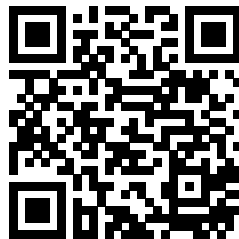


Can a Christian Perish?

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Why this booklet?

The question of whether a believer can perish has probably occupied the thoughts of almost every true Christian. It has caused great distress for some believers: some have doubts about the authenticity of their repentance, others are cast into doubt on account of sins they have committed after their repentance, and still others are shaken by certain verses they have read in the Bible.

Further, there is a teaching that claims that the safety or security of salvation should not be preached because it leads believers to be careless about sin. Therefore some insist that a believer can perish if he does not live in holiness. To support this teaching numerous Bible verses are cited. Many true children of God are terrified by this and live in constant fear of being lost.

Therefore we want to examine this subject as presented throughout the Holy Scriptures. Only this can provide the right answer, because the Bible alone shows the way to redemption by faith in the Saviour Jesus Christ. We want to start by stating two principles which are key for a right understanding of the Word of God and which can protect us from wrong conclusions concerning any subject.

The first principle applies in general to any interpretation: a statement can only be interpreted correctly if the context in which it is made is taken into account. When applied to the Word of God, this means that one must distinguish, for example, whether something is said in the Old or New Testament, whether it is said to Jews or Christians, to unbelievers or believers, etc. Many supposed contradictions in the Bible can be clarified by reading and interpreting the relevant passages in their context.

The second principle, which relates specifically to the Bible, is declared by Peter in reference to the prophecies of the Old Testament, but it is of general validity for the understanding of the whole of the Holy Scripture:

“Knowing this first, that the scope of no prophecy of scripture is had from its own particular interpretation” (2 Pet. 1:20).

Peter assumes that all prophecy – and in a broader sense the entire Word of God – is a whole. A scriptural passage must therefore not be interpreted independently from other passages that deal with the same subject. If this happens, it can cause great difficulties.

We do not want to lose sight of these two principles when dealing with our topic. God, the Holy Spirit, the real ‘author’ of the Word of God, never contradicts Himself (see 1 Cor. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16). This leads us to the conclusion that a truth which is clearly stated in the Bible cannot be brought into question by a single scriptural passage that may not be so easily explained.

Before we come to the answer to the question as to whether a Christian can be lost, it is essential to establish what constitutes a true Christian.

What is a Christian?

About a third of the world's population professes to be Christian. Most are members of the major world churches such as the Catholic or Protestant churches with their different persuasions. Many consider themselves Christians because they were baptized and grew up with a connection to the church. They go to church frequently, irregularly or infrequently, and believe more or less what is preached to them. But are they really Christians in the biblical sense by virtue of these things alone? The answer to this question must be a clear, 'No'. It is not enough to be a member of a church or religious community. It is also not enough to believe in the existence of a 'higher being' or in God. To be saved forever, more is needed.

James says clearly and unequivocally that faith is not enough for salvation:

"You believe that God is one, you do well. The demons even believe, and tremble" (Jas. 2:19).

But demons will never be saved, as the demons' question in Matthew 8:29 shows:

"What have we to do with you, Son of God? Have you come here before the time to torment us?" (cf. Luke 8:31).

Demons believe in the existence of God and His Son, but they know that they are going to eternal condemnation. Moreover, in Acts 8 we read of a man named Simon who also "believed; and, having been baptized, he continued constantly with Philip" (v. 13); but when Peter later joined him, he was forced to say: "your money go with you to destruction, ... you have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not upright before God" (v. 21). A mere adherence to biblical truth is not enough for the salvation of the soul.

A true Christian is one who believes in the Lord Jesus as the Son of God and as the Saviour who died for him on the cross, and has thereby received forgiveness of sins and new life (see John 1:12, 13; Acts 16:31; 1 Cor. 15:1–4). The life God has given will be manifested in a new walk, based on the Word of God.

However, the strength or intensity of faith is not the key to salvation. If it were, many a child of God might despair – which unfortunately is not uncommon. People look to themselves and are occupied with their own faith instead of trusting in the Lord Jesus and His accomplished work. Those who are preoccupied with themselves will never become happy children of God. The security of our salvation is not based on the strength of our faith, but on the value of the work of the Lord Jesus in the eyes of God. This is made clear to us by a picture from the Old Testament.

When God announced the last of the ten plagues upon Egypt, the killing of all the firstborn, He ordained the Passover lamb as the means of salvation for His people Israel. Each family had to slaughter a lamb and smear its blood on their doorposts and lintel. Many Israelites may have trembled in their homes and doubted whether the blood would really protect their family! But the destroyer passed by all the houses whose doors were painted with the blood of the Passover lamb, because God had said,

"And when I see the blood, I will pass over you" (Exod. 12:13).

It was not the people's valuation of the blood and its effects that determined the outcome. It was God's. We know from the New Testament that the Passover lamb refers to the Lord Jesus:

"For also our Passover, Christ, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7).

Everyone who takes refuge in Him in faith is forever under the protection of His blood. Even if our faith may seem weak to us, God sees the work of His Son that has been accomplished and sees us as one with Him! Those who feel weak in faith may be comforted and encouraged by the word:

"A bruised reed will he not break, and smoking flax will he not quench" (Matt. 12:20).

This is what happened to the father of the possessed boy who cried out to the Lord Jesus:

"I believe, help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

Let us first of all deal with the important subject of perfect redemption and the certainty of salvation. We will see how God's Word judges man and what God has done to give him an eternal salvation. In the last part we will look at various passages of Scripture which are often interpreted in a way that causes uncertainty and doubts about salvation.

Man – a lost sinner

The Bible shows us that mere religiousness does not lead to salvation. The letter to the Romans makes this particularly clear. Here we are shown (ch. 1:18–32) that God is recognizable in creation as the Creator (v. 20), but also that many people do not acknowledge this. Instead of honouring God the Creator, they have turned away from Him and have become fools as a result. They have made their own idols in human or animal form and worship them instead of the only true God (v. 21–23). This has led to God ‘giving them up’ and leaving them to their own devices, so that their sinfulness becomes all the more apparent. According to the biblical statement in 1 Corinthians 10:20, the idolatry that still prevails among many peoples today is the worship of demons, that is, of satanic spirits.

Even those who follow the more philosophically oriented religions are not better off (Rom. 2:1–16). They too are by nature lost sinners who cannot be saved by their religion. Their conscience accuses them but cannot show them the way to salvation.

This is most evident in the only religion established by God, which is laid down in the Law of Sinai. Here too, as with every religion, it is a matter of doing or refraining from doing certain things – seeking to attain the goal by keeping the commandments. This religion, unlike all others, was given by God Himself. In Leviticus 18:5 it says that keeping the Law results in “life”, and in Deuteronomy 6:25 that it is the standard of “righteousness”. But according to Romans 2:17 to 3:20, no man can be justified before God, even by the Law. No one is able to keep all the commandments of God. As James writes, the breaking of a single commandment is enough to cause someone to become guilty (Jas. 2:10), and the Lord Jesus said that the purely outward observance of the commandments is of no use, but that it depends on the condition of the heart (Matt. 5:21ff.). The inescapable conclusion, then, is:

“By works of law no flesh will be justified before him [i.e. before God]” (Rom. 3:20).

How then can a man be justified before God? Job asked this question almost 4000 years ago (Job 9:2). There is no way for man to come to God and make peace with Him by his own power. According to the Holy Scriptures, there is only one way that leads to God, namely to believe in the Lord Jesus and His sacrificial work on the cross. God sent Him to earth so that through Him we may receive reconciliation, forgiveness, redemption, justification, eternal life and a glorious future.

In contrast to religion, the New Testament shows us that man is not able to contribute anything to his salvation, but that God has done everything for us. It is up to us to accept this grace in faith.

Reconciliation

According to the teaching of the Bible, all people are sinners by nature. They hate the thought of a holy God to whom they are accountable and have thus become His enemies (Rom. 5:10). This does not mean, however, that God is our enemy. No, He loved us even though we did not love Him, and He sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10). Just as enmity did not come from God but from men, so the result of Christ's work is not God making peace with men, but "peace with God" for men, which is now preached to all through the gospel (Eph. 2:17). And how does man receive peace with God? Through faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross. Only through this, can people who were once enemies of God be reconciled to Him (Col. 1:22). Everything came from God, who

"Has reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and given to us the ministry of that reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18).

Through the coming of Christ, God revealed Himself in His gracious willingness to reconcile people to Himself, and on the cross Christ completely fulfilled all His holy and righteous requirements for sinful man. Hence there is now a "ministry of reconciliation" through which is proclaimed

"How that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not reckoning to them their offences" (2 Cor. 5:19).

From this, however, one must not draw the conclusion that God will one day reconcile all people to himself. If this were so, the following words of the apostle would be superfluous:

"We entreat for Christ, Be reconciled to God" (v. 20).

The same is true of Colossians 1:19–20:

"For in him all the fulness of the Godhead was pleased to dwell, and by him to reconcile all things to itself".

It doesn't say 'all men', but "all things". This refers to the introduction of a new creation, in which there will be new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13; Heb. 9:23). The fact that the noun, 'things', is not present in the original text does not change this, because the pronoun "all" is neuter and therefore cannot refer to persons. This is underlined by the fact that Paul adds, "And you ... has [he] reconciled" (v. 21). While the reconciliation of all things is still to come, all those who stand on the firm foundation of faith in the Lord Jesus may know that they are already reconciled to God, because Christ has entered into death "in the body of his flesh" (Col. 1:22). This reconciliation effected by God is eternally secure and irrevocable.

Forgiveness

Another consequence of the work of Christ is the perfect forgiveness of sins for those who believe in Him. Through our conduct, we have all become guilty before God, and we cannot free ourselves from this burden of guilt. Only God can meet the need for eternal forgiveness from the guilt of our sins, and He does it gladly. Everyone who recognizes himself as guilty and believes in the work of the Lord Jesus on the cross may know that God has forgiven him all his sins because of this work (Col. 1:14; 2:13; 1 John 2:12; cf. Luke 5:21).

God's forgiveness is perfect, irrevocable and eternal. Even in the Old Testament these things were expressed – in rich figurative language. The clarity of these passages is impressive.

- In Psalm 103:9, 12, David says of God:

"He will not always chide, neither will he keep his anger for ever. ... As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

Something that would probably not have been known in David's time is this: While the distance from the North to the South Pole of the Earth is fixed, there is no way to indicate a distance between the cardinal points East and West! It is, so to speak, infinite.

- King Hezekiah sang in his hymn of praise in Isaiah 38:17:

"For you have cast all my sins behind your back",

from where they would never come back into view again, and the prophet Micah could exclaim:

"You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Mic. 7:19).

- Again, another image is used in Isaiah:

"Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they will be as wool" (Isa. 1:18).

- Jeremiah proclaimed to the people of Israel that the Lord would pardon their iniquities and would no longer remember their sins (Jer. 31:34; cf. ch. 50:20).

Now it could be objected that these passages are from the Old Testament and refer to the people of Israel. This is true, but should God have two different measures for His forgiveness? In other words, is the forgiveness of sins with Israel in the past or

in the future more perfect than with those who believe in the work of redemption of the Lord Jesus in the present day? There is not the slightest indication of this in the Bible. On the contrary, in Hebrews 9:12 it says that Christ entered into the heavenly sanctuary "once for all" when He had found an eternal redemption. In chapter 10:14–18 it is added that His sacrifice "perfected forever", and that "where there is remission of these [i.e. of sins], there is no longer a sacrifice for sin". This means nothing else than that for sins that have been once forgiven, there is no need for a new sacrifice. Moreover, in verse 17, the words from Jeremiah 31:34 already quoted are applied to the present day: "their sins and their lawlessnesses I will never [or by no means] remember". Everyone may take God at His infallible Word, and trust that if he has confessed his sins to Him sincerely and with true repentance, they are also completely and eternally forgiven.

What about unconfessed or 'unknown' sins?

There is certainly no person who at the time of his conversion confessed all the sins he had ever committed. This fact has brought some believers into inner distress, because it has made them doubt whether God has accepted their confession of sins. But wouldn't God know and take into account the weakness of our memory? Therefore, conversion cannot depend on a complete and perfect confession of sins, but on the sincerity of the confession. A publican who once prayed to God in the temple said only one sentence:

"O God, have compassion on me, the sinner" (Luke 18:13).

But he could leave justified, because the Lord Jesus, looking into his heart, had seen that these words had been spoken in sincerity. And that is what matters with God. If someone makes a confession of sin before God, in which he consciously avoids certain sins, he is not sincere (cf. Acts 8:21). There is certainly no forgiveness for such a sham confession. But if the awareness of being a lost sinner leads to a genuine confession, then no sin need weigh on his conscience any more. God forgives according to His own principle laid down in 1 John 1:9:

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and clean us from all unrighteousness" (cf. Col. 2:13).

Sins before and after repentance

The perfection of forgiveness on God's part is evident both in its eternal validity and in its thoroughness. Not only are the sins before our conversion forgiven, but also those we commit later. When the Lord died for us, not only the time of our conversion but our whole life with all our sins still lay in the distant future. If He

"bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24),

then this can only mean all our sins, not only those we committed before our conversion. Everyone who believes in Him can trust that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin (1 John 1:7).

Therefore, “purging of his former sins” (2 Pet. 1:9) is not limited to the sins committed before conversion. Peter is speaking here of believers who have turned back to their old lives, thereby showing that they have forgotten what price Christ had to pay for the cleansing of their sins, and how detestable in God’s eyes are all the sins that they committed in the past. Compare here “the former conversation (way of life)” in Ephesians 4:22. A sincere and faithful disciple of Christ is ashamed of the things he did as an unbeliever and will shy away from falling back into them (Rom. 6:21).

These Bible passages, however, show us that it is by no means unimportant how we live after our conversion. Through the new birth, we have received a ‘new nature’ that has only one desire: to do God’s will. In contrast, the flesh, the ‘old nature’, is and remains incorrigibly evil. Unfortunately, even as believers we still sin too often because we are not vigilant enough to judge the impulses of the flesh.

However, when we have fallen into sin in thought, word or deed, our eternal salvation is not called into question, but the joy, blessing and strength of our communion with our Lord and our Father are clouded and weakened (cf. Ps. 32:3–4). However, if we confess these sins, God is faithful to Christ and righteous towards us, His children, when He forgives us our sins (1 John 1:9). Through this forgiveness, the lost joy and enjoyment of our fellowship with the Father is restored. We must therefore distinguish this repeated forgiveness of the Father towards His children from the unique eternal forgiveness received from God by those who have recognized themselves as lost sinners and have come to the Lord Jesus in repentance of their sins.

However, if we as Christians do not confess our sins, we fall into the sad state of spiritual blindness, short-sightedness and forgetfulness described by Peter (2 Pet. 1:9). If someone carelessly said: ‘I have been converted and can no longer be lost, therefore it is no harm if I sin’ – then there would indeed be reason to doubt the authenticity of such a ‘conversion’.

Saved as through the fire

On the other hand, it is an undeniable fact that even true believers can fall into terrible sins. We see such a case in 1 Corinthians 5. The assembly in Corinth had to exclude from its midst a person whom Paul no longer calls “brother”, but says is “called brother”. Yet he was clearly a true Christian! Otherwise Paul could not have written: “for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” The person in question came to repent, and the assembly was later required to therefore show love and forgive him (2 Cor. 2:6–10).

But what if a Christian lives and dies in sin without putting things right? Such a case is obviously found in 1 Corinthians 11:29–32. In the Corinthian assembly, various

people had behaved very unworthily at the Lord's supper, because they had not distinguished that the bread and cup were symbols of the death of their Lord. Several of them, through eating and drinking unworthily, had brought themselves under God's judgment and had become ill. Others had even died because they had so disgraced the Lord that He no longer wanted to leave them on the earth. But their death has nothing to do with eternal damnation, as is clear from the second part of verse 32: "...that we may not be condemned with the world." The people of this world who have rejected the Lord Jesus face eternal judgment – they will be condemned. But those who are saved by faith in the Saviour will not be condemned. However, the believer must know that the Lord chastises His own when they disobey His will (see 1 Pet. 1:15ff.). This chastisement can lead to death. It is similar with the "sin to death" in 1 John 5:16–17 (see the chapter, "Sin to death") and also with Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. In all these cases it is a serious punishment by God for sins that dishonour Him, but without calling into question eternal salvation. In such a case, God says, as it were: 'I do not want you to continue to dishonour me, therefore I am taking you away from the earth to myself!'

Further, the words in 1 Corinthians 3:15: "saved ... but so as through the fire", should not sow any doubts, as if there are also believers who will not pass this "trial by fire". After all, it is said that even someone whose work burns up will be ultimately saved! This section of the letter is about service and about building the house of God, that is, the assembly. As human beings, we are often unable to judge the true character of a servant of Christ. But before the judgment seat of Christ, even the hidden things will be brought to light and tested and judged in the fire of God's holiness.

"If the work of any one which he has built upon the foundation will abide, he will receive a reward. If the work of any one will be consumed, he will suffer loss, but he will be saved, but so as through the fire" (1 Cor. 3:15).

Paul looked forward to this day because he knew that the Lord, the righteous judge, would then bestow the crown of righteousness upon him (2 Tim. 4:8). But it may also be that someone's work will not endure in the eyes of the Lord. He will then suffer loss in that he will not receive any reward from his Lord. This is not a question of whether he is saved or not, but of his reward as a servant of Christ. This is clearly stated in the words, "but he will be saved".

Redemption

A Christian can rejoice not only in the reconciliation and forgiveness received, but also in redemption through which he is freed from the judgment of God (eternal condemnation), from his former sinful way of life, and from all lawlessness (Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:18). The Lord Jesus paid the ransom for us by giving His blood for our redemption. No man can redeem himself or even others.

“None can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him, for the redemption of their soul is costly, and must be given up for ever” (Ps. 49:7–8).

Even in the Old Testament, we read of a ransom or atonement for someone who was under the judgment of God or on whom God laid claim. Thus the firstborn in Israel had to be “redeemed” – as though on behalf of all; someone who deserved to die could pay a “ransom” as “atonement” for his life, and at the numbering of the people every Israelite had to give the Lord half a shekel of silver as “a ransom for his soul” (Ex. 13:13; 21:30; 30:12). But when it comes to eternity, no man can redeem himself or anyone else.

Only one was able to do this:

“The man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2:5–6).

Just as in the Old Testament types the Lord received the ransom, so the Lord Jesus sacrificed His life to God (Heb. 9:14), as He foretold in Matthew 20:28: “as indeed the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (cf. Mark 10:45). The “recipient” of the ransom is God. From 1 Timothy 2 it is clear that it is so great that it is sufficient for the redemption of all people, whereas from Matthew 20 it is also clear that it only benefits those who also accept the resulting redemption in faith.

According to Hebrews 9:12, this is “eternal redemption”. It cannot be reversed by anyone or anything. Although we still expect the “redemption of our body” and the “redemption of the acquired possession”, these too do not depend on us and our faith, but are the work of God and will be fulfilled at the coming of the Lord at the rapture (Rom. 8:23; Eph. 1:13).

Justification

Another aspect of salvation is justification. No letter of the New Testament presents it as systematically and logically as the Letter to the Romans. As we have seen, this letter shows us not only the condition of man under condemnation, but also the gracious action of God consistent with His nature, which is both love and light. His love is revealed to the sinner in undeserved grace, but His light is revealed in His incorruptible righteousness. God is too pure of eyes to look upon evil (Hab. 1:13). But if God showed only mercy, His righteousness would fall short; if He was only just, we would all be lost. In both cases, He would deny His own nature.

In the fulness of time, God sent His Son to the earth (Gal. 4:4). The expression "fulness of time" means that God had exhausted all time and all means to show man that there was no possibility of self-justification and salvation from the sin into which the first human couple had plunged all their descendants. If He had come earlier, someone could have said: 'We have not had the opportunity to show that we can do better!' But no one can dare say that anymore. The history of mankind has proved the opposite.

Christ served God perfectly and without sin throughout His whole life, and did nothing but good to men. Yet He was hated by them. Their completely corrupt condition was revealed by their condemnation to death of the only one innocent of sin.

This moment of condemnation on the part of sinners was the occasion for God to reveal His righteousness. On the cross, during the three hours of darkness, Christ bore our sins in His body on the tree and took God's just punishment for them (1 Pet. 2:24; see Isa. 53:5). Therefore He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; cf. Ps. 69:5). When He died after these three hours, all the demands that God had against man were completely met. The Lord Jesus, through the offering of His life and the shedding of His blood, paid all our debts and even more: He thus glorified God and was able to cry out: "It is finished" (John 17:4; 19:30).

God now stood, as it were, under an obligation to His Son. Therefore, He resurrected Him from the dead and took Him away from the eyes of men by raising Him to His right hand and glorifying Him there. The glorification of Christ was thus the just consequence of the fact that He had glorified His God and Father. Therefore, the Lord Jesus could say that the Holy Spirit would demonstrate righteousness to the world

"Because I go away to my Father, and you behold me no longer" (John 16:10).

Now when a person, conscious of his guilt and condemnation, in faith takes refuge in the Lord Jesus and His work, the righteousness of God is demonstrated even towards the sinner (Rom. 3:22, 26). He, who in righteousness judged sins in His Son and raised Him up and glorified Him in righteousness, now acts in righteousness when He does not condemn but justifies the one who believes in Christ (cf. 1 John 1:9).

God therefore has a righteous basis for His action. It is the work of Christ, through which all His righteous demands have been fully met. He always acts in justice – even when He justifies a lost sinner. This justification means simply righteousness or acquittal. Christ has borne the sins and the just punishment of God for them, and a righteous God does not punish twice.

Everyone who is justified by faith has peace with God (Rom. 5:1). This wonderful peace is not a temporary feeling, but is based on the eternally valid work of Christ and the justification of the sinner by God based upon it.

The doctrinal part of the Letter to the Romans therefore concludes with a confirmation of the eternal security and certainty of those who are saved. In Romans 8:28–30, Paul reminds us of God's eternal counsel (see the section on "Election" p. 42) and then asks various questions, the answers to which he crowns with the exclamation:

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor thing present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38–39).

Do not these words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, impressively confirm that the saved person is eternally safe in the hands of God? Only a power stronger than God could take away this security and certainty. But there is no such power!

New birth and Eternal life

So far we have seen what God has done for us in His Son and through His work on the cross. To this could be added the salvation of the soul (1 Pet. 1:9), the washing and cleansing of our sins (Rev. 1:5–6; 2 Pet. 1:9) and our purchase (1 Cor. 6:20). Now we come to what He has done in us and to us. Through reconciliation, redemption, forgiveness and justification, our sinful deeds have been removed, but our sinful nature has not been changed. The nature of man is incorrigible (see Rom. 8:7). As a descendant of fallen Adam, every man possesses this corrupt, sinful nature. His sins can be forgiven, the sinner can be justified, but this does not remove his sinful nature. With this 'old nature', man cannot live on earth in a way pleasing to God, nor spend eternity in the glory of God. Therefore, something new must come into being, and this happens through the new birth.

The Pharisee, Nicodemus, had to learn that only someone who is "born anew" can see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). The new birth represents a fundamental new beginning in human life. Through this birth, which the Lord Jesus calls a birth "of water and the Spirit" in John 3:5, man receives a new nature and new, divine life. The "water" is not an image of baptism, but of the Word of God in its purifying power (cf. John 15:3; Eph. 5:25), and the "Spirit" is the Holy Spirit (cf. John 3:6). All who are thus "born of God" become "children of God" and reveal in their lives that they are "partakers of the divine nature" (John 1:12–13; 2 Pet. 1:4). Believers have also received eternal life (John 3:16). This is not only a life without end, but it is the life of the Son of God. He Himself is eternal life (1 John 5:20).

However, not only did we possess a corrupt, sinful nature, but to God we were also spiritually dead, even though we were alive in sin (Eph. 2:1). God took us out of this spiritual death – He "quickened us with the Christ" (Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13). The life of the risen Christ is now our life (Col. 3:4). It is secure and untouchable, for it is "hid with the Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).

And what has happened to the "old man", that is, our position and our condition as sinful, lost people? According to Romans 6:6, "our old man has been crucified with him", and in faith in the Lord Jesus at our conversion we have "put off the old man" and "put on the new" (Eph. 4:22f.; Col. 3:9–10).

Is it conceivable that God will take away the eternal life He has given us? Could Christ be my life today and not tomorrow? Could children of God ever lose the filial relationship in which He has placed them? Impossible! A child always remains a child, even if he or she disobeys! After all, it is not our work, but God's, even if we also participate in it through faith.

The Holy Spirit

On top of all of the blessings we have so far considered, God has put the seal of the Holy Spirit on everything He has done in His Son Jesus Christ for the salvation of lost sinners. "In whom also, having believed, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the earnest of our inheritance" (Eph. 1:13; cf. 2 Cor. 1:22). A seal is a final confirmation from an authorised party. All who have believed the gospel of salvation receive the Holy Spirit. He now testifies to the believer's spirit that he is a child of God (Rom. 8:16). He wants to lead us into all the truth and to guide us on our journey of faith (John 16:13; Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:18). Although we can grieve Him and even practically quench Him in His effect (or suppress or dampen Him) – which is very serious – the sealing remains (Eph. 4:30; 1 Thess. 5:19).

The Lord Jesus said:

"And I will beg the Father, and he will give you another Comforter, that he may be with you forever, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see him nor know him; but you know him, for he abides with you, and will be in you" (John 14:16–17).

This divine Advocate (or Solicitor, Comforter, Supporter) will therefore never be taken away from us. Christ is our Advocate with the Father in heaven, and the Holy Spirit (the "other comforter") in us is our Advocate on earth. These are two wonderful facts of Christian faith!

Today, however, the Holy Spirit not only dwells in every single redeemed person, but when He came to earth He baptized and united all believers into one body (Acts 2; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4). Every redeemed person receives the Holy Spirit and thereby becomes a member of this body, which includes every one of the children of God. The assembly, as the body of Christ, presents to us the unity of all the redeemed, with Christ as Head and believers as members one of another. At the same time, as "living stones", together they form a "holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together as a habitation of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:21–22; cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Pet. 2:5). The Holy Spirit will never depart from us, a member of the body of Christ can never be "cut off", and a living stone can never be broken out of the house of God. The language of the Scriptures is unambiguous. Losing the Holy Spirit is impossible, even though some believers fear it, citing the words of David in Psalm 51:11: "take not the Spirit of your holiness from me." In so doing, they overlook the fact that no believer in Old Testament times had the Holy Spirit dwelling within him as in the present time of grace. Repeatedly it is said that people were filled with the Spirit of God, that He came upon them, even that He was in them, but never that He dwelt in them (Gen. 41:38; Ex. 31:3; Num. 24:2).

Election

We now come to another aspect that is important for the subject “assurance of salvation”. The redemptive work of the Lord Jesus on the cross is not the ‘reaction’ of God to sin, but it goes back to an eternal plan. This counsel of God not only expresses the omniscience of Him who can already declare the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10), but also His definite, indisputable will (Acts 2:23; Eph. 1:11) and His eternal purpose (Eph. 3:11).

The counsel of God is as eternal as He is, as we know from the expressions chosen by the Holy Spirit in this context: “purpose of the ages” (Eph. 3:11), “before the world was” (John 17:5), “before the ages” (1 Cor. 2:7), “before the ages of time” (2 Tim. 1:9), “before the ages of time” (Titus 1:2), and the threefold “before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:20). In the eternity before the creation of the world, God foreknew each one of those who would one day believe in His Son. In His omniscience, He also knew every other person, but the foreknowledge of which the Bible speaks refers only to believers. According to Romans 8:29, we are not only “foreknown”, but also “predestinated” for sonship.

He knew when we would be born, who and how we would be as people born in sin, but He also knew that we would be converted and believe in His Son! The foreknowledge of God had a certain glorious intent that corresponded with His counsel and purpose.

Chosen in Christ

Connected with this foreknowledge of God is the election of all those who, once united with the Lord Jesus, their Redeemer and Lord, will enjoy eternal joy in glory in communion with God the Father. Peter writes at the beginning of his first letter, that our election happened “according to the foreknowledge of God” (1 Pet. 1:2).

In the Letter to the Ephesians, which describes the personal and common blessings of those who believe in the Lord Jesus, we are told that in Christ, whom the Father loved before the foundation of the world and who was known beforehand as the sacrificial Lamb, we were chosen before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). Our blessings are thus not only the result of God’s mercy towards lost sinners, but are based on a decision He had already made before the world existed and before any of us were born or had committed even a single sin. Both the origin and the objective of this divine election are therefore outside of creation.

The eternal counsel of God, however, does not only consist in His foreknowledge and election of those who were to believe in His Son, but it also encompasses their predestination to wonderful, eternal blessings. God has predetermined everything that is connected with this, down to the last detail. The Lord Jesus was crucified not only because His own people rejected Him and because Pilate, the Roman governor, condemned Him to death, but because God’s hand and counsel had so predetermined it (Acts 4:28).

The Apostle Paul also mentions in 1 Corinthians 2:7 the blessings that God in Christ had kept ready for His own from eternity, but which were not known in the times

before the cross,

“God’s wisdom in a mystery, that hidden wisdom which God had predetermined before the ages for our glory”.

And when we think of ourselves, we read in Ephesians 1:11 that we were

“marked out beforehand according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his own will”.

Not going beyond the Word of God

By going further than God’s Word allows, foreknowledge, election and predestination are sometimes put into a false context. But we must not go beyond what God’s Word reveals to us. In it we find wonderful statements about the eternal thoughts of God concerning those who will one day be with Him in glory, but not a single passage about an eternal predestination of other people to damnation! All who are lost will receive their righteous punishment for their sins, not on the basis of God’s predestination, but “according to their works” (Rev. 20:11–15; cf. Rom. 9:22–24).

For the mind of the natural man there seems to be a contradiction in this which he cannot come to terms with. But for faith, God’s Word gives a simple answer in Isaiah:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says Jehovah. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8–9).

The wisdom of God is infinitely greater than our feeble knowledge. But in His Word, He gives us insights into His counsels, which He made in eternity before the creation of the world with regard to those whom He wanted to redeem. If we keep to this, we will be saved from the accusation: “But you, O man, who are you that you answer again to God?”, which is addressed in Romans 9:20 to those who do not want to accept God’s sovereignty.

Safety and Certainty

Everything that God's Word says about salvation conveys the thought of the eternal assurance of those who believe in the Lord Jesus and His work. If it weren't for this certainty, we couldn't trust the Word of God. God's firm promises about His own actions would then have to be called into question. But the Word of God is the revealed truth, of which the Lord Jesus says:

"Your word is truth" (John 17:17).

Let us now look at some biblical passages which testify to the perfect and eternal certainty of the redeemed, in order to substantiate what has been said so far.

Shepherd and sheep

In John 10 the Son of God presents Himself as the Good Shepherd who gives His life for the sheep, that is, for those who believe in Him. He says of them:

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them life eternal; and they will never perish, and no one will seize them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one can seize out of the hand of my Father" (John 10:27-29).

Let us note: These words of the Lord Jesus do not contain a single condition, exhortation or warning, but on the contrary establish seven incontrovertible facts:

- They hear the voice of the Good Shepherd because they are His property.
- The Good Shepherd knows His sheep who believe in Him.
- The sheep follow the Good Shepherd because this corresponds to their new nature.
- He gives them eternal life.
- They will not be lost for all eternity, for He does not let them go.
- No one can take them out of His hand.
- No one can take them out of the Father's hand.

The last two points are sometimes explained as saying that while no other power can steal the sheep from the hands of the Good Shepherd and the Father, they themselves can very well 'tear themselves away'. Would this not be incomparably worse than a person saved from a burning house who escapes the arms of his saviour and plunges once more into the deadly flames? Much more significant, however, is that someone who 'tears himself loose' from the Father's hand must have greater power than He does, as Romans 8:38–39 shows. For there we are told that no creature can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Christ, our life

"Your life is hid with the Christ in God. When the Christ is manifested, who is our life, then will you also be manifested with him in glory." (Col. 3:3–4)

As this passage shows, not only are we made alive with Christ, but He Himself is

our life, and He is inviolably situated at the right hand of God in heaven. With Him our life is hidden in God. So too our life in Christ is secure and untouchable. If we could lose this life, He must lose it too! If we were to be lost, He – which is unthinkable – would also have to be lost!

No condemnation

“There is then now no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

Through faith, Christ is not only in us, but we are also in Him – inseparably united to Him – as though wrapped up in His perfection and glory. If there were any damnation for us now, it would have to be for Christ! But that is impossible. This is why Paul closes the chapter with the words:

“For I am persuaded 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 creature, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38–39).

a The KJV adds: "who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

To summarise the thoughts of the highly respected Bible teacher William Kelly (1821-1906) in his *Notes on the Epistle of Paul, the Apostle, to the Romans*:

Romans 8 gives a summary and conclusion to Paul's previous reasoning from chapter 5:12 to the close of chapter 7. It continues to develop the revelation of the truth, but alludes to and builds on the points already covered. Nothing is more striking than the explicit, distinct, and comprehensive affirmation of verse 1. "There is therefore now no condemnation to those in Christ Jesus." The truth is here clearly stated for all those who are in this new place of acceptance – "in Christ Jesus." For these he could not say more and he would not say less. What he says is absolute and decisive. He purposely leaves no loophole for modifying or weakening the deliverance.

Some claim that it makes no difference to accept the clause added into the second half of the verse, as in the KJV. I cannot agree. The best manuscript authority proves it to be spurious. To understand the force of the passage it is essential that the added clause should be rejected. These words belong in verse 4, where they are of immense importance. They are completely misleading in verse 1, where they would act as a qualifying clause, casting the soul upon an examination of its walk as the means of certifying that one is in Christ Jesus. I freely admit the duty of self-judgment as to my heart and ways; but this is not the way to ascertain that I am in Christ. If it were my walk and demeanour that gave me assurance, it would be completely self-righteous and presumptuous. A man who gets assurance based on his own estimate of his inward and outward ways should be pitied, not envied. Christian self-judgment has an important place. But to introduce it here would dislocate all truth, impair all grace, and actually destroy the source of power for a Christian walk.

The passage in its true form denies all condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. It

views Christians as being in an altogether new place, in Christ Jesus; where condemnation is not, and cannot be. It is not a question of degree but an absolute fact, true of all real Christians. To suggest that in proportion as he displays the Spirit of Christ he is free from condemnation is to miss the truth here revealed. I repeat, it is a question of the place grace gives them in Christ and not of their measure of making it good in feeling and ways. "In Christ" rightly understood precludes all question of degree or doubt.

The precious principle of 'no condemnation' was first introduced in the latter half of Romans 5. Here it is re-asserted with even greater strength and absoluteness. Not only are we not condemned, but there is no condemnation. We are in Christ, and no possible condemnation can reach us there.

We know

In many passages of the New Testament there is mention of a believing 'knowledge'. I am only quoting a few of them here:

- Romans 8:28: ***"But we do know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to purpose."***
- 2 Corinthians 4:14: ***"Knowing that he who has raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will present us with you."***
- 2 Corinthians 5:1: ***"We know that if our earthly tabernacle house be destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."***
- 1 John 3:2: ***"We know that if it is manifested we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."***
- 1 John 5:19: ***"We know that we are of God."***
- 1 John 5:20: ***"We know that the Son of God has come, and has given us an understanding that we should know him that is true."***

It expressly does not say here "believe" but "know". On a human level there is a difference between 'believing' and 'knowing': 'to believe is not to know' is a saying. You can believe something today and not believe it tomorrow because you are not really convinced of it. However knowledge goes further: it is based on facts or on experience. In our relationship with God, "faith" is such a firm conviction of the irrefutable facts of salvation, brought about by God's Spirit, that it is put on a par with "knowledge" in the Word of God. Here everything is not only guaranteed by God, but as believers we are knowledgeable and can therefore live in perfect security and certainty.

Grace and Responsibility

In contemplating the eternally valid salvation of those who had been lost, we are occupied with the grace of God. Everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus and is justified by this stands in this eternal and unfading grace of God (Rom. 5:1–2). But linked with this position is a responsibility which no one who professes Christ can escape. Everyone who calls Him his Lord has the responsibility to live according to His Word. Living up to this responsibility is not a burden but a joy for the new, divine life that we have received.

We all know from our own experience the general principle that every relationship in which a person is placed entails a responsibility. We need only think of a husband and a wife in marriage, parents and children in the family, and a boss and an employee in professional life. Even as a creature, every human being is in a relationship with God the Creator and bears a corresponding responsibility. The highest relationship that there is for a human being, that of the redeemed to God, is indeed the result of the grace of God, but it brings with it the responsibility to behave as God expects of those who profess to know Him. That is the Christian's responsibility. Nevertheless, it is not a heavy yoke imposed on us by our Lord, but an easy yoke and a light burden (see Matt. 11:30). The thought of His great love for us will make it easy for us to love Him in return and to obey His Word:

"He that has my commandments and keeps them, he it is that loves me" (John 14:21).

Love for Him can save us from carelessness and indifference to sin.

Two sides

Both sides of Christianity are clearly and unambiguously specified in 2 Timothy 2:19:

"Yet the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, The Lord knows those that are his; and, Let every one who names the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity."

The "firm foundation of God" does not refer to Christ or to the church (cf. Matt. 16:18; 1 Tim. 3:15), but to an unchanging principle which forms the basis of God's relationship with man. This "foundation of God" remains firm and unshakable, even if everything else collapses or falls apart. The "firm foundation of God" also bears a "seal", that is, His own final, unalterable confirmation.

One side of the seal – one could say the side facing God – contains the words: "The Lord knows those that are his". As we have seen, God has foreknown all those who believe in His Son in eternity, and His Son, the Lord Jesus, knows all His sheep by name (John 10:14, 27). There is no room for any doubt here! It may sometimes be difficult or even impossible for people to judge whether someone is really a child of God. It is comforting to know that the Lord knows His own. Anyone who has sincerely confessed his sins and accepted the Lord Jesus in faith as his Saviour can rely on this.

Even if he often feels a 'failure' in his practical life of faith – and what Christian does not know this feeling – the fact remains unalterable: "The Lord knows those that are his". James wrote in his letter: "We all often offend" (Jas. 3:2). But did that make him doubt his salvation? Not at all. He knew that he belonged to those who, according to the will of God, were begotten "by the word of truth", that he was part of the "first-fruits of his creatures", and that the Holy Spirit dwelt in him (Jas. 1:18; 4:5).

The divine seal, however, has another inscription which reads: "Let every one who names the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity"! Here it is obviously about the profession of Christ as Lord, which expresses itself in word and deed. With all the certainty that the believer has, he must not forget that there is a responsibility connected with his profession of Christ. God expects everyone who professes to know Him and His Son to live in obedience to His Word. Every Christian has the sacred duty to refrain from iniquity. "Iniquity" here means any behaviour that is contrary to the thoughts of God. A similar injunction was given to the faithful in Thessalonica:

"Hold aloof from every form of wickedness" (1 Thess. 5:22).

No Christian, therefore, can allow himself to live in sin and thereby lull himself into a supposed security! On the one hand, the Holy Scriptures teach us about the positive fruits of the life of faith, but on the other hand it warns every Christian against sin. This refutes the accusation that the faithful are tempted to be careless in the face of sin when they are told that they cannot lose their security and certainty of salvation.

Let us just take the following Bible passages. James points out the connection between faith and works:

"What is the profit, my brethren, if any one say he have faith but have not works? ... So also faith, if it have not works, is dead by itself" (Jas. 2:14–17).

So if someone says he believes in the Lord Jesus, he has to prove it in his life. Paul also points out the indissoluble connection between faith and joyful confession:

"With the heart is believed to righteousness, and with the mouth confession made to salvation" (Rom. 10:10) [1] .

And why is this so? Because the Christian has received new, divine life, through faith, and this cannot stay hidden. Paul summarizes this in these words:

"For we are his [God's] workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has before prepared that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

According to the Bible, then, there is no real faith without it also being evident in works and words.

Once again, whoever says that the proclamation of the certainty of salvation leads to carelessness in the face of sin is not standing on the ground of the Word of God!

The New Testament gives every believer complete certainty, but at the same time warns against any carelessness in thinking and doing. We will not find a single passage that indicates that a redeemed person can be lost, but neither will we find one that says that a path of sin leads to glory in the end!

When the believers in Philippi are called upon by the apostle Paul to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12), this does not mean that they could contribute anything to the salvation of their souls. We have seen that this is impossible and also unnecessary, because God has done everything perfectly for us in Christ. By "salvation" here Paul means the liberation and deliverance from all difficulties and temptations on the way to the end of our path at the coming of the Lord. The Philippians were to keep this goal in mind. Now, when Paul was no longer with them, and they were in some ways left to their own devices, they were reminded that they were in constant danger of falling into sin. However, they were not to have been afraid of getting lost, but rather of the flesh that dwelt within them and its activities. On the other hand, they were given to know:

"For it is God who works in you both the willing and the working according to his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

These are encouraging words. Every redeemed person may have the certainty: 'I am the property of the Lord, my sins are forgiven, I have received eternal life and the Holy Spirit, and God is concerned about me. He is the source of strength that enables me to fulfil my responsibility as a Christian and to stand separate from iniquity.'

If....

This brings us to the point where it is necessary to take a closer look at some Bible passages which are often cited as "proof" that a believer can be lost after all if he does not persevere in faith and live accordingly. These may be called the "if" clauses of the New Testament. But let us remember what we have just established. In the New Testament the Christian is viewed from two sides: from God's eternal perspective, salvation is certain; but the authenticity of the profession of Christ is tested and recognized by a life in accordance with the Word of God. Some of these "if" clauses (and there are also others besides these) will now be briefly explained.

"If you live according to flesh, you are about to die; but if, by the Spirit, you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:13).

In the letter to the Romans we find the perfection of justification by faith and its wonderful, eternally certain consequences. (See the chapter on Justification). How then could the apostle Paul write such words to the believers in Rome? To show them that salvation ultimately depends on our walk? Surely such a conclusion is wrong. A redeemed person has received new life, which is here called "spirit", and furthermore the Holy Spirit dwells in him as a Person (v. 9–10).

This enables him to live a life pleasing to God. This is the divine side. There is nothing lacking.

But now comes the human side of responsibility. When someone who professes to be a Christian “lives according to flesh”, that is, practically reveals the characteristics of a person who is not born again, God does not tell him: ‘Don’t worry, you will reach your goal after all!’ On the contrary, it says: “If you live according to flesh, you are about to die”! The end of a path according to the flesh is not only bodily death, but the “second death”, eternal damnation (see Rev. 20:14). Nowhere in God’s Word does one find that a life of sin ends in glory. God not only shows us grace, but He also places us under corresponding responsibility. The following example may illustrate this: A father sees his child carelessly playing on the edge of a dangerous body of water and warns him with the words, ‘If you fall in the water, you will drown!’ But he does not tell him that if he falls in, he will do everything he can to save him!

“...heirs of God, and Christ’s joint heirs; if indeed we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified with him” (Romans 8:17).

Doesn’t this verse make glory with Christ in heaven dependent on our suffering on earth? No. But rather, we are reminded here of the biblical principle that suffering comes before glory (see verse 18; Acts 14:22; 1 Pet. 5:10). Not only some but all who are redeemed will be glorified with Christ in heaven, but the way there is through suffering. The future glorification of all the redeemed is so certain for God that Paul can write a little later: “...but whom he has justified, these also he has glorified” (v. 30).

“And you ... has [he] reconciled ... to present you holy and unblameable and irreproachable before [him], if indeed you abide in the faith founded and firm, and not moved away from the hope of the glad tidings” (Colossians 1:21–23).

We could not contribute to reconciliation and its consequences, because it is God’s work. (See the chapter on Reconciliation). But in the last part of the sentence we are seen as people responsible before God, and as such we should remain firm and not be moved away from the hope of the gospel. The Lord knows those who are His, but He does not always let us know with certainty who the true believers are among those who profess to belong to Jesus. Hence the warning against letting go of the hope of the gospel. “Faith” here is the good faith, the truth of salvation, in other words what we believe. That means holding on to it. We are not warned here, then, against an ‘apostasy of the faithful’, but are called upon to let our profession of Christ be confirmed by our walk (cf. 1 Cor. 15:2; Heb. 3:6, 14).

“The word is faithful; for if we have died together with him, we will also live together; if we endure, we will also reign together; if we deny, he also will deny us; if we are unfaithful – he abides faithful, for he cannot deny himself.” (2 Timothy 2:11–13).

Here, in several “if” clauses, very different things are said. The first “if” refers to two facts of salvation that have nothing to do with our practical life as Christians. Everyone who died with Christ in faith will also live with Him eternally (cf. Rom. 6:5, 8). The second “if” indicates (similarly to Romans 8:17, discussed above) the inevitable consequence of perseverance in view of our future reign with Christ. However, the third clause “if we deny” is a warning to someone who makes it clear through word and deed that he fundamentally does not want anything more to do

with Christ; it says that Christ will also deny him. This refers to people who have professed to believe on the Lord but who have never possessed a living relationship with Him, not to someone like Peter – otherwise so faithful – who denied being His disciple but later sincerely repented of this. The last “if” clause, on the other hand, says that our practical failures do not prevent Him from bringing to fruition all thoughts of His love for us. We are dependent on Him, but He is not dependent on us!

The condition set by the “if” never refers to salvation, but always to our behaviour on the way to glory. Only a truly redeemed person can fulfil the condition, but an unbeliever cannot, even if he outwardly professes Christianity. God’s Word, on the other hand, gives us various examples of the restoration of a believer who falls into sin and repents.

There is another group of “if” clauses that contain a profession of faith without the person in question having divine life. The First Epistle of John contains several statements such as this:

“If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not practise the truth” (1 John 1:6, cf 8, 10; 4:20).

In the same vein, James asked:

“What is the profit, my brethren, if any one say he have faith but have not works?” (Jas. 2:14).

In those who speak in this way, there is only an empty profession that contradicts their way of life. Such a pious profession has no value. It leads to eternal ruin.

Kept guarded by the power of God through faith

Reading the previous passages, a fearful child of God might come to the conclusion: ‘I fail so often in my life of faith, falling into the same sins and temptations over and over again, that I wonder whether I am really saved at all.’

We have already quoted James who did not doubt the authenticity of his faith, although he had to confess: “We all often offend.” He knew the confession of sin as a child of God, the Father’s forgiveness, and he also knew of His helping grace. Now let us take a few more encouraging passages from the New Testament on this subject.

Paul writes to the Corinthians:

“Awaiting the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall also confirm you to the end, unimpeachable in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:7–8).

The Lord does not want to make us fearful. On the contrary: He who loved us and gave Himself for us will secure us to the end. He does not demand anything from us for which He does not also give us the ability and the strength to carry out, and He will do so until the end. Without Him we can do nothing, but He comes to our aid in

our weakness and protects us so that we may be blameless in that day, when He will appear in glory on earth and we will be revealed with Him (and of course also at His previous coming at the Rapture: 1 Thess. 5:24).

Similarly, in Philippians it says:

"Having confidence of this very thing, that he who has begun in you a good work will complete it unto Jesus Christ's day" (Philippians 1:6).

Again, it is not a question of our steadfastness, but of the work of God in our souls. He began this work through new birth, and He will complete it. Although weakness and even sin may occur in our life of faith, He still completes His good work in us!

Also in we are encouraged by looking to our Lord:

"But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and keep you from evil" (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

The Lord Jesus is faithful and true to His Father, to Himself and to us. We are often shaky and unstable, but He will strengthen us and keep us from evil.

"I do not demand that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them out of evil" (John 17:15). [see also 1 Peter 5:10]

There is another encouraging passage:

"... you, who are kept guarded by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." (1 Peter 1:5).

The previous verse speaks of the "incorruptible and undefiled and unfading inheritance, reserved in the heavens for you". Not only is our future heavenly inheritance untouchable, but we ourselves are also preserved by God's power. The power of God is not revealed visibly, but to our faith. God does not remove all difficulties, but He gives us the strength to overcome them in faith and makes sure that our faith does not fail. The Lord Jesus said to Peter:

"But I have besought for you that your faith fail not" (Luke 22:32).

He will also not allow temptations to exceed our spiritual strength, but will make sure that we can bear them in faith (1 Cor. 10:13). For the sake of completeness, it should be added that "salvation" in 1 Peter 1:5 does not mean the salvation of the soul, as in verse 9, which we already possess ('carry away'), but the final and complete salvation of body, soul and spirit at the rapture of the believers (see Phil. 3:20f.; 1 Thess. 5:23).

Finally, let us take a look at the concluding words of the Epistle of Jude:

"But to him that is able to keep you without stumbling, and to set you with exultation blameless before his glory, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, might, and authority, from before the whole age, and now, and

to all the ages. Amen” (Jude v. 24-25).

Jude writes in his letter of terrible attacks on the faithful by the enemy. Yet he does not doubt in the least their eternal safety. In the first verse he reminds them that they are beloved in God the Father and are preserved in Jesus Christ. He now concludes with the adoration of Him who is able and willing to keep us in faith during our life on earth without stumbling and to present us before Him in glory with unspeakable joy in eternal perfection.

Do these passages not show us that, despite our weakness or our failure in our life of faith, we do not need to doubt that we will reach our goal? The grace of our God is so great that He has not only given us eternal salvation, but He also strengthens and preserves us on the often difficult path to the heavenly goal!

Summary

From all that we have noted so far on the subject of ‘certainty of salvation’, two things emerge.

- First: Not only the redemptive work of Christ but also the salvation of the sinner based on it is something absolutely perfect. Nothing and no one can snatch the redeemed from His hand on account of the blood of Christ. He will preserve them all until the glorious end.
- Secondly, everyone who professes Christ, that is, everyone who calls himself a Christian, is under the responsibility of living according to his profession.

A Christian may therefore rest completely in the fact that he is eternally secure by faith in Christ and His work, but the Lord Jesus expects him to live in accordance with it. Nowhere does the Word of God say that a Christian has a licence to sin – on the contrary: if someone claims such a thing, he must seriously doubt his conversion. According to Scripture, a path of sin ends in eternal perdition.

We must never separate the two biblical aspects of the perfect grace of God in the redemption of sinners and personal responsibility in the life of everyone who calls himself a Christian, but we must distinguish between them. We can compare them to the two parallel tracks of a railway line: only when both are properly aligned can the train run on them. So we must always keep the two sides of grace and responsibility in their place if we are to stand on the firm foundation of the Holy Scriptures. Unfortunately, many beloved children of God do not see it that way. In a way, they separate the ‘track of responsibility’ from the ‘track of grace’ and thus come to the conclusion that a redeemed person can miss the goal and be lost forever. But this is impossible.

No. Footnotes of last chapter

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- [1] A confession of Christ which is not the result of faith, on the other hand, has no value whatsoever (see the section “If ...” p. 58).

What about the other Bible verses?

After having first looked at the 'track of grace' in the first part and then at the 'track of responsibility', we will now consider the other Bible passages which cause the greatest trouble and which even cause fear for many children of God. They all concern the second 'track' of responsibility, that is, our profession. We will consider these passages in the order in which they appear in the New Testament.

But if the salt has lost its taste (Matt. 5:13)

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt have become insipid, with what will it be salted? It is no longer fit for anything but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot by men." (cf. Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34).

These words are part of the Sermon on the Mount, in which the Lord Jesus, as the promised King of Israel, sets forth the principles of His Kingdom. His words also contain messages that are important for us, but we must not ignore the context in which they are set. In Matthew 5:13 the Lord Jesus calls His disciples "the salt of the earth". Salt here is an image of the preserving and sanctifying influence that is to proceed from those who profess Him as their Lord in the Kingdom of God. The Lord Jesus continues: "But if the salt have become insipid, with what will it be salted? It is no longer fit for anything but to be cast out and to be trodden under foot by men." In ancient times, salt was not as pure as it is today. If stored inappropriately for a long time, the salt could be leached out, leaving only the worthless components that were thrown out and carelessly trampled on. So Jerusalem, the city that rejected its own king, was trampled underfoot by the nations (Luke 21:24), and also Christianity, which has possessed the message of the gospel for centuries, will fall away from God and be judged (2 Thess. 2:3; Rev. 18:4–8).

As the context shows, the question here is not whether a person who has been born again can be lost or not. It is a matter of the responsibility of those who call themselves disciples of Jesus. When Peter denied His Lord, he was not a witness for Him. But was he lost because of this? However, it is said of the nominal Christians of the last days that they "have a form of piety, but denying the power of it" (2 Tim. 3:5). Such people are meant here.

I never knew you (Matt. 7:23)

"Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of the heavens, but he that does the will of my Father who is in the heavens. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied through your name, and through your name cast out demons, and through your name done many works of power? And then will I avow unto them, I never knew you. Depart from me, workers of lawlessness."

Matthew 7:21–23 also belongs to the Sermon on the Mount. Here it refers to people who profess Jesus as their Lord, but do not do the will of the Father who is in heaven. They know and call on the name of the Lord Jesus, they lead a religious life, and yet they are deceived, or even deceivers, who will be lost forever. But many

Bible readers may ask, can such unbelieving people prophesy in the name of the Lord Jesus, cast out demons and do miracles? Or: Can people who do great things in the name of Christ be lost forever?

The Lord Jesus had already warned against false prophets in the preceding passage (Matt. 7:15–20). Among His own disciples, to whom He gave the power to cast out unclean spirits, there was also the traitor Judas! Paul warns against “false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And is it not wonderful, because Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. It is no great thing therefore if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (2 Cor. 11:13–15). Demonic forces under a cloak of Christianity still exist today (cf. Matt. 12:27; Acts 19:13ff.).

Such people will one day hear the words of the Lord at the last judgment before the great white throne: “I never knew you. Depart from me, workers of lawlessness.” By their false profession they have feigned a closeness to Christ in their lives, although they were inwardly far from Him. Then they will receive their righteous punishment and be eternally separated from Him. It is quite clear that believers cannot be apostates, only unbelievers. Otherwise the Lord Jesus would have to say to them: ‘I knew you once, but I do not know you now!’ But no, unlike His sheep, the people who belong to Him, He never knew them (cf. John 10:14). They are spiritually dead professors who do not possess eternal life.

The blasphemy against the Spirit (Mt 12:31)

“Every sin and injurious speaking will be forgiven to men, but speaking injuriously of the Spirit will not be forgiven to men” (cf. Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10).

Many believers find themselves in deep inner turmoil and distress because they believe they have committed a ‘sin against the Holy Spirit’. But is not every sin directed against God and therefore also against the Holy Spirit, the Son and the Father? Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit and God, but were they lost because of this (Acts 5:3–4)? This shows us how important it is to adhere exactly to the God-given language of the Holy Scriptures. Matthew 12:31 does not speak of a sin against the Holy Spirit, but of ‘blasphemy (speaking injuriously) against the Spirit’ (cf. Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10).

This sin could only be committed while the Lord Jesus was living on earth. The Pharisees accused Him who, by the Spirit of God, cast out demons: “This man does not cast out demons, but by Beelzebub, prince of demons” (cf. Mt 12:24). Of Him – whom God “anointed ... with the Holy Spirit and with power; who went through all quarters doing good, and healing all that were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:38) – these despisers claimed that He was in league with the devil! This was a direct blasphemy against the Holy Spirit who worked in the Son of Man. It was the highest stage of His rejection as the Messiah of Israel and led to eternal damnation.

The blasphemy of the Spirit cannot be carried over to the present day, because no Christian is perfectly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit at all times. Even true

Christians can actually give cause for blasphemy through their behaviour when they fall into sin and thereby dishonour the name of God (see 2 Cor. 6:3; 1 Tim. 6:1). Negative utterances about a Christian or a servant of Christ must therefore never be called blasphemy against the Spirit. The Lord Jesus, however, was completely sinless. To impute to Him an alliance with the devil was a unique sin that could not be transferred in any other way, namely 'blasphemy of the Spirit'.

Nor is this a sin of true believers, but of declared enemies of Christ who did not want to believe in Him under any circumstances. As we have seen with the man in 1 Corinthians 5, God can and will forgive even the most terrible sins of His children if they sincerely repent of them. Although they can be severely chastised by Him for this and come under the discipline of the assembly, His promise also applies here: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and clean us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Endure to the end (Matt 10:22; 24:13)

In Matthew 10:22 and 24:13, the Lord Jesus says to His disciples:

"But he that has endured to the end, he will be saved."

From these words, the conclusion is drawn: He who does not persevere in faith until the end of his life will be lost forever. But that is not what this is about. Let us remember the principles of the interpretation of the Word of God mentioned at the beginning: Every Bible passage can only be understood correctly in its context. Chapters 24 and 25 of the Gospel of Matthew contain the Lord's so-called "end-time discourse", in which He speaks about the future of the Jewish people (ch. 24:4–44), of Christianity (ch. 24:45 – 25:30), and of the nations (ch. 25:31–46), in view of the imminent destruction of the temple in Jerusalem (70 AD).

Our verse is in the passage about the Jewish people in the time of tribulation after the rapture of believers. So this is not about Christians. In those days not only general trials will come, but also direct persecution of the Jews from outside and hatred of one another (v. 9–10). False prophets will appear and deceive many, and lawlessness will increase to such an extent that the love of a large part of the people will grow cold (v. 11–13). Here the Lord obviously speaks – albeit in very general terms – of the time of Antichrist, which falls during the last three and a half years of this period. However, those Jews who do not allow themselves to be influenced by all these horrors, but faithfully persevere in the tribulation until the end, will be recognized as His people at the appearance of the Lord (cf. Rom. 11:16; Rev. 14:1–5). Those who persevere, then, are the faithful Jews in contrast to the "many", that is to say the unbelieving Jews, whose love is only an emotional one and will eventually grow cold, because they are not born again at all. The salvation of those who persevere takes place through their deliverance at the appearing of Christ on earth. The context is similar in chapter 10:22. Both passages cannot simply be generalized and transferred to Christians.

True and false disciples (John 6:66; 8:31; 15:2, 6)

"From that time many of his disciples went away back and walked no more with

him" (John 6:66).

Here we must first understand what is meant by a disciple in biblical language. "Disciple" is not the same as "child of God". The Greek word *mathetes* means 'disciple, apprentice, follower'. It says nothing in itself about the salvation of the soul, but refers to (outwardly recognizable) discipleship. Accordingly, wherever discipleship is mentioned in the New Testament, the focus is on practical discipleship, that is, the side of our responsibility. "Thus every one of you who forsakes not all that is his own cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33). A true disciple is able and willing to do this because he has new life, whereas a false disciple is not able to in the long run.

We have already seen the difference between false and true profession on several occasions. A disciple is someone who professes to follow Christ. By his way of life you can tell whether he is a true or a false disciple. In the passage above, those who no longer wanted to walk with the Lord Jesus and went back were false disciples (see John 6:64). They followed Him for a while, but when His demands became too high for them, they abandoned Him. He had said that only those who eat His flesh and drink His blood, that is, who believe in His work of redemption, have eternal life (John 6:54). However, that's exactly what they didn't have, and evidently didn't want.

Such cases still exist today. People come to the assembly meetings and for a while they fit in with the Christians because they feel attracted to them in some way. After a while, however, they withdraw, and one has to doubt whether their 'discipleship' was genuine.

But when the Lord Jesus asked the twelve apostles,

"Will you also go away?", Peter replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of life eternal; and we have believed and known that you are the holy one of God" (John 6:67–69).

Eleven of them were true disciples because they really believed in Him and loved His Word. In John 8:31, the Lord Jesus mentions a sign of true disciples:

"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples" (John 8:31).

True discipleship of the Lord is thus manifested in holding fast to His Word.

In addition, the branches on the vine in John 15 speak of disciples, not of children of God. The theme is not eternal life, invisible in itself, for example in chapter 10 with the shepherd and the sheep, but the visible fruit. Therefore, verse 2 does not say: 'Every branch in me that no longer bears fruit', but: "not bearing fruit", that is, it has never borne fruit and is therefore a picture of a false disciple, just like the person in verse 6 who does not remain in Christ. Here 'abiding' is the biblical expression for an inner life-connection with the Son of God. When John speaks of our relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, he does not speak of a temporary abiding but only a permanent one (cf. John 5:38; 6:56; 14:10, 17; 1 John 2:27; 3:15, etc.).

To be cut away (Rom. 11:22)

***"For if God did not spare the natural branches, he may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but towards you, goodness, if you continue in his goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off "* (Rom 11:21-22).**

The words "he spare not you either" and "otherwise you also will be cut away" in Romans 11:20– 22 have caused many children of God to feel insecure. 'Will I perhaps also be cut out of the olive tree if I do not persevere in my faith?' some have anxiously asked themselves. But again with these words the context must be taken into account. In Romans 9– 11, God gives us a glimpse of the history and future of the people of Israel in their relationship to Christianity. Chapter 11 is about whether or not Israel has been rejected by God forever because of its rejection of Christ. The olive tree in verses 16– 24 represents a group of people who receive special favour (and responsibilities) from God on earth, the root of which is the patriarch Abraham (v. 16; cf. Gen. 12:2, 3). Abraham received far-reaching promises from God and is not only the physical ancestor of Israel, but also the spiritual father of all believers of the present time (cf. ch. 4:16). The original branches of this olive tree were therefore the descendants of Abraham, the children of Israel, but only up to the time when they rejected the Lord Jesus as their Messiah. Then they were broken out and the nations converted to Christianity were grafted in in their place (the "wild olive tree"). In the present time, therefore, Christendom is the bearer of blessings.

But after the rapture of the believers, when that which professes to be Christian but does not remain in the goodness of God falls away from Him (2 Thess. 2:3), He will re- establish His relations with Israel. Then the wild branches (the nominal Christians) will be cut out because of their unbelief, and the natural branches (the believing Jews) will be grafted back into their own olive tree. The pronouns "you" and "they" here are not to be understood individually, but collectively. By "they" the people of Israel is meant, and by "you" the whole of Christendom. The focus here is not on any individual person, but on the history and future of Christianity and the people of Israel, in each case seen as a whole. The nominal Christians who will fall away from God are no more believers than the Jews who have rejected the Lord Jesus. So, only unbelievers are cut out, never believers.

Causing the weak to perish (1 Cor. 8:11)

"And the weak one, the brother for whose sake Christ died, will perish through your knowledge" (1 Cor. 8:11).

Children of God should be considerate of each other and not offend one another. The believers in Corinth paid no attention to this. Some of them, in their supposed freedom, went so far as to participate in sacrificial meals in an idol temple. They did not do this for religious reasons, but to have a good meal of meat. A weak brother, in whose eyes it was a sin to enter an idol temple at all, for whatever reason, could be influenced to imitate this and be drawn into something that his conscience forbade him to do, because he saw in it a connection with idolatry. Thus, knowledge without love leads to action without a sense of responsibility for others, especially

weak believers. These are thereby tempted to do something that they consider sinful.

Despite the harsh wording, the question here is not whether a child of God can be lost, but the seriousness of the responsibility borne by someone who tempts a spiritually weak believer to sin. Anyone who puts poison in another's food is considered a murderer, even if the other person does not die from it! This is the meaning of the words: "And the weak one, the brother for whose sake Christ died, will perish through your knowledge" (1 Cor. 8:11). The fact that the Lord will restore such a believer is not mentioned here, so as not to diminish the responsibility of the other.

To be rejected (1 Cor. 9:27)

"Lest after having preached to others, I should be myself rejected" (1 Cor. 9:27).

The words are written, as in the point just discussed, in a section that deals with the proper use and the abuse of privileges that God has given to His own (1 Cor. 8:1 – 11:1). Instead of addressing a direct exhortation to the Corinthians, Paul – as he so often does – sets himself as an example. In contrast to them, who did not want to acknowledge the seriousness of their responsibility, he lived in constant self-denial in order to maintain and develop his spiritual strength. He was not at all afraid of being lost but was completely sure of his eternal salvation, as many passages in his letters prove (e.g. Phil. 1:21, 23; 2 Tim. 1:12).

On the other hand, however, it is conceivable that someone might preach all his life and yet be eternally lost. What Paul is presenting here in his own person is again the inseparability of grace and responsibility. Anyone who professes that he has been saved by grace also has the responsibility to live accordingly. A mere profession is not enough; it leads to eternal ruin.

Believing in vain (1 Cor. 15:2,14,17)

"By which also you saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you – unless you believed in vain" (1 Cor. 15:2).

In the assembly at Corinth false teachers had appeared who basically denied the possibility of the resurrection. Paul deals with this serious false teaching in 1 Corinthians 15. The Christian faith is based not only on the death, but also on the resurrection of Christ. Whoever denies this cannot be a Christian in the sense of the Holy Scriptures. Therefore Paul first of all cites witnesses to the resurrection of the Lord (v. 5–11). From verse 12 onwards he lists seven consequences of denying the resurrection. These include that our faith is vain or void (v. 14, 17). This means that only under the false assumption that there is no resurrection and therefore no resurrection of Christ, one's faith is in vain! We see that these verses are not about a futile struggle in faith, but about the consequence of a false doctrine.

If there is no resurrection of the dead then, first of all, Christ cannot be resurrected either (v.13)! But if Christ is not raised then, secondly, the preaching is meaningless, and accordingly, thirdly, so is the faith of those who have accepted it (v.14). The

Corinthians were able to determine in their own hearts and lives whether they had believed a hollow and empty preaching, or whether by doing so they had experienced God's power (cf. ch. 2:5). Fourth, the apostles would be false witnesses if they proclaimed the Lord's resurrection when there was no resurrection at all (v.15). At this point Paul repeats his first conclusion from the assertion of the doubters that there is no resurrection of the dead: there is then also no resurrection of Christ either (v. 16)! Fifth, if Christ was not raised, then the Corinthians' faith was meaningless and futile, and they would have no forgiveness of their sins (v.17). If, however, despite faith in the Lord, no forgiveness of sins is received, then sixthly, all those who had already "fallen asleep" in false certainty of faith were also eternally lost (v. 18)! As a seventh conclusion Paul then adds:

"If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are the most miserable of all men" (v. 19).

So if there were no resurrection of the dead, Christianity would be limited to life before death. There would be no forgiveness of sins, no peace with God and no hope for eternity – we would have nothing! Following an empty delusion, we would turn away from the world, only to possess nothing at the end. The biblical faith in the Lord Jesus would therefore be the greatest deception. It would indeed be a 'futile', a "vain" faith.

Falling from grace (Gal. 5:4)

"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4).

The expression "*you have fallen from grace*", which only occurs here in the New Testament, is sometimes cited as proof that a true Christian can be lost. But it certainly does not mean that a believer can lose eternal salvation by committing certain sins. To fall from grace means to move out of the realm of God's grace and into the realm of the law (cf. Rom. 5:2; 1 Pet. 5:12). Whoever, like the recipients of the Epistle to the Galatians, chooses the law of Sinai and the observance of its commandments as a guide for his life of faith, abandons grace as the basis of his relationship with God and is thus "fallen from grace".

Here again we see how important it is to consider the context in order to understand it properly. The believers in Galatia were in the greatest danger of submitting to the Jewish law as the guiding principle of life after they had been saved by faith in the work of Christ. Paul warns them very seriously, but with little success, because the majority of Christians still hold the Ten Commandments as the ideal guideline for life.

The apostasy (2 Thess. 2:3; 1 Tim. 4:1)

"The apostasy [will] have first come, and the man of sin have been revealed, the son of perdition; who opposes and exalts himself on high against all called God, or object of veneration; so that he himself sits down in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God" (2 Thessalonians 2:3–4).

What do these words mean, which at first sight seem to present such a dark prospect? Here we are taken into the time after the rapture of believers. The Thessalonians had been confused by false news and teachings. They had been told that the tribulations they had experienced were a sign that the terrible day of the Lord had dawned (see Joel 1:15). Paul refutes this in this passage.

He reminds the Thessalonians that the next event to be expected for them (and for us!) is the coming of the Lord Jesus for the rapture of believers (the “coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him”; see v.1). No prophecies need to be fulfilled before this event. The Lord has said: “I come quickly!” (Rev. 22:20). The Day of the Lord, which will come with the public appearance of Christ in power and glory for the judgment and establishment of His millennial reign, only takes place afterwards. It is preceded by the time of tribulation and many other events.

When all true believers have been raptured by the Lord into the Father’s house, the coming of the “apostasy” will be the first subsequent event. The remaining nominal Christians will turn away completely from the teachings of the Bible and from God. Every trace of Christianity will be wiped out – especially in Europe, the territory of the coming Roman Empire. That is the apostasy mentioned here. So it is by no means an apostasy of believers, but of people who have only a form of godliness, without being born again. It will be similar with the Jews, for from their midst will arise the man of sin, the son of perdition, that is to say the Antichrist, who will allow himself to be worshipped as God and who will enter into a close alliance with the head of the Roman Empire according to Revelation 13:11–17.

The apostasy mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:1, on the other hand, takes place before that. Here it is not a global apostasy either but only concerns “some”. But they too are not children of God who give up their personal faith, but people who “apostatise”, that is to say, who turn away from the Christian truth, the Christian faith. We will go into this in more detail in the following section.

Shipwreck, depart from, stray (1. Tim. 1:19; 4:1; 6:21)

“Having faith and good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck” (1. Tim. 1:19).

Various verses in the first letter to Timothy are cited as evidence of the possibility of apostasy of believers. In chapter 1:19 there is mention of the “good conscience; which last some having put away, have made shipwreck as to faith”, in chapter 4:1 it says “that in later times some will apostatise (depart from – KJV) from the faith”, and in chapter 6:21 Paul states that some “have missed (strayed from – KJV) the faith”.

Here it depends on what is meant by the word, “faith”. We need to distinguish two main meanings that are important in the New Testament. Firstly, faith is the conviction of faith, of personal trust in God. The eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews in particular gives us examples of this, where the heroes of faith in the Old Testament are characterized by the words: “by faith”. Secondly, faith is what we believe, the truth of salvation, the Christian faith. In Greek, in these cases the article (“the faith”) is usually given, as for example in Jude 20: “building yourselves up on your most holy faith”, but this is not always evident in English (cf. Gal 1:23; Col 2:7).

In the three passages from the first letter of Timothy, it is the second meaning, the good deposit of the faith, that is intended. The people of whom Paul speaks have not thrown their personal faith overboard, but have given up Christian truth partly or completely. Whether such people are saved or lost is another question. To be “shipwrecked” is not the same as being lost. It is the visible result of a journey through life without the right compass. ‘Straying from the faith’ can be understood in a similar way. Here, too, it is about a failure in practical responsibility, with the question remaining open as to whether such a person is saved or not. The issue here is not salvation but walk. The Holy Scriptures never confuse responsibility and grace, as we unfortunately often do to our own detriment.

‘Departing from the faith’, on the other hand, means giving up all Christian truth. There are people who have embraced Christianity as a philosophy or ideology without their conscience having come into the light of God. By professing faith and changing their lives, they have externally embraced Christian truth, but without having repented and without believing in the redemptive work of Christ. One day they turn away again and deny everything. They were never born again as children of God,

“for if they had been of us they would have surely remained with us, but that they might be made manifest that none are of us.”

This is how John judges people whom he calls “antichrists” (1 John 2:19). In this case too, then, we are dealing with unbelieving professors who turn away from biblical truth, not with children of God.

The Epistle to the Hebrews

The Epistle to the Hebrews poses particular difficulties for many. The advocates of the doctrine of the apostasy of believers rely especially on various passages of this letter. They neither consider the character of the letter nor read and interpret the biblical text carefully. We must therefore pay special attention to the passages in question. For this purpose a brief presentation of the background of the letter is essential.

The Hebrews, as the name implies, were Jews in Palestine who had initially converted to Christianity by the thousands (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 21:20). However, they had not yet completely broken with the law and the temple in Jerusalem, as we can see from the Acts of the Apostles in particular. Among them were apparently many followers who, although deeply impressed by the new doctrine, were not really converted. Soon persecutions began on the part of their unbelieving countrymen (Acts 8:1–3; 11:19; 12:1–3; 1 Thess. 2:14; Heb. 10:32–34; 12:4–11). These persecutions were arguably one of the main reasons why the Hebrews had become discouraged and weak (Heb. 5:11; 6:12). Several of them were apparently considering returning to Judaism because they were worse off than before!

This is why we find so many exhortations in this letter to persevere and hold fast to the faith (Heb. 2:1; 3:6, 14; 6:11; 10:23, 35, 36; 13:7). The writer also presents to them on various occasions what it means when someone who, as a Jew, has professed faith in the gospel of Christ and then renounces this faith and returns to

Judaism.

On the other hand, the believers are addressed several times with very encouraging words (Heb. 6:9; 10:32–39). The fact that these exhortations are pronounced precisely after the admonitions shows that the writer is not thinking of believers being lost, but is appealing to the responsibility of believers with appropriate admonitions and warnings.

Hebrews 2:1 Slipping away

“For this reason we should give heed more abundantly to the things we have heard, lest in any way we should slip away” (Hebr. 2:1).

First of all, it is important to see that here (as in most such passages) not an individual, but a whole group of people is addressed (“we” or “you”). The condition of the individual’s heart is not at issue, only that everyone has “heard” something that they must ‘pay attention to’ so that they do not “slip away”. Let us remember that among the Jews who were truly converted there were also unsaved followers. But here no distinction is made between them. All are addressed together because all of them have, by their profession, placed themselves under the same responsibility before God. Whoever pays attention to what is heard will be saved from slipping away. But those who have no life from God can slip away in the face of pressure or persecution. This verse warns us against this: that true believers are meant here is a mere assumption with no basis in the text.

Hebrews 3:12; 6:4–8 Apostasy

“See, brethren, lest there be in any one of you a wicked heart of unbelief, in turning away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12).

The two passages in Hebrews 3:12 and 6:4–8, which have been a cause of distress to many believers, do not refer to true children of God, but to the already mentioned Jewish followers.

The professors living among true Christians are here compared with the unbelieving and disobedient portion of the Israelites in the wilderness. When, under the pressure of persecution, they abandoned their profession of Jesus and returned to Judaism, they also turned away from God, since no one can be justified before Him through works of law (cf. Rom. 3:20). Only such people can be described as having a “wicked heart of unbelief”. The heart of a born-again person, on the other hand, has been purified by God through faith (ch. 3:12; see Acts 15:9). “Turning away from the living God” is a complete turning away from the only true God.

It is the same in Chapter 6. To avoid difficulties by returning to the Jewish religion is an aberration. The law as a “tutor up to Christ” (Gal 3:24), and the parts of the teachings of the Lord Jesus which made reference to it during His earthly life – before the work of redemption – are here called “the word of the beginning of Christ”. As a basis of faith, both belong to the past and must therefore be ‘left’, that is, left behind. Things known to the Jews, such as the repentance from dead works, faith in God, the doctrine of washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the

dead and the eternal judgment, have their place in the Word of God but they do not form the basis of the Christian faith, which presents Christ and His perfect work of redemption to us (v. 1–2). To accept this in faith is “full growth”, and it was the desire of the writer to continue in it (v.3).

Verses 4 to 6 describe people who had experienced all the blessings of Christianity but were not born again and sealed with the Holy Spirit.

“For it is impossible to renew again to repentance those once enlightened, and who have tasted of the heavenly gift, and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God, and the works of power of the age to come, and have fallen away, crucifying for themselves as they do the Son of God, and making a show of him” (Heb. 6:4–6).

These people were “enlightened”, but they had not become “light in the Lord” and “children of light” by faith (cf. John 1:9; Eph. 5:8). They had tasted the glorified Christ as “the heavenly gift”, i.e., they had tasted Him, but they had not believed in Him and His work of redemption, eating, as it were, His flesh and drinking His blood to receive eternal life (see John 6:53). They were “partakers of the Holy Spirit”, that is, they had experienced His activity, but without having been personally “born of the Spirit” or having received Him as a seal and pledge (see John 3:6–8; Eph. 1:13). Finally, they had “tasted the good word of God and the works of power of the age to come” – but we read nothing about them taking it seriously and believing the gospel (see Matt. 7:22; Mark 4:14–20)!

If, in spite of these quite far-reaching experiences – which are by no means to be equated with the new birth and its fruits – they gave up their profession of Christ in order to return to Judaism, then this was apostasy from God. For those who had come to Christianity from the Jewish religion of the law and had come to know its blessings, but without true conversion, and had then fallen away, there was no more repentance, no more grace. Along with Christianity, they also rejected Christ and crucified Him, so to speak, for the second time. We are therefore occupied here with a historically unique situation. For these people, who had rightly given up Judaism and now had wrongly given up Christianity, there was no other course left to them that would bring them salvation.

These apostate Jews must not be put on the same level as Christians who have fallen into sin or even live in sin, however serious this may be. When a child of God makes a hasty misstep or strays from the truth, God’s Word speaks quite differently:

“Brethren, if even a man be taken in some fault, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of meekness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1),

and:

“My brethren, if any one among you err from the truth, and one bring him back, let him know that he that brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (Jas. 5:19–20).

Hebrews 10:26–31 To sin wilfully

The verses from Hebrews 10:26–31, which are often quoted as proof of the possibility of believers being lost, have the same background. Again and again in this Epistle the writer points out the same danger and its eternal consequences.

Chapter 10 deals first of all with being absent from the meetings of believers, often the first step towards the complete abandonment of the Christian profession (v. 25). Then the author continues:

“For where we sin wilfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains any sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and heat of fire about to devour the adversaries. Any one that has disregarded Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses: of how much worse punishment, think you, will he be judged worthy who has trodden under foot the Son of God, and esteemed the blood of the covenant, by which he has been sanctified, common, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?” (Hebr 10:26–29).

As is evident from the mention of the law of Sinai, Jews who professed the Christian faith are again addressed here. A Jew who had professed to know the value of the sacrifice of Christ, and then gave it up, could not resort to any other sacrifice, nor could the sacrifice of Christ be repeated. For such a person there was no other sacrifice, only the terrible expectation of eternal judgment. Such a professor, who had recognized the truth and left it again, took on the character of an adversary of God.

If everyone who despised the Law of Moses had to die without mercy, what could a Jew expect who had trampled the Son of God underfoot, who had considered the blood of the covenant by which he was outwardly sanctified, that is, separated from God, to be common, and had insulted the Spirit of grace? This was not only disobedience, as bad as it is, but contempt for the grace of God that was revealed in Christ to save the lost. The rejection of Christ’s sacrifice was apostasy from Christianity and is called sinning “wilfully” here. It is on a par with sinning “with a high hand” in the law of Sinai. For such sins, in contrast to sins of “inadvertence”, there was no sacrifice and no forgiveness (cf. Lev. 5:15; Num. 4:15, 30).

The words, “the blood of the covenant by which he has been sanctified”, cause some Bible readers particular difficulty. It is argued that this could only be applicable to believers. But does “sanctified” really always include belief? In Scripture, “sanctify” generally means “to separate for God”. There are indeed passages in which “sanctify” refers to true believers, as in 1 Corinthians 6:11: “but you have been washed, but you have been sanctified, but you have been justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God”, or in 1 Peter 1:2: “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by sanctification of the Spirit ...”.

But often “sanctification” also means that someone is only separated for God in an external way. The best example of this is 1 Corinthians 7:14, where an unbelieving man is “sanctified” by a wife who is converted. He is by no means saved by this, but he has been brought into a relationship and into a sphere where he is outwardly separated from the world and can experience the influence of the life-giving Word of God. Children born into such a marriage are even sanctified from birth, although they too need to be personally converted.

Such external sanctification by the blood of the covenant is spoken of here. Anyone who has taken refuge by faith in the blood of Christ will be eternally sanctified for God, but that is not the point here. It is about the blood as the seal and foundation of the new covenant with the Jewish people. Anyone who considers this to be common – completely despises it – and tramples upon the Son of God and reviles the Holy Spirit (the “Spirit of grace”), can only be an unbeliever.

Hebrews 12:14 Pursuing holiness

“Pursue peace with all, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord” (Hebr. 12:14).

Some Christians read from this verse the demand for a certain degree or level of holiness that must be attained in order to reach the goal of being saved. Through every sin holiness is lost, and one must start again from the beginning. In the original Greek text there is a contrast between this verse and v. 10, which refers to a state of holiness where the nature of God is the subject. Here the subject is ‘being sanctified’, in the sense of practical surrender to God. Even the weakest and most fearful child of God need not be frightened by this admonition but rather be encouraged to continue in practical devotion to God. We also find calls for practical holiness in the life of faith in other places (1 Thess. 4:3; 1 Pet. 1:15). Whoever professes to belong to the Lord Jesus, however, and does not strive for separation from evil and devotion to God, lives in contradiction to his profession. Hence the warning: “without which no one will see the Lord.”

Saved with difficulty (1 Pet. 4:18)

“And if the righteous is difficultly saved, where shall the impious and the sinner appear?” (1 Pet. 4:18).

The difficulty of this verse is increased by the fact that some translations have the rendering ‘scarcely’ or ‘barely’ instead of the word “difficultly”. The Greek word *molis* thus translated is a derivative of *molos*: ‘work, toil, effort, strife’. Some translations of the Bible do indeed give the impression that salvation is on a knife edge and that there would not much that would have to happen for a believer to be lost. But that is not the meaning of this expression. It intends rather to tell us that God uses great effort to bring us as believers to His end-point. But He will get us there because He does not let go of His own. Salvation here – as it is usually the case with Peter – is not the salvation of the soul, but the complete salvation of spirit, soul and body at the coming of the Lord Jesus.

Satan uses everything in his power to attack believers in order to rob them of the power of their testimony and the joy of their salvation. The only thing he cannot do is to snatch them from the hand of God (John 10:29; Rom. 8:39). But how often he succeeds in bringing down children of God! Then he can accuse them before God as the “accuser of [the] brethren” (Rev. 12:10; Zech. 3:1–5). But the Lord Jesus as our “patron (advocate) with the Father” intercedes on our behalf and restores us when we have sinned (1 John 2:1). It is true that the Father must often chastise us, but everything works for good to those who love God. What trouble God has with His own until He has brought them safely to their destination! This is what is meant

by the words: "If the righteous is difficultly saved ...". The words should not sow any doubts, but on the contrary they emphasize the security of the redeemed in spite of all difficulties!

Deny the Lord (2 Pet. 2:1)

"But there were false prophets also among the people, as there will be also among you false teachers, who will bring in by the bye destructive heresies, and deny the master that bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction" (2 Pet. 2:1).

On the basis of this verse it is asserted: 'This clearly states that someone who has been bought by Christ can be lost.' But Scripture does not contradict itself! The 'buying', which in other passages is certainly used for the salvation of lost sinners (1 Cor. 6:20; Rev. 5:9), refers here to the finished sacrificial work of the Lord Jesus. By this He has purchased the right to the whole of creation, including human beings, but this does not mean that all will be redeemed. What 'buying' means is shown by the parable of the treasure in the field in Matthew 13:44. In order to possess the "treasure", which represents those truly redeemed, the merchant buys the "field", symbolic of the whole world. But this does not at all mean that the whole world is saved!

The Lord Jesus is therefore not called Lord in relation to the false teachers mentioned here, but merely "master". This indicates His absolute authority but not a personal relationship of faith. Further, we search in vain here for the possessive pronoun 'your' (as if it were to say 'your Master'). They have no relationship with Him at all. He is not 'their Lord' and Saviour, but only "the master", and that is basically what He is for all people.

The false teachers, who are compared with the false prophets amongst the people of Israel, are therefore without any doubt unbelievers who have no living relationship with Christ, but who call themselves Christians and even act as teachers. But in their teachings they deny the Lord Jesus as the Son of God and Saviour of the world and show that they are far from Him.

The dog has turned back to his own vomit (2 Pet. 2:20–22)

"For if after having escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, again entangled, they are subdued by these, their last state is worse than the first. For it were better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. But that word of the true proverb has happened to them: The dog has turned back to his own vomit; and, The washed sow to her rolling in mud" (2 Pet. 2:20–22).

These verses form the end of a passage that begins with the warning against the false teachers just discussed. Terrible things are said about their behaviour in the intervening verses. It is quite clear that they must be unbelievers, especially since it is expressly stated in contrast to them that "the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of trial" (v. 9).

In the verses of the Epistle to the Hebrews that have already been dealt with, we have also seen 'professors' or 'followers' who had experienced many things, but had never possessed true faith. Here it is not much different. We read of the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and of the way of righteousness, but not a word that these people really repented and believed in the Lord Jesus.

At the conclusion two images are used to describe a returning to sin, which are probably taken from common proverbs, but in the context of the Word of God they contain a particularly serious meaning. Peter is not speaking here of "sheep" as the Lord Jesus does in John 10, but of a "dog" and a "sow". Now we know from the Old and New Testaments that these two kinds of animal were unclean to Israel, and that they also have a clearly negative meaning in a figurative spiritual sense (see Lev. 11:7; Deut. 23:18; Matt. 7:6; Phil. 3:2; Rev. 22:15). They are pictures of unbelieving people. They may have been deeply impressed by Christian doctrine and practice for a while, but then they turned away again. Although they had seen and perhaps understood how terrible sin is in God's eyes, they did not repent but turned away after a certain time to be lost forever! Hence the harsh words, which are not meant for stumbling children of God, but for Christian professors without true faith.

Sin unto death (1 John 5:16)

"If any one see his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he will ask, and he will give him life, for those that do not sin unto death. There is a sin to death: I do not say of that that he should make a request" (1 John 5:16).

Since it says in many translations: "There is a sin to death", it is believed that a certain sin is meant here that cannot be forgiven but leads to eternal damnation.

As the context shows, it is a matter of brotherly intercession for a Christian who has sinned and is therefore chastised by God (cf. Jas. 5:15–16). The death mentioned here is not eternal damnation, but bodily death. We have seen that the salvation of believers is certain. But if a believer sins, God, in His holiness and righteousness, can chastise him for it without calling into question his eternal salvation in the least.

Two examples in the New Testament may illustrate this. In Corinth, many were "weak and infirm", and a good number of them had "fallen asleep", i.e. died (1 Cor. 11:30). They had so dishonoured God by their behaviour at the Lord's supper that He had called them away from the earth. Ananias and Sapphira, in the bright beginning of the assembly, had publicly lied to God and His Holy Spirit and therefore died on the spot (Acts 5:1–11). In the case of the believers in Corinth, it is explicitly added that the sicknesses and deaths were a punishment because they had not judged themselves. They were chastened by the Lord so that they would not be condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:32). This makes it quite clear that they really were true believers. In the case of Ananias and Sapphira this is not stated so clearly, but there is no reason to doubt that they too were believers.

So the "sin to death" does not mean a particular sin that cannot be forgiven and leads to eternal damnation. In Corinth it was a matter of dishonourable behaviour at the Lord's supper, and in Ananias and Sapphira's case it was a lie. When John

writes: "There is a sin to death", then in principle it could well be any sin, which under certain circumstances in which God is seriously dishonoured, that could lead to bodily death. To recognize this and to know that in such a case no intercession should take place, the Holy Spirit can make clear to a spiritual and sober Christian.

That God our Father does not forgive certain sins of His beloved children even if they are sincerely confessed is a thought that is completely contrary to the teaching of Scripture. The blasphemy of the Spirit, on the other hand, which cannot be forgiven, was a sin committed by unbelieving enemies of the Lord Jesus (see the chapter, 'Blasphemy of the Spirit'). Every sinner who comes to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith receives eternal forgiveness of all his sins, and every child of God who has sinned and confesses this is granted perfect forgiveness by God the Father: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and clean us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9; see the chapter, 'Forgiveness').

Be faithful unto death... hold fast what you have (Rev. 2:10; 3:11)

"Be faithful unto death, and I will give to you the crown of life", (Rev. 2:10)

"hold fast what you have, that no one take your crown", (Rev. 3:11)

Through these words many anxious souls have been troubled, because they have deduced that a Christian is able to lose salvation in Christ. But is that what it says here? Actually, a crown is a reward as other passages show (2 Tim. 4:8; Jas. 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4). It expresses the Lord's appreciation for faithfulness in the life of faith and in service to Him. Now while it is possible to lose the reward if one is not faithful, it is something quite different than losing eternal life! A true believer will be saved, even if it is "as through the fire" (1 Cor. 3:15). The exhortations to be faithful and to hold fast, therefore, are not warnings about the loss of eternal life, but appeals to the responsibility of Christians, and the crown is the reward to be received by the one who heeds the exhortation.

Nor must we forget, when considering the seven letters, that they are not addressed to individual believers, but to entire assemblies, each of which is represented by the "angel of the assembly".

The book of life (Rev. 3:5)

"He that overcomes, he will be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life" (Rev. 3:5).

This verse from the letter to Sardis does not address the whole assembly, but only the "overcomers". The promise is made to them that their name will not be erased from the book of life. Is it correct to conclude from this that a child of God who does not overcome can be erased from the book of life and so be lost?

The "book of life" appears not only in this chapter of Revelation, but also in chapters 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15 and 21:27. There is no reason to see different books here. In all cases, it is the same divinely perfect 'register' in which there are no changes. [1] In it are listed the elect of the Lord who believe in Him as the slain Lamb, whether now

or in future epochs of salvation. Nowhere is there any mention of anyone actually being wiped out of this book. Therefore the conclusion drawn from the above verse, that someone could be blotted out, is wrong. Whoever is written once in this book always remains in it (cf. Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3). The promise of the Lord Jesus to those who overcome is an encouragement to all those who are His, who may be 'written off' by the world, but can never be erased from the book of life!

But there are people who are not recorded in the book of life. These are those who "dwell upon the earth" (Rev. 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10 twice; 13:8, 14 twice; 17:2, 8), and in Revelation this always means unbelievers who, in contrast to the faithful "have their tabernacle in the heaven" (Rev. 13:6), do not have a heavenly home, and are eternally lost (Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 20:15).

The New Testament "book of life" must not be confused with the various books mentioned in the Old Testament, such as the book of God (Ex. 32:32–33; Ps. 139:16) and the book of life (Ps. 69:29). These books deal with Israel, the earthly people of God, and the thoughts associated with them cannot be transferred to the New Testament period (see also Isa. 4:3; Dan. 12:1). Apparently all members of God's earthly people were recorded in this book or these books, but only those who really believed in the God of Israel remained in it. Here there was definitely a 'blotting out'. But in the verse from Revelation 3:5 quoted above, the Lord Jesus says exactly the opposite: "I will not blot His name out of the book of life", just as in John 10:28: "and they will never perish".

I am about to spew you out of my mouth (Rev. 3:16)

"Thus because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spew you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:16).

Again, this is not a warning from the Lord Jesus to a single believer, but to the angel of the assembly in Laodicea, who stands before Him on behalf of the whole assembly. The seven assemblies also prophetically represent, as "seven candlesticks", various states of the testimony of Christianity on earth, at the end of which is Laodicea. As "candlesticks" for the Lord Jesus, they are judged by Him accordingly.

Without going into too much detail, it can be said that the assembly at Laodicea is in a state of being aware of that which was emphasized as praiseworthy in the previous letter to Philadelphia, but despises and spurns it. There they kept the word of the Lord, did not deny His name and waited for His coming. Where all this is lacking and one is only concerned with oneself and one's supposed wealth instead of the Lord, one is in danger of falling into the terrible state that the Scriptures show us here. Here there is no real testimony for the Lord Jesus any more, and so He will spew it out of His mouth as something for which one feels only disgust and revulsion.

So we are not concerned here with temporal (and still less with an eternal) judgment on individual believers, but with the condemnation of a state of corporate Christian testimony to the Lord. The Lord does not spew people out, but in this way separates Himself from the testimony as such. The true believers (the

“overcomers”) who are in it, on the other hand, receive a blessed promise: “He that overcomes, to him will I give to sit with me in my throne; as I also have overcome and have sat down with my Father in his throne” (v. 21).

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong, a perfect plea.
A great High Priest whose name is love
Who ever lives and pleads for me.
My name is written on His hands
My name is hidden in His heart
I know that while in Heaven He stands
No power can force me to depart

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end to all my sin.
Because the sinless Saviour died
My sinful soul is counted free
For God the just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me

C L Bancroft

No. Footnotes of last chapter

- [1] That the expression “book of life” is a figurative expression, because the omniscient God does not need ‘books’, is certainly obvious.