

# **The Full Weight of Scripture On the Security of Our Salvation And the Falling Away of the Believer**

Scripture Used: NASB 1995

There is more than one topic in God's holy scriptures that appears to have two sides, and seemingly opposing or contradictory sides at that. The security of our salvation and the possibility of the believer falling away to eternal damnation is an example of one of those topics.

In our day, and as they are commonly taught, the teaching of eternal security stands on one side and the teaching of falling away from the faith stands on the other. Therefore, these two teachings are a source of debate, conflict, and even division within the church and among individual Christians.

All this dissension and division is often justified by each side claiming that their side is the only side supported by God's Word. In addition to this, each side likes to use anecdotal evidence to support their position. For example, those who believe in eternal security point to the discouraging and sometimes paralyzing daily fear experienced by those who believe they can lose their salvation. And those who believe Christians can fall away from the faith point to the ongoing, unholy lives of some who believe that once they are saved they are always saved. On top of all this, the human inclination to resort to derogatory comments about the opposition enters in. Consider these two examples. Those who teach a Christian can fall away often claim that those who hold to eternal security are giving Christians a license to sin. And from among those who teach eternal security there is the claim that Christians who teach one can fall away from the faith are teaching a works based salvation. The point to be made here is that too often, instead of being gracious, both sides misrepresent the other and accuse each other of being unbiblical, or even worse, heretical.

It is my intention to be respectful of our brothers and sisters in Christ, whether they teach or believe in once saved always saved or in the possibility of falling away from the faith. As I have stated in the past, no issue within the Body of Christ is worthy of casting insults on one another, and this issue is not worthy of separating over. If we are going to criticize our fellow Christians or separate from them, may it be far more because of the impurity of their heart and unholiness of their conduct and far less because of their theology.

## **Church History**

With the understanding and full support for the fact that God's Word is our final authority on all matters of faith and practice, it seems important at this point to address Church history in relation to the teaching on eternal security and falling away.

According to church historians, there wasn't any teaching on eternal security that was approved and supported by the church for the first fifteen hundred years. This does not mean there were no theological innovators or Christian thinkers who taught and wrote about something different than the consensus and defended teaching from the time of the Apostles to the time of the

Reformation. In fact, we see in the letters of the apostle Paul that innovative, aberrant teaching came into a number of local churches soon after they were planted (Romans 16:17-18; Galatians 1:6-8; I Timothy 1:3-7; Titus 1:7-10). And Peter said that a number of untaught and unstable Christians were distorting Paul's teaching – to their own destruction (II Peter 3:14-16). The point here is that from the beginning of the Church, there has been those who teach things that depart from the approved and generally accepted understanding of scripture. In spite of this, there was a consistent consensus concerning Bible doctrine related to the eternal security of the believer from the time of the apostles to the Reformation.

For example, the book, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers*, takes us back to the first four hundred years of teaching on this topic. Under the heading of "Salvation" (pp. 586-591), we find this question, "Can those who are saved ever be lost?" After several Scriptural passages are quoted [II Chronicles 15:2; Ezekiel 33:12; Matthew 10:22; Luke 9:62; II Timothy 2:12; Hebrews 10:26; II Peter 2:20-21], five pages of quotes are given from the writings of early Christian leaders. These quotes give evidence that the early church did not believe in "once saved, always saved." They taught that it was possible for a genuine believer to reject God and end up eternally separated from God in hell.

Again, acknowledging that human quotes are not equal to God's Word, they nevertheless reveal how the early church understood God's Word concerning salvation in comparison to the teaching on eternal security that has found favor in the church following the Reformation. With this in mind, here are several quotes from the early church leaders found in this book.

It is neither the faith, nor the love, nor the hope, nor the endurance of one day; rather, "he that endures to the end will be saved." (Clement of Alexandria, c. 195)

[After the flood] the world returned to sin . . . and so it is destined to [be destroyed by] fire. So is the man who after baptism renews his sins. (Tertullian, c. 198)

Certain ones of those [heretics] who hold different opinions misuse certain passages [of scripture]. They essentially destroy free will by introducing [the teaching that we have] ruined natures incapable of salvation, and by introducing [the teaching that] we can be saved in such a way that we cannot be lost. (Origen, c. 225)

Being a believing man, if you seek to live as the Gentiles do, the joys of the world remove you from the grace of Christ. (Commodianus, c. 240)

He says, "He that endures to the end, the same will be saved." And again He says, "If you continue in my word, you will truly be my disciples" (John 8:31-32). So there needs to be perseverance in order that hope and faith may attain their result. (Cyprian, c. 250)

He who sins after his baptism, unless he repents and forsakes his sins, will be condemned to Gehenna. (Apostolic Constitutions, compiled c. 390)

A review of Catholic theology – which was the predominate church influencing and defending theology up until the Reformation – further supports the historians’ claim that the accepted and defended teaching of the church did not include an understanding of eternal security as put forward by Calvin or by those Arminians who hold to the more recent teaching on eternal security.

It wasn’t until John Calvin (1509-1564) that unconditional eternal security was approved as an accepted teaching in the church. And it wasn’t until two hundred or so years after Calvin that churches began accepting and teaching eternal security as we hear it taught today.

At this point it seems wise to show the progression of teaching related to eternal security from John Calvin through today. To do this, we will begin with Calvinism.

Few dispute that John Calvin took some or much of his theology from Augustine’s writings. But neither Augustine nor Calvin separated salvation from sanctification. In other words, neither Augustine nor Calvin separated salvation from an ongoing, obvious and measured growth in purity of heart and holiness of conduct – from the time of salvation to the end of one’s life. Calvin taught that God is sovereign over all, including who will be saved, when they will be saved, and how they will live after being saved. Calvin taught that God sovereignly ensures that everyone elected will persevere in living a godly life from the time of salvation to the time of death. According to Calvin, no elected, born again Christian can do otherwise than persevere in godly living until death takes him from this world. This teaching is found in Calvin’s, **Perseverance of the Saints**. And Calvin concluded that anyone who did not persevere to the end in living a godly life was proving by his lack of perseverance that he was not elected in the first place.

Fortunately, Calvin wrote a number of commentaries on the Old and New Testament. I want to take a quote from his commentary on I John, but before doing that, let us look at the portion of scripture he is commenting on: “Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother” (I John 3:7-10).

It should be obvious to all that this portion of scripture addresses the matter of how we live after being saved. In commenting on this scripture, Calvin says: “John (the apostle) denied that any one belongs to Christ except he who is righteous and shows himself to be such by his works [behavior].... Hence two conclusions are to be drawn, that those in whom sin reigns cannot be reckoned among the members of Christ, and that they can by no means belong to his body [the Church].... All who are born of God lead a righteous and a holy life, because the Spirit of God restrains the lusting of [desire for] sin.... John not only shows how effectively the power of God works once in man [for salvation], but plainly declares that the Spirit continues God’s grace in us to the last, so that inflexible [fixed, unable to be altered] perseverance is added

to newness of life. Let us not, then, imagine with the Sophists [i.e., self-improvement teachers] that it is some neutral movement [of free will combined with good motives], which leaves men free either to follow or to reject; but let us know that our own hearts are so ruled by God's Spirit, that they constantly cleave to righteousness.... John declares that all who do not live righteously are not of God, because all those whom God calls, he regenerates by his Spirit. Hence newness of life is a perpetual evidence of divine adoption.”

The point to be made here is that Calvin, who took some of his theology from the writings of Augustine, did not separate salvation from sanctification as if one were vital and the other optional. For both Augustine and Calvin, salvation and sanctification were a unified whole, and anyone who was elected to salvation went on to live a sanctified life. Anything other than the union of these two aspects of the Christian life (salvation and sanctification) did not exist in their understanding of scripture.

There is one more point to be made here: from Calvin's perspective, man has no free will, and even if he did it counts for nothing because he has no ability to exercise his free will in any positive movement toward God. Therefore, both salvation and sanctification – or persevering in living a godly life until death – is all God's doing in the life of the Christian.

Moving on to Arminianism, we see that this theology, like Calvinism, places a solid emphasis on sanctification, implying that how one lives after being saved is just as important as salvation itself. According to Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), Christians come to salvation through the combined work of God's wooing, the Holy Spirit's convicting, and mankind responding by willfully choosing to repent and put his faith in Christ for salvation. Upon being born again, Christians, by the gracious empowerment and assistance of God, are able to resist sin, put off the old nature, and put on Christ-likeness. In other words, Christians still retain the freedom of will to submit to God and live according to His word or return to sinful ways.

If a Christian returns to a persistent practice of unrepented sin, he is considered as falling away from the faith. If he repents of his persistent practice of sin before he dies, he gains forgiveness and continues on with God just as any Christian who confesses and receives forgiveness of sin. If he does not repent of his persistent practice of sin before he dies, he is considered to have fallen away from the faith and to have died in his sin.

What this means is that the security of salvation is conditional in that it is based on persevering in righteousness. In other words, we are secure in our salvation as long as we continue to live a godly life following salvation. Falling away (apostasy) begins when we deliberately and willfully turn away from God's will and word and return to the willful practice of known sin. Falling away concludes in eternal damnation when we persist in the practice of known, unrepented sin and die in that unrepentant state.

For the sake of clarification, let me restate that both Calvinism (Reformed Theology) and Arminianism (Free Will) differ from the current teaching on eternal security. Calvinism teaches that the believer is eternally secure because the same sovereign God who elected and saved him sovereignly keeps him living a godly life to the end. Arminianism teaches that the believer

responds to the invitation of God for salvation through an act of his will, and he can, with the same will, choose to turn away from God and return to living in known sin. If he dies in his unrepented, ongoing practice of sin, he will die in a lost condition – having lost his salvation. Therefore, the believer is secure in his salvation as long as he continues living according to the truth he has gained from knowing the will and word of God.

Eternal Security, as it is taught today, is neither Calvinism nor Arminianism, but rather a combination of the two. Its foundation is Arminianism with the addition of two partial teachings from Calvinism. In the past sixty years or so, some who hold this teaching have re-labeled themselves from believers in eternal security to believers in free grace. Therefore, eternal security and free grace are largely interchangeable terms pointing to the same teaching on the security of the believer's salvation.

Those who hold to this teaching believe in the Arminian view of free will as it is applied to the Christian life in general and specifically to salvation and sanctification. However, they remove the Arminian teaching on falling away from the faith and replace it with Calvin's understanding of the sovereignty of God and a portion of his teaching on the Perseverance of the Saints. In this way they are able to blend the exercise of human free will with God's sovereign rule so that in spite of free will we are able to remain eternally secure in our salvation.

Let me explain. When we speak of drawing from Calvinism's view of the sovereignty of God, we are speaking of taking that part which teaches that a particular action or condition in the Christian's life is all God's doing. In other words, no human free will is involved. When we speak of drawing from a portion of Calvinism's Perseverance of the Saints, we are speaking of taking that part that says a Christian will not fall away from the faith. When we put these two parts of Calvinism together and apply it to remaining eternally secure once we are saved, we come to the conclusion that God sovereignly overrules anything we might do – by an act of our will – that could or would lead to losing our salvation.

Therefore, this blending of these two parts of Calvinism with a foundation of Arminianism leads to the current teaching on eternal security which holds to the free will of man in regard to salvation and living a holy life while holding to the sovereignty of God in regard to keeping Christians eternally secure in their salvation.

One of the stronger criticisms of the current teaching on eternal security is that it opens the door for born again Christians to live an unchristian or unsanctified life. Dealing with this criticism has led to two distinct groups within the eternal security camp. One group holds that going back to a persistent, unrepented life of sin is proof a person was never born again. This view is a direct reflection of Calvin's teaching on the Perseverance of the Saints. The other group holds that once a person is born again, living a godly life subsequent to salvation is good but not essential to being eternally secure. Many in this second group prefer to use the "free grace" label rather than the "eternal security" label.

It appears that the majority of those who adhere to the eternal security teaching are in this second group. Some in this second group prefer the "free grace" label instead of the "eternal

security” label. Among those who prefer the “free grace” label are such notable Christians as Charles Stanley, Norman Geisler, Zane C. Hodges, and Bill Bright. The essence of what they believe is that God saves mankind by grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ and in His redeeming sacrifice on the cross. They believe that though we must respond to God’s invitation to salvation by an act of our will, no human effort of any kind leading up to or during the moment of saving faith contributes anything to the free and gracious gift of forgiveness and eternal life. (*Everything up to this point fits with orthodox Christianity from the disciples onward.*) Since we are saved by grace alone, nothing we do or don’t do following salvation can affect our salvation.

In his book, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville: Oliver Nelson, 1990), Charles Stanley states in very clear terms what is meant by “nothing we do or don’t do following salvation can affect our salvation.” In the chapter entitled “For Those Who Stop Believing” Stanley says, “The Bible clearly teaches that God’s love for His people is of such magnitude that even those who walk away from the faith have not the slightest chance of slipping from His hand (p. 74).” Six pages later Stanley says: “Faith is simply the way we say yes to God’s free gift of eternal life. Faith and salvation are not one and the same anymore than a gift and the hand that receives it are the same. Salvation or justification or adoption – whatever you wish to call it – stands independently of faith. Consequently, God does not require a constant attitude of faith in order to be saved – only an act of faith” (p. 80). A little later, Stanley also writes: “You and I are not saved because we have an enduring faith. We are saved because at a moment in time we expressed faith in our enduring Lord” (p. 80).

Commenting on these quotes from Stanley’s book, Zane C. Hodges writes: “It is Christ who endures, not necessarily our faith, as Stanley points out so clearly. ‘If we are faithless,’ wrote the apostle Paul, ‘He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself’ ” (II Timothy 2:13).

One may think that Charles Stanley, and others like him who hold to the free grace teaching within the eternal security camp, believe that our behavior after salvation makes no difference at all. This is not true. Stanley is crystal clear about the doctrine of rewards and the role that the biblical teaching on rewards should play in motivating godly Christian living. Stanley says: “Does our behavior matter once we are assured of our salvation? You bet it does. Are there any eternal consequences when a believer sins? Absolutely. Will eternity be the same for those who follow Christ faithfully and those who live for themselves? Not a chance” (p. 118). Shortly afterwards, he states: “Keep in mind we are not talking about heaven and hell. That is a different issue altogether. Our works have nothing to do with where we spend eternity. But they have a lot to do with what we can expect once we get there” (p. 118).

To summarize Church history, in relation to eternal security and falling away from the faith, we see that Calvinism, Arminianism, and some who hold to the eternal security teaching believe that salvation and sanctification are both essential if a Christian is to enjoy eternal life with God. In spite of some differences, these three groups hold this to the point that either the absence of salvation or the turning away from living a godly life to a life of persistent, unrepented sin indicates we have never been born again (Calvinism, eternal security), or we are in a state of falling away from the faith – and should we die in that condition we will have lost our

salvation (Arminianism). In contrast to these two positions, many in the eternal security group and all who hold to the free grace teaching believe that salvation and sanctification are two totally separate options. Salvation is essential for spending eternity with God, while sanctification is optional such that its presence or absence has no impact whatsoever on one's eternal salvation. And finally, for the first fifteen hundred years the church did not support "once saved, always saved." They taught that it was possible for a genuine, born again believer to reject God and die in that condition so as to end up eternally separated from God in hell.

### **Worthy Questions And Not So Worthy Questions**

There are those who raise challenging questions about eternal security and about falling away from the faith. Some of these questions are well intended, worthy of being asked, and deserving of an honest answer. Some are rather difficult – even to the point of having no definite answer. Some of these questions, however, are not so well intended – serving only to create a win/lose type of debate or to make the other side look foolish by asking a question that can only be given a ridiculous, indefensible answer.

One of the questions raised numerous times by many different people has to do with those who, after being taught they can fall away, are filled with a consuming or paralyzing fear of falling away. The immediate implication of the question is that such a fear is irrational and therefore harmful to one's spiritual well-being. The ultimate implication of the question is that there is nothing in the scriptures which even infers God wants us to live with this kind of fear – which in turn proves the scriptures do not teach that a Christian can fall away from the faith.

Regardless of what we may think of the implications associated with the question, it is a worthy question and should be addressed – seriously and thoroughly. After all, to live with an ongoing fear of falling away that consumes your thinking or paralyzes your Christian life is not only spiritually unhealthy, it is intellectually and emotionally unhealthy. Such a fear could easily feed a sense of hopelessness and despair that would discourage one's faith in the goodness of God and sap one's zeal for persevering in the pursuit of godliness. And need we be reminded that discouraged faith and an unholy life are to the devil's advantage, not God's? Therefore, this kind of irrational fear regarding the possibility of losing one's salvation should be addressed and done away with.

Most Christians recognize that the scriptures teach the fear of God, and we are to fear Him in a manner that produces reverence and awe, veneration and obedience. The seventh verse in the first chapter of Proverbs affirms this truth when it says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7). In Proverbs 2:5, God says the same thing in reverse – pointing out that true wisdom brings about a fear of the Lord that opens us up to the knowledge of God (*"Then [if you pursue and cling to wisdom] you will discern the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God."*) And looking further into Proverbs, we read: "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverted mouth, I [wisdom] hate" (Proverbs 8:13). We see in these three statements a two sided truth. A proper fear of God produces wisdom in living as God calls us to live, and wisdom in living as God wants us to live produces a proper fear of God leading to a fuller knowledge of God.

Both Matthew and Luke record the words of Christ to his disciples concerning the fear of God. In speaking to his disciples, Jesus said: “My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him (Luke 12:4-5; Matthew 10:28)! Luke, in writing about the early days of church life says: “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase (Acts 9:31). Paul, in urging the Corinthians to separate themselves from unholy alliances and improper relationships with unbelievers – along with all the ungodliness that goes with such alliances, said: “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (II Corinthians 7:1).

And so we see that the fear of God is neither a quality confined to Old Testament saints nor an enemy of grace – as some teach. Rather, a search of the scriptures reveal that Jesus said this fear is to be found among his followers, while Luke, in the book of Acts, and Paul, in his second letter to the church at Corinth, speak of the fear of God as a natural component in the lives of New Testament Christians. Therefore, fearing the fear of God or fearing the abuse of the fear of God so as to reject the fear of God as an unhealthy or unwanted part of the Christ-like life is to reject God’s way for His people as taught in both the Old and New Testaments.

So what are we to do with those who, in believing they can fall away from the faith are crippled spiritually by an irrational, all-consuming fear that at any moment they might lose their salvation? It seems to me there are several answers to this question. First, we ought to teach them about godly fear and the basis for a confident faith in God and His goodness – especially in relation to salvation and eternal life. Second, we ought to teach them about irrational, unholy fear and how it serves the devil’s purposes rather than God’s. Third, we ought to encourage them to focus on living a holy life instead of being concerned about living a sinless or perfect life. This is important because only Christ has and can live a sinless, perfect life. The best the rest of us can do is to consciously make it our daily aim to walk in the light as He Himself is in the light (I John 1:7) so that we no longer live for ourselves but rather for him who died and rose again on our behalf (II Corinthians 5:14-15). And along the way, we will fail and give way to sin. Yet even here, those focused on holy living quickly confess their sin, receive forgiveness, and get back to walking in the light and living for Jesus (I John 1:9).

Finally, we ought to show them from the scriptures two examples of irrational, paralyzing fear and the outcome of that fear. The first example comes from the Old Testament. When Israel’s ten spies gave a bad report about the Promised Land – telling the people they should not go in and try to take the land because of the giants, the walled cities, and the well equipped armies, the people gave way to irrational fear rather than trusting God to enable them to do what He told them to do. As a result of their fear driven unbelief and disobedience, that whole generation of Israelites died in the desert of natural causes over forty years, and the ten spies who gave the bad report died immediately by a plague before the Lord (Numbers 13:1-14:38). The second examples comes from the New Testament. Jesus told a parable about a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and then



he left on his journey. The one who received five talents and the one given two talents used what was given them to double their money. The one given one talent, out of a fear of what his master would do to him if he did not earn a profit, dug a hole and hid his money. As a result, the master called him a wicked, lazy slave who knew better. Then he took the one talent back from the slave and cast that slave into outer darkness (Matthew 25:14-30).

To sum up this point in the simplest of terms: to fear falling away within the boundaries of a proper fear of God leads to great gain. To fear falling away within the boundaries of an irrational fear of God leads to great loss.

A second question that is often raised implies that the current teaching on eternal security opens the door to lazy, fleshly, immature, worldly Christianity by allowing Christians to feel secure in their salvation no matter how they live after being born again. And yet we need only look at the current spiritual condition of the Church and at the lives of specific Christians to conclude that something is allowing Christians to feel safe and secure in living so much like the world that it is hard to tell the difference between them and the average unbeliever. So how do we answer this question, for surely the teaching on eternal security seems to be at least part of the problem?

Beginning with the Old Testament and working our way through to the end of the New Testament, we see that there has been and continues to be many who are selfish, fleshly, spiritually immature, and worldly among God's people. Consider Jacob – for the first years of his life, eleven of his twelve sons for most of their lives, Lot, the generation of Israelites that Moses led out of Egypt, numerous kings of Israel and Judah, all twelve of the disciples while Jesus walked on the earth – with Judas, Peter, James and John having their weaknesses exposed for all to read about, a good number of the Christians in the church at Corinth, at least four of the seven churches represented in the book of Revelation, and numerous others who, without being named, are mentioned in the New Testament epistles. None of these ever heard the current teaching on eternal security, yet all of them – at least for a time – found a way to live a low level form of godliness or obvious godlessness.

The point here is this, with or without the current teaching on eternal security, many of those who profess faith in God and allegiance to His rule have lived unholy lives. Therefore, whatever outward influences might encourage and motivate such ungodliness – and there are many, the real problem is in our heart. God said: "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it" (Jeremiah 17:9)? Both God, in the Old Testament, and Jesus, in the New Testament, said: "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me" (Matthew 15:8). And finally, Jesus made it abundantly clear that anyone and everyone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness will have their hunger and thirst satisfied (Matthew 5:6). And so we see that it is not the current teaching of the day that bears the bigger burden of responsibility for ungodliness among God's people, but rather their hearts.

Here is one last thought on this point. We know from God's response to Phinehas when he zealously brought an end to one Israelite's open, flagrant sin (Numbers 25:1-15), that any godly concern about the low state of spirituality among God's people is highly commendable in the

sight of God. In fact, God spoke of Phinehas' behavior as a jealousy like unto the jealousy God has for His people in wanting them to be faithful to Him – and God rewarded Phinehas accordingly. Therefore, zeal for holiness in ourselves and among God's people should be found in all of us who are born again. Blaming the lack of holiness among God's people on some current teaching is reasonable to a degree, but the fuller responsibility lies with the individual Christian.

A third, often asked question has to do with how many sins it takes to fall away. The question is often asked in one of two ways. The first way sounds something like this: "Can a single sin cause us to fall away from the faith?" The second way usually asks: "How many sins does it take to fall away from the faith?" Some ask these questions in an effort to show that the teaching about falling away is ludicrous, that is, so devoid of wisdom or good sense that it is laughable. Some ask because they don't know their Bible all that well. Some ask because they are sincerely searching for the answer in order to come to a settled conclusion on the subject. Regardless of the motive in asking these questions, they deserve a reasonable, biblically based answer.

From Genesis through Ezekiel, there are sixteen passages in which God is quoted as identifying a number of sins or failures for which an Israelite would be cut off from his people (*see Cut Off By God From God's People*). The offending Israelite was to be cut off from his people for committing just one of these listed offenses one time. Therefore, in sixteen portions of the Old Testament we have the quoted words of God identifying the fact that one would be cut off from his people for committing certain specified sins one time.

The New Testament teaches that blaspheming the Holy Spirit is a single sin that will not be forgiven by God. We read in Mark 3:28-29, "Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; [29] but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." This truth is repeated in Luke 12:10, where we read: "And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him." Assuming that being guilty of an eternal sin results in eternal separation from God, it then follows that for anyone committing this sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – be they Christian or non-Christian – the consequence is eternal damnation.

Beyond the sixteen statements from the Old Testament about being cut off from God's people and the statement about blaspheming the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, there are no other references to single sins being the cause of falling away from the faith. Therefore, for the New Testament believer, blaspheming the Holy Spirit is the only sin, committed just once, that can result in falling away.

But what about the question that asks how many sins it takes to be in a fallen away condition? If, with the exception of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, there is no indication in the scriptures that one sin will put us in a fallen away condition, how many will?

The clearest and most direct answer is: no one knows. Why? Because God has not given us a numerical answer to this question. However, if there is an answer in the scriptures as to when a believer reaches a fallen away state, it is an answer that points to one's settled way of life

– as shown by ones prevailing ways of thinking, speaking, and behaving – rather than the number of sins committed.

This is an important distinction – moving into a fallen away condition based on a change in ones settled way of life rather than the number of sins committed – because no human being from Adam until now has lived a perfect or sinless life. When I say no human being has lived a perfect life, I am including all those who have repented, come to faith in Jesus Christ, and received the Holy Spirit. Even the scriptures make it clear that no one has been perfect or can be perfect in this life other than Jesus Christ. Yet even though we all sin, there is a clear difference between the one whose heart is intent on living a holy life – though he sins on occasion (Philippians 3:12-14), and the one whose heart is intent on doing selfish and sinful things – though he puts on a show of righteousness (Matthew 7:21-27; Mark 7:6-8).

The writer of Ecclesiastes supports this distinction when he says: “There is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). When he speaks of “a righteous man,” he is talking about the child of God whose settled way of life is to do what is righteous. Though a righteous person will sin on occasion, he does not get up in the morning intending to do evil that day. He does not cling to or defend or justify any known sin. He does not continue to commit any known sin over and over again, as if it were an acceptable thing to do. He does not continue to hide or deceive himself or live in denial about the sin he knows he is committing. And he does not turn a deaf ear to those who come to his attention. Rather, when a righteous person becomes aware of sin in his life, he confesses it and throws it off in order to quickly return to doing what is right in the sight of God. And when the righteous person confesses his sin, he does so with a broken and contrite heart over having done such an unholy thing to his loving Father.

God, speaking through John, says: “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us” (1 John 1:8-10). When He says, “If we say we have no sin,” He is referring to our saying there is nothing in us that wants to sin, that is, that we have no interest in sinning or disposition for sinning or desire to sin or craving for some specific sin. When we see ourselves or think about ourselves in this way, it is the result of what God calls self-deception. In modern language, we would call it living in denial of the truth. When God says, “If we say we have not sinned,” He is referring to our saying, either openly or by inference, that we know of no sin which we have committed in the last day or week or even month or year. Such a claim puts us in the place of calling God a liar and shows how little of God’s word we have taken in as truth by which to live. When God says, “If we confess our sins,” He is not referring to those who admit what they did because they got caught and realize that the fastest way to end their troubles with the authorities is to confess – yet still desire to do it again and would do it again if given the opportunity. Rather, God is referring who confess because their conscience is working as it ought, who are sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s conviction, who make it their daily aim to live according to God’s word, who are intent on loving God with all their being, and who abhor even the slightest distance their sin puts between them and intimate fellowship with God – so as to want forgiveness and to restore purity of heart, holiness of life,

and hence intimacy with God. To such as these, God not only forgives sins but also cleanses from all unrighteousness. Truly, these are the righteous who – though they sin on occasion – their settled direction of life is to live for God and not self.

The point being made here is that falling away from the faith is never talked about in the Holy Scriptures as a result of committing a specific number of sins. Rather falling away is talked about as being the result of turning back to an ungodly direction of life. God makes this clear through the prophet Ezekiel, when He says: “But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die” (Ezekiel 18:24). When God says, “turns away from,” He is not just speaking of turning away from righteousness to nothing – as if we could do that. No, God is speaking of turning away from righteousness and returning to unrighteousness. When God says, “and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does,” He is not speaking of committing a single sin or committing a single sin several times or even committing a number of different sins in a short span of time. Rather, He is speaking of having turned away from a consistently righteous way of life – that is, a life of faith lived unto God – and turning toward a consistently unrighteous way of life.

Bear with me while I give you two examples from the scriptures of this contrast between a predominant path of godlessness and a predominant path of godliness. When reading through the list of Old Testament saints listed in Hebrews 11 we soon become aware that the Bible itself exposes the sins of most of them. In fact, we read that the righteous man falls seven times, and rises again (Proverbs 24:16). Yet the settled direction of their lives – including Lot – was such that God listed them as examples of those who lived by faith to the extent that their settled way of life was that of righteousness.

In the New Testament, we read that Jesus – during His last supper with His disciples – told them they would all abandon Him that very night. Upon hearing this, Peter protested and proclaimed that even if all the others abandoned Jesus, he never would. Jesus responded by telling Peter that on that very night he would deny knowing Jesus three times (Matthew 26:31-35). And indeed, Peter did deny knowing Jesus. But notice that in God’s eyes, Peter’s denial was not the end of his faith or the loss of salvation, for Jesus said: “I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32). And so we see that though Peter’s denial was a grievous sin, it was not the result of a settled way of life, but rather the foolishness, carelessness, and fear of the moment. As we read in the four Gospels and the book of Acts, Peter was generally intent on serving his master, Jesus Christ, and he went on from that night of failure to godly living and humble service that all of us would be wise to emulate.

What is the point here? The godly sin, but sin is not their settled way of life. For the born again Christian to be in a fallen away condition, he must turn from righteousness as his settled way of life and return to unrighteousness as his settled way of life. Should such a person refuse to repent and therefore die in this unrighteous way of life, he will lose his salvation.

There is one more question that is often asked and needs an answer. The question is: “Who decides who has fallen away?” The only answer is: God decides. In searching God’s Word we find that the focus is not on who has, but who can fall away. Historically, excommunication from the Church was a statement by the church that the person excommunicated was in a fallen away condition. However, being in a fallen away condition only results in losing one’s salvation if the person who has fallen away refuses to repent and subsequently dies in an unrepentant state. While there is earthly life there is always the possibility of repentance and returning to God and godly living. Therefore, our responsibility as Christians is to pay heed to God’s warnings concerning the possibility of falling away – both individually and as a church – while focusing on remaining faithful to living a godly life to the end of our days.

### **Two Primary Approaches to the Answer**

There is no doubt that the Word of God speaks in varied ways and in numerous places about the matter of being eternally secure in our salvation. Yet there are varied and numerous scriptures warning us about the possibility of falling away from the faith. So how do we find truth or God’s mind on this issue? It seems to me there are two primary ways to discover what God is saying to us about eternal security and falling away.

The first way is to treat the scriptures on eternal security and falling away as if they are separate from each other, or as if we can take one group seriously while discounting the other, or as if it is up to us to decide which group is right and which group is wrong. The natural result of this approach is to treat eternal security and falling away as if the two are incapable of existing together in the mind and will of God. Upon concluding that God does not support both, the next step for teachers and theologians who take this approach is to build doctrine and theology on half of what God says about them both. The final outcome of this approach is a well-defined theology built on those scriptures that support our position while ignoring or explaining away those scriptures that challenge our position.

The second way is to set aside Calvinism, Arminianism, and the current teaching on eternal security and approach the scriptures with an openness that seeks to discover all the scriptures related to eternal security and falling away. Upon compiling our list of verses, we can then proceed with much prayer for help from the Holy Spirit, much consideration of the individual verses within their contexts, much effort to discover the consensus understanding of all the scriptures discovered, and much honesty about the fact that we will have to accept some amount of mystery, some portions that are hard to understand, and a few verses that seem to clearly support one view over the other. The final outcome of this approach is a reasonably defined position built on all – or at least most of – the scriptures available while admitting we cannot answer every question or satisfy every concern.

If we are going to take this second way, one more ingredient is essential – and that ingredient is a good dose of humility. It is only too easy and too tempting – with the devil’s encouragement – to think that our approach is spiritually, biblically, and logically superior to Calvinism, Arminianism, and the current teaching on Eternal Security. The reality is, these other approaches – regardless of what we think of them – have been held and taught by some of God’s most serious minded children whose lives shine brighter than ours, whose service to God

demonstrates a more comprehensive death to self than ours, whose education is greater than ours, whose understanding of the scriptures is richer than ours, and whose spiritual maturity is superior to ours. If we add the sin of pride to our approach, it only makes us that much less than them. We have the right, before God, to think we are right in our understanding of scripture. But we have no right to ever or in any way think we are superior. Therefore, humility is essential as we proceed in searching the scriptures to see what they say about this difficult matter of eternal security and falling away from the faith.

### **The Method of Searching The Scriptures**

The starting point for a comprehensive study of the scriptures concerning eternal security and falling away requires a survey of all the scriptures in the Old and New Testament which are directly or indirectly related to either side. For my benefit, I put these scriptures into two columns – one column dealing with eternal security and the other dealing with falling away.

Upon completing that list, I turned my attention to John Cassian's extensive presentation of scriptures proclaiming God's part and man's part. This particular study has already been presented under the heading: "Whose doing is it: God's or Man's?" One of the most notable examples of "Whose doing is it" is found in Philippians 2:12-13 . . . "So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; [13] for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." My purpose of giving attention to John Cassian's presentation was two-fold. First, it provided an excellent example of searching the entire Bible for any and all of God's statements on the subject of God's part / man's part, and using them to discern God's mind on the matter. Second, it provided an extensive gathering of scriptures showing that we have a responsibility to do our part in response to God's action toward us and for us.

Following this, I searched for and studied those scriptures that speak of God's covenants with man. I did this believing they would further reveal the mind of God on the matter of eternal security and falling away from the faith since the breaking of Christ's body and the shedding of Christ's blood established a new covenant for the Church age.

Next, I searched the scriptures for those portions that contain a conditional "if." For example, II Chronicles 7:14 says: "**If** My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, **then** I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." This effort was also directed and seeking a clearer understanding of God's mind on the issue at hand.

Finally, I gathered those New Testament verses where the verb "believe" is found in the Greek present tense. According to Greek scholars and commentators, verbs in the Greek present tense speak of continuing action as opposed to a one time act. An example of this is found in John 3:36 . . . "He who [continues to] believe in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." Here again, my purpose in gathering and studying these scriptures was to gain further understanding of God's mind on this matter of eternal security and falling away from the faith.

## **What Does God's Word Say?**

In my study of those scriptures that deal with the covenants God made with man, I found two covenants that were truly one sided. By one sided I mean that God established the covenant with one or more people while requiring nothing in return to keep the covenant in force. The first one sided covenant that appears in the Bible is God's covenant with Noah about never destroying the earth again by water. In Genesis 9:8-13, we read: "Then God spoke to Noah and to his sons with him, saying, 'Now behold, I Myself do establish My covenant with you, and with your descendants after you; and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you; of all that comes out of the ark, even every beast of the earth. I establish My covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all successive generations; I set My bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between Me and the earth.'" As I pointed out, nothing was required of Noah or any successive human being from Noah's day to the end of time to keep this covenant in force.

The second one sided covenant recorded in the scriptures was between God and Phinehas, the son of Eleazar and the grandson of Aaron. At the time God made this covenant with Phinehas, a number of Israelite men were accompanying Moabite women to the worship ceremonies of the Moabite God, Baal of Peor, where during the ceremony there was sacrifices to the god, feasting, and a great deal of sexual licentiousness. Some of the men were even bringing Moabite women back into Israel's camp for further escapades of immorality. In God's eyes, these men were defiling themselves by worshiping an idol, participating in gross immorality, and joining themselves to foreign women. Therefore, the Lord's anger burned against his people. So the Lord told Moses to seize all those responsible for this evil and put them to death. So Moses ordered Israel's judges to put to death the men under their authority who had joined in worshiping Baal of Peor. As Moses and many of the Israelites were weeping at the entrance of the Tabernacle over this grave sin that had entered the camp and the dire consequences it was bringing on the people, one of the Israelite men brought a Midianite woman into his tent – right before the eyes of Moses and those with him. When Phinehas saw this, he jumped up and left the assembly. He took a spear and ran after the man into his tent – thrusting the spear through the man's body and into the woman – killing them both. This act by Phinehas stopped God's anger and the killing, but not before 24,000 people had died (Numbers 25:1-9).

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Phinehas has turned away My wrath from the sons of Israel in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them, so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel in My jealousy. Therefore say, 'Behold, I give him My covenant of peace; and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the sons of Israel' " (Numbers 25:10-13)

Once again, the point being made here is that of all the covenants established by God between himself and mankind, the rainbow – signifying God will not destroy the earth by water ever again, and the perpetual priesthood for Phinehas' offspring are the only two one sided covenants

where God does everything and the recipients of the covenant have not requirements placed on them at all.

However, from Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden through Hebrews – which is the last book in the New Testament to directly speak of any covenant between God and man – every covenant spoken of either infers two sides or is clearly two sided. By two sided I mean that God has a part in upholding the covenant agreement and we have a part in upholding the covenant agreement.

Now when God speaks of His side in upholding the terms of the covenant, He consistently uses language that makes it clear there is absolutely no chance He will fail in the least way in doing His part. And indeed, He will never fail to fulfill His side of any covenant He makes with us. For example, in making a covenant with Abraham, God said: “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an **everlasting** covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you” (Genesis 17:7). However, God’s perfection in fulfilling all His covenants does not mean they cannot be broken.

A two sided covenant implies both sides have a part in guaranteeing the fulfillment of the agreement. One side may play a greater part than the other, yet even when that is the case – as it is with God and us – the lessor part still has the power to either fulfill or break the agreement. And though God’s covenants with us are everlasting from His side because He is good – that is, His lovingkindness is everlasting and His faithfulness continues to all generations (Psalm 100:5) – we are not so dependable. In fact, we are weak, fickle, filled with competing desires and emotions, easily distracted, and often tempted by the evil one. And since all the covenants recorded in the scriptures are with people like us, it should be apparent that the likelihood of any covenant being broken from our side is great.

Look at Adam and Eve. Though there is no record in the book of Genesis of God making a covenant with them, they clearly broke the agreement God made with them – an agreement whereby Adam and Eve could choose life or death. As long as they chose life – by continued obedience to God’s one command – they preserved the face-to-face relationship God had with them, and they maintained the privilege of living in the Garden of Eden. But upon choosing death, they lost their face-to-face relationship with God, their heavenly home here on earth, access to the tree of life – which would enable them to live forever, and freedom from physical suffering and death.

Now it is obvious, Adam and Eve could no more create themselves than you or me. Their creation was all God’s doing. And it is obvious they could no more get back into the Garden, once God put them out, than we can find that very same garden today. Yet in spite of their very existence and life in the Garden of Eden being all God’s doing, God still placed in their hands the perpetual responsibility of choosing life over death. Was Adam and Eve’s choice of death God’s failure? No! His side of the agreement was as certain, as foolproof, as the rising of the sun and changing of the seasons from the dawn of creation down to this very day. The failure to keep the agreement between God and Adam is born solely by Adam and Eve.



Consider the nation of Israel. From one man, Abraham, they became a great nation with God's visible presence in their midst in the forms of a cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night, and the glorious light of God's presence radiating in the Holy of Holies. God raised up Moses and rescued them from slavery in Egypt in order to bring them into the Promised Land. Though they were primarily shepherds by trade, God gave them the power and ability to defeat and drive out the inhabitants of the Promised Land, even though the Land was filled with walled cities like Jericho, giants, and well-equipped armies. And though God's covenant with them was guaranteed by His character, it required something from Israel to remain in force.

Yet Israel, over time, began to neglect their part and in doing so, broke the covenant God had with them. We read in **2 Kings 17:18** that the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from His sight; none was left except the tribe of Judah. In spite of this, Judah, too, failed to keep the commandments of the Lord their God, and instead walked in the ungodly ways Israel – under Jeroboam – had introduced. And so the Lord God not only removed Judah, He departed from Judah – destroying His temple and His city, Jerusalem. The short version of this story is found in **II Chronicles 36:15-21**.

Moving to the book of Revelation, we read about God's warnings to the seven churches that were in what we now know as Turkey. The warnings were not given to the church building or to some impersonal concept of the church, but to the people who made up each of the seven congregations. And what was the outcome of the people's response to God's warnings to repent and return to living as God willed them to live? The removal of a once vibrant and influential church so that in Turkey today, Christianity is so small in comparison to Islam that it is as if Christianity hardly exists there any longer.

What is my point? From Adam and Eve through the book of Revelation, most of God's dealings with us include some form of agreement that requires something from God side and something from our side. There is no question as to God fulfilling His side – that has been proven true throughout human history. If there is going to be a problem in any covenant or agreement between God and us remaining in force, we will be the source and cause of the problem.

An example early on in the Old Testament of a two-sided covenant between God and man is the covenant God made with Abraham. When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly." Upon hearing this, Abraham fell on his face before God. Continuing His talk with Abraham, God went on to say: "As for Me, and listen carefully to what I am saying, My covenant is with you, and you will be the father of a multitude of nations, and kings will come forth from you." Yet God did not stop there. He said: "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you" (Genesis 17:1-7). This covenant God made with Abraham included giving him and his descendants the Promised Land as an everlasting possession.

According to the language God used it would be easy to conclude that He was guaranteeing this covenant with Abraham would last forever. And indeed it was intended to from God's side.

However, Abraham and his descendants had a side to play in this covenant and their part was just as important as God's part in keeping the covenant in force. Here is what God said about Abraham's side: "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations (Genesis 17:9). Abraham's side of this covenant required two things. First, every male who lived in Israel – be he a slave or a freeman – from eight days old and older was to be circumcised. Any male who refused to be circumcised was to be cut off from God's people, for such a refusal was to break God's covenant with them. Second, all of God's people – from Abraham onward – were to depart from evil and do good, so that they could continue living in the covenant land. And here is the reasoning for this second requirement given to us by David: "The Lord loves justice and does not forsake His godly ones; they are preserved forever, but the descendants of the wicked will be cut off. It is the righteous who will inherit the land and dwell in it forever" (Psalms 37:27-29).

And God, speaking through Moses, affirmed that His covenant with His people placed a serious requirement on them when He said: "If you will obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples [of the earth], for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5).

In speaking about the security the Israelites had as God's children in the Promised Land, the Psalmist said that "Those who trust in the Lord are as Mount Zion, which cannot be moved but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people from this time forth and forever. [3] For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest upon the land of the righteous, so that the righteous will not put forth their hands to do wrong" (Psalms 125:1-3). Added to this promise of security in the land, God said that if His children would live according to His will and word, He would make sure they had rains in the rainy season so that the land would yield its produce and the trees of the field would bear their fruit. But He did not stop there. God went on to say that the result of obedience would not only be sufficient provision year by year, but also peace in the land from turmoil within and threats from without. And to that God added these words: "In addition to all that, I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people" (Leviticus 26:3-12).

Such promises from God are wonderful, yet God made it clear that the fulfillment of all these blessings were not based His faithfulness alone, but also on the faithfulness of His children. Therefore, to the words just spoken God added: "But if you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, and so break My covenant, I, in turn, will do this to you.

Now before reading all that God will do to His children in response to their willful disobedience, I want to point out that God, as any loving father would, starts with light discipline in an effort to get His children's attention and call them back to their senses. And though His discipline becomes harsher and more severe the longer Israel stubbornly resists God's discipline so as to continue walking in disobedience, His patience and longsuffering increases at the same time. It is not until their disobedience reaches a certain point – known only to God – that God has

had enough and finally drives them out of the land to die in bondage in a foreign land. Listen to what God says:

“If you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, and so break My covenant, I will appoint over you a sudden terror, consumption and fever that will waste away the eyes and cause the soul to pine away; also, you will sow your seed uselessly, for your enemies will eat it up. I will set My face against you so that you will be struck down before your enemies; and those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee when no one is pursuing you.

If also after these things you do not obey Me, then I will punish you seven times more for your sins. I will also break down your pride of power; I will also make your sky like iron and your earth like bronze. Your strength will be spent uselessly, for your land will not yield its produce and the trees of the land will not yield their fruit.

If then, you act with hostility against Me and are unwilling to obey Me, I will increase the plague on you seven times according to your sins. I will let loose among you the beasts of the field, which will bereave you of your children and destroy your cattle and reduce your number so that your roads lie deserted.

And if by these things you are not turned to Me, but act with hostility against Me, then I will act with hostility against you; and I, even I, will strike you seven times for your sins. I will also bring upon you a sword which will execute vengeance for the covenant [which you have broken]; and when you gather together into your cities, I will send pestilence among you, so that you shall be delivered into enemy hands. When I break your staff of bread, ten women will bake your bread in one oven, and they will bring back your bread in rationed amounts, so that you will eat and not be satisfied.

Yet if in spite of this you do not obey Me, but act with hostility against Me, then I will act with wrathful hostility against you, and I, even I, will punish you seven times for your sins. Further, you will eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters. I then will destroy your high places, and cut down your incense altars, and heap your remains on the remains of your idols, for My soul shall abhor you. I will lay waste your cities as well and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your soothing aromas. I will make the land desolate so that your enemies who settle in it will be appalled over it. You, however, I will scatter among the nations and will draw out a sword after you, as your land becomes desolate and your cities become waste.

As for those of you who may be left, I will also bring weakness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies. And the sound of a driven leaf will chase them, and even when no one is pursuing they will flee as though from the sword, and they will fall. They will therefore stumble over each other as if running from the sword, although no one is pursuing; and you will have no strength to stand up before your enemies. But you will perish among the nations, and your enemies' land will consume you. So those of you who may be left will rot away because of their iniquity in the lands of your enemies;

and also because of the iniquities of their forefathers they will rot away with them (Leviticus 26:14-39).

What are we to learn from such strong words? First, God's covenant with Israel was not one sided. Without question, His side was guaranteed, for even though we may be unfaithful, He has been, is, and will be faithful from eternity past to eternity future (II Timothy 2:15). And He himself has said: "I will never break My covenant with you" (Judges 2:1). And so we see that from God's side there is no chance of even the slightest unfaithfulness in keeping covenant with us. However, His covenants are two sided, and both sides play a part in keeping the covenant in force. And though He does not quickly turn His back on those who break covenant with Him, there is a point at which He turns from discipline to punishment, from calling us to our senses to driving us out from His sight and presence. The second lesson we can learn from these strong words in Leviticus 26, is that God uses the same strong, unambiguous, seemingly extreme language when describing the certainty of His part as He does when describing the certainty of what will happen if we fail to uphold our part of the covenant. Finally, there is a powerful lesson contained in these words concerning God's magnanimous grace and extensive mercy in the face of our sinfulness. The Psalmist captures the bounty and extent of God's mercy toward His sinful children when he wrote: "When God killed them, then they sought Him, and returned and searched diligently for Him; and they remembered that God was their Rock, and the Most High God their Redeemer. But they deceived Him with their mouth and lied to Him with their tongue. For their heart was not steadfast toward Him, nor were they faithful in His covenant. But He, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity and did not destroy them; and often He restrained His anger and did not arouse all His wrath. Thus He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not return" (Psalms 78:34-39). And again the Psalmist says: "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust" (Psalm 103:8-14).

However, lest we act like those who would take advantage of God's mercy and discount God's hatred of sin and the destructive, horrifying consequences sin brings upon mankind, God, in speaking through Moses to the nation of Israel before they entered the Promised Land, said: "Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments; but repays those who hate Him to their faces, to destroy them. Therefore, you shall keep the commandment and the statutes and the judgments which I am commanding you today, to do them. Then it shall come about, because you listen to these judgments and keep and do them, that the Lord your God will keep with you His covenant and His lovingkindness which He swore to your forefathers" (Deuteronomy 7:9-12).

And again God said to Israel: “I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you listen to the commandments of the Lord your God, which I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I am commanding you today, by following other gods which you have not known (Deuteronomy 11:26-28). God went on to say: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them” (Deuteronomy 30:17-20).

Just as Adam and Eve had the choice of life or death set before them by God, so did Cain in regard to his dealings with Abel, Noah in relation to building the ark, Abraham and Sarah in regard to Isaac’s birth and in presenting him as a sacrifice to God, Lot in regard to fleeing Sodom, Joseph after being sold into slavery in Egypt and most obviously when tempted by Potiphar’s wife, Moses in refusing to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, Joshua and Caleb in urging the people to trust and obey God rather than being afraid to enter the Promised Land at the urging of the ten other spies, Rahab in protecting the Israelite spies, Rahab in protecting the Israelite spies, David when patiently waiting for God to put him on the throne of Israel, the prophets of Israel who served the Lord in spite of persecution and a rebellious audience, and the many martyrs – from the days prior to the birth of Christ up until today. All these know what it is to have the choice of life or death set before them.

Returning to the scriptures we read that God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the subsequent generations of Israelites was an everlasting covenant in which God said, “To you I will give the land of Canaan, as the portion of your inheritance” (I Chronicles 16:14-18). And yet God warned Israel just before entering the Promised Land that if they did not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before themselves, those whom they let remain in the land would become sharp sticks in their eyes and thorns in their sides – thus giving them trouble in that Land of Promise. And should Israel fail to drive them out, God said that he would do to Israel what He planned to do to those Israel was to drive out” (Numbers 33:55-56). To this warning about driving out all the inhabitants, God also warned Israel about idol worship – telling the Israelites that they had seen the abominations of the nations they passed through from Egypt until coming up to the Promised Land. God said Israel had also seen their idols of wood, stone, silver, and gold. Therefore there was not to be among them a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord God, to go and serve the gods of those nations – so that there will not be among them a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood who claims to be right with God yet walks in the stubbornness of his heart. God concluded this warning with these words: “The Lord shall never be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the Lord and His jealousy will burn against that man, and every curse which is written in this book will rest on him, and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven. Then the Lord will single him out for adversity from all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant which are written in this book of the law (Deuteronomy 29:14-21).

In talking with David about who would build His temple in Jerusalem, God said: “Your son Solomon is the one who shall build My house and My courts; for I have chosen him to be a son to Me, and I will be a father to him. I will establish his kingdom forever if he resolutely performs My commandments and My ordinances, as is done now” (I Chronicles 28:6-7). In talking about this with his son, Solomon, David advised Solomon to “know the God of your father, and serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the Lord searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you forever” (I Chronicles 28:9).

When Solomon had finished building the temple and had dedicated it to the Lord, God appeared to Solomon twice. In one of those meetings God said: “I have consecrated this house which you have built by putting My name there forever, and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually” (II Kings 9:3). And on the other occasion God said: “If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people [because of their sin], and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (II Chronicles 7:13-14). But God did not stop there in speaking to Solomon. He went on to say: “As for you, if you walk before Me as your father David walked, even to do according to all that I have commanded you, and will keep My statutes and My ordinances, then I will establish your royal throne as I covenanted with your father David, saying, ‘You shall not lack a man to be ruler in Israel.’ But if you turn away and forsake My statutes and My commandments which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will uproot you from My land which I have given you, and this house which I have consecrated for My name I will cast out of My sight and I will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples” (II Chronicles 7:17-20).

Notice the strength of God’s words concerning His presence being in the Temple forever and the perpetual attentiveness of His eyes and heart toward the people. And yet notice God’s warning that makes it clear the people and Solomon could bring it all to an end by giving themselves to the worship of other gods. Isaiah, in speaking as God’s mouthpiece, expresses this truth when he says: “those who forsake the Lord will come to an end” (Isaiah 1:28). And God speaking to Israel, through Jeremiah, about the soon coming judgment, said: “Many nations will pass by this city [after it is destroyed]; and they will say to one another, ‘Why has the LORD done thus to this great city?’ Then they will answer, ‘Because they forsook the covenant of the Lord their God and bowed down to other gods and served them.’ Do not weep for the dead or mourn for him, but weep continually for the one who is carried away; for he will never return or see his native land” (Jeremiah 22:8-10).

“Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off” (Romans 11:22).

But, you say, that was the Old Testament which represents the old covenant. That was before the new covenant – which is not like the old. That was before the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That was before the Church age and the New Testament.

And all that is true. We are living under the new covenant in the Church age and according to the scriptures, there is a difference between the old covenant and the new.

The difference between the old covenant and the new was prophesied by Jeremiah way back in the Old Testament days. In Jeremiah 31:31-34 we read, “Behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. [It will not be] like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them, declares the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord, I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, declares the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

And so we see that in this new covenant God has made with us, one significant difference is that He writes His law on our hearts instead of tablets of stone. But there is one significant similarity as well – and that similarity is that He intends to be our God and us to be a people for His own possession. Now this similarity is important to take note of, for it connects the new covenant with the old and indicates two sides to the new covenant just like there was with the old.

The writer of Hebrews quotes this same prophecy from Jeremiah in Hebrews 8:8-12. Two of the truths He makes clear in referring to this prophecy is that God replaced the old covenant – as found in the Old Testament – with a new covenant, and this new covenant is the covenant of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. No more are God’s people to rely on the sacrificial system that God established for His people under the old covenant to repair and maintain right relationship with God. Now we are to rely on Jesus Christ – his death, resurrection, and intercession.

Jesus, himself, spoke of this new covenant on the night he was betrayed. While eating the Passover meal with his disciples, he took the cup and after giving thanks, He gave it to his disciples, saying: “Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:27-28). And Luke records Jesus as saying: “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood” (Luke 22:20). So we see that Christ, our Savior, established this new covenant between God and all who put their faith and trust in Jesus for salvation – a salvation that, according to God’s holy scriptures, saves us from the penalty, the power and the practice of sin.

The apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote these words to the church in Rome: “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). And again Paul writes: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. [Therefore], God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been

justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him (Romans 5:1-9). And so we see that those who put their faith and trust in Jesus for salvation are saved from the penalty of sin, that is, from eternal damnation and separation from God.

To be saved from the penalty of sin is a marvelous gift of God's grace. Yet He did not stop there. God also saves us from the power of sin, that is, from sin's rule or dominion over us. Returning to the apostle Paul's words, we read: "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin (Romans 6:4-7). And further on Paul writes: "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14). The apostle John says the same thing in similar words when he writes: "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (I John 3:8). Therefore, the scriptures teach that the salvation brought to us through Jesus Christ, not only saves us from the penalty of sin, but also from the power of sin's dominion over us. And this means we no longer have to sin!

Added to our salvation from the penalty and power of sin is God's gracious work of saving us from the practice of sin. John, in his first letter to Christians of all ages makes it very clear that what he was writing in his letter was being written so we would not go on sinning. Yet he acknowledges that sin is a possibility even for the new covenant believer when he says: "And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (I John 2:1). When he says, "And if anyone sins," he is admitting sin is a possibility in the Christian's life while making it clear it is to no longer be a constant or perpetual or persistent or practiced part. He further clarifies God's position on the practice of sin in a believer's life when he says: "Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. You know that [Jesus] appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in [Jesus continues to practice] sin; no one who [continues to practice] sin has seen Him or knows Him" (I John 3:4-6). And further on John says: "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot [practice] sin, because he is born of God" (I John 3:9). And what kinds of thoughts, words and deeds does God label sin? Paul gives us several lists, but the one in Galatians 5:19-21 is sufficient to make the point: "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

Paul also speaks clearly about this matter of practicing sin, when he says: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. Therefore do not let sin reign (*have sovereign*



*power, dominate, prevail*) in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting (*submitting*) the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God” (Romans 6:1-4, 12-13). Paul affirms our being saved from the practice of sin when he wrote these words to Titus: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:11-14). And finally, Paul says of those who have been born again: “For the love of Christ controls us, or compels us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf” (II Corinthians 5:14-15).

The point of all these scriptures is that the new covenant saves us completely. How? By means of the redeeming work of Christ; by means of God writing the law on our hearts; and by means of Jesus bringing us into a reconciled and personal relationship with God. Paul summarizes this complete salvation, that is, salvation from the penalty, power and practice of sin when he says: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things [have] passed away; behold, new things have come” (II Corinthians 5:17).

Now it is understandable that many consider the new covenant separate from the old covenant as if the two exist totally apart from each other. After all, the old seems to have been put to rest and the new established by the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it is true, the old has been put to rest. The writer of Hebrews makes this clear when he said: “When [God] said, ‘A new covenant,’ [it means] He has made the first obsolete. [And] whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear” (Hebrews 8:13). But one covenant being put to rest so another can take its place – on the one hand, and being two totally separate covenants – on the other hand, are two different things. To treat the two covenants as totally separate requires seeing them as having nothing to do with each other, and we know from scripture that this is not the case.

In the first chapter of Luke we have the record of Zacharias prophesying, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, about his new son, John, in relation to God’s intentions for the soon coming Christ. And so we read: “. . . Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying: ‘Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant; to show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant, the oath which He swore to Abraham our father, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days’” (Luke 1:67-69, 72-75). And so we see that Jesus and his new covenant are the fulfillment or the completion or, we might say, a revision of the covenant God made with Abraham.

God, in speaking through the apostle Paul addresses this truth in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Paul writes: “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore,

be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations will be blessed in you.' So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer . . . in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:6-9,14).

Therefore, according to the scriptures, we can rightly say that God has connected the old covenant with the new. And in that the two are connected, it is reasonable to believe, or at least assume, that the new covenant is two sided just as the old covenant was. Indeed, Peter affirmed the two sides of the new covenant on the day of Pentecost when, in his sermon, he quoted a prophetic word given by God to Moses. Here is what Peter said: "And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord . . . [For] Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to Him you shall give heed to everything He says to you. And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people' " (Acts 3:17-23).

In speaking about fulfilling His part in the new covenant, God used language that sounds very similar to the language He used in speaking about fulfilling His part in the old covenant. Consider how clear and strong the language is when God tells us how secure our salvation is from His side in these words of Christ: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:37-40). Yet lest we think we can enter into this covenant of salvation with no other responsibility toward God than to believe in Jesus for salvation from the penalty of sin, God says through the apostle Paul: "But if some of the branches were broken off [i.e., unbelieving, unrepentant Jews], and you [Gentiles by birth], being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root [God], but the root supports you. You will say then, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off" (Romans 11:17-22). And God gives us this warning from the prophet Ezekiel: "When I say to the righteous he will surely live, and he so trusts in his righteousness that he [turns away and] commits iniquity, none of his righteous deeds will be remembered; but in that same iniquity of his which he has committed he will die. . . Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' [Is it not your ways that are not right? (Ezekiel 18:25)] O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways" (Ezekiel 33:13, 20)

Speaking of the security we have in Christ, Jesus said: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand” (John 10:27-29). Yet this same Jesus warns us of what can happen if we do not remain steadfast in our faith, when he says: “The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away” (Matthew 13:20-21). It is possible some may say that the rocky soil represents unbelievers who got ever so close to saving faith but were never saved. To this we respond with Christ's words as recorded by Luke: “Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away” (Luke 8:13).

Jesus said: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). And the writer of Hebrews adds these words: “Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25). Surely it seems irrational or at the very least, misleading, to tell us we have eternal life if that life can be lost by falling away from the faith. How can something be eternal yet not be eternal? Though this specific question is never specifically answered in the scriptures, this same Jesus said: “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned” (John 15:2,4-6).

The apostle Paul, in writing to the Christians in Rome said: “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:1-4). Yet the writer of Hebrews warns us about not taking seriously the responsibility we have toward God as a result of receiving His gracious gift of salvation, when he writes: “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge His people.’ It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Hebrews 10:26-31). And a little further he says:

“Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul “ (Hebrews 10:35-39).

We find great encouragement and hope concerning the faithfulness and love of God toward all who belong to Him in these words from the apostle Paul: “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, ‘For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:31-39).

There are those who say that the phrase, “or any other created thing” includes the believer, which means once a person is born again he cannot remove himself or separate himself from the love of God which we have in Christ Jesus. Whether that be true or a misapplication of those words, I cannot say. What I do know is that the writer of Hebrews said: “Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end” (Hebrews 3:12-14). “Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard. For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, ‘As I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest,’ although His works were finished from the foundation of the world” (Hebrews 4:1-3). And Peter, addressing this same issue says: “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘A dog returns to its own vomit,’ and, ‘A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire’ ” (II Peter 2:20-22).

Paul, in writing to the Christians in Ephesus, says: “In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation – having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the

redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13-14). Yet to Timothy, Paul writes: “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons” (I Timothy 4:1). And Jesus adds his own words of warning when he says: “Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved” (Matthew 24:9-13).

And finally, all who come to faith in Jesus are recipients of the grace and mercy of God. The apostle Paul in speaking about this great truth speaks of it in light of both sides – God’s side and our side. In Romans 2:4-11, Paul says: “Do not think lightly of the riches of God’s kindness and tolerance and patience, for it is the kindness of God that leads you to repentance. But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

What does all this mean? Certainly it does not mean we can, in any way, earn or secure our salvation, for there is only one way we can personally pay the penalty for our sin – die physically and spend eternity separated from God in the depths of hell. Without Christ paying this debt in our place, we have only ourselves to pay it.

And just as certainly, it does not mean that our responsibility to God or our participation in God’s new covenant begins and ends with believing on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from the penalty of sin. As the apostle Paul said: “So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by [obligating yourself] the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:12-13).

And though we are warned of God to be on our guard against falling away, it does not mean we cannot live each day with a spiritually healthy, God-ordained assurance of our salvation. Here again, the apostle Paul speaks to us about this when he says: “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God” (Romans 8:14). Now when he says, “all who are being led by the Spirit,” he is clearly inferring there must be willful and persistent following on our part to the leading of the Spirit. And we can gauge or even test this willful and persistent following of the Spirit’s leading. With a good dose of self-honesty coupled with self-examination, we can know if we are or are not willfully and persistently following the leading of the Holy Spirit. If we are, our hearts will not condemn us and we can live in the assurance of our salvation – as well we should.

And finally, presenting these scriptures to you this way does not mean you must agree with what I have presented. As I have said from the beginning of this study, sincere, faithful Christians have disagreed and will continue to disagree about eternal security and falling away from the faith. My goal has been to show you the value of dealing with any topic, and especially any controversial topic through a search of all the scriptures related to that topic as opposed to using a select few or turning to innovative reasoning to explain away those that disagree with your position.

May God and His word be glorified in all things. And in regard to issues like eternal security and falling away, may we esteem Him and His word more highly than our theology or the culture and leanings of any denomination or popular teachers.