

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #136:

ETERNAL SECURITY

By John Temples

On a scale of one to ten, how certain are you that if Jesus came today, you would be among those bound for heaven? If a friend were to ask you, “Are you going to heaven?” how would you answer? For many of us, the answer would be something like “I think so...I hope so...I assume so.”

Why would we answer such a serious question in such a tentative, uncertain, vague way? It could be for a couple of reasons: (1) You want to be careful not to come across to your friend as cocky, arrogant, or self-righteous--“holier than thou.” (2) You are genuinely uncertain about your eternal salvation.

We Christians are sometimes accused of being the ultimate neurotics: always speaking of heaven as our eternal home but never being sure we’ll get there. Let us look to the Scriptures and think about the subject of *eternal security*.

CAN I KNOW I’M SAVED?

As with many questions, the answers go to two extremes:

One extreme is “Yep, I’m saved--couldn’t be lost if I tried.” This idea reflects a doctrine put forth by John Calvin in the Middle Ages, the idea of “perseverance of the saints” (popularly known as “once saved, always saved”). Here are some expressions of this doctrine:

- “Since God is sovereign and his will cannot be frustrated by humans or anything else, those whom God has called into communion with himself will continue in faith until the end. Those who apparently fall away either never had true faith to begin with (1 John 2:19), or, if they are saved but not presently walking in the Spirit, they will be divinely chastened (Hebrews 12:5–11) and will repent (1 John 3:6–9). “ (Wikipedia, article on Calvinism)
- “We believe in the doctrine of eternal and particular election of a definite number of the human race chosen in Christ before the foundation of the

world, that they should be holy and without blame before Him in love.... We believe that all the saints of God justified by the righteousness of Christ shall preserve in grace, and none of them finally fall away so as to be lost.”
(Primitive Baptist Church Articles of Faith, Articles III and IV)

- “Is it possible to be saved, and then lose that salvation? Fortunately, the answer is a resounding ‘no.’ Once a person has accepted Jesus Christ as Savior, he/she is forever saved. This fact is referred to as the doctrine of ‘eternal security,’ often summarized as ‘once saved, always saved.’”
(<https://www.allaboutgod.com/once-saved-always-saved.htm>)

So Calvin taught, and many modern preachers continue to teach, that the eternal salvation of a person pre-chosen by God is guaranteed--he cannot lose his inheritance, although he may not enjoy it as much. Perhaps the most extreme example of this extreme doctrine is found in a popular tract written by Sam Morris, a Baptist preacher in Texas. His tract can be found at many sites on the Internet. Morris wrote:

“We take the position that a Christian's sins do not damn his soul. The way a Christian lives, what he says, his character, his conduct, or his attitude toward other people has nothing whatever to do with the salvation of his soul. All the prayers a man can pray, all the Bibles he may read, all the churches he may belong to, all the services he may attend, all the sermons he may practice, and all the debts he may pay, all the ordinances he may observe, all the laws he may keep, all the benevolent acts he may perform, will not make his soul one bit safer. And all the sins he may commit from idolatry to murder, will not make his soul in any more danger.”

The opposite extreme on the issue of eternal security is, “I can never be sure of salvation.” My life is like a rubber ball, bouncing between a saved state and a lost state. Salvation is a moving target. If I happen to be thinking an impure thought when the Lord returns, all my years of serving Him will be for nought and I will be cast into outer darkness. This uncertain view is held even by many in the Lord’s church, in spite of the fact that the writings of the apostles are characterized by *assurance, peace of mind, certainty, and knowledge*. Here is a passage you need to write out and post on your bathroom mirror:

“These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that **you may know that you have eternal life**, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.” (1 John 5:13)

WHAT IS THE TRUTH ABOUT ETERNAL SECURITY?

The truth is, both extremes discussed above are faulty interpretations of Scripture. Calvinism is certainly false; the Bible is full of warnings that God’s people can fall from grace. 1 Corinthians 10:12 is very familiar: “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.” Paul said of some Galatians, “You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace” (Galatians 5:4). Jesus told the church at Ephesus that if they did not repent and return to their first love, He would “remove their lampstand” (disown them as His, Revelation 2:5).

The idea that a Christian can never be sure of his or her salvation and eternal destiny is also false, as we saw in 1 John 5:13. John said there is a sense in which we can KNOW that we have eternal life.

That sense is this: *Salvation--eternal life--is in a certain SPHERE, STATE, or LOCATION, and as long as I am in that sphere, state, or location, I have eternal life as a present possession and eternal certainty.* That is the principle taught in 1 John 5:13.

This principle of safety and security being located in a certain place, sphere, or state is seen several times in God’s word:

For Noah and his family, salvation was in the ark. It is obvious that Noah had to remain in the ark to survive the Flood. But as long as he did so, there was no uncertainty--He had God’s promise of deliverance.

For certain Israelites, safety and security were in the cities of refuge. These cities, appointed by God, were “safe harbors” for Israelites who accidentally killed a fellow Jew (what we call manslaughter). Deuteronomy 35:11-12 reads, “You shall appoint cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person accidentally may flee there. They shall be cities of refuge for you from the avenger,

that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation in judgment.” The point is this: as long as the manslayer remained in a city of refuge, he could not be killed by the “avenger of blood” (a relative of the deceased). But notice Deuteronomy 35:26-28--”But if the manslayer at any time goes outside the limits of the city of refuge where he fled, and the avenger of blood finds him outside the limits of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood, because he should have remained in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest. But after the death of the high priest the manslayer may return to the land of his possession.” So if you were an Israelite who had accidentally killed his neighbor, you were safe in a city of refuge *as long as you remained in the city.*

For Paul and a certain ship’s crew, safety was in the ship. Paul was once on a ship bound for Rome. The ship was nigh to being destroyed by a storm, but God graciously granted Paul his own life and the life of all on board. Acts 27:22-24 says, “[Paul said to the sailors] I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must be brought before Caesar; and indeed God has granted you all those who sail with you.’” In spite of this promise, some of the sailors intended to abandon ship and take the lifeboats with them. Paul persuaded the sailors to remain on the ship. As a result, they were all saved, eventually landing on the island of Malta. But here is the point: *they were all safe as long as they remained on the ship.*

What is God telling us in all these examples? “I have provided safety and salvation for you, but you must remain in the location or state in which I have placed that salvation.”

- Noah was safe, but only if he remained on board the ark.
- The Israelites were safe from avengers of blood as long as they remained in a city of refuge.
- Paul and the sailors had a divine guarantee of safety and deliverance, but only if they stayed on the ship until it ran aground.

You and I want to KNOW that we have eternal life, that we have a “place prepared” in heaven. The inspired apostle John writes to us in 1 John 5:13, “I have written...that you may know that you have eternal life.” And two verses before, he

tells us where that eternal life is: "This life is *in His Son.*" As long as we are in Christ, we have eternal life and a promise of heaven.

But what does it mean to be "in Christ"? In practical terms, in our present state, to be "in Christ" is to be in His body, the church. Now obviously, we are not talking about being baptized, getting your name on the church roll, and never darkening the door of the church building again. A person who is "in Christ" is one who has obeyed the gospel, who actively and regularly attends the assemblies of the church and strives to the best of his or her ability to live the Christian life. John calls this "walking in the light" in 1 John 1:7. That text affirms that if we walk in the light, we have ongoing fellowship with one another and with God, and the blood of Christ continually cleanses us from sin. Hence, we remain in a saved state, and eternal life is ours.

I once heard of a father who was proud of his son for going to college. He told his son, "Son, if you remain in college and graduate, I will give you the keys to a new Ford Mustang." Every weekend, the boy would go home and take his friends by the car lot and say, "You see that Mustang? That is mine." They would say, "How can you say it's yours? You don't own it yet." But as long as he complied with his father's conditions--as long as he remained in school--*he had the car.*

The church is our ark, our city of refuge, our ship of safety. As long as we remain therein, and are faithful in our Christian walk and our prayer life--even though we may stumble from time to time--we are walking in the light and can therefore say, "I have eternal life." Let us take comfort in that. --John Temples