

At Face Value

How God's Promise of Eternal Security Builds Both Confidence and Diligence

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Confidence and Diligence in a Nutshell

Have you ever wondered about the idea of eternal security? Is it really a good policy to teach Christians that they cannot lose their place in heaven? Perhaps you have wondered whether that teaching might lead to backsliding, spiritual laziness and sin? If these questions are troubling you, I hope that you will read this booklet and consider both the warnings and the assurances of the Bible at face value. To save you time, here is the very short version of what I want every disciple of Jesus to know regarding their eternal security in Him.

How do I know that I am saved? God wants us to be completely secure in our relationship of love and trust in His Son. He has given us many exceedingly great and precious promises that He intends for us to take at face value—absolutely free. He has also given us His Spirit and a number of internal witnesses, quite apart from any works that we have done. It is the Spirit's work to assure God's children of salvation.

How do I know that I am saved forever? Since my assurance of salvation does not come from works that I have done or will do but from God's eternal purpose for me, my assurance does not depend on works. As long as God's promises are forever unchangeable, so is my assurance that I am unchangeably saved.

How do I know that the other guy is saved? This is the question most people are really asking when they talk about eternal security. Most people are willing to accept grace for themselves but want to see some works in the other guy. Well, there is an element of practical truth there, because I really do need some sign that the guy next to me is a brother and not some kind of impostor. The sign that Jesus gave us is love for one another expressed in practical ways.

What if the other guy is carnal? If the fruit that we expect to see in a Christian is missing from one of our members and the trajectory of his life is consistently to live from the flesh, we are to treat him as an outsider rather than as a Christian. This does not mean that he is therefore not a true believer, but it does mean that we no longer extend fellowship to him. The primary responsibility for identifying and reproofing carnal members rests with the Holy Spirit, whose agents are the leaders of each local church.

Aren't there differences of opinion about security? There certainly are! In fact the warnings in Hebrews and James are simple to understand but very difficult to apply in real life. My very close partners and teammates who share all of my central commitments still have some differences of opinion about how to interpret the warnings in Hebrews and James, and I am sure that they would express these truths somewhat differently.

But this is what we can all agree on: the Bible has the last word on security, and God truly desires His children to be secure and confident in His love and grace. Our Father wants us to take His assurances at face value. I have written this booklet not as a final word, but as a sort of “first word” for disciples who lack confidence that they are eternally secure in God’s love. Please read this booklet carefully, check out the Scripture references, and use this as a beginning point to discuss with a more mature Christian who can disciple you. My prayer is that it will help you to grow more confident and diligent as you take the promises of God at face value.

Why a Confident Christian Stays Diligent

In many areas of life, it is commonplace to find that confidence leads to complacency and that a complacent person becomes lax in his work and behavior. On the other hand, both in business and in family life, we have all seen that members who have integrity in their relationships actually grow in productivity as they grow in confidence. It has become my settled conviction that Christians with integrity follow this second pattern of increased diligence and productivity as they grow in their confidence. A right understanding of security does not lead to complacent sloth! I hope that as you read this booklet, you will grow more confident in the security that is available to those who are “accepted in the Beloved,” and that this confidence will stimulate you to greater fruitfulness and joyful diligence in Him.

My confidence is founded upon the character of God and His complete sovereignty as revealed in His word. When you begin with God’s unchanging character as revealed in Scripture you find confidence and security; if you begin with your own faith and choosing, you will be driven and tossed by the winds of your own vacillating will.

The best-known verse in the Bible is John 3:16 which tells believers in Jesus that we will “not perish but have everlasting life.” This life comes not on the basis of goodness in us but upon the basis of God’s unchanging love and His commitment demonstrated in the sending of His only Son (Titus 3:4-7). We affirm that as God’s loving and sending are not changeable, so neither is the everlasting life.

Jesus has gone on record (John 10:25-30) that His sheep will never perish. We are confident that we will never perish because Jesus knows us and keeps us and gives us eternal life. Jesus intends for us to have such security and confidence, not on the basis of our constancy but on the basis of God’s omnipotence: “no one can snatch them from My Father’s hand.” Perhaps you are thinking that Jesus means only that nobody apart from you can snatch you from the Fa-

ther's hand, that perhaps you could slip through His fingers through freewill just as you slipped in by freewill. My friend, if you are in Christ Jesus, you did not "slip through" into the Father's hand, but heaven and earth had to move to redeem you by an act of overwhelming love and power. You are Christ's purchased possession and do not belong to yourself any longer (I Cor. 6:19-20), and in that sense you are not free to return either to the marketplace or to the wilderness.

Why are we confident? Our confidence comes from the perfection of Jesus' redemption, perfect in the sense that He completely redeemed us and perfect in the sense that His ministry on our behalf will never cease. Galatians 3:11-14 makes it clear that we are not justified by any works that we have done, but simply by faith in Christ Jesus. He took the whole curse upon Himself, so that the blessing would rest upon us. The transaction is complete: He became sin for us and we have become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus' redemption is perfect in the sense that it is absolutely complete forever, but also because God promised that Christ's ministry shall never cease. God Himself has gone on record, binding Himself by an unchangeable oath expressly so that we would have strong confidence and an "anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast (Hebrews 6:19)." Our expectation is in Christ and is as certain as Christ is certain. Since Christ has entered into the presence of God forever (6:20) and because He holds His priesthood unchangeably upon God's binding and unchangeable oath, Christ saves us "to the uttermost (Hebrews 7:17-25)." He will never stop interceding and His intercession will never cease to be effective to save us. **We will never perish.**

Inward Tests to Increase our Confidence

In addition to the security we have in the character and promises of God and Christ's perfect ministry of redemption, we also have inward and outward evidence to encourage us. Paul describes the inward evidence as "the Spirit

of adoption” who “bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God” (Romans 8:15-16). Regarding the inward and outward evidence Paul says, “With the heart one believes unto righteousness and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” and “whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame” (Romans 10:10-11). The inward evidence of the Holy Spirit in residence and of whole-hearted belief is coupled with the outward evidence of confession to give us even greater confidence. **We will never perish.**

John agrees that the primary inward evidence is “the Spirit whom He has given us” (I John 3:24). He says (4:1-6) that the Spirit of God in us is not subjective but is open to testing and differentiation from the spirit of the world. Altogether John finds four internal bases for assurance (I John 4:12-17) so we can know that “His love has been perfected in us.” He doesn’t mean that we ever love perfectly in this life, but that the relational circle of love is complete (perfect). As John describes it love is complete when it begins with God’s love for us and our trust in His love; when it recognizes and bears witness to God’s act of love in sending His Son to save us; when it comes to us by His indwelling Spirit, and when it results in love for others. These are the four internal evidences of eternal life that will allow us to be bold as we anticipate the day of judgment: 1) our love for others, 2) His Spirit dwelling with us, 3) our confession of Jesus as Savior and God, and 4) our trust in God’s love.

Though these evidences are inward, they have objective results that can be seen by others. Jesus’ love for us resulted in His death on our behalf, and so our love for others should not be in word only but also in deeds of love (3:16-18). The Holy Spirit also bears fruit in our lives. The fruit may not always be visible to others, but the Spirit-led life has a certain trajectory, the goal of which is conformity to Jesus Christ.

In the same way our confession of Jesus as Savior is inward but will also often have a public and observable effect—certainly His two ordinances are intended to be public proclamations. When Philip evangelized the Ethiopian, he

insisted that the only pre-condition of baptism was that the eunuch must “believe with all your heart;” to which the eunuch replied, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God!” (Acts 8:37) Likewise Paul when he delivered the ordinance of holy communion, indicated that when “you eat this bread and drink this cup, you *proclaim* the Lord’s death (I Corinthians 11:26).”

Inward Tests and Outward Tests: Why We Need Both

I mentioned above that the Biblical tests for assurance of salvation are the objective and changeless promises of God, the perfect redemption of Christ, and the increasing inward evidence of transformation. Besides these we have His Spirit living within us, and our confession of faith in Jesus’ atoning sacrifice. If you were exiled alone to an island with nothing but your Bible, you could still have perfect assurance of salvation through this internal evidence.

Fortunately most of us are not marooned on islands. We also have external evidence that we are among the saved and justified. The importance of this outward evidence is that we may be able to identify fellow believers in Jesus and have true fellowship with them without having to wonder whether they are genuine or not. If there were no outward evidence of our faith we would be constantly exposed to the deceptions of false brethren and subject to perpetual division and mutual suspicion; but as Paul points out, the works of the flesh are obvious and clearly distinguished from the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5). John says that our outward Christian “walk” is evidence to others that we are in fellowship with God, which is in turn the basis for our fellowship with one another (I John 1:5-7).

We use the outward test of adherence to God’s command to confirm the verbal testimony of those who confess Christ. The commandment John directs us to is to believe in Jesus and to love one another (3:23 and throughout the let-

ter). “Whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him (2:5).” This does not mean that we are requiring perfection from our brethren before extending fellowship to them but that we are expecting to see the circle of love moving towards completion in their lives: their response of gratitude and love to God and outward evidence of their Spirit-inspired love for others. Where this evidence is lacking, John calls them false professors—liars (2:4-6). Perhaps it could be possible for someone to trust Christ but not show evidence of forgiveness and love for others, but John responds very practically, “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother (3:10).” The Bible does not obligate us to extend Christian fellowship to those who profess Christ but continue to walk in darkness and division—quite the opposite.

When the Evidence Doesn’t Add Up

This brings up a theological problem. We know that our salvation is solely on the basis of our faith in Christ’s work apart from any works we do. By the same token we know that our security is anchored in Christ’s complete work of redemption and we are not secure because of any works that we have done. So then, if a man confesses Christ and then goes on to live like the devil, is he any less secure than the faithful follower?

This is a mystery that on our side of the Judgment we cannot unravel, simply because we cannot evaluate another man’s testimony of faith by any test other than works. We cannot see the heart, but one day God will judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. “With the heart man believes resulting in righteousness,” and since we cannot look on the heart, we will not be able to solve this mystery during the present age.

Paul lays out two complementary and fundamental truths: 1) God knows which ones are His, and 2) “Let every-

one who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness (2 Timothy 2:19).” We are not to assume that those who name the name of the Lord are regenerate if they neither manifest righteousness in their lives nor love God’s people! In such cases there is a failure of integrity: the words do not measure up with the actions, and the observable evidence is contradictory. We need to disciple and shepherd such persons with a view to waking them up, whether from the sleep of carnality or from death. Sometimes we may not be able to discern whether a person is asleep or dead until we start resuscitation!

In the Bible a “carnal” person is someone who is living his life according to the flesh. For such people the satisfaction of their appetites with temporary pleasures seems more important than worshiping the Lord and living for His kingdom. When we talk about carnal Christians, we mean people who have truly put their faith in Christ but are living as though their personal satisfaction is more important than their love for Jesus—the Bible promises (I Corinthians 3:15) they will not perish. But Jesus also speaks of “tares.” Tares are people who live for temporary happiness in this life but pretend to serve the Lord Jesus and say they are His followers—they are false brethren who are dead in sin and on their way to hell, because they are not trusting in Jesus.

What do you do for a friend who says he believes in Jesus but continues to live according to the flesh? I think we can find some answers in the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews: Insight from a General Epistle

Hebrews 6 and 10 are often mentioned as problem passages for the security of the believer. In fact, the “problems” extend throughout Hebrews, a letter that forces us to face the question, what will the recompense be for neglecting or turning from the salvation that is in Christ Jesus?

If those who disobeyed the old covenant were punished, “how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation

(2:3)?” Those who disobeyed under Moses were not able to enter the promised rest because of unbelief, let us therefore fear lest any of you seem to come short of the future rest (3:19-4:1). Those who set aside the Law of Moses died without mercy on the basis of two or three witnesses, how much worse punishment do they deserve who despise the sanctifying covenant of Jesus (10:29)? If they did not escape who refused God on Sinai, much more we shall not escape if we refuse the voice of Jesus’ blood from heaven (12:25).

These warnings and admonitions were given soberly as the oracle of God, and we who are preachers must never take the edge off of these warnings. So, to whom are these warnings written? The book is called both a general epistle and an epistle to the Hebrews. It has a general meaning because it is read in all of the churches, but it also has a special meaning because it was originally addressed to Hebrew Christians who were at a crisis point in their faith.

Let’s begin by understanding this book as a general epistle whose sermons are directly applicable in every assembly (including ours), since every assembly will contain some who are not living consistently according to the faith that they profess. We who teach the security of the believer must at least recognize that one natural meaning of “the fury of a fire that will consume the adversaries” is the eternal judgment of hell. We do not imagine concerning those who went back from the old covenant and served other gods and were condemned to death by stoning (Deut. 17: 3-5), that they are among the saved in heaven. If therefore those who go on sinning willfully under the new covenant deserve more severe punishment, we should be reticent to hold out to them a promise of eternal life. Preachers of right doctrine must diligently present the promises and assurances to the righteous by faith in Christ without pulling any punches toward those who shrink back to destruction (10:39).

The sermons of Hebrews are not problems for security unless we have gotten into the business of judging before the time. The clear pattern in these sermons is that every admonition is based upon Scripture and followed immediately

by assurance. Though we cannot escape judgment if we neglect the Lord's offer of salvation, we are assured that Jesus loves to call us His brothers and to free us from the fear of death (2:14-15). How could we be free from the fear of death if the threat of damnation still hangs over us? Though we are taught to fear that some among us may come short of eternal rest, and though we recognize that the rest is still future and must be entered with diligence (4:11), we also have confidence to closely approach the throne (4:16). How could we sinners come confidently to God, if there was some chance that our High Priest might cease to intercede or that His intercession might sometimes be insufficient?

Though the parable of the soils in Hebrews 6 is apparently a picture of damnation for those who fall away, we are taught to expect better things (6:9) and things that pertain to salvation. How could this expectation be both secure and steadfast (6:19) for anyone if each of us is capable at any time of falling away to perdition? Though we can expect nothing but fiery judgment if we continue in sin (10:26), we also know that we have enduring possessions in heaven (10:34). Though we have no escape from the shaking if we reject Jesus' call from heaven (12:25), the kingdom we are receiving is one thing that can never be shaken (12:28). Each of the warnings is bundled in a blanket of assurance.

For whom then are the warnings intended? Well, if Hebrews is considered as a general epistle, then they are for the whole church, because there are some among us who have not obeyed the voice from heaven, who have heard but not believed, who received the knowledge of the truth but have continued in sin. We are told to be diligent and on the lookout lest there be among us any fornicator or godless person like Esau. We are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but that doesn't mean that such persons do not exist in our assemblies.

Jesus makes clear that such persons truly do exist among us (Matthew 13:24-43) and that their judgment will be hell's furnace of fire. The maddening thing about the tares is that they look to us just like wheat but don't bear

grain. This means that while we can have 100% assurance of salvation for ourselves, we can only assure others to the degree that they bear grain.

It seems to me that this is also the message of James. There is a “double-minded man,” a hearer who is not a doer, who talks faith but has no works, who thinks he is religious but whose religion is empty. James does not condemn those who are living carnally, but he does raise questions in the minds of complacent leaders: godly wisdom bears righteous fruit in those who make peace; but if the assembly is full of jealousy and strife, be sure you have among you earthly, demonic wisdom. Nevertheless, now is not the time for [sorting out the wheat from the tares by] judging one another, instead we patiently await the One true Judge who is able to save and to destroy. The Farmer is waiting for the harvest to fully ripen, for the wheat and the tares to become obvious by their grain; and now He is standing just at the door. He will give the promised crown of eternal life to anyone who loves Him.

Insight from an Especially Hebrew Epistle

I mentioned before that Hebrews is not just a general epistle for all churches but that it was written especially for the benefit of the Hebrew churches of the first century. If we try to understand the meaning of the difficult passages without considering their original purpose, we will miss some of the most important points.

The first Christians were Jewish by ethnicity and came to faith in Christ from a background of Jewish religion. The first hurdle they had to overcome was to recognize that the promised Messiah had not come to them as a ruler but had come as their perfect priest and sacrifice...and that they had participated in killing Him!

The second hurdle was almost as difficult: the Church of Jesus was not a religious organization held together by a code of conduct or rituals; it was a people set apart by grace through their faith in Jesus Christ. Every step they

took back toward the old way of outward religion was a step away from the way of life in Christ.

Hebrews was originally preached and sent to Jewish (Hebrew) churches that were in danger of retreating from their loyalty of faith in Jesus back into a practice of outward Old Testament religion. The crisis year for the church was 49AD when the Jerusalem Council met as recorded in Acts 15. The epistles associated with the crisis are Galatians and James, and the book of Hebrews should also be understood in light of this crisis.

This perspective helps us to understand the “problem” sermons. The Jewish Christians were neglecting the great salvation of Jesus and in danger of drifting back into their old religious system (Hebrews 2:1-3). They needed to understand that the offer of life in Christ Jesus was not just an ingredient that they could stir into the stew of their ancient religion. If you treat Jesus’ sacrifice as just one among many, you are not a Christian at all!

Here is the special message of Hebrews to the Jewish believers: remember what happened when our fathers went backward after God saved us from Egypt (chapters 3-4)—they were not allowed to enter the land! Remember what happened to everyone who rejected the Law of Moses (chapter 10 and 12)—they all had to be killed! In the same way, you cannot retreat back into your Old Testament religion and still expect God to be pleased with you (10:38-39).

A Mystery Even Apostles Chose Not to Penetrate

Paul calls the covert instigators of this retreat “false brethren” in Galatians 2:4 describing their method of operation with terms like “secretly,” “stealthy,” and “spy.” He is speaking of the same class of secret agent that Jesus means when He says about the tares, “An enemy has done this!” Paul’s preferred description of these spies is the word “reprobates” (**adokimoi**), those who “profess to know God but in works deny Him (Titus 1:16).” This is a different class entirely from believers who walk carnally: but rather

these are “defiled and unbelieving” (1:15); they are specifically “reprobate as concerning the faith (2 Tim. 3:8).”

“Reprobates as concerning the faith,” the description is so typical of the way the apostles refer to false brethren. It is rare to find them clearly consigning them to hell. Typically the apostles prefer to leave the window slightly ajar: “lest any of you seem to come short,” “it is near to a curse whose end is to be burned,” “how much greater punishment will they be found to deserve,” etc. It is these veiled anathemas that have led some to deny that hypocrites in the churches will be damned. After all, if the apostles understood that someone who learns Christ and is baptized in His name could end up in hell, why don’t they say it clearly?

I think that the apostles, far from being obscure, are simply heeding their own admonition not to judge before the time. Since there is only one Lawgiver and Judge, even the apostles do not feel able to damn individual tares in the assemblies. Paul commands disassociation from those who are brethren in name but live immorally (I Cor. 5). He commands the churches to judge such people, not as to whether they are destined for heaven or hell but as regards their fellowship with the saints. Paul is willing to prayerfully deliver hypocrites to Satan (I Cor. 5:5, I Tim. 1:20), but his hope is that when they find themselves in his clutches they may learn and be saved.

Notice also that the responsibility for diligence in church discipline lies with the leaders. Christ and the apostles do not envision assemblies where Christians constantly test one another’s works as to whether they are in the faith. It is to the shepherds that Jesus has entrusted this responsibility. Jesus sharply rebukes the angel of the Thyatira church for not disciplining hypocrites and seducers, but “to the rest,” to the other members at Thyatira He has no such rebuke. Jesus is very stern with the wobbly angel of the Sardis church, but for the members who have not defiled themselves He has only blessing (Rev. 2-3). John recognizes that it is his job to rebuke Diotrophes (3 John 9-11) and that Gaius is merely responsible to faithfully follow the good.

Finally, Brethren

When all has been said, God's grace is greater than we have yet imagined and may extend to many whose fruit is invisible to our eyes. There are also a number who wobble under pressure in the walk of faith (Peter comes immediately to mind) but God's grace to them is without variableness. Fortunately we are not called to judge regarding any man's eternal destiny but our own. We are secure in our relationship with God, because He has given us objective evidence that He loves us by sending His Son. Moreover, He has given us the inward experiential witness of His Spirit. It is ultimately the Holy Spirit who is responsible to bear witness in the believer that he is the child of God. He whispers to us that we are sons and makes us shout aloud, "Abba, Father!"

Before our God we have no fear of condemnation, but on behalf of our brethren we fear lest any seem to fail the outward test in a way that comes short of the eternal rest. We are diligent: exhorting those who appear double-minded, we disassociate from those who are immoral; we snatch some by their grimy collars and drag them out of the fire (Jude 23). We teach them what grace always teaches (Titus 2:11-14), that Jesus' purpose in dying was to redeem us from lawless deeds and purify us to be zealous for good. In the case of those who lack the purity and lack the zeal, we are not surprised when they lack also the assurance. To these we offer, not security or assurance but the free gift of the Gospel: that if they will put their faith in Jesus and in His death in their place, the blood of God's Son will cleanse them from all unrighteousness and Jesus will give them eternal life.

It is the Father's desire, not only that we should be secure but also that we should feel secure in His arms. Therefore we delight in the whispers of His Spirit and take the solid rock of His promise at face value. Meanwhile, as our confidence and fruitfulness increase, so does our concern for others and our diligence that we may present everyone complete in Christ...that we do not lose those things that we have worked for, but that we may receive a full reward.