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The Eternal Security
of the
Believer



By
LOUIS T. TALBOT, D.D.



The Eternal Security of the Believer



Many members of the radio audience have written letters, asking questions concerning the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer, quoting passages of Scripture which, they believe, support what is called "the falling away" doctrine. Before we put these questions under the lens of Holy Writ, let us first consider what we mean by the term, "the eternal security of the believer." Much opposition to the doctrine has grown from a misunderstanding of what is meant by this expression.

WHO IS ETERNALLY SECURE?

"My sheep . . . shall never perish," John 10:27, 28.

"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven," Matthew 7:21.

What do we mean when we speak of the eternal security of the child of God? We mean that once a poor sinner has been regenerated by the Word of God, once he has been born again by the quickening power of the Spirit of God, once he has been made a partaker of the divine nature, once he has been adopted into the family of God, and justified before the throne of God, it is absolutely impossible for that man to be a lost soul. That is what we mean when we speak of the eternal security of the believer.

Now to emphasize this point, let us see what we do *not* mean by the eternal security of the believer. We do not mean that if one merely professes to be saved, if he goes down to the altar, takes the minister's hand, and says that he accepts Christ as his Saviour—in spite of his public confession, it does not necessarily follow that such a man is eternally safe. We do not mean that he is safe just because he joins the church, is baptized, takes communion, does so-called Christian work, and takes an interest in religion. He may do all these things, and yet not be truly regenerate.

Our Lord uttered a grave warning concerning such professors when He said: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that

doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out demons (R. V.)? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, *I never knew you*: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matt. 7:21-23). Mark you; our Lord did not say, "*I used to know you*, but you went away from me, and consequently have forfeited your salvation." Rather, He said, "*I never knew you.*" He was talking to mere professors who were never really born-again children of God.

When I announced a few days ago that I expected to speak on this subject, a person wrote me a letter, charging me with teaching a dangerous doctrine. Then, as if to prove his point, he proceeded to tell the story of a minister who had once seemed to be devoted to religion, but who had divorced his wife for no scriptural cause, had repudiated Christianity, and had been living before God a life of sin. Then this questioner asked, "Where does your eternal security come in, in a case like that?" My answer is that it does not come in at all, as far as that man is concerned; but rather, the words of Matthew 7:21-23 would apply to him: "I never knew you." The fact that one has been a Sunday School teacher, a deacon, an elder, an evangelist, or an ordained minister, does not necessarily prove that he is saved. One may be all of these things, and yet be eternally lost. The Lord Jesus spoke of mere professors as those whom *He never knew*, even though they were so active in public service that they had cast out demons and had done many wonderful works.

Now let us compare this searching statement with what Christ said in John 10: 27-29 concerning His sheep. Please note the words: "*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*" These words are true of every born-again child of God. They are the marks of regeneration. And in them three facts stand out clearly: (1) "*My sheep hear my voice*"; (2) "*I know them*"; (3) "*They follow me.*" Then, as if He would leave no room for doubt, the Lord Jesus added: "And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand." Is that not a wonderful assurance? Of His own sheep He said, "*I know them*"; but to mere professors He declared, "*I never knew you.*" My friends, to my mind, these statements answer all the objections that can be offered to this doctrine. To those who say: "I know a man who made a wonderful profession and was really saved; but now he has repudiated Christianity for some time"—to these I would read again the unmistakable words of the Lord Jesus.

Moreover, the Scriptures abound in other passages which

bear out this eternal truth. The Apostle John stated the case clearly in one definite, final answer to all questions on the subject when he wrote: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not of us" (1 John 2:19).

Only God is the Judge; He alone knows who is saved. You and I know it if *we* are saved, but we dare not judge our fellow-men. Yet God has said, "By their fruits ye shall know them." And it is far more consistent to question the empty profession of a sinful man than to doubt the eternal promises of a holy God, especially when He said that there would be hypocrites in the church.

When we speak of the doctrine of eternal security, let us remember that it applies only to the born-again child of God.

DOES THE DOCTRINE OF ETERNAL SECURITY ENCOURAGE LAX STANDARDS OF LIVING?

"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new," II Cor. 5:17.

The main objection to this truth, to quote one who opposes it, is this: "The teaching is dangerous because it engenders loose and careless living. It gives license to sin." "Why," writes another, "if I am eternally secure, it does not make any difference what I do or how I live; I will get to heaven anyway." My friend, do not deceive yourself. It makes a tremendous difference what you do and how you live. If you do not act as a Christian, you are just revealing the fact that you are not a real Christian at all. I know that a real Christian may fall into sin, but he is never happy so long as he continues in sin. If a professing Christian is happy in sin, then he gives evidence that he is not a child of God.

The difference between the sinning saint and the mere professor is illustrated by the experiences of Peter and Judas. Peter failed, failed grievously; with oaths and curses he denied his Lord. But one look from the Son of God sent him out weeping bitterly. Judas, however, was possessed by Satan all the time. He was never a child of God. He ever had his own self-interest before him. He was a thief, and held the bag. Although he companied with the Lord for three and one-half years, yet he was never born again. He planned deliberately to sell the Son of God. More than once Christ branded him as a traitor. And in the end he went out and hanged himself. Peter, on the other hand, hated the very sin that caused him

to grieve the Lord. This is the fundamental difference between a real believer and a false professor.

Personally, I believe that "the falling away" doctrine, and not the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer, produces lax standards of living. Some even go so far as to say, "If I commit this sin and 'fall away,' I can go back to the altar and get converted all over again." Certainly the Word of God teaches no such doctrine.

IS CHRIST'S INTERCESSORY WORK IN VAIN?

"My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous,"

I John 2:1.

"The falling away" doctrine makes absolutely no provision for Christ as our Great High Priest at the right hand of the Father. The Word of God teaches that at Calvary we are born again; then for us Christ, the Saviour, becomes a High Priest in the presence of God. He is not interceding for the world. He said in His great intercessory prayer, "I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine" (John 17:9). The Holy Spirit is in the world to convict men of sin and to regenerate the heart. But Christ is now "an Advocate with the Father," pleading for the sinning saint. All believers are saints; that is, separated ones, called to be witnesses for the Lord Jesus. But when the redeemed child of God fails, Christ in the glory intercedes for him, even as He said to Peter: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not" (Luke 22:31, 32).

According to "the falling away" doctrine, when a child of God sins, he loses his salvation, and must go to Calvary and be converted anew. According to this teaching, the Lord Jesus is known to the Christian only in the capacity of a Saviour. He is not known as an all-powerful High Priest. But the whole message of the book of Hebrews is that of a Great High Priest, even Jesus, the Son of God, who "ever liveth to make intercession for us" (Heb. 7:25). Throughout the New Testament we find this comforting, reassuring truth. And John wrote very plainly, saying: "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (I John 2:1). Now an advocate is a lawyer, an intercessor. But according to "the falling away" doctrine, when a child of God sins, he ceases to be a child of God, and conse-

quently must go, not to a risen and an interceding Christ, but to Calvary, to be born all over again. The Bible does not teach this; my brother. Your child does not cease to be your child just because he disobeys you. Neither do we cease to be God's children just because we grieve Him at times with our sin and folly. We have been adopted into the family of God by faith in His only begotten Son who died to save us. Our eternal security depends upon what He has done for us, not upon what we can ever hope to do. And because of His finished work on Calvary, we shall "never perish" if we truly love Him. And remember: "If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

IS SALVATION A REWARD?

"By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God . . . Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." Ephesians 2:8; Titus 3:5.

There is another insurmountable difficulty that confronts those who hold the doctrine that a child of God can fall away and be eternally lost. I have put this matter before many men who hold this teaching, and have not yet received the semblance of a satisfactory answer. It is in regard to *salvation and rewards*. Paul leaves no room for doubt in his discussion of the subject in I Cor. 3:11-15. Let us look carefully at this passage:

"For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: *but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.*"

Here the Holy Spirit is talking of the structure which the redeemed child of God builds upon the one foundation, even Christ Jesus. Only true believers will stand before the judgment seat of Christ—the wicked shall be judged at the great white throne. But when the rewards for service are given to the saints at the judgment seat of Christ, one believer will receive a reward for the things done in the flesh for the glory of God, while another will "suffer loss" because he did not "lay up treasures in heaven." *He shall lose his reward, but not his salvation; for "he himself shall be saved."* He himself is eter-

nally secure, because of his faith in the only Saviour, the one foundation. But, according to "the falling away" doctrine, that man would be eternally lost whose life, after conversion, did not bear fruit unto the glory of God.

Salvation is not a reward, my friend. It is not partly of faith and partly of works; it is the gift of God. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost."

WHAT DOES THE WORD OF GOD SAY?

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine . . ." II Timothy 3:16.

Possibly some objectors will not yet be convinced that once saved, we are forever saved, even though the argument already presented seems conclusive to us, and in harmony with the whole body of Scripture. Therefore, let us examine further some of the specific passages from the Word of God which are often quoted by those who hold that the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer is both dangerous and contrary to truth. God's Word is final! But let us be careful to consider each verse in the light of its context. There is no other way to arrive at its real meaning.

HEBREWS 6:4-6. "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." In these words the Holy Spirit refers to Hebrews, many of whom were *intellectually* convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. But because of bitter persecution, they were going away from the light they had, returning to Judaism.

Four things are said of the privileges these Hebrews were rejecting:

1. *They were "enlightened."* So also is every man who hears the Gospel, whether he accepts Christ or not. These were *enlightened, but not born again.*

2. *They had "tasted of the heavenly gift."* Now it is one thing to taste; it is another thing to eat. Christ Himself is the Heavenly Gift. How many sinners have been under conviction, have admired the beautiful life of our Lord, have acknowledged that He died for a lost world, have even admitted that they expect one day to accept Him as a personal

Saviour, and yet have refused to open their hearts to Him. They are among those who have only "tasted of the heavenly gift."

3. *They had been made "partakers of the Holy Ghost."* Now the word "partakers" in the Greek means those who had been "going along with" the Holy Spirit, "in company with" Him. Every Jew who witnessed the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and heard Peter's sermon, as recorded in the second chapter of Acts, was "in company with" the Holy Spirit. But, you will remember, the record tells us that some mocked and said, "These men are full of new wine" (Acts 2:13). To witness the power of the Holy Spirit is one thing; to be baptized by the Holy Spirit is another.

4. *They had "tasted the good word of God, and the power of the world (or 'age') to come";* that is, they had heard the Word of God, and had seen the dead raised, the lepers cleansed, the eyes of the blind opened—enough to convince them that Jesus was their Messiah and Lord.

Concerning these the Holy Spirit says: "It is impossible . . . if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance." If they deliberately refuse to accept Christ as the only One who can save them, then they are doing the very same thing their fathers did; for they "crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame."

Moreover, if this passage of Scripture was written concerning Christians, it is very discouraging to those who hold "the falling away" doctrine; for they say a man can be saved, "fall away" or be lost, and then be converted again; whereas this passage from the Word of God says, "*It is impossible . . . if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance.*" Do you not see the fallacy of this doctrine, my friend? This one passage alone contradicts it definitely and finally.

But please note further the illustration given by the Holy Spirit in the verses which follow; it bears out the fact that verses 4-6 were written concerning those who had been "enlightened," but not regenerated. In other words, the saved man "bringeth forth" fruit; but the man who rejects the Heavenly Gift bears "thorns and briers." We are not saved *by* our good works; but we are saved *unto* good works. And "by their fruits ye shall know them."

Yet another convincing proof of the fact that verses 4-6 describe the enlightened, but unregenerate, is seen in verse nine and the following verses. Here the Holy Spirit turns, as it were, from a description of those who had rejected Christ, and addresses the truly born-again Hebrew Christians. He calls them "beloved." And He says, "*But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you*"—He had referred to the unregenerated as "*those*" (verse 4). Of "*you*," "beloved" of God, "we are persuaded better things" than merely an intel-

lectual knowledge. "We are persuaded . . . *things that accompany salvation.*" These words unmistakably prove that, in the preceding verses, the born-again souls were not in view at all.

And in verses 13-20, which follow, we find one of the strongest passages bearing upon the eternal security of the believer to be found in all the Word of God. The illustration is given of Jehovah's promise to Abraham, at which time God confirmed His Word by His oath. According to the law of Moses, two or three witnesses were required to establish a fact in point of law. And here we read that by God's Word and God's oath—by these two "immutable," unchangeable things, we have a hope, "an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast." What could be more plain, more reassuring, my friend? God's Word is unchanging; His promise is sure!

II PETER 2:20-22. In this passage also the Holy Spirit is writing of the unregenerate. Even a casual reading of the entire second chapter of this epistle reveals the fact that those described here are "false prophets," "false teachers" (verse 1). They are repeatedly referred to as "they" and "them"—never as "you" or "beloved." Peter was describing those who perhaps through the influence of godly parents, perhaps through the environment of a godly home, those who in some way had "escaped the pollutions of the world" in large measure (verse 20). Restraint had kept them from much that is evil for a time. Then, still unregenerate, such as these had deliberately turned to the world with all its vices. And since God holds us responsible according to the light we have, "it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them" (verse 20). The man who hears the Gospel and rejects it is in a worse condition than the man who has never heard; his responsibility is greater, and his punishment will be all the more severe. Some "shall be beaten with many stripes"; others, "with few stripes" (Luke 12:47, 48).

Furthermore, Peter proves that he is describing the enlightened, but unregenerate, when he adds in verse 22: "But it happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire." The man referred to here was a "dog" all the time—not a "sheep"; a "sow"—not a "lamb." Spurgeon once said, "If this dog had been born again, and had gotten a sheep nature, he would never have returned to his vomit." The sheep in the mire is unhappy, even as the Christian is not satisfied when he is out of the will of God; but the hog enjoys the mire. Even after he has been "washed" by his environment or good resolutions, the unsaved man still possesses the old nature. He is a sinner still.

HEBREWS 10:26-38. What we find in this passage belongs in the same class with such references as Hebrews 3:12-14; 6:4-6; 12:15; I Peter 5:8; II Peter 2:20, 21. These words were all addressed to Jews, Christian Jews, who were being warned against the empty profession of those who were intellectually convinced that Jesus was their Messiah, but who were not really saved. Many of these enlightened, but unregenerate ones had *seemed* to embrace Christianity for a time; but when persecution came, they had returned to Judaism. And their example the Holy Spirit uses as a warning against rejecting Christ, the only Way of Life.

ROMANS 11:22. "On them which fell, severity"—what do these words mean? Again let us note the context. Romans 11:13-24 is addressed to Gentiles, not to individual believers. The matter of personal salvation is not in question here. The whole passage deals with Jewish responsibility not assumed. Israel is called the "olive tree"; Gentiles are the "wild olive tree." Some of the "natural branches" in Israel were broken off through unbelief; and the wild branches, Gentiles, were "grafted in among them." And the fact that the natural branches were broken off is given as a warning to the Gentiles, lest they too be not spared. The Jews, as a nation, rejected their Messiah; and in this Church age God is visiting the Gentiles, "to take out of them a people for his name" (Acts 15:14). Then He will once again deal with His ancient people, Israel; the natural branches shall "be grafted into their own olive tree . . . And all Israel shall be saved." (See Rom. 11:24-27.) This, in brief, is the meaning of Romans 11:13-27.

MATTHEW 12:43-45. These are the words of Christ: "When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man"; that is, when he is *gone out* of his own accord—not *cast out* by the Lord Himself—when by self-reformation a man seeks to clean up his life, he still belongs to "this wicked generation" (verse 45). In another place the Lord Jesus said, "Ye must be born again." These words in Matthew were spoken to the Pharisees, who had attributed to Beelzebub the works of Christ. The house of Israel had been "swept" and "garnished" of the spirit of idolatry in the Babylonian captivity; but still unregenerate, these leaders of the nation were self-righteous hypocrites. The Lord Jesus said so. And this passage in Matthew 12:43-45 described their state, not the state of the redeemed who had fallen into sin.

MATTHEW 24:13. "He that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved." In our study of Matthew we saw that this entire passage refers to "the great tribulation" that shall come upon the earth; and the Lord Jesus referred to that period when He uttered the words of verse 13. He had in mind

the faithful remnant in that day. "Many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many . . . But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (verses 11-13).

However, the principle set forth here I accept. If a man does not "endure unto the end," he only reveals what he was all the while, a mere professor, not a born-again soul.

JOHN 15:2, 6. But someone asks, "Does not John 15:2, 6 prove the fallacy of the doctrine of eternal security?" No, my friend. A careful examination of the text makes it very clear that we have in this passage: (1) What *God* does with a fruitless branch; and (2) what *men* do with a fruitless branch. But the branch is united to the vine all the while!

What does God do with the fruitless branch? "He taketh it away" (verse 2). Where does He take it? To heaven. In Corinth, because of a misuse of the Lord's Supper, Paul says, "Many are weak and sickly . . . and many sleep" (I Cor. 11:30). Then he adds, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit: "For if we would judge ourselves, but should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord." But, my friend, chastening of the Lord is one thing; eternal condemnation is another. "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth" (Heb. 12:6). The branch which the Lord "taketh away" represents the Christian who is saved, "yet so as by fire" (I Cor. 3:15). He loses his reward, but not his salvation. Fruit-bearing *follows* conversion, and is not a *means* of conversion.

There are two ways of going to heaven. One was Paul's way; for he was able to declare with joy: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day" (II Tim. 4:7, 8). The other way of going to heaven is that of the child of God who dies without having "finished the course," without having won souls for Christ, without having consecrated all to His service after conversion.

Many of our Bible Institute students go home every year, rejoicing over a diploma, a reward for work done. They have finished their course, as it were. But sometimes we have the sad duty of dismissing a student. He goes home, but not with rejoicing. My Christian friend, are you getting ready to meet your Saviour with the victory of a life spent in His service, to the praise of His glory?

But let us look again at our text. What do *men* do with the fruitless branch? "*Men* gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned" (verse 6). *Men* have no way of judging the sincerity of our profession, except by the testimony we give before the world. The *Lord* looketh on the heart. It is very important that we witness to Him by our

works before a sinful world. But it is reassuring to know also that the branch is united to The True Vine, which is Christ. It is reassuring to know that our eternal security depends upon His perfect work on Calvary, rather than upon our imperfect, faltering work, even after we are born again.

I CORINTHIANS 9:27. Who is "a castaway"? To find the answer, let us read the entire passage here. Paul is discussing rewards for service, not salvation. And he uses the illustration of the Olympian games to show the meaning of running the Christian race. Only free-born citizens could contend in these games; and only born-again children of God can run the race as Christians. Salvation is not the goal; it is the starting place. The judgment seat of Christ is the goal.

Now the word "castaway" in the Greek means "disapproved." The prize went to the victor in the Olympian games; and the crown awaits the Christian who is not "disapproved," in so far as his service is concerned, at the judgment seat of Christ. Salvation is not a reward; it is a free gift. And Paul was not writing about salvation in this passage, as the context clearly shows.

REVELATION 3:5. But someone asks, referring to Revelation 3:5, "How can a name be blotted out of the book of life if it is not first entered therein?" It is only by inference that "the falling away" doctrine can be built upon this quotation from the Scriptures. On the other hand, these words mean just what they say, and give us the blessed assurance that God will *not* blot our names out of the book of life if we are trusting in the finished work of Christ. Moreover, "no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation" (II Peter 1:20); and if specific passages are considered in their relation to the whole body of truth, as set forth in the Word of God, no contradictions will be found. When Christ promised: "My sheep . . . shall never perish," He meant exactly what He said.

"JESUS PAID IT ALL"

Space forbids a further consideration here of selected passages bearing upon this theme; but the same principle of interpretation will never fail. As we let the Holy Spirit who wrote the Word of God take the things of Christ and show them unto us, He will be our unerring Teacher. As we read each passage in the light of its context, comparing Scripture with Scripture, we arrive at the same conclusion: "By two immutable things (God's Word confirmed by His oath), in which it was impossible for God to lie, we . . . have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the

hope set before us: *which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast*" (Heb. 6:18, 19).

Good works *are* important. God expects His blood-bought children to bear "much fruit." An empty profession before a world lost in sin is dead. But good works can not save the sinner. Salvation must come first.

My unsaved friend, do not trust in your own efforts. You need a Saviour. And that One is Jesus of Nazareth who died for you. Look to Him by faith, and you will become one of His "sheep." You will "never perish"; for His Word is the Word of the eternal God! It is forever established in heaven. You will want to witness before the world to His measureless wisdom and limitless love. Then if you fall into sin, you will not be lost; but you will be unhappy until you have confessed your sin to your Great High Priest, even Jesus, who will cleanse you from all unrighteousness. You will be Christ's for time and for eternity. And you will be among that blood-bought company, of which He Himself has said: "My sheep . . . shall never perish." Will you not take Him at His Word, and be saved today? If you will, then you can sing with assurance the words of the old hymn:

"Jesus paid it all;

All to Him I owe:

Sin had left a crimson stain;

He washed it white as snow."



