness, provided that we repent of it. We are to pray for our brothers that they will repent of all sin. When we do this, we have God's promise that he will hear our prayers."³ But John does not say that the brother was about to "cross over" some such line. Indeed, he says just the opposite. It was to the brother who was *not* committing sin unto death that God promised to give life.

Furthermore, it would be difficult to think of another New Testament author who affirms the doctrine of eternal security with any greater conviction or frequency than the Apostle John (John 6:37-44; 10:11-18,27-30; 17:1-2,7-12; 1 John 5:18). Other texts likewise deny what Marshall affirms (Rom. 8:29-39; 1 Cor. 1:4-9; Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 2:13-15; 2 Tim. 2:19; 1 Pet. 1:5; Jude 24). Finally, why would John not require us to pray for an apostate? Marshall says it is because "where a person himself refuses to seek salvation and forgiveness there is not much point in praying for him."⁴ But isn't that a description that applies to everyone in the world who is not a Christian? Are we not to pray for unbelievers at all?

Raymond Brown, a Roman Catholic scholar, seems to argue for a position similar to Marshall's. Those who sin unto death, he says, are "former brothers and sisters who have opted to be children of the devil by going out to the world that prefers darkness to light. Since Jesus refused to pray for such a world (John 17:9), the author's adherents should not pray for those who belong to the world (1 John 4:5). When his readers came to faith and joined the Johannine community of 'brothers,' they passed from death to life (1 John 3:14). By leaving the Community the secessionists have shown that they hate the 'brothers' and have reversed the process by passing from life to death. In that sense theirs is a sin unto death."⁵ But then in a footnote Brown balks, saying that it is unclear "whether the author would admit they ever had life, since he says that the secessionists never really belonged to the Community (1 John 2:19)."⁶ Stephen Smalley also argues for a position in many ways identical to Marshall. Whereas John "expected his readers to walk in the light as sons of God . . . he did not ignore the possibility that some believing but heretically inclined members of his community might become apostate. . . . We conclude that John attributes the possibility of 'sin which

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 248-49.

⁴ Ibid., 249.

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible, The Epistles of John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1982), 636.

⁶ Ibid., 636, n. 17.

does not lead to death' to believers, but 'mortal sin' to unbelievers who are, *or believers who have become, antichristian.*"⁷

(2) Others say the "sin unto death" is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. This view finds its most able proponent in John Stott. His arguments are as follows.

The brother about whom John speaks is not a Christian man. The term brother is being used in "the broader sense of a 'neighbor' or of a nominal Christian, a church member who professes to be a 'brother'" but who in reality is a counterfeit.⁸ He appeals to 1 John 2:9-11 for an example of this broad use of the term. Also, how can a Christian with eternal "life" (1 John 3:14) be given "life" as John affirms? "How can you give life to one who is already alive? This man is not a Christian, for Christians do not fall into death when they fall into sin."⁹ Stott agrees with Marshall that both the "life" and "death" of which John speaks are spiritual and eternal in nature.

However, neither individual in verse 16 is a Christian. The individual in verse 16b who commits "sin that leads to death" is no more a believer than the "brother" of verse 16a. He is, most likely, one of the false teachers about whom John has been warning his readers, a counterfeit Christian who is exposed by his eventual departure from the church (1 John 2:19). The sin which "leads to death" is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:22-32), that is to say, deliberate, open-eyed, and persistent rejection of Jesus Christ. Sin that leads to death, therefore, is not some solitary sin, but a settled state of sin. It is the high-handed and obstinate repudiation of the claims of Christ as made known in the gospel. Although John did not forbid us to pray for someone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit, he did not recommend it because he could not be certain that God would answer it.

Again, several observations are in order. First, although it is possible, I think it is highly unlikely that John would here refer to a non-Christian as a "brother." Most commentators agree on this point. Second, if both men in verse 16 are nonbelievers, men who reject and disbelieve the gospel of Jesus Christ, how are we to know which one has committed sin that does not lead to death and which one has committed sin that *does* lead to death? How are we supposed to differentiate between an unbeliever and a so-called "hardened" unbeliever, in order that we might pray for the former but not the latter? If John was supposed to be giving us guidance for knowing when and when not to pray, he was uncharacteristically fuzzy about it.

Third, Stott's view must also face a problem that plagues every interpretation. When we read verse 16 in the light of its immediately preceding context (verses 14-15), one gets the impression that John was describing a particular kind of prayer that we could know would always be answered. In other words, prayer for a brother whose sin is not unto death is always according to God's will. Consequently, John assured us that in response to such prayer God would give life to the errant brother. If this is correct, the implications are astounding, for it would mean that any non-Christian for whom we pray, assuming that he has not sinned unto death, will be saved, will be given eternal life. Even were we to interpret "brother" as referring to a Christian, the problem remains. In the latter case, it would imply that any sinning Christian for whom we pray will be restored and renewed. This, however, ascribes more to the power of prayer than the rest of Scripture would allow. And although it is not a final authority, experience itself teaches us that not every believer for whom we intercede responds and repents.

Also, what about the man who commits sin that leads to death? In Stott's view, John was saying that he does not recommend we pray for him because it is doubtful if that prayer will be answered. If "sin that leads to death" is blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, as Stott argues, then whoever commits this sin will never be saved. But if it is never God's will to give life to a man who is committing sin unto death, why doesn't John explicitly forbid prayer for him? The fact is, whereas John does not require that we pray for this man,

⁷ Stephen S. Smalley, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, 3 John* (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 299 (emphasis mine).

⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 190.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

neither does he prohibit such prayer. But why doesn't he forbid it if by definition (on Stott's view) the sin he has committed is unforgivable?

Donald Burdick, although not agreeing in every particular with Stott (he said the "brother" is a believer), suggests that one reason why God may not answer prayer for the man sinning to death is because "the stubborn will of the sinner may not bend. God," says Burdick, "though sovereign, chooses not to coerce the will and thus violate the integrity of the personality he created in his own image."¹⁰

But God's effectual grace in converting the sinner is persuasive, not coercive. More important still, if Burdick's point is valid, why would it not also apply to the brother who commits sin not unto death? Why should we think that God's activity with regard to the brother not sinning to death is any less "coercive" or any less a "violation" of the integrity of his personality than God's activity with regard to the man whose sin *is* unto death? Sin is a stubborn, rebellious act of one's will, both in the believer and unbeliever, regardless of who commits it. The alleged coercion or violation that concerns Burdick, irrespective of its degree or intensity, is coercion and violation nonetheless.

Perhaps a way to avoid this problem is to understand John to be saying that giving life to brethren who do not sin unto death is something that God often desires to do. Therefore, we should pray to that end. There is no guarantee that it is always God's will to answer such prayers, even though the language of verse 16a is seemingly unconditional. But even this does not explain why John does not forbid prayer for those who, by definition (on Stott's view), can never be forgiven of their sins (for remember, blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is, according to Jesus, "unforgivable").

Finally, if the man who commits sin unto death is a non-Christian, he is already dead. What, then, could John have meant by saying that if he sins deliberately and persistently, that is, if he blasphemes the Holy Spirit, he will *die*? Stott agrees that the man is already dead, but by persisting in unbelief he will die the "second death" (Rev. 20:11-15). "Spiritually dead already, he will die eternally."¹¹

(3) This third view is difficult to label. It is somewhat of a mediating position between the views of Marshall and Stott. David M. Scholer is its most convincing defender. Scholer agrees with Marshall that the "brother" is a Christian man and that "death" is spiritual and eternal in nature. He also agrees with Marshall that "sin that leads to death" must be identified and defined from within the epistle of 1 John itself. It consists primarily of hating the brethren and denying that Jesus is the Christ.

However, unlike Marshall he insists that *believers* do *not* commit sin that leads to death. Nowhere in the passage, Scholer strenuously claims, is it ever said that a true believer, a "brother," commits sin that leads to death. Believers do commit sin that does not lead to death (1 John 1:8; 2:1), and the Christian community is to intercede for them. Prayer for such sinning Christians will be used by God to renew and reconfirm the "life" they already have in Christ (1 John 3:14).

John is not primarily concerned with the sins of unbelieving outsiders, such sins that lead to death, and therefore does not speak in order that anyone should pray about it. "Prayer," says Scholer, "is not absolutely forbidden concerning the matter, nor is it said that one who commits the 'sin unto death' is forever beyond the hope of becoming a member of the believing community. But throughout 1 John there is a radical separation between the believing community and the unbelieving world so that prayer for the unbelieving world would not be a 'normal' or 'effective' practice."¹² Scholer proceeds to interpret 1 John 3:6, 9 and 5:18 in the light of 5:16-17. Simply put, the "sin" that Christians cannot commit is not a reference to the practice of sin in general or persistence in sin. Rather, the sin the believer can't commit is "sin that leads to death," namely, hatred of believers and denial of Jesus.

¹⁰ Donald W. Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle: An In-Depth Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 408.

¹¹ Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 190.

¹² David Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16-18," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1975), 243.

Essential to this view is a rephrasing of the closing statement in verse 16. The New American Standard Bible translates this phrase, “I do not say that he should make request for this.” The New International Version renders it, “I am not saying that he should pray about that.” Both of these translations make it appear that John was recommending we not pray about the sin unto death or for the one who commits it. Scholer would translate this phrase in another way: “I am not speaking concerning that (i.e., sin unto death), in order that you should pray.” In other words, John’s purpose is not to enlist prayer concerning sin unto death and those who commit it, although in another context and at another time it may be legitimate to do so. Rather, it is the sin of believers, sin that is not unto death, that he is speaking about and for which he asks that his readers pray.

To sum up, “sin that leads to death” consists principally of hating believers (what John called “murder”) and not confessing Jesus (what John called “lying”). This sin cannot be committed by believers for the simple reason that, by definition, this is the sin that makes one an unbeliever. Believers are guilty of sin that does not lead to death, that is, “they do break fellowship with God (1:6-2:1), but without participating in hating the brothers or denying Jesus.”¹³ Sin unto death is a sin of those who are “disruptive, heretical outsiders.”¹⁴ Consequently, John is not here concerned with them or their sin. His concern is with the sin of “insiders,” that is, believers within the community of faith.

This view has much to commend it. First, it looks for the meaning of “sin that leads to death” within 1 John itself and interprets “brother” and “death” in keeping with their usage in this epistle. Second, this view has the advantage of restricting sin unto death to unbelievers. Similar to Stott’s interpretation, the “death” into which the sin of these unbelievers leads them is the second, eternal death. Third, Scholer’s interpretation supplies us with a cogent solution to other problem texts in 1 John, namely, those that assert that the one born of God cannot or is not able to sin. When 1 John 5:18 (literally, “no one who is born of God sins”) is read in the light of 5:16-17, one can see the sense in taking verse 18 to mean, “no one who is born of God sins sin that leads to death.”

The only problem one might have with this view is the phrase “God will give him life.” To say this means “he will renew and reconfirm the life he already has” lacks explicit parallel in 1 John and is not, so far as I can tell, stated in precisely these terms elsewhere in the New Testament. But given the number of difficulties the other interpretations face, this one problem is slight by comparison.¹⁵

(4) The interpretation of Benjamin B. Warfield is one deserving of careful attention. Warfield agrees with Marshall on two points. The “brother” is a Christian, and it is possible for him/her to commit “sin that leads to death.” Where Warfield disagrees with Marshall (in addition to his affirmation of eternal security, which Marshall denied), is in his belief that *the death in view is physical, not spiritual*. The New Testament does refer to believers suffering illness and occasionally physical death because of persistent and unrepentant sin (see Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 5:5(?); 11:29-30; James 5:14-15,19-20).

According to Warfield’s interpretation, this brother is not sinning in such a way that his physical life is in jeopardy, and since he is a Christian he already has spiritual life. What, then, could John have meant when he said that God would give him “life” in response to our prayers? Warfield writes:

“We may suppose that by giving life there is meant rather the maintaining or perfecting than the initiating of life. He who lives below his privileges, in whom the life which he has received is languid or weak in its manifestations, is made by our prayers the recipient of fresh vital impulses, or powers, that he may live as the Christian should live. Hitherto living on a plane which can be

¹³ Ibid., 242.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ A helpful discussion of this passage that takes a view quite similar to that of Scholer is found in Robert W. Yarbrough, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, *1-3 John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 305-314. According to Yarbrough, “sin unto death” would refer to “doctrinal convictions, ethical patterns, and relational tendencies – or any combination of these three – which belie one’s claim to know the God of light (1:5)” (310). Thus “sin unto death” is “simply violation of the fundamental terms of relationship with God that Jesus Christ mediates” (310).

spoken of only as sinful – though not mortally sinful – he will through our prayers receive newness of life."¹⁶

In saying that some sin leads to death and other sin does not, John is not giving us a criterion by which we may examine the lives of other believers in order to determine whether or not we should pray for them. He differentiates between these two kinds of sin simply to tell us why it is that some of our prayers are answered and others are not. Warfield explains:

"He is merely saying that of those whom we observe to be sinning in the community, some are, in point of fact, sinning to death, and others not; and that, in point of fact, our prayers will be of benefit to the one and not to the other. Who they are who are sinning to death, we do not in any case know. John does not suppose us to know. Only, in urging us to pray for our sinful brethren, and promising us an answer to our prayers, the gift of life to them, he warns us that there are some for whom our petitions will not thus avail. But he warns us of this, not that we may avoid praying for these unhappy ones, but that we may be prepared for the failure of our prayers in their case."¹⁷

That no sinner is to be excluded from our prayers is proved, says Warfield, by noting the difference between two Greek words John uses in verse 16 (the NIV translation renders both of these words by the single English term, "pray"; whereas the ESV renders the first "ask" and the second "pray"). The word in verse 16a translated "he should pray" (*aiteo*) refers to genuine Christian prayer. But the word in verse 16b (*erotao*), likewise translated "he should pray," does not refer to intercessory prayer. Rather it denotes the asking of questions, the seeking of information, perhaps for the purpose of debate or discussion. If this understanding of the two words is correct,

"the passage would no longer have even the surface appearance of excluding one kind of sinners from our prayers. . . . It would, on the contrary, expressly require us to pray for all sinners, intimating that though there is a sin to death, that is a matter about which we are not to make anxious inquiry before we pray, but, leaving it to God, we are for ourselves to pray for all our brethren whom we observe to be living sinful lives."¹⁸

The purpose of this passage, therefore, is not to set us upon the task of determining what the sin unto death is or who may or may not have committed it. The message of the apostle is that sin is deadly, and that if we would have life we must avoid it. Let us therefore come to the aid of our brethren by praying for one another. If the sin of the brother for whom we pray is, in point of fact, sin unto death, our prayers will not be answered. His sin has taken him beyond the point at which our prayers will restore him. However, that his sin is unto death is not something we can know before we pray. On the other hand, if the sin of the brother for whom we pray is not, in point of fact, sufficiently severe and persistent to put his physical life in jeopardy, God will answer our prayer and restore this brother to the fullness of joy and spiritual energy in his daily life with Christ. But again, that his sin is not the kind that leads to death is not something we can know before we pray.

Although Warfield's interpretation is intriguing, like the others it is subject to several objections. In the first place, it is unlikely that "death" means physical death, that is to say, the chastisement by God of an errant believer. Scholer reminds us that in 1 John "death is the state in which one is before he becomes a believer and out of which he is transferred unto life (3:14; see John 5:24). The one who does not love the brothers (that is, believers) remains in death (3:14). Those who do not love (unbelievers; see 3:9-10; 4:7-8) are not of God (3:10), are in darkness (2:11; see 1:5) and do not know God (4:8; see 4:7). Thus it is clear that a 'sin unto death' is one which signifies the complete absence of any fellowship with God."¹⁹ Of course, this is not to say that it was impossible for John to shift his emphasis from spiritual to physical death, but only that it seems improbable for him to have done so.

¹⁶ Benjamin B. Warfield, "Praying for the Erring," *Expository Times* XXX (Summer 1919), 537.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 539.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ David Scholer, "Sins Within and Sins Without," 240.

Second, Warfield says that John did not mean to tell us that before we pray we could actually know whether a brother's sin is unto death or not unto death. We are to pray, and if his sin is not to death God will answer our prayer. If it is to death, our prayer will fail. But this seems overly subtle of John, if not downright obscure. A straightforward reading of verse 16 appears to indicate that the brother for whom we are to pray is the brother *whom we see* sinning the sort of sin that is not to death. If John did not expect us to be able to know whether his sin was to death, he surely chose an odd way of saying so.

Finally, there is some doubt to the validity of drawing a sharp distinction between the Greek words *aiteo* (used in verse 16a) and *erotao* (used in verse 16b). There are several verses in John's gospel (John 14:14; and 16:19,23) in which the distinction most likely does apply. In 1 John 5, however, most modern commentators insist that the words are synonymous and that the apostle's shift from one to the other is purely stylistic. Note well, though, that even should one accept the distinction between these two terms as a valid one, it doesn't necessarily follow that "death" is physical. It is conceivable that all the views we have examined are compatible with this distinction.

If push comes to shove, and I suspect many of you are waiting for my answer, I would have to endorse the view of Scholer and Yarbrough (among others who advocate this position). Therefore, No, a Christian cannot commit the sin unto death because such a sin(s) is precisely what identifies and defines a non-Christian.

Revelation 3:5

The promise to those who conquer continues in Revelation 3:5, a passage that has stirred considerable discussion and controversy. "The one who conquers," said Jesus, "will be clothed thus in white garments, and *I will never blot his name out of the book of life*. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Some are frightened by this or filled with anxiety that perhaps one day they will fail to conquer and thus have their name blotted out of the book of life. Others read it as a glorious promise of security, a solid rock of assurance, a declaration by Jesus himself that our names will *never* be deleted from God's eternal register. Let's begin our study of it by trying to identify what the "book" is that Jesus mentions. There are at least five possibilities.

(1) Colin Hemer refers to one particular custom in ancient Athens according to which the names of condemned criminals were erased from civic registers before their execution. The Greek word translated "to erase" (*exaleiphein*), "was the technical term for such degradation."²⁰ As insightful as this may be, it is more likely that we should look for a *biblical* background to this imagery.

(2) In the OT the "book of life" (or its equivalents) was *a register of the citizens of the theocratic community of Israel*. To have one's name written in the book of life implied the privilege of participation in the temporal blessings of the theocracy, while to be erased or blotted out of this book meant exclusion from those blessings. In other words, this book had reference to *the rights of citizenship* for the Jewish people (cf. Ex. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; Isa. 4:3).

(3) The concept of a "book" was also used to portray God's all-inclusive decree (Ps. 139:16); i.e., the very days of one's life are ordained and written in God's "book" before one of them occurs.

(4) There is also the notion of "books" of judgment in which are recorded men's deeds. They serve as that by which or from which one shall be judged (Dan. 7:10; Rev. 20:12).

(5) The most vivid usage, however, is the concept of the book as the register of those who have been chosen for salvation from eternity past. It is not temporal or earthly blessings that are in view, but participation in the eternal kingdom of God as recipients of eternal life (see Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Heb.

²⁰ Hemer, 148.

12:23; Rev. 13:8; 17:8). It would appear from these texts that not all are written in this book, but only the elect.

If it is this fifth and final view which Jesus had in mind, and I believe it is, there are three possible interpretations.

On the one hand, Jesus may be saying that it is possible for a sinning, unrepentant Christian (such as were many at Sardis) to fail to overcome or conquer and thereby to forfeit their place in the book of life. Their names, already inscribed in the book, will be erased, signifying the loss of their salvation.

Others suggest that to have one's name blotted out refers to something other than salvation. In Revelation 3:1 Jesus referred to the people at Sardis as having a "name" for being alive, i.e., they had a reputation for spiritual vitality. The idea, then, is that such people are saved, but will forfeit any hope of an honorable position in the coming kingdom of God. They are saved, but will experience shame at the last day. It is not the loss of life, per se, but the loss of a certain *quality* of life that otherwise could have been theirs. Thus, what one loses by having their name erased from the book of life is *eternal rewards* in the kingdom.

Several factors lead me to conclude that John does *not* envision the possibility of a true Christian forfeiting salvation. We should begin by noting that all of the other promises to the "conqueror/overcomer" are coined in positive terms with no threat (implied or explicit) of losing a salvation once gained (see 2:7,11,17,26-27; 3:12,21). This isn't to suggest that Christians can't backslide and sin badly. The rebukes in these seven letters indicate otherwise. Nevertheless, the evidence of the reality of true saving faith is *perseverance* (i.e., "overcoming"; cf. 1 John 2:19).

If it is asked why this promise is couched in negative terms, the answer is obvious: Jesus couldn't say "I will write his name in the book of life" because the names of the "overcomers" (i.e., the elect) were *already* written in the book from eternity past (see Rev. 13:8; 17:8). There is no indication in Scripture, least of all in Revelation, of additional names being inscribed in the book as a reward for faithfulness or perseverance. Rather, ***faithfulness and perseverance are the evidence or fruit of having had one's name written in the book.*** Those who worship the "beast" do so precisely because their names were *not* written in the book in eternity past (13:8; 17:8).

We need to look more closely at Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 to understand what our Lord is saying in 3:5. According to 13:8,

"all who dwell on earth will worship it [i.e., the Beast], everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain" (Rev. 13:8)

Similarly, in 17:8,

"The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come."

Note carefully that there are two and only two groups of people. On the one hand are those whose names have *not* been written in the book of life from eternity past. They "worship" and "marvel" at the Beast. The second group consists of those whose names *have been written* in the book of life, which constitutes the *reason* why they refuse to give their allegiance to the enemy of Christ. Nowhere does it suggest a third group: people whose names had been written in the book in eternity past but, because they worshiped the Beast, failed to overcome or conquer and thus have their names blotted out.

In other words, as John Piper explains, "having our name in the book of life from the foundation of the world seems to mean that God will keep you from falling and grant you to persevere in allegiance to God. Being in the book means you *will not* apostatize."²¹ Or again, being written in the book means that God is

²¹ John Piper, "Can the Regenerate Be Erased from the Book of Life?" (12/22/06 at www.desiringgod.org).

committed to guarding your heart so that you *will* “conquer” and “overcome” the Beast by not yielding to the temptation to worship his name or receive his mark.

Those who worship the Beast do so because their names were not in the book. Having one’s name written in the book from eternity past is what guarantees a life that overcomes, a life that perseveres, a faith that conquers. Piper summarizes:

“This fits with Revelation 3:5, ‘He who overcomes . . . I will not erase his name from the book of life.’ The triumph *required* in 3:5 is *guaranteed* in 13:8 and 17:8. This is not a contradiction any more than for Paul to say, ‘Work out your salvation . . . for God is at work in you to will and to do his good pleasure’ (Philippians 2:12-13). It is not nonsense to state the condition: if you conquer, God will not erase your name (3:5); *and* to state the assurance: if your name is written, you will conquer (13:8 and 17:8). God’s ‘written-down-ones’ really *must* conquer, and really *will* conquer. One side highlights our responsibility; the other highlights God’s sovereignty.”²²

Therefore, this declaration of Jesus is a promise to the elect that nothing will ever, by any means (he uses a double negative), prevent them from possessing the eternal inheritance to which they have been ordained. In other words, we must take note of what Jesus does not say. He does *not* say that anyone *will* be erased from the book of life. Rather, he says the overcomers will *not* be erased. His word is *a promise of security* to overcomers, not a threat of insecurity to those who lapse. So again, Jesus nowhere says he will erase names previously inscribed in the book of life.

When the disciples returned to Jesus, celebrating their victory over the power of the Devil, our Lord responded by alerting them to an even greater, more glorious, indescribably reassuring truth: “Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20).

What joy! What comfort! What incentive to love him and praise him and serve him. Jesus will *never* blot my name out of the book of life!

²² Ibid.