



Setting the Stage

IRONICALLY, Slade Thompson found stability in his dangerous job, but in his faith it was a different story. Slade was a roofer whose specialty was the slate roofs on old houses in southeastern Pennsylvania.

“Are you comfortable up there?” I asked him as he climbed up on my roof in Souderton, Pennsylvania, to make repairs.

“Yes, I’m careful, but I know that the Lord will take care of me,” came the reply. “He has for twenty years.”

“Have you ever fallen?” I asked.

“Twice, and the Lord was with me each time. I was high up and would’ve been hurt bad if I’d hit the ground. Both times I landed in some bushes that broke my fall.”

Though Slade had confidence on the rooftops, it was not the same when it came to the assurance of his salvation. When he had come to Christ, he felt a wonderful sense of forgiveness. Now, a year later, he was unsure if he was saved. He was grateful to the people who had led him to Christ. But now he was troubled about the messages he heard in church. This made him feel guilty because Pastor Atkins was a dedicated man of God who preached the Bible.

Most confusing to Slade was the church’s practice of having altar calls every Sunday, during which some of the same people kept going forward. At first Slade thought that these people were rededicating their lives to Christ, but that was not how Pastor

Atkins described it. He explained that they were coming to Christ again for salvation.

“But why do you need to become a Christian over and over?” Slade mused. Because he loved his church, he questioned the “once saved, always saved” view he had heard from other friends, and over time he came to doubt his own salvation. For weeks this bothered him until one day he talked to Pastor Atkins.

“Yes,” the pastor explained, “the people coming forward each week are getting saved again. They had come to Christ, but backslid and lost their salvation, just like the book of Hebrews warns. They are getting right with God again.”

“But what about me, pastor? Do I lose my salvation each time I doubt?”

Slade was not satisfied with his pastor’s answer to that question. He knew Pastor Atkins wanted to help him, but he was not able to assure Slade that he was safe in Christ. The pastor’s view that Christians could lose their salvation prevented Slade from resting in Christ.

Frustrated, Slade turned to more earnest prayer and Bible study. Jesus’ words spoke to his heart: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28). But then there were those threatening warning passages in Hebrews 6 and 10. Slade’s frustration increased as he thought that maybe the Bible contradicted itself.

Slade is not the only Christian to be troubled by these issues. His story raises important questions for believers of all traditions. These questions especially concern two topics related to the assurance of salvation. The first is *preservation*, often called eternal security, which means that God keeps believers for final salvation. The second topic is *apostasy*, which is denial of the Christian faith formerly professed. Why give attention to preservation and apostasy? Here I offer four answers.

- God Uses Preservation to Assure His Children.
- God Teaches His Children the Need to Persevere to the End.

- God Warns His Children of the Danger of Apostasy.
- The Bible Often Speaks of Preservation and Apostasy.

God Uses Preservation to Assure His Children

Sincere Christians are sometimes confused about how two of the Bible's teachings fit together. On the one hand, Scripture says that God wants us to be assured of salvation: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). It comforts: "For I am sure that neither death nor life . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38–39).

But, on the other hand, the Bible also says, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!" (2 Cor. 13:5). Does God want us to have assurance or not?

Listen as Julie tells her touching story:

A few years ago a good friend of mine tragically took his own life. We had been working together in ministry for two years prior to this. I and many others were devastated. He had fallen into a deep depression and even lost assurance of his faith. When he died he didn't believe that he was saved. I know that I can't have assurance for someone else, but the Bible's teaching of preservation gives me cause to hope that he is with the Lord. We saw the fruit of ministry and the work of the Holy Spirit in his character.

As I grieved the death of my friend, I fell into a deep dread as I wondered if God for some reason simply abandoned him at the end. And what if God did the same to me? I clung to passages like John 6:39, where Jesus says he will lose nothing God has given him but will raise us up on the last day—and he says this more than once!

As I studied what Scripture said about preservation I became more deeply convinced of God's power, will, and love to keep his own. He does not hold us by the scruff of the neck that he might let go at any moment (the image that kept returning to my mind as I thought about my friend). God is deeply loving—he loved his own before the beginning of time. No one can snatch us from his hand (John 10:28). How much less would he ever drop us from his hand! I am amazed at his fatherly compassion as he guards and carries us. He will not walk away, turn his back, let us go—he cannot deny himself and his covenant to save those who believe. What comfort!

Julie and her friends passed through deep waters after their friend's suicide. It is normal for them to have doubted their own faith in the light of such a tragedy. But ultimately God used evil for good. Julie came out of her struggle stronger in her faith—which had been tested and proved—as she sought God in his Word. She became “rooted and built up in him and established in the faith” (Col. 2:7). Today she testifies that the Lord used that terrible experience to strengthen her and to prepare her to help others. God does want his children to have assurance of salvation. But sometimes he wants them to test that assurance in order to do something greater in and through them.

I do not want to give the false impression that I have all the answers to the difficult questions people ask concerning assurance. I do not. But I have learned many answers from God's Word and seek to whet your appetite for them here and to explore them more thoroughly in the pages to come.

God Teaches His Children the Need to Persevere to the End

Scripture not only teaches that God will not let his children fall away from salvation—it also teaches that those who profess Christ must persevere to the end to be saved: “[God will present you holy and blameless] if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you

heard” (Col. 1:23). “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). Only those who continue to believe the gospel will be saved, Paul teaches in Colossians. And the writer to the Hebrews insists that without holiness no person will see the Lord in final glory. For people to profess faith in Christ, therefore, is not enough. We will discuss the Bible’s extensive presentation of inadequate faith. A man or woman must truly believe to be saved. We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone; it is evidenced by a changed life.

Unfortunately, it is possible for professing Christians to take advantage of God’s grace and to claim that they are saved while living in open sin. Such was the case years ago with a friend whom I will call Craig. Craig left his wife and two small children and moved in with another woman. When the pastor and an elder from his church came to rebuke him for his sin, Craig had a ready answer: “God wants me to be happy, and I am very happy. Sure, what I am doing is wrong, but you and I both know that I am saved.” Craig’s defiant words buffaloed the young pastor and elder. They *did* believe that he was saved. He had walked with the Lord for years and had given every indication of believing in Christ. His current behavior was entirely inconsistent with his previous life.

When a seminarian heard about the aborted pastoral visit to Craig, he was unhappy: “I too think that Craig is a Christian, but one thing is certain: He is not now living the way a Christian should live. And while he persists in such flagrant sin, he has no right to claim that he is a Christian. He may well be saved, but if that’s the case, he will renounce his sin and return to his family. In the meantime, Craig’s empty words remind me of Paul’s words to the Ephesians:

For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these

things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. (Eph. 5:5–6)”

Armed with the Word of God and a renewed determination to help Craig, the pastor and elder visited him again. This time they were not easily rebuffed by his brashly claiming to belong to Christ while living in sin. They lovingly but firmly told him, “Craig, we think that you are a Christian man. But this is plain: You are not living as a Christian man should.” After sharing Paul’s words quoted above, they said, “You have no right to say that you love Jesus while your life says that you love that which he hates. As long as you live in adultery, you have no right to the assurance of salvation. You may try to fool yourself, but you are no longer fooling us. As long as you live like this, in your heart of hearts you do not have assurance.”

This tough love was exactly what Craig needed. The Word of God, shared prayerfully and boldly by men who cared for him, broke him. The Holy Spirit worked through the Word, and Craig repented, turned from his sinful lifestyle, and asked to be restored to his family. When Craig benefited from pastoral counsel, his patient wife took him back. As far as I know, they have lived happily together for the past thirty years.

God Warns His Children of the Danger of Apostasy

Many of us know people who have fallen away from the faith. Sincere believers disagree as to whether or not this can happen to saved persons and as a result ask many hard questions. Later I will attempt to address some of these questions. For now I will cite the most famous warning against apostasy:

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are cruci-

fying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. (Heb. 6:4–6)

This passage is so important that I will devote a chapter to it and to another equally tough warning passage in Hebrews 10:26–29. Here I will tell two true stories.

Almost thirty years ago a student of mine named Paul heard that I was beginning to study perseverance and apostasy.

“I am so glad to hear that,” he said, “because the hardest thing I have ever dealt with was when a Christian friend walked away from the gospel.”

I asked him to explain.

“Harry and I were close in the Lord. We ministered together, worshiped together, witnessed together. The day he turned away from Christ was the hardest day of my life.”

“Did you try to help Harry?” I asked.

“Try?” Paul retorted, in a raised voice. “I tried everything. I begged him; I prayed for him; I rebuked him. Nothing worked. He just deserted Christ and his family.”

“How long ago was this?” I wanted to know.

“Five years,” he replied.

“What did Harry say when you asked him why he committed apostasy?” I asked.

“He said that he just got tired of fighting against sin,” Paul explained.

Harry’s answer seems telling. That is because on one level you and I can identify with Harry. We have all had really bad days, weeks, and maybe months. At our lowest ebb, we too might have felt like walking away from the faith. But I don’t know how to explain it except to say that we couldn’t. We just *couldn’t*. Many people have told me stories similar to Paul’s, and their stories have kept me interested in this subject for years.

In God’s mercy, Paul had another story to tell, a remarkable one with a happy ending. It too involved apostasy. At a good church Paul had been attending while going to seminary, a dreadful thing occurred. An elder and another elder’s wife had been

having a secret affair and one day abandoned their spouses and children and left the church for parts unknown. They had thought things through carefully and had all of their ducks in a row. This included mailing letters of resignation to the church.

The departing couple had planned their escape well. But they seriously underestimated two things: the church's love for the Lord and for them. Paul told me that he had never seen anything like what happened. The Sunday that the announcement was made to the congregation, the people responded with sackcloth and ashes. During a time of prayer people wept openly over the sin of the couple and the losses felt by their devastated families. What really astonished Paul was the way God used the couple's sin for good. Believers, including leaders, openly confessed adulteries in their hearts. The church rallied around the two wounded families. Paul explains, "It was like a scene in the book of Acts, when a holy fear of God fell upon the early believers. It was awesome."

But the church's greatest response was to vow not to give up on the erring couple. The church made contact with them and assured them that the congregation would never stop praying for them. At first the couple hoped that these statements were pious but idle words, but time proved the church's love for them to be genuine. Many prayer meetings were held at various times of the day and night. After months of concerted prayer for the couple and many gentle but persistent contacts, God broke through.

There was cheering in the congregation the day the pastor announced that the couple had repented and wanted to return. But, he said, both parties were too ashamed to face their families or other members of the congregation. After weeks of pastoral counseling, the families were put back together and the elder—no longer in office, of course—and the other elder's wife returned to Sunday worship. Their fellow believers welcomed the repentant man and woman with open arms and tears of joy.

I was happy to hear Paul say that the joy he experienced that day exceeded the sorrow that he felt when his friend Harry had apostatized. I commended Paul for persevering after Harry's defection and praised God with him for his grace shown to Paul

in allowing him to experience such a noteworthy demonstration in the church's dealings with the two defectors.

Once again I confess that I cannot answer all the hard questions about apostasy. But five chapters devoted to Scripture's warning passages will provide many answers that, Lord willing, will help us to serve God and help others who are dealing with these issues.

The Bible Often Speaks of Preservation and Apostasy

Preservation and apostasy are significant biblical themes. I count at least seventeen passages that teach that God will not allow his people to fall away from grace but will keep them for final salvation: Luke 22:31–34; John 6:35, 37–40, 44; 10:25–30; 17:9–12, 15, 24; Romans 5:9–10; 8:1–4, 28–39; 1 Corinthians 1:4, 8–9; 11:27–32; Ephesians 1:13–14; 4:30; Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24; Hebrews 6:17–20; 7:23–25; 1 Peter 1:3–5; 1 John 2:18–19; 5:18.

I count even more warning passages: Matthew 7:21–23; 10:33; 24:24; Luke 8:5–15; John 15:1–8; Acts 5:5, 10; 8:13, 20–24; Romans 8:13; 11:20–22; 1 Corinthians 9:27; Colossians 1:21–23; 1 Timothy 1:18–20; 4:1; 5:8, 11–12; 2 Timothy 2:11–13, 17–19; Hebrews 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; James 5:19–20; 2 Peter 2:20–22; 1 John 5:16–17; Revelation 3:5; 22:18–19.

Surely, these numerous passages deserve our attention. To ignore them is to close our ears to vital messages from God's Word. The rest of this book will seek to bring those messages to light. Chapter 2 treats the Old Testament background for the New Testament's teachings on God's preservation and human beings' apostasy. Chapters 3 through 6 explore the teaching of Jesus and his apostles on preservation. Chapters 7 through 11 deal with the most prominent warnings in Scripture, including those that deal with apostasy. Chapter 12 attempts to pull things together and underscore ways in which these teachings can help us live for Christ.