

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

PART 19

KEY TERMS: ASSURANCE, PART 3

Jesus Himself proclaimed eternal security. We've already examined two Scriptures that present this truth, John 6:47 and John 3:14-15.

John 10:26–30 ²⁶“But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. ²⁷“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; ²⁸and I give eternal life to them, and they will never [οὐ μὴ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα] perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹“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. ³⁰“I and the Father are one.”

How can anyone read these words spoken by the Lord they claim to worship and even dare to think they could lose their salvation for any reason? In the Greek this is even more emphatic. The οὐ μὴ construction is “the strongest way to negate something in Greek” [Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, p. 468]. The BDAG lexicon reports that this construction has the effect of strengthening the negation; it is the most decisive way of negating something in the future [BDAG, s. v. “μὴ”]. In English, we could express the force of this negation by saying something like, “No! Not never ever!” or something like “Not only no, but absolutely no!” It is also worthwhile to note the granting of eternal life is not conditional. Jesus didn't say, “If you are obedient, or if you are faithful, or if your are spiritual,” you will be given eternal life. “Give” is a present active verb which means the Lord gives eternal life at a point in time and that life then continues. Based on other Scriptures in John, we know we become His sheep simply by believing in Him and once we do that He gives us eternal life and eternal life, in turn, cannot be lost. No one can snatch the believer out of the hand of the Lord. The words of the Lord here are totally in concert with the truth Paul later presented in Romans 8:38-39 we discussed earlier. But it is not simply Christ who keeps us secure. The Father, who is greater than all, has the Lord's sheep securely in His grasp as well.

Unbelievers are not the Lord's sheep but in contrast to their state the Lord has sheep that are His. He knows them and He has given them eternal life. As a result of possessing this eternal life, they cannot perish. The Greek could be translated here “they will never, no, not ever into the age perish.” Perish, ἀπόλλυμι, means to destroy, ruin, or cause destruction; it can refer to ceasing to exist; it is to destroy or to cause the destruction of persons, objects, or institutions. Into the ages is referring to eternity. So we can understand the Lord to be saying here that believers belong to Him and He has given them an eternal life that cannot ever be destroyed in any way. How much more

assurance does a believer have to have in order to know he is saved and eternally secure? No one who has placed their faith in Christ Jesus should ever doubt their salvation. Doubt creates an uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty; believers should be totally certain and comfortable in the knowledge they are eternally secure. They should have confidence in that fact and be emboldened to forge ahead in living the Christian life and in glorifying the Lord who saved them. After all, it is the very promise of God as John presented it in his first letter.

1 John 5:13 ¹³These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

This Scripture is so important. John said, regarding Soteriology, that when you, the born again believer, know the written Word of God as presented through the prophets and the apostles and the sound doctrine contained therein, you can be absolutely certain that you have eternal life. He didn't say that you should think you have eternal life and he didn't say that you could lose eternal life and he didn't say that you could earn eternal life; he said believe and know you have eternal life. That knowledge is based on the sure Word of God. That is the same thing John said in a different way in John 3:16.

John 3:16 ¹⁶“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

This is a very explicit Scripture concerning the relationship between God and the person who believes. God did two things: He loved the world and He gave His Son. We do one thing in response and that is to believe. For the person who believes, God promises them two things: they shall not perish and they will have eternal life. It is impossible for the believer in Christ Jesus to perish, meaning to suffer eternal death, and conversely they will, without any doubt whatsoever, enjoy eternal life. There is no equivocation in this statement made by the Lord. God gave; that is a fact. The responsibility of man is to believe the truth as presented by the Word of God concerning that truth. When any individual believes, God promises to give them eternal life and they will not perish. That is not a difficult concept to grasp.

Those who claim that salvation may be lost due to egregious sin or falling away or, in the alternative, that faith must be proved by works of any kind, are, in effect, calling God a liar.

Titus 1:1–2 ¹Paul, a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness, ²in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago,

I understand that pastors and theologians want those who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ to be sanctified, that is, they want them to be experientially set apart and holy in thought, word, and deed. Most of these pastors and theologians do acknowledge the fact that a person is saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. So why is it so impossible for so many of them to see that the moment they require any level of obedience or faithfulness or law keeping to prove salvation, they have added works to the gospel and defeated it? This kind of confused, contradictory thinking should never exist if the Bible is properly interpreted. But that's the problem: hermeneutics. These people interpret the Bible through a theological grid that must be maintained at all costs. The result is the Bible is manipulated to conform to the theology. Are we saved by grace through faith or are we saved by faith plus works? Is it any wonder that those in such theological systems who believe salvation is faith plus works are plagued by doubts about their eternal security? In addition to that thought, those who think they are so pious that they will never fall away are living in a spiritual fantasy world of their own making. Didn't Peter tell the Lord that he would never fall away even if everyone else did? And didn't Peter subsequently deny the Lord and fall away? If the great apostle Peter fell away, what are the chances that we can fall away? At the very least, it is a possibility for everyone. I'm not saying that is a good thing and I'm not saying it is fitting and proper and I'm not saying it's going to happen to everyone and I'm not saying there won't be consequences for our failures and for our sins; I am saying it is a possibility and it doesn't mean that a person is unsaved. They may well be unsaved, but that's because they never believed and not because they fell away and that is a separate issue.

Matthew 26:33 ³³But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away."

Where does all this lack of assurance leave people? It leaves many of them worried, confused, and constantly doubting their salvation or worrying they have committed the unforgivable sin. People get really afraid contemplating these things. The solution is to go to the Word of God and figure these things out but very few people do. Instead, they seek out teachers who can tell them what it takes to be saved and most of these teachers don't know either. As a result, the people seeking encouragement and validation are left in despair because false doctrine cannot satisfy the seeking soul.

I have three books and a booklet that all purport to tell people how they can know they are saved. All of the books, in whole or in part, rely on 1 John to prove salvation. But there is a problem with that approach; it isn't biblical. 1 John is not about justification and proving you have it; 1 John is about believers and their fellowship within the family of God both with God and with other believers. These books are: *Saved Without a Doubt: How to be Sure of Your Salvation* by John MacArthur, Jr., *That You*

May Know: Assurance of Salvation in 1 John by Christopher D. Bass, and *Am I Really a Christian?* by Mike McKinley. The booklet is "Seven Signs of a Born Again Person" by Wim Malgo. All three of these books are based on the premise that works and behavioral change must accompany salvation and if not, the profession of faith was false. All three of them proclaim justification by faith alone but they qualify it in various ways to include works of some sort.

For example, in *Am I Really a Christian?*, McKinley lists five principles that "prove" a person is a Christian but the door is left open for other principles to be added [p. 121].

1. You're not a Christian if you do not believe and trust in the facts of the gospel.
2. You're not a Christian if you love sin.
3. You're not a Christian if you do not persevere in the faith until the end.
4. You're not a Christian if you don't love other people.
5. You're not a Christian if you love your stuff.

In my lesson on the head/heart dichotomy, I suggested that the concept of heart faith was a cover for faith plus works. I have no real problem with someone calling trust heart faith if that's what they really mean and they limit what they mean to faith/trust/belief. The problem is that heart faith almost always as they define it means faith that is validated by works. McKinley proves my point. "I've spent the bulk of this chapter arguing that a true Christian must believe in the factual truth of certain propositions. But I must also be clear that biblical belief or faith is more than intellectual assent to a set of propositions. Biblical belief or faith is a personal, heartfelt trust in a person....A personal heartfelt trust...means changing the direction in which you're walking. Someone you love and trust has asked you to follow, and so you do. Heartfelt trust yields a happy obedience" [p. 55]. The simple act of believing the facts of the gospel and trusting them as applicable to you and your personal situation isn't enough; you must also be obedient or you have proven you didn't really trust the gospel truth.

From the book of 1 John, MacArthur has developed what he calls "eleven tests from an apostolic expert." MacArthur approvingly cited some words from the Puritan Jonathan Edwards. "...the principle evidence of saving grace is holy practice. He [Edwards] said true salvation always produces an abiding change of nature in a true convert. Therefore, whenever holiness of life does not accompany a confession of conversion, it must be understood that this individual is not a Christian." For Edwards and MacArthur, assurance comes from the "present and ongoing" work of the Holy Spirit..." For these men, assurance is not about what a person has believed in the past, it is about what a person is doing in the present that proves or validates what one has believed. The eleven tests MacArthur developed from 1 John are: "1) Have you enjoyed fellowship with Christ and the Father? 2) Are you sensitive to sin? 3) Do you obey God's Word? 4) Do you reject this evil world? 5) Do you eagerly await Christ's return? 6) Do you see a

decreasing pattern of sin in your life? 7) Do you love other Christians? 8) Do you experience answered prayer? 9) Do you experience the ministry of the Holy Spirit? 10) Can you discern between spiritual truth and error? 11) Have you suffered rejection because of your faith?...If you pass those tests, you can have confidence before God. After all, John wrote what he did so 'you may know that you have eternal life'" [pp. 67-91]. MacArthur makes the claim that if you pass these "tests" you can be assured of eternal life. How much of each test is sufficient to give a person assurance? Do you have to pass every test? Can you only pass some of the tests and still have assurance? Every one of these tests is subject to the emotions and the mind of each individual believer. Nothing here is based on biblical assurance even though he uses proof texts from 1 John for each one of them. When people of the stature of John MacArthur tell other people they have to pass all these subjective tests in order to prove their salvation, is it any wonder people lack assurance? All of these issues are sanctification issues; they have nothing to do with justification salvation.

A man named Wim Malgo who is associated with Midnight Call Ministries wrote a booklet entitled, *Seven Signs of a Born Again Person*. His seven signs are: 1) He knows that he has been born again. 2) The new life becomes visible. 3) The born again person has a spirit of prayer. 4) The born again Christian has a hunger for the Word of God. 5) The born again Christian will suffer much adversity. 6) The born again person has victory over many temptations and sins. 7) The believer waits with joy and expectancy for the return of the Lord Jesus. This man's set of assurance characteristics raises questions as well. How much time does a new believer have before exhibiting these Christian characteristics and behaviors before he has failed to prove his faith? What does this doctrine do to the biblical truth that the new birth occurs in a moment in time resulting in eternal life? How much of these things and how often must they be done in order to prove justification salvation and provide assurance? How can a spiritually dead person who is unable to discern spiritual truth know any of these things the moment he first believes? If those things must be present in the life of a believer, shouldn't they be present from the very first moment of faith? If not, then how long before they become present and in what measure? This kind of teaching simply destroys assurance; it puts a tremendous amount of pressure on an already confused and frightened person who is searching for the assurance they are saved.

Isn't it rather obvious that if MacArthur, McKinley, and Malgo were developing Bible based proof of salvation their "tests" would match or at least be quite similar with one another? But they aren't particularly similar because they are not based on the biblical text. Instead, they are based on the desires of these men to see a holy lifestyle exhibited in Christian people and then they set themselves up to be the arbiters of what that life should look like and they decide what that lifestyle should be. No matter how noble that desire is, and I'm not denying that all of us in ministry want people to live holy, set

apart lives, if it isn't based on the text, then it can only leave people confused and full of doubt. How confused must people be who resort to these men for their information as assurance they are saved? Can they be any less desperate for answers after reading these men than they were before? I don't think so; I think they might even be more frightened and confused.

The last book, *That You May Know*, relies on 1 John as well but Bass includes a criticism of the Free Grace understanding of that book. Note the condescending attitude this pastor takes towards those who are not so-called "biblical scholars." One problem with this elitist, condescending attitude is most of the elite "scholars" we have around today are anything but Biblicists. "While this group [referring to the Grace Evangelical Society, a Free Grace ministry] has clearly captured a following at a popular level, it has not enjoyed the same response among biblical scholars....they have introduced a rather novel view of assurance in 1 John....Hodges's [Zane Hodges, Dallas Theological Seminary professor and Free Grace theology proponent] overarching theology of assurance is that it is based exclusively on the promises of God and work of Christ and is therefore completely divorced from works....Assurance is therefore part and parcel of saving faith but can have no secondary support, for that would result in righteousness or assurance based upon works. It would appear that Hodges begins with this overarching theological construct of assurance and then imposes it on the text of 1 John by way of an innovative reading of John's tests. Arguing against the overwhelming majority of New Testament scholars, he asserts that John does not give 'tests of life/salvation/assurance' throughout this epistle; rather, he gives his readers 'tests of fellowship.'...Following this line of thinking, the numerous 'by this we know' passages...were not written to strengthen the readers' assurance of salvation but their assurance that they are currently enjoying right 'fellowship' with God....Hodges wants to make absolutely clear that this 'fellowship with God' or 'abiding in God' must never be misunderstood to be referring to salvation. He argues that if one were to assert that 'abiding/remaining' in God or in the community was at all tied to regeneration or salvation, then one could not be certain of his salvation until death" [pp. 27-30]. Amen! Hodges is correct and Bass is wrong.

Bass follows everyone else who confuses justification and sanctification. He asserts numerous times that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone but then he writes things such as the quote above in which he criticizes Free Grace for maintaining that very theology. When you depart from the clear truth of the word, it is hard to keep your doctrinal aberrations straight! For example, Bass clearly articulates justification salvation very early in the book. "I will argue that the writer of 1 John grounds his reader's assurance of eternal life on the solid foundation of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is clearly displayed as the believer's παράκλητος ('advocate') with the Father and the ἱλασμός ('propitiation') of their sins. Given that sin is inevitable in the life of the

believer, nothing other than the work of Christ can be viewed as the foundation of assurance, for it is the only effective remedy for their sins and thus the only ground for confidence of right standing with God. Moreover, it will be argued that assurance is not only grounded in the past work of Jesus on the cross but also on the promise of His ongoing work of protecting those who have been born of God" [p. 2]. I can't see anything he has written here with which I can disagree. But this doesn't comport with what he wrote in his criticism of the Free Grace understanding of assurance. Furthermore, he contradicts what he has just written in this paragraph in the very next paragraph of his book. "While assurance is fundamentally grounded in the work of Christ, this letter also demonstrates that the lifestyle of the believer serves as a vital corroborating support for such assurance....The Holy Spirit should produce a change of life in the new covenant believer that is observable in the public arena and therefore able to be tested and validated" [p. 2]. Isn't the only test for justification salvation belief in the person and work of Christ Jesus?