

Grace and Paul's Conversion, No. 5

After the Spirit-directed Ananias immersed Saul of Tarsus, he excitedly explained, "Saul, you now possess eternal life. You are eternally secure. No one can take salvation from you. Though you should strive to live without sinning, you will surely sin, but Jesus has already taken care of that. Your flesh may lead you to commit sin but you cannot practice such grievous sins as to negate the grace of God."

You know that Ananias offered no such explanation. It required centuries for biased theologians to come up with such teachings of eternal security of the believer. So far, in this series, we have let Paul be his own commentator regarding justification by faith and salvation by grace through faith. Why not let him tell about his security and vulnerability?

Forgiveness Is Not Immortality

Although Paul was forgiven, he did not claim immortality. Many years later he clearly stated that only God had immortality (1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16). He explained that those who seek for immortality may be given eternal life (Rom. 2:7). Further, he states, "*The mortal puts on immortality,*" after physical death (1 Cor. 15:54). Please read these references in full context.

In contemplating the approaching time when the whole earthly system of Moses would be changed into God's new creation through redemption, he assures, "*For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience*" (Rom. 8:18-25). Not having eternal life here, we seek and hope for immortality.

Forgiveness – justification – salvation – reconciliation is not some sort of gift package which gives us immunity from future misconduct. Our President has power to grant a full pardon for grievous crimes. He might absolve a person of his guilt but he cannot extend his pardon to include whatever other crimes the person might commit through the rest of his life. The President cannot offer an indulgence for crimes yet to be committed.

Neither does God offer such a gift package. The "once-saved-always-saved" concept offers a full indulgence for sins yet to be committed. John Tetzel, in the time of Martin Luther, offered indulgences for sale. Now, preachers offer plenary indulgences free! The advice goes like this: "Christ has already covered your sins. Now, just try not to sin, but if you do (and you certainly will), just be happy that you cannot sin so grievously as to damn your soul and lose eternal life; so tell everyone about that good news!"

Use God's Escape or Fall

That, however, is not the kind of advice Paul gave fellow believers. He wrote in language we cotton-patch people can grasp: "*I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under*

*the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness. **Now these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance.'** We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents; nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. **Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:1-13).***

Paul used this example of persons who had believed strongly enough to leave Egypt and follow God's instructions given through Moses on a depriving and treacherous journey of escape. It was not weakness of faith that Paul warned about but it was weakness of the flesh toward sin. Paul was applying this to fellow disciples. To deny that Paul was saying they could fall is to deny his credibility.

Paul introduced the warnings written above by telling of his own vulnerability by use of an illustration. He wrote, "*Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified*" (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

It has been observed that in each of Paul's writings except *Philemon* he includes a warning against the disciple falling away. He never indicates that the ones falling away never really had saving faith to begin with. That is an interpolation by theologians devised to strengthen their case for eternal security of the believer.

This is by no means a thorough treatment of the subject but it is enough to reveal Paul's teaching. Just read his short epistle to the Galatians to see his recurring warnings. His familiar text still stands: "*You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace*" (5:4). They could not have been severed from Christ had they not been in Christ and they could not have fallen from grace had they not already been saved by grace.

In further warnings Paul urged disciples not to use their freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. They should be governed by the inward man rather than gratifying the desires of the flesh. Giving a long list of works of the flesh, he added, "*I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God* (see 5:13-26). That includes modern preachers who proclaim eternal security of the believer while carrying on damning sexual affairs or dishonest monetary schemes.

Was Paul Running Scared?

Was Paul running scared? Was he instilling fearful uncertainty in the disciples? No, while nurturing assurance, he was wisely practicing and teaching caution and concern. They would not be tempted beyond what they could bear. The person desiring to do right could always find a way of escape. They who had been crucified with Christ would have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. But none are perfected becoming impervious to sin, else that would savor of merit. All persons sin and may be overtaken in trespasses, thus making them in need of restoration (6:1). *“He who sows to the flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit **reap eternal life**. And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for **in due season we shall reap, IF we do not lose heart.**” (6:8-9).*

The aged Paul, near the end of his earthly journey, assures us with his own statement of assurance: *“For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, **will award** to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing”* (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

How can we live in assurance and happiness knowing of our vulnerability? If we impenitently continue to practice what we know is sin, we cannot! We should be reminded that *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!”* (Heb. 10:31). But it is only by choice that a person lives in impenitence.

Thousands of persons die each year in automobile accidents in spite of the many warning signs along all our highways. Who would dare to travel on any of those roads where so many lives are lost?

In the last seventy years I have probably driven the distance equal to fifteen trips around the earth. Most all of that driving has been enjoyable with family and friends with few mishaps and no serious wrecks. Often we sang or engaged in fun conversation as we traveled. It was something I looked forward to and planned for, and I still enjoy driving within my limitations. Yet, there was never a mile of that driving in which I did not exercise caution. If I had taken my hands off the steering wheel for a minute, fallen asleep for half a minute, or failed to observe caution signs, it could have been disastrous. But appropriate prayerful concern and wise caution because of my vulnerability has allowed me to enjoy driving for seventy years without fear.

In similar manner, I have enjoyed confidence as a disciple through assurance of God’s grace and work in my life, always being prayerfully mindful of the pitfalls along the way. Such living trust allows no fears as I approach the time of my transition.

What We Have Learned

Saul of Tarsus was subjected to a drastic, miraculous experience on the road to Damascus but he was not saved by it. Jesus spoke to him but, instead of assuring him of salvation, he told him to go into the city where he would be told what he must do. Because he was blinded, he was led

into Damascus. Paul was so shocked by the revelation that he had been persecuting Jesus that he took no food or water for three days and nights. In deep penitence, he called on the Lord in prayer that entire time, yet he was still burdened with his sins. Ananias, divinely directed to Paul, laid his hands on him so that he received the Holy Spirit and his sight. The Holy Spirit neither saved him nor gave evidence that he had been forgiven of his sins, nor did miraculous recovery of his sight confirm his salvation. The Spirit-directed Ananias then told him to get up and be baptized to wash away his sins calling on the name of the Lord. There is no record of Paul arguing about the necessity or role of baptism. He was familiar with Mosaic rituals of cleansings. He now believed in Jesus, so by his obedience to him he was calling on him who had previously authorized universal baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in his Great Commission. Although in later years Paul wrote various explanations about baptism, he never renounced the fact that his baptism was the defining point at which his sins were remitted. In those later writings Paul recognized his continued vulnerability to sin through which he could lose his soul but he also expressed his confidence in the promises of God enabling him to face death without fear. And he continually warned disciples of their vulnerability while pointing them to God as their source of strength and hope.

Paul is the one who taught most concerning the principle of salvation by grace through faith, a principle which we could neither devise nor implement. His conversion and writings are an illustrative commentary on how that principle can be applied in our lives. My deep concern is that his example and teachings are so cautiously avoided or purposefully perverted by theologians, preachers, and teachers whose responsibility is to tell sinners how to access that grace and to continue in it. []

(Cecil Hook; January 2007)

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