

Grace and “On and Off Salvation” #1

When scriptural teachings concerning the vulnerability of the believer are presented, it is only to be expected that those who teach the eternal security of the believer will disagree. Some object that in such case, each later sin would cause one to lose salvation until it was recognized, repented of, and forgiven. Thus salvation would be in a constantly “lost and regained” syndrome of “on and off salvation.” Everyone would have to be sure to pray for forgiveness immediately after each sin hoping eventually to die immediately after prayer for forgiveness.

Although that claim has a sound of logic when artfully presented, it is about as illogical as saying that when I was given life on November 24, 1918, I was made immune from accident, disaster, and disease for the next 88 years. Rather than me being made invulnerable to those destructive forces, I have had to deal with them cautiously, avoiding them when possible, and taking remedial action when subjected to them. My life has not been a constant fear of death!

In dealing with this matter simply and briefly, we will ask and answer a few easy questions.

1. Is it possible for a believer who has been forgiven to sin again? John is very dogmatic in declaring, *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ... If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. ... My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father...”* (1 John 1:8-10; 2:1). John includes himself as he addresses those in fellowship with the Father. He introduces no hint of *pretended* fellowship

2. Is it possible for a believer’s sin to destroy him? James adds his voice, *“My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins”* (James 5:19). This refers to a brother, not a make believe brother. By sin he leaves the way of truth resulting in the death of his soul if his course is not corrected.

In the message to the church in Sardis, there was warning for those whose works (not faith!) were not perfected. *“Yet you have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life...”* (Rev. 3:1-6). Their names were in the book of life and would remain so contingent upon their conquering/overcoming.

Jesus pictured himself as the vine with those in him being branches. For those who would not sustain such a relationship in him, however, he warned, *“If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned”* (Read the context: John 15:1-11). Yes, a believer in relationship with Christ can fall into such sin as to destroy him. Many warnings in the Scriptures advise disciples of such a fate but we need not review them all here.

3. Now we ask: Isn't there continuous cleansing of our sins if we are in fellowship with God? The welcome answer is "yes." It is not a "pre-cleansing" before the sin is committed but a cleansing in progress. "...*but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin*" (1 John 1:7). So the atonement has already been made for our sins. No worry! "...*but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world*" (1 John 2:1-2). Forgiveness has been provided by Jesus so there is continuous cleansing. If that means a "pre-cleansing" was made at a point in time on the cross, then the whole world is saved! John did not teach that.

4. Who, then, receives that continuous cleansing? Is it without qualification or condition? John identifies who receives it. Let us read the entire paragraph. "*This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us*" (1 John 1:5-10).

In both his Gospel and Epistles, John uses many terms to denote a relationship with God – knowing God, believing in him, trusting him as the light, the way, the truth, and the life, being in the Vine, being in his flock, consuming him through faith, loving him, keeping his word / commandments, abiding in him, doing the will of the Father, and other terms that indicate continued living in him. In this passage particularly he writes of walking in the light; that is, living in relationship with him. In that relationship one is not in a state of perfection or invulnerability because he still sins. Is he "automatically" forgiven of those sins? There is a condition to be met. He must confess his sin specifically, not just saying, "I am always a sinner," while continuing to live in / practice a specific violation. If a person is impenitent and will not confess his sin to God, there is no promise of forgiveness. If we claim forgiveness while walking in darkness (continuing to practice sin), "*we lie and do not live according to truth.*"

The parent who loves his child is not intent on picking flaws in his immature offspring so he might punish the child but he is patient, nurturing, and supportive of the child. The father is more concerned about the attitude of his child than in his ability to understand best how to please the father in every detail. I don't think we have to line up a page of proof-texts in order to agree that our Father has a similar love for us and expectation of us. Even though the Father's love remains for the disciple who may become totally rebellious and impenitent, that love does not save the disciple. Salvation is not a gift forced upon the unwilling. Neither is the attitude of rebellion and impenitence something turned "on and off" during the day making salvation an "on and off" daily problem.

The same Apostle John, who wrote of the vulnerability of believers mentioned above, also gave much assurance to the same people. It is not wise to align his "for and against" passages to

conflict with one another or to choose one list while disregarding the other. Let us copy a paragraph of his assurances (1 John 3:4-10):

*“Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared to take away sins, and **in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he is righteous. He who commits sin is of the devil. No one born of God commits sin; for God’s nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother.**”*

Hebrew writers could state laws very dogmatically, but for more subjective thoughts, they often employed poetic literary styles. One such style used often by writers of the poetic books of the Bible and by John is the parallelism with one line making a statement followed by a line amplifying it or qualifying it. Let me try to clarify that by use of the paragraph above. I shall give the lines and then insert my thoughts about it.

“Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.” He simply confirms what he had already taught that all of us sin.

“You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.” Therefore, a practice of sin by one in relationship with him would be totally inappropriate.

“No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.” A continued relationship in him by an impenitent person is both inappropriate and contradictory.

“Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he is righteous.” Let no one who claims to be in Christ while doing unrighteous things fool you, for,
“He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning.” John had confirmed that all sin. Now is he saying that all those in Christ are of the devil? Or, is he not saying that those born of God do not continue to impenitently practice sins, as he states in the next lines,

“No one born of God commits sin; for God’s nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God.” The word “cannot” does not always denote “impossibility” but it can point to something totally inappropriate like, “Remembering my father’s honor, I cannot compromise my morals,” or an airline pilot cannot drink liquor on the job. All these thoughts must be interpreted in harmony with John’s earlier statements about sin in Chapter 1.

“By this it may be seen who are the children of God,

and who are the children of the devil:

whoever does not do right is not of God,

nor he who does not love his brother.” Just when is a person born into the devil’s family? John is not referring to birth into the family of God or of the devil. He is pointing to those who bear the characteristics of God or the devil. Whoever “does right” has godly character, and that doing right is identified as loving our brothers, not keeping rituals. It would be of value to re-study John’s entire epistle with special attention to his literary style.

At this point, I hope you can agree that the Apostle John was not discussing “on and off” salvation — some puzzling vacillation between salvation and damnation as the hours of each day go by. Rather, he pictures relationships based upon the heart of the individuals. The sincere believer, realizing his vulnerability, yet with trust in the grace of God, seeks not to dishonor God, and is eager to reform his life as he perceives the need. That person is walking in the light of fellowship. The impenitent believer, however, who claims fellowship with God while continuing to refuse to forsake his sinful practices, is both deceived and deceiving. His practice is totally incompatible with fellowship.

Next issue: How often do you sin – every moment, hourly, daily, seldom? []

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