

Can a Child of God ever be Lost?

David Gooding

A Myrtlefield House Article



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PART ONE

1

Where the Problem Lies

Everyone believes in the eternal security of the believer—everyone, that is, who accepts the authority of holy Scripture. They do so for the simple reason that the Bible asserts time and time again that the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ is eternally secure.

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. (John 10:27–29)

The believer is secure, then, and not only so, but God wants him to know that he is. 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life' (1 John 5:13). What is more, God wants to put that knowledge utterly beyond question and to that end he has taken the extraordinary step of swearing an oath.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, 'Surely I will bless you and multiply you.' And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. 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 for ever after the order of Melchizedek. (Heb 6:13–20)

God desired to convince the heirs of the promise with the unchangeability of his intention. Indeed, Paul tells us that the principles on which salvation works were devised on purpose so that believers might be sure of obtaining their eternal inheritance.

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith . . . That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring. (Rom 4:13, 16)

No one who accepts the Bible as God's word, then, can have the slightest doubt that God wants us to know that the believer's salvation and the believer's inheritance are eternally secure.

Where doubt may well arise, however, is here: can a believer be sure that once he has believed, he will always remain a believer; that he will persist as a believer all the way through life to the end? If he can, then he certainly can be sure that he is, and ever will remain, eternally saved.

But if he cannot be sure that he will remain a believer, if it is possible that he might one day lose his faith and cease to be a believer, then of course he cannot be sure he will retain his eternal life. 'He who believes has eternal life' (John 5:24), but there is no scripture in the whole of the Bible that says, 'He who believes has eternal life; and even if he thereafter loses or throws away his faith and ceases to be a believer—never mind he still has eternal life even if now he is not a believer at all.'

Here then is the heart of the matter. Can a genuine believer lose his faith, cease altogether to be a believer and so be lost after all? Or can a genuine believer be confident that his faith will endure, prove indestructible, and that he will remain a believer and therefore be eternally secure?

On a matter of such fundamental importance, let us go first to the Lord Jesus.

Once a Believer, Always a Believer?

According to our Lord a proper understanding of the parable of the Sower is basic to the understanding of all other parables, and much other New Testament doctrine as well (Mark 4:13).

When the seed is sown, we are told, there are four results, only one of which yields any fruit. Only one therefore is any good. Two of the results, however, have direct bearing on our question.

Here, to begin with, is our Lord's description of those who fall on the rock.

And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. (Luke 8:13)

So here are people who believe—and we cannot deny that they believe for our Lord himself says they do. But they only believe for a while and then their faith disappears and they fall away. So it is obviously possible for people like this to lose their faith.

But what kind of people are they? Are they people who in genuine repentance and faith have trusted the Saviour, have been born of God, received eternal life and been indwelt by the Holy Spirit—and then under trial or persecution have abandoned their faith and given up their profession of Christianity?

No, quite clearly not. Our Lord puts the matter beyond all doubt. He tells us plainly who these people are and why they wither: 'these have no root.' They never did have, apparently; it is not that they developed roots and then somehow the roots withered away. The word of God never took root in their hearts. It may have germinated or sprouted in their minds, and to that extent it is different from the seed that was sown by the roadside, which was taken away by the devil before it had time even to germinate. But there was never any root, and therefore never any possibility of continued growth or fruit bearing.

Our Lord's description, then, of these people, 'They believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away', alerts us to the fact that the word *believe* is used in the New Testament in different senses. It is used, of course, of the genuine faith by which those who believe are justified and have peace with God (Rom 5:1); it is also used, however, to describe the response of people who have neither genuinely repented nor genuinely believed. The believing is superficial; they have never become genuine children of God.

Let us take an example.

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because

he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man. (John 2:23–25)

Here is a group of people who believed in some sense in our Lord's claims, simply because the miracles he performed before their very eyes left them no option but to admit that he was someone special. Christ, however, could see into their hearts and he saw that their faith was only superficial. It had not affected their hearts; it had not led them to repentance for sin or to trust Christ for salvation. Their faith was not of that solid, permanent kind, which effectively works in the hearts of those who really believe. And our Lord passed them by.

Another example.

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in 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.' (John 8:31–32)

John says they had believed on the Lord, and our Lord proceeded to tell them what they must do to show themselves as his genuine disciples. But they got very angry; they were not going to let Jesus Christ or anybody else tell them that they were slaves to sin and needed liberating. They picked up stones to stone him and Christ was obliged to tell them that they were neither children of Abraham nor of God, they were of their father the devil (vv. 39–44).

Once more, then, we notice that these were not people who had genuinely repented of sin, genuinely trusted the Saviour and then somehow lost their faith. They never had repented. They believed for a while but they had no root. Their faith was superficial and they eventually showed themselves for what they were—they had never been true believers.

One more example.

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)

This time it concerns teachers of such extreme false doctrine that the Apostle John calls them antichrists (v. 18). The solemn thing is that at one time they were members of a Christian church, professing believers whom everybody took to be genuine. But then they began to teach dire heresy about the Lord Jesus, and this is how John diagnosed their true stage. 'They went out from us,' says John, and he means it in the doctrinal as well as in the ecclesiastical sense, 'but they were not of us.' That is, they never were true believers, never true members of the Body of Christ. And not content to leave it there, John states categorically, '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.'

We should notice John's statement very carefully. He is saying that, if they had been true believers to start with, they would not have abandoned the fundamental apostolic doctrines concerning the person of the Lord Jesus. They would have continued doctrinally and ecclesiastically with the Apostles. As we are about to observe, the mark of a true believer is that he does continue in the faith and with the Lord and his people. But they were not true

believers and according to John they never had been. Outwardly they had professed to believe, but their belief had only lasted for a while and then they had gone out and shown themselves for what they were.

These examples are enough for the moment to show that the New Testament uses the word 'believe' in different senses. Most frequently, of course, it is used of genuine believers, but not always. Not all those who are said to believe turn out to be genuine believers; some prove to be only superficial believers. And in the examples we have considered, those who believe for a while and then fall away are described as never having had any root; never having been children of God, never having been a living part of the Body of Christ.

The mark of a true believer

With this we return to the parable of the Sower and to our Lord's description of those represented by the seed which fell on the good ground. 'As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience [endurance, persistence]' (Luke 8:15).

The only result that is of any use is the one which produces fruit, and these last two all-important words describe the utterly indispensable condition for producing fruit: endurance and persistence. That is true in nature and it is certainly true in grace. Here then is the evidence that the word has been truly received and salvation has taken place: the person concerned endures, persists in faith and produces fruit.

But if endurance is so all-important, a question necessarily arises. Can anyone be sure that, having once genuinely placed his or her faith in the Saviour, they will in fact endure and persist in faith? Or, even though at the moment they have a root in themselves, could they later find themselves so overwhelmed with trials and testing of one kind or another that their faith is altogether uprooted and destroyed? If that is a real possibility, then no believer can be sure that he will endure, and therefore no believer is eternally secure.

Since the matter is so immeasurably important, it is not surprising that Scripture itself raises the question and explicitly answers it several times.

What does James say?

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (1:2-4)

The word 'testing' (*peirasmos*) is translated 'temptation' in some versions. But it denotes more than some minor temptation, such as to overeat or sleep too much. It is in fact the word used by our Lord in the parable of the Sower in his description of those 'who believe for a while, and *in time of testing* fall away' (Luke 8:13). James is talking about trials of such seriousness that they test nothing less than whether we are true believers at all, or not. With such a fundamental matter at stake, how could we possibly do as James says and 'count it all joy' when we face the trial?

If the outcome were uncertain, if there was the possibility that the trial might break our faith or show it to be not genuine, we surely could not count it all joy when we encounter the trial; we should be consumed with anxiety. But James tells us how we can face and go through such trials with joy. We are to *know*—notice the term—not ‘feel’ or ‘hope’ or ‘pray’ but *know* that, where there is genuine faith to start with, trial, tribulation, persecution, testing of whatever kind will but produce endurance. *Endurance*, we remember, is the mark of the seed which fell into the ground, the mark of those in the good soil who prove themselves genuine by bearing fruit with endurance (v. 15).

Here, then, is one of God’s great facts, which true believers are entitled to lay hold on. God wants them to know that their faith will endure, come what may, and by enduring, eternal security is theirs.

What does Paul say?

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul begins chapter 5 by summing up his argument thus far.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (v. 1)

He then proceeds to show that in addition to justification and peace with God there are other glorious things which we as believers may enjoy on that very same ground of faith (vv. 1–5).

Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand . . . (v. 2)

Our standing before God is one of grace. That is, God has not given us a mere conditional acceptance and put us on probation, so that if we do not come up to scratch our acceptance will be cancelled. Our standing is in grace, which is equally unconditional as the grace by which we were justified and saved.

. . . and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (v. 2)

We can rejoice—boast, or exult. The word ‘rejoice’ does not signify joy in the sense of bubbling over with lovely feelings of happiness, but rather ‘confident exultation’ or ‘boastings’ in hope; that is, in the New Testament sense of sure and certain expectation of attaining the glory of God. At the present moment it remains true of believers, as of all others, that all have sinned in the past, and still do come short of the glory of God in the present (3:23). But now that we have been justified by faith we may be utterly certain that one day, when the Lord is manifested, we shall be altogether like him, for we shall see the Lord as he is and shall be transformed into his likeness (see 1 John 3:2).

But now comes the rub. If this justification, this standing in grace, this certain expectation of attaining the glory of God, all depends on our faith—that is, on our believing—what would happen if tribulation came along so severe that it broke our faith? All would be lost, of course. We urgently need to know therefore what the position is.

Can tribulation ever totally break and destroy a believer's faith?

Not surprisingly, Paul now proceeds to deal with the question. Everything that he has subsequently to say about the developing life of sanctification and the eventual glorification which is to be built on our initial faith, depends on his answer to the question. If we could not be sure that our faith will survive all tribulation, we could be sure of nothing. This would be the Achilles' heel of God's whole scheme for our salvation.

Paul's answer is absolutely clear and leaves nothing uncertain. We can exult, he says, even in the face of tribulation.

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance . . .

(v. 3)

The Authorised Version translates this last word as 'patience', and that has given rise to the idea that what an impatient man needs to cure him of his impatience is a good dose of tribulation. But the word which Paul uses does not mean patience as distinct from impatience, but *endurance* as distinct from giving up, or being overcome. Paul is using the same word as James uses, and both of them are using the word which our Lord uses in the parable of the Sower.

The good seed is that which, when it is sown, not only springs up but also puts down roots and, because it has a root-hold, when the time of testing comes it continues growing, bears fruit with endurance, and manifests itself as good seed. So this is precisely what Paul, in agreement with James, is saying—the fact that a man endures marks him out as a genuine believer.

and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (vv. 4–5)

Finally, Paul agrees with James over a third point. Where there is true faith to start with, tribulation works endurance; and our confidence is based, not on feelings, or on hope, or on natural high-spirits, and certainly not on presumption; it is based on knowledge—firm, calm, God-given knowledge. We exult in tribulations, knowing that tribulation works endurance.

What does Peter say?

We have heard James and Paul, now let us hear Peter on this topic. In the first chapter of his first Epistle he reminds us of our initial experience—we have been 'born again' (1:23). He has already reminded us of the inheritance that awaits us and of the final stage of our salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (vv. 4–5). Meanwhile, as we travel life's road, we are being guarded by the power of God through faith (v. 5).

There can be no doubt that the power of God is altogether sufficient to keep us safe until the final state of our salvation puts us forever beyond all danger. But if, as Peter states, the power of God is made effective through our faith, the question once more arises whether we

can be sure that our faith will prove adequate, or whether under testing and trial it will prove to be the weak link in the chain, break down, and we shall lose us everything.

Peter is aware of the question, and answers it explicitly by comparing and contrasting our faith with gold tested by fire so as to eliminate all dross and leave behind nothing but pure gold. The fire in the goldsmith's crucible is not intended and is not allowed to destroy any of the genuine gold, but only to refine it. So it is with our faith. Tests and trials of various kinds are necessary and allowed by God, not to destroy our faith but to purify it. When the trials and tests have done their work the result will be that 'the genuine part of our faith'¹ will be found unto praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ (v. 7).

Our faith is like gold, then. God will no more allow trials and testing to destroy it than a goldsmith would allow the fire of his crucible to destroy his valuable piece of gold. This is gloriously reassuring. But as if it were not enough, the Holy Spirit now contrasts our faith with gold in order to give us even more assurance. Gold, he points out, is so valuable that it is worthwhile refining it, even though it is a corruptible thing and will ultimately perish (v. 18). Our faith, by contrast, is of much more value than gold that perishes. Why? For the obvious reason that it is an imperishable thing, and when Christ comes and eternity dawns the 'genuine part of our faith' will be found to have been imperishable, to the eternal praise and honour and glory of God.

¹ Greek: *to dokimion hymōn tēs pisteōs*. The renderings 'the trial of your faith' (KJV) and 'the proof of your faith' (RV) are mistaken. It is not the process of the trying of our faith that is precious. It is the genuine, solid faith, purged of all dross, which emerges as a result of the trial that is precious. See *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, London, 1959 *sub voce*.

The Secret of the Believer's Endurance

We have now seen that James, Paul and Peter all unite to assure us that, where there is genuine faith to start with, testing of whatever kind will but produce endurance and we are to know that this is so. But by what infallible means is this endurance secured so that we can be so sure of it? The answer is, the intercession of Christ.

For our instruction and encouragement, the experience of this intercession by one of the leading apostles is held out as an example and precedent. When Peter first came to Christ, he was re-named and made into a living stone (John 1:40–42). His conversion became a model for ours. When we come to Christ we are built up as living stones into God's spiritual house, just like Peter was when he came to Christ.

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet 2:4–5)

But it is common knowledge that at a later point in his life Peter denied the Lord with oaths and curses. How then are we to understand what happened to him? In the early stages of his Christian experience he was so sure: 'We have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God' (John 6:69). There is no doubting the genuineness of his faith; our Lord attributed it to the revelation given to him personally by the Father (Matt 16:17).

On the other hand, there is no denying that he gave up the confession of his faith. If we had been standing nearby when he was using all the oaths and curses he knew to convince everybody that he was not a believer, what could we have thought (26:74)? Having been a genuine believer, had he now lost his faith and temporarily become an unbeliever, and then he eventually started to believe again? Or how was it?

Fortunately, we are not left to our own conjectures on this score. Scripture tells us explicitly what happened. As he has to do before he can assault a believer's faith, Satan asked to be allowed to sift the twelve apostles like wheat (see Job 1:9–12; 2:1–10; Luke 22:31). Permission was granted, but our Lord knew all this in advance and made special and particular intercession for Peter. Said he, 'I have prayed for you (second person singular, referring not to the twelve apostles as a group but to Peter individually) that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers' (Luke 22:32).

First we should notice exactly what it was our Lord prayed for. He did not pray that Peter would not lose his courage and deny him. Indeed, he told Peter there and then that he would deny him three times (v. 34). Nor was he taken in by Peter's protest, sincere though that protest was, that he was ready to go with Christ to prison and to death. Christ knew that

Peter would break down, his nerve would fail and his testimony would be ruined. He told Peter it would be so, but he prayed for Peter that his faith should not fail.

We know from the rest of the story that Peter's faith did not fail. Indeed, his faith in the Lord was stronger after he had denied him. Before it happened, Peter would not believe the Lord when he said that he would deny him. But when he had denied the Lord for the third time, the cock crowed and the Lord turned and looked on Peter (v. 61). In that moment Peter's unwillingness to believe the Lord vanished. Now he knew that everything the Lord said was true and he believed the Lord more than he had ever believed him before.

Next we should notice that our Lord not only prayed that Peter's faith should not fail, and it didn't; but he indicated in advance that Peter would certainly be restored. 'And when you have turned again,' said Christ, 'strengthen your brothers' (v. 32). Notice it is not, 'if ever you turn back again,' but 'when you have turned again.' There was no doubt about it. The Lord had prayed for him; his faith would not fail, he would come back and he would strengthen his brothers.

Questions arising

First, can we be sure that our Lord will pray for every believer as he did for Peter? Some have suggested that Peter might have been a special case and that we cannot conclude from the fact that Christ maintained Peter's faith by his intercession that he will necessarily do the same for all believers. The idea, that Christ would have favourites and pray for some of those who trust him and not for others, is distinctly odd, especially in the light of scriptures which assure us that 'the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him' (Rom 10:12). But we are not left to speculate; we are explicitly told.

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. (Heb 7:25)

If a promise like this does not include every believer, no believer could be sure of any promise. But just in case we need further assurance that our Lord's intercession covers not only eminent apostles but also every individual believer all down the centuries, we may surely let ourselves be convinced by our Lord's own statement made in the course of his famous prayer of intercession, 'I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word' (John 17:20).

Peter's attempt to walk on the water

Now that the point has been established by straightforward statements of Scripture, we can afford to use an incident in the life of our Lord as an illustration of the way he saves to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him.

After the feeding of the five thousand, our Lord told his disciples to get into a boat and cross the sea, while he dismissed the crowds and then went up into a mountain to pray (Matt 14:22-33). The sea crossing was very rough, but while they toiled he prayed. Then in the fourth watch he came to them, walking on the sea (v. 25). When Peter got over his

astonishment at seeing Jesus actually walking on the water, he thought he would like to walk on the water himself. So he asked the Lord to command him come to him on the water. Our Lord told him to come and Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water towards Jesus. At first all went well but presently the violence of the wind terrified Peter and he began to sink. Our interest lies especially in what happened next.

There is no doubt that Peter's attempt to walk on the water was a genuine act of faith and not *presumption*. Faith is not deciding on one's own initiative to do something and then expecting Christ to back it up. True faith is a response to some word of the Lord and the Lord told Peter to come to him on the water. Peter was acting and walking in true faith. It is likewise clear that he allowed fear to overcome his faith; he gave way to doubt when he should not have done and our Lord rebuked him for it. 'O you of little faith, why did you doubt?' (v. 31).

But notice what our Lord did not do. He did not let Peter sink and he certainly did not get angry with him and push him under as a punishment for his lapse of faith. Nor did he first lecture him on the folly of doubt and unbelief and then save him. Peter was sinking; in a moment or two he would be gone and there was no time to lose. Immediately therefore, as soon as Peter cried 'Lord save me', Jesus stretched out his hand, grabbed hold of him and held him up on the water. Only then did he rebuke him for giving way to doubt.

The case of Judas Iscariot

Christ will do the same for all believers who find themselves sinking and their faith overcome by fear and doubt, if they call on the Lord to save them. On the other hand, we must admit that there was another disciple for whom Christ did not pray, who was lost. That was Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, one of the Twelve, who would betray him; but then he was never a true believer (John 6:70–71).

Nonetheless it is very interesting and instructive to note what Christ had to say on the topic in the course of his high priestly prayer (John 17). As he spoke of how well he had guarded those whom God had given to him, he had to report that one of the disciples had got lost. But he did not simply report the fact, he obviously felt constrained to give an account. A disciple could not simply be reported lost; the loss had to be explained.

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. (v. 12)

We notice the explanation once more. Judas has been lost because he never was a true believer. Admittedly, when we first hear it, it is difficult to take it in. Judas was chosen as an apostle; he was treasurer of the apostolic band (12:6). He went out on preaching tours with the other apostles (Matt 10:4), and presumably performed miracles like they did. But it was not the case that at the beginning he genuinely believed, then later under stress he lost his faith and ceased to believe, or even threw his faith away. He never was a believer; 'Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil?' said Christ (John 6:64, 70–71).

The case of Judas is an awful reminder of how far it is possible for someone to go in the direction of appearing to be a believer without being one.

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 7:22–25)

Not, 'Once I knew you, but now I disown you'; but, 'I never knew you'.

Christ fulfilling the will of the Father

To revert to our Lord's High Priestly prayer in John 17, it is surely a very moving thing to hear him rendering account to his Father for those whom the Father had entrusted to his keeping. It reminds us of what he told his disciples on an earlier occasion; that he was, and still is under a solemn duty imposed on him by the Father not to lose so much as one single believer. He said, 'I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me' (6:38). We have only to be told this to see at once that that will, whatever it is, shall be done, and done to perfection. It is utterly unthinkable that Christ should fail to do it even to the tiniest extent. Then, what is God's will?

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. (v. 39)

So no believer will ever be lost. To suppose the impossible for a moment; if so much as one believer were finally lost, Christ would have failed to do the Father's will and would thereby be proved to be a sinner.

In spite of this assurance some might still be worried. They would readily agree that Christ will most certainly not lose any of those whom the Father has given him; but how can we be sure that we are among those whom the Father has given to the Son?

Fortunately for them, and for us all, our Lord has put the matter beyond doubt. Having given the assurance once, he repeated it a second time in slightly different terms. This time he said,

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. (v. 40)

This puts our minds at rest, for we know that we are looking to the Son as our only hope and we do believe on him as our only Saviour. Our salvation is therefore eternally secured by the fact that the Son will not and cannot fail to do the Father's will.

The Nature of the Work done in a Believer when he is Born Again

We ought now to face a possible objection.

‘What you have proved so far is that a believer will not be allowed to lose his or her faith under pressure of insupportable trial, irresistible temptation, or Satan’s attack. You have not proved that it is impossible for a believer, of his own free will, to throw his faith away. But, unless God removes our free will altogether, we must be able at any point along the line to deliberately opt out of salvation, choose to break off all relationship with Christ, throw back in God’s face, so to speak, the eternal life which he gave us when we originally received Christ, and go our own way. If that were not possible, then we would have lost our free will and salvation would have reduced us to the level of mere machines.’

Free will

The first thing to be said about this objection is that, if it were true, it would prove too much; far more than even those who advance it would wish it to. For our part, we would not want to assert that salvation has taken away our free will; but then we shall still have our free will in heaven, shall we not? If, therefore, it was possible for a believer here on earth to use his free will to throw away his salvation, what would there be to stop him doing the same in heaven?

It is no answer to say that in heaven a believer will no longer be dragged down by his old sinful nature and surrounded by such unmixed joy that he will never want to rebel against God. Before Satan fell he had no evil nature to drag him down either, and he too was surrounded by unmixed joy. Yet he used his free will to rebel against God in spite of it all. If we believe, then, as we most surely do, that in heaven no believer will ever use his free will to reject the Saviour, we must look for a better reason why that will be so then, and we must also see whether that reason does not already apply now.

The explanation is to be found in the nature of what transpires when a person receives the Saviour and is born again. We shall now see from Scripture that what happens at regeneration is irreversible.

Christ is the final judge

Our Lord informs us that he has been appointed as the final judge by the Father (John 5:22). We are to understand, therefore, that, when a few verses later he speaks about judgment, he is speaking with all the authority of the final judge.

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life. (v. 24)

Only the final judge himself could make such a pronouncement, for, as we see from the terms he uses, this pronouncement is not a tentative, *pro tem* ruling designed to remain in force provisionally until the final court is able to survey the complete evidence and reach a final and eternal verdict. This pronouncement by Christ *is* the final verdict. He says that the one who believes has—not just life—eternal life; that is, the life of eternity. And he has it now.

Moreover, he is assured that he will never come into judgment; that is, adverse judgment. He will never be condemned. The assurance is unlimited and covers, of course, the final judgment. To make it plain that the verdict he is giving is the verdict of the final judge, he adds that the one who believes has (already) passed out of death into life. The life referred to is once more eternal life. To see the significance of the phrase in this context, we should put it alongside another pronouncement which our Lord once made. He said that when he eventually sits as judge on the throne of his glory and passes his verdict on the nations, ‘these (on the left hand) shall go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life’ (Matt 25:41, 46). Eternal punishment, eternal life—these are the two possible outcomes of the final and eternal judgment.

The first wonderful thing for the believer is that he does not have to wait until he stands before the Great White Throne before he hears the final verdict pronounced upon himself. Meeting Christ in this life, hearing his word and believing on him that sent him, the believer is assured by the judge himself that as far as the believer is concerned the final verdict is settled. The believer has already passed out of death into eternal life.

The second wonderful thing is that, since this verdict is the final verdict, it is irreversible. As Paul puts it, ‘Who shall bring any charge against those whom God has chosen, when it is God who justifies?’ (Rom 8:33). Will anyone dispute God’s verdict, or question his declaration that those who believe in Christ have been justified from all things? And if no one brings a charge there will be no case to try, nor will any charge be proved against them.

But just suppose, for the sake of the argument, that a charge is brought and proved, ‘Who shall condemn?’ (v. 34). Who shall bring in the ‘Guilty’ verdict and pronounce the sentence? No one would have the right to except the sinless Son of Man. But he will not do so, for it was he who died for the accused and bore the penalty of their sin. What is more, he has been raised from the dead and intercedes for them at the right hand of God. He will never desert his intercession for them and so far deny the value of his atonement as to condemn and sentence them for sins for which he himself suffered.

This then is the eternal legal implication of the declaration which God makes over every one who repents and trusts the Saviour. Upon their faith in Christ, he there and then justifies them—declares them right with himself. And, since ‘God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind’ (Num 23:19), this declaration of justification stands eternally irrevocable.

In Christ we are a new creation

But in addition to this legal verdict, the work done at regeneration within the believer himself is also irreversible. Human beings are born into this world as creatures of God; fallen creatures it is true, but still creatures. And even if they refuse salvation and are lost eternally, they will never cease to be creatures of God. When a man is born again, a new creation takes place. 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come' (2 Cor 5:17). This new creation likewise lasts eternally. The person is 'born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God' (1 Pet 1:23).

The seed is in fact 'God's seed', and Scripture declares that it abides, or remains, in the believer. God's seed carries God's nature and this is what accounts for the fact that no one who has been born of God can thereafter go on living in sin.

No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. (1 John 3:9)

John does not mean that the believer is sinlessly perfect and never sins. He has himself warned us that it is quite false to say that we have no sin or that we have not sinned (1:8, 10). At the same time, he has assured us that, if anyone does sin, there is provision for us. Christ, who is the propitiation for our sins, acts as our advocate with the Father (2:1–3). But, while true believers can and do sin from time to time, John asserts that they will not continue living in sin. They cannot go on sinning because God's seed, God's very nature, abides permanently in them and constantly exerts its divine power and pressure towards making them holy; and when they temporarily lapse, draws them back to holy living again.

Contrariwise, John declares that if a person does continue in the practice of sin, that shows, not that he once had the seed of God abiding in him and then lost or rejected it; it shows that he never had it. He was never born of God at all (1 John 2:19; 3:8–10).

We thank God then for this double assertion, that God's seed remains permanently in the believer and therefore he cannot go on in sin; and here lies our confidence that no true believer will ever throw away his faith and the eternal life that God has given him. And incidentally, if it is true even in this life that, when believers are still beset by sin in the flesh, they cannot go on in sin, we can be certain that when they stand in the presence of God in heaven, all sinful nature gone for ever, they will never do as Satan did and rebel against God. It will not be because free will has been removed; it will be because by their consent the divine, imperishable and unsinning nature was ineradicably implanted within them at their new birth.

We are led, moreover, to this same conclusion when we consider how Scripture talks of the believer's spiritual union with Christ. The believer is not only 'in Christ' (Rom 8:1) and Christ is 'in him' — unless he is not a genuine believer at all (2 Cor 13:5); the believer is 'joined to Christ' (see Rom 7:4). By being baptized in the Holy Spirit and being made to drink of the Holy Spirit he has become a living member of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 5:30); and being joined to the Lord he has become 'one spirit with him' (1 Cor 6:17). In other words, he is no longer a completely separate, independent individual. In trusting and receiving Christ, he

has agreed that Christ shall live in him and that he shall be joined to Christ and Christ will neither give him up nor let him go.

Christ is the Bread of Life

With this let us look again at John 6. We have already seen how in this chapter our Lord declares that he will not lose so much as one of those who have believed on him. Now let us notice his superiority as the bread of life to the manna which was provided to maintain the Israelites in the wilderness. Redeemed out of Egypt by the blood of the Passover lamb, the Israelites faced a problem. How could they be sustained so as to survive the journey through the desert and arrive and enter safe and sound into their promised inheritance? The provision for their maintenance was the manna from heaven. 'Man ate of the bread of the angels' (Ps 78:25).

But it proved inadequate. 'Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.' They did indeed, and Christ repeats it twice to emphasize the sorry fact (John 6:49, 58). They died in the wilderness and so never got into the promised land. And we know why they died. When they arrived at the borders of the promised inheritance and heard the spies' report, they rejected the inheritance and refused to enter in. And not only the inheritance, they despised God. They refused to believe him in spite of all his miracles, tempted him time and time again, saw his glory and despised it as well, rebelled, refused to listen to him and turned back from following him (Num 14:9, 11, 22-23, 35, 41, 43). And, of course, they died. Eating manna every day of the week had obviously not changed their rebellious hearts nor given them a new nature. And no amount of manna eating saved them from God's judgment on their apostasy.

I, the LORD, have spoken. Surely this will I do to all this wicked congregation who are gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die.
(Num 14:35)

So that generation of Israelites in the wilderness used their free will to repudiate all the blessings which they had professed to receive through their redemption from Egypt.

How is it, then, with us believers today? We have been redeemed by the blood of our Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7; 1 Pet 1:18-20) and we have an inheritance ahead, reserved in heaven for us (1 Pet 1:4). We have, moreover, bread from heaven to eat, as they had manna. Is it not then possible for us to do as they did; having started out from our 'Egypt' and having eaten our bread from heaven, can we not subsequently reject God, the inheritance and everything to do with it, and die spiritually and eternally as they did physically?

Happily, we are not left to decide the answer for ourselves. Our Lord has pronounced upon it.

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. (John 6:48-50)

This emphatic contrast between the effectiveness of the manna and Christ's own effectiveness as the bread of life is all the more striking because Israel's eating of the manna in the desert was not a merely physical matter. The manna was sent miraculously by God; so eating it was in some sense, or should have been, an experience of fellowship with God.

And all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. (1 Cor 10:3-4)

We naturally ask therefore, what is the difference between Israel's experience of Christ through eating the manna, and our experience of Christ through eating the bread of life? Our Lord explains it.

1. While the manna was certainly miraculous bread, it was only a physical substance and at best a symbol of fellowship with God. Christ is the true bread, the real thing as distinct from the symbol.

2. While the manna in some sense came down from heaven and mediated to the people some spiritual experience, yet at best it was a very pale pointer to our Lord's coming down from heaven, which was nothing less than the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. The manna fell as a mere mindless physical substance; the bread of life was a person who came down with a person's deliberate purpose and intention to fulfil the will of God; namely, not to lose one single person who saw and believed the Saviour.

3. While the manna was certainly food, it was not alive; but the bread of life is himself alive. 'I am the living bread,' he says (John 6:51). He does not simply maintain the life a person has already, like natural bread maintains physical life without itself being alive; he is a living life, which lives out its own life with all its powers and desires within the believer.

4. While the living bread is real food—'For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink' (v. 55)—we are not to understand this in a material sense but in a spiritual sense, as our Lord later makes clear (v. 63). Just as when physical food enters a person it does not remain a completely separate entity within, so when we eat the bread of life there is an intermingling between him and us. We abide in him, and he in us (v. 56).

To help us understand this, our Lord cites his own relationship of life with the Father. Of course, we must never think of ourselves as becoming part of the Trinity, but our relationship of life with Christ is analogous with that of Christ's with the Father. 'As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me' (v. 57).

It is then in the light of this intermingling of the life of Christ and the life of the believer, that Christ reiterates his assertion that, while eating the manna did not prevent the Israelites from apostatizing and dying in the wilderness, eating the bread from heaven will preserve a believer eternally. 'This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live for ever' (v. 58).

The sequel to this assertion, as John records it, is very instructive. Apparently many of Christ's disciples objected to Christ's teaching at this point, and Christ replied, 'Do you take offence at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?' (vv. 60-62).

The manna in the desert came from heaven, but it did not return there. The journey's end for Israel was only a promised land here on earth. The bread of life not only came down from heaven in a far profounder sense than the manna did, but returned to the heaven from which he came. And seeing the believer's inheritance is reserved for him in that same heaven, the bread of life not only has to be able to maintain him on the journey through this life, it has to enable him to make the crossing from this material world to that spiritual realm. For that, it is clearly insufficient simply to maintain the believer in the physical life he already possesses. What is required is nothing less than the creation within the believer of a higher order of life, a spiritual life which he did not possess before he believed. How then is this done? 'It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life' (v. 63).

Why do some people turn back?

At this many of his disciples not only murmured, they 'turned back and no longer walked with him' (v. 66). Sad, unspeakably sad. Christ was about to return to the heaven from which he came, and if they no longer followed him it is obvious they would never get there. Like the Israelites who followed Moses until they got to the very borders of the promised land and then refused to enter, these disciples had followed Christ so far, but now no further.

What are we then to think of these people? Scripture calls them 'disciples', so we cannot say they weren't. Were they true believers who had heard the words of Christ and received them and had had the life from above created within them—the life of the Spirit of God dwelt in Christ and he in them—and then of their own free will they had thrown it all away and become unregenerate all over again, spiritually dead once more? Had they indeed eaten of the true bread from heaven and then, in spite of Christ's assertions, died like their ancestors in the wilderness?

Mercifully, once more we do not have to decide the question ourselves. Christ has himself told us the answer, 'But there are some of you who do not believe. (For Jesus knew *from the beginning* who those were who did not believe)' (v. 64). Notice the words, 'from the beginning'. Though they are described as disciples, they never had believed. They had not now thrown away their faith; they had never had any.

How different was the true believer's response to the Saviour.

So Jesus said to the Twelve, 'Do you want to go away as well?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.' (vv. 67–69)

Notice again the precise words, *we have believed*. Peter was expressing what had been true of him right from the very start, and still was, of course. His attitude was typical of a true believer. Believers may get into many a scrape and difficulty, and may be shaken in their faith. But they do not give up on Christ, for the simple reason that they know, and have known from the very first moment they trusted Christ, that there is no hope elsewhere. That is why they trusted him.

Peter spoke for himself, but he spoke also for the other eleven apostles, and Christ had to correct him. Even among the twelve apostles, chosen by Christ and called an apostle just like the others, was one who was not, and never had been, a true believer. The Lord had known it right from the start. It was not a question, therefore, of Judas having once been a believer and then throwing away his faith.

But there are some of you who do not believe. (For Jesus knew from the beginning . . . who it was who would betray him.) . . . Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil. (vv. 64, 70)

The evidence is mounting; those who apostatise never were true believers, and conversely, true believers never throw their faith away.

‘But it’s no use talking like that,’ says someone, ‘for there are many texts in Scripture which warn us that it is possible for true believers to depart from the faith, to fall away and be lost. Indeed, they tell us that some have actually done so in the past and some will yet do so in the future. It’s no good, then, concentrating on texts which seem to teach the security of the believer and ignoring the many others which explicitly teach the opposite.’

No, of course it isn’t. But then it is not our wish or intention to ignore any text of Scripture nor to deflect the thrust of the solemn warnings of God’s word, either by neglecting them or by explaining them away. In the third major part of this article we shall in fact make an honest attempt to examine these warnings and to give them not the minimum but the maximum weight they were intended to carry.

But meanwhile let us end this first part of our study by considering what is the ultimate ground of the believer’s security.

The character of God

In the opening paragraph of Paul’s letter to the Philippians we find him doing what he does in other letters to his converts; he is going over in his mind all the evidence he can see in their behaviour that shows they are genuine believers. He observes that, from the very beginning of their profession of faith in Christ right up to the present, the Philippians have shown a constant practical interest in the spread of the gospel (1:4–5). That gives him great joy and encouragement, for how could anyone make a credible claim to being a believer if he showed no practical interest in the spread of the gospel to others?

But then the question arises. Will this interest and fellowship in the gospel last, or is it only a flash in the pan? The answer Paul gives is, ‘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’ (v. 6). God is not inconsistent; he does not begin a work, then lose interest and abandon it. When we commit ourselves to Christ as our only hope of salvation and he undertakes to save us, the very fact that he begins the work is the guarantee that he will complete it.

He says a similar thing to the Corinthians, and that is all the more remarkable because, though they were a very gifted church, unlike the Philippians many of them were very worldly, immature and carnal. In the body of his letter Paul does not spare their faults; but in his opening paragraph, as he reviews what God has done in them in calling them into the

fellowship of his Son and in enriching them with spiritual gifts, he thanks God for this in particular, that God will maintain them firm unto the end so that they will be unimpeachable on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 4–8).

How can Paul be so sure? Because of the character of God. ‘God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (v. 9). If he called them into the fellowship of his Son, it was with the intention of maintaining them in that fellowship for ever.

The Holy Spirit is given as a seal on those who have believed

Moreover, God has given us an unambiguous assurance of that intention. When we first believed, God gave us his Holy Spirit as a seal, which marked us out as his own property and possession. More than that, he gave us the Holy Spirit as a pledge, an earnest, a deposit, a part payment acting as a guarantee that God will one day bring us and give us our full and complete and eternal inheritance (Eph 1:13–14). When we pay a deposit on a house, car or some other article, it certainly expresses our intention eventually to pay the full amount. With us, lack of funds might in the end make it impossible for us to fulfil our intention, but God does not and never will suffer from lack of resources. His pledge therefore is his guarantee that he will give us all the rest of our eternal inheritance.

Let us notice, then, the nature of this first instalment/deposit/pledge. It is not something merely external, like a legal document or a promise. It is the Holy Spirit himself, who performed the initial work of regeneration within us and now dwells in us to guide us and intercede for us. In other words, the pledge resides in the fact that God has begun his great work of redemption within us, and the fact that he has begun it is the guarantee that the work will be completed. The NIV puts it well.

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory. (Eph 1:13–14)

PART TWO

5

The Objection Stated

OBJECTION: Assurance of security would lead to laxity; therefore, it is impossible that Scripture should teach the eternal security of the believer.

Every true believer will know instinctively in his heart that any doctrine which leads a professing Christian into lax and careless living must be false. It is impossible to think that divinely inspired Scripture would teach anything that implied that sin does not matter.

We remember the words of the Lord Jesus, 'Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven . . .' (Matt 5:19).

If, therefore, the doctrine of *the eternal security of the believer* could be shown necessarily to encourage believers in lax and sinful living, we should abandon it at once, since it would then be self-evident that it was unscriptural. Let us say here and now that if, after reading this article, anyone should conclude that it proves after all that it does not seriously matter if a believer continues to live in sin, he or she has completely misunderstood what the article is saying. We hold tenaciously that sin in a believer matters exceedingly, and any doctrine that encourages people to think otherwise is wrong.

[The Objection Answered](#)

Actually, as we understand it, it is not we who regard sin with less than due seriousness. In the first part of this article we argued that the mark of the true believer is that he endures and so brings forth fruit. On the other hand, those who believe for a while and then in time of testing fall away are not true believers; they have no root in themselves and never did have.

At this, however, many will object. 'You cannot say that such people were not true believers.' With respect, it is this view and not our own that regards sin with less gravity than it should.

What does John say?

They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.
(1 John 2:19)

These false teachers, or 'antichrists' as John calls them, were at one time (for how long we are not told) members of Christian churches. They professed to hold the Apostles' doctrine, otherwise they could not be said to have 'gone out from us,' as John puts it. But to claim that, during the time when they associated with the apostles and professed orthodoxy, they were true believers and only later lost the true faith, would be doubly inadequate.

In the first place it would contradict what John himself says. Their going out, their departure from true doctrine, made public what had been the real situation all the way along the line. They never were true believers.

And in the second place it represents the situation as being less serious than it really was. It says that, initially at any rate, they were true believers, when in fact they had not been born again.

Similarly, when John turns from questions of doctrine and applies the other two tests by which he judges all Christian profession, he delivers the same verdict.

By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practise righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:10)

John is not denying that believers from time to time act inconsistently, fall and sin. What he is talking about is people's normal, constant behaviour. People who make a practice of doing what is wrong, who hate their brothers and have no intention of doing anything else,

according to John are not people who once were children of God and now have ceased to be; they never were children of God.

'No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God' (v. 9). Whereas, 'Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil' (v. 8), and 'No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him' (v. 6). Notice the past tense. This is a very solemn pronouncement.

To protest, 'But you cannot say these people never were believers; surely they did at one time 'see' the Saviour and know him, even though now they are not saved,' would be to take away from the seriousness of God's word.

What does Paul say?

For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them; for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light. (Eph 5:5-8)

Like John, Paul recognizes only two groups of people. 'You' on the one hand; 'them' on other, with whom you are not to have fellowship. You are said at one time to have been darkness, but now to be light in the Lord. You have been saved, regenerated, made new creatures in Christ. They are described as immoral, impure, covetous, idolatrous. The list is longer in similar passages in Paul's writings (Gal 5:19-21; 1 Cor 6:9-10). They are 'sons of disobedience', a Hebraic phrase denoting people characterized by deliberate disobedience to God, and therefore subject to God's wrath.

There are only two groups: genuine believers and unbelievers. Those who habitually practise sin are not an inferior grade of believers. Paul, like John, says they are not believers at all; they have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Paul appeals to us not to allow ourselves to be deceived into thinking that there is a third group composed of people who habitually live in sinful ways and yet are genuine believers.

What does Peter say?

Peter, as we might expect, agrees with John and Paul, and uses vivid homely illustrations to press home his point. Writing of some who were just escaping from those who live in error and have since been misled by false teachers he says,

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour 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.’
(2 Pet 2:20–22)

By common consent this is an unspeakably sad thing to happen to anybody. Many Christians think that its seriousness lies in this, that it could happen to a true believer. According to them, to say that it could not happen to a true believer diminishes the solemnity of the warning. The passage, they argue, explicitly says that these people have come to know the way of righteousness, and, what is more, have come to know the Lord himself.

They point out that the Greek word for ‘know’ used in this passage implies a close and thorough knowledge; and they argue that this knowledge must have been genuine at the time because it had the good practical effect of enabling them to escape the immoralities of the world. They conclude, therefore, that these people were genuinely born again. They had received the Holy Spirit, they were justified, sanctified and reconciled to God, and yet somehow had slipped back, lost their salvation and descended to a worse state than they were in before they got converted. So they hold that to teach that this could not happen to a genuine believer is to lull the believer into a false sense of security that could contribute to his downfall.

But let us look at the passage more closely and more carefully. The phrase which Peter uses to describe the state of these renegades, ‘The last state has become worse for them than the first,’ is a phrase which our Lord himself used on one occasion, and it is instructive to notice what kind of situation he used it to describe.

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation. (Matt 12:43–45)

He envisages a man from whom an unclean spirit has gone out, but after a while the spirit decides to return to its ‘house’; ‘And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order.’ Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there. ‘The last state of that person is worse than the first,’ says Christ. Crucial and ominous in our Lord’s description is the word ‘empty’. The man had obviously experienced some kind of moral reform. The unclean spirit had gone out, the house of his personality was cleaned up and re-ordered, but that was all it was. It was not now positively indwelt by the Holy Spirit; no new life had entered, no divine nature now reigned within. The house was empty, unoccupied, and there was nothing to resist the return and re-entry of the evil spirit with its seven worse companions.

A house cleaned up but still empty – that hardly sounds like a description of a man who has genuinely been born again. It sounds much more like an experience of a reformation that has stopped short of the new birth and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. But this is our Lord’s description of a situation which, though it is described by the same phrase as Peter uses, could have been different from the situation Peter depicts.

Two analogies

So let us get back to Peter and notice the two analogies he uses to help us understand what has happened to the people he is describing. They are like dogs and pigs, he says. To a Jew, brought up under the Old Testament food and hygiene laws, both these creatures were unclean animals. To liken a man to either a dog or a sow bordered on the offensive. It is difficult to think that Peter, who himself had once fallen into a pretty nasty ditch and then recovered, would have called a fellow-believer a dog or a sow, however far he had fallen.

Even more revealing, however, than the mere term 'dog' or 'sow', is the feature in the behaviour of these animals which Peter uses to explain what has happened to the renegades.

The dog in the ancient world was, more often than not, a scavenger. As such, the dog envisaged in the proverb had eaten a lot of filthy food, and subsequently feeling sick and disgusted it had vomited up the unholy filth. As a result, it felt better for a while, but later on it went back to the vomit and gobbled it up again. Why does a dog behave so disgustingly? Because it is its nature. All dogs instinctively behave like that. When a dog vomits out some filthy half-digested mass, you should not suppose that it has repented of eating filth and has somehow received a new nature. It is simply that eating excessive filth has caused it a little temporary discomfort, so it vomits it out. But only to return to it later.

And here is the point of Peter's analogy. In the previous chapter he had described the true believer as one who has laid hold of the great promises given in the gospel by which the believer becomes a partaker of the divine nature. ('God's seed', as John would put it). That is true conversion—nothing less than receiving a new life and with it a new nature, the very nature of God.

Why, then, have the people he is describing in Chapter 2 gone back to their former unclean way of life? The behaviour of a dog will explain it, says Peter. They used to live immoral lives. Then, like the dog that vomited, they experienced a temporary disgust with sin. They heard the gospel and learned a great deal about the beautiful life and teaching of Christ, so they decided to clean up their lives and experienced a moral reformation, but it fell short of regeneration. They were not born again of incorruptible seed; they received no divine nature. The unclean spirit went out, but the house, though swept and re-decorated, remained empty and, their nature not having been changed, dog-like they went back to their old way of life.

To enforce his point Peter adds the old Greek fable, the sow that went to the baths. This sow, so the fable goes, had been watching the ladies going to the baths and had noticed how beautiful they were when they came out. It decided to copy them, so it went to the public baths and took a bath just like the ladies. Then it hung diamond earrings on its ears and put a jewel in its nose and made a pretty good effort at walking down the street on its hind legs, just like it had seen the ladies do. Then by chance it came across a beautiful puddle of gorgeous mud. Alas, the bath and the jewels had only cleaned it up outside; inside it was the same old unregenerate sow as before. It had not received the nature of a sheep, let alone a lady. Into the puddle it went and rolled delightedly in the mud, giving up completely its recent attempt at acting the lady.

The necessity of being born again

But by now it is becoming clear as to what danger Peter is calling attention. He is not saying that a true believer, having received the divine nature can subsequently fall away and be lost; he is calling attention to the grave possibility that people can be Christianized without being saved. Outwardly reformed in their morals, without inwardly being born again of the incorruptible seed of the word of God. They see the beauty and desirability of the Christian way of life, make an effort to clean up their lives and take some steps in the direction of Christ and the gospel. But they are not, or not yet, born again. To use Peter's phrase, they are 'barely escaping from those who live in error' (v. 18).

The very real danger is that when such people come under the teaching of supposedly Christian advocates of permissiveness, and Christendom nowadays abounds with such advocates, they have no resistance. The teaching of permissive morality appeals to their unregenerate nature, which is the only one they have, and back they go into their old sinful lifestyle.

Christendom has a lot to answer for in allowing teachers of permissive morality, such as Peter so sternly denounces, to teach openly and in the name of the Church; and to practise what they preach without discipline from the Church. But perhaps it has even more to answer for in encouraging millions of people to think that they are children of God, when all the while they have never been born again. Ritualism does so by assuring people that, just because they have undergone the ceremony of baptism, they are now regenerate, children of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven.

Evangelicalism is no less to blame if, descending to the methods of modern salesmanship and psychological manipulation, it pressurizes people into making a profession of Christianity before they have come to genuine repentance and faith. If such people believe for a while, but then in time of testing fall away because they have no root in themselves, it is nothing to be wondered at. Of course, we are not saying that false professions of faith only occur as a result of unworthy methods of evangelism. Some who professed to believe Christ himself when he preached proved to be not genuine. But to claim that such people were true believers to start with and then fell away is, in our opinion, not only untrue but dangerous. It masks what the real cause of the trouble is.

The result is doubly sad; for, when people who have been religionised instead of born again go back into worldly living, they imagine that they have known and experienced all that Christ could do for them and have found it inadequate. Their last state is indeed worse than that of someone who has never heard or professed to believe in the Lord Jesus.

About the Author

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