

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

PART 18

ASSURANCE, PART 2

In some places, αἰών carries the basic meaning of a lifetime so it may be understood as the life of God which is obviously a life without beginning or end. In that concept then those who believe and are in God share in His life which is life eternal both in quality and quantity. “John, however, understands eternal life in relation to Christ through faith, love, and obedience to the commands of Christ (John 3:15-16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; 17:2-3). The word ‘eternal’ here indicates a definite quality; it is a different life from the old existence typified by hate, lack of love, sin, pain, and death. Eternal life does not therefore just begin in the future—it is already the possession of those who have entered into fellowship with Christ. Thus John 3:15 speaks of having eternal life in the present. But there is also a temporal sense, so that ‘eternal’ indicates the quantity or length of this life: because it belongs to Christ, who himself is the Life (14:6), it has no end. It will not even cease at death (8:51; 11:25-26)” [*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*,” s. v. “αἰών”]. The point is John identified eternal life as a concept that encompasses both quantitative and qualitative aspects.

In terms of Soteriology, we understand these Greek words concerning eternity as they are translated into English to frequently carry the same meaning we attach to the definition of eternal which is “lasting or existing forever; without end or beginning...” [*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, s. v. “eternal”]. However, there is a qualification we need to add to that English definition as it relates to biblical revelation. Only God has no beginning; therefore, our biblical understanding of eternal refers to a life that having started at a point in time at the new birth has no end from that point on; the Bible refers to that as eternal life. We realize that we all had a beginning so in a sense we have a life without end rather than an eternal life but since the Bible refers to what we now possess as “eternal life” then we can adhere to that use of the word. The other problem with our English definition of eternal is that it has no reference to quality of life which the biblical concept of eternal life does encompass.

I want to explain what the quality aspect of eternal life means because I don't want people to get the wrong idea about it. The quality of life I'm referring to is applicable to our spiritual life; it may or may not be applicable to our temporal situation in terms of health and wealth. The word of faith movement teaches that once you are born again, you are entitled as your Christian birthright to have perfect health and prosperity. Your life will be blessed with a good job, great kids, a home and car, and so on. But that's

not true. Many Christians are poor in material things; they go to bed hungry with few of the things we consider to be the basic necessities of life. It certainly goes without saying they do not possess the luxuries of life many of us possess. Many Christians are persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered for their faith in Christ. Yet, by virtue of their new birth, these believers have a quality of life, eternal life, that is impossible for an unbeliever to possess no matter how wealthy in a worldly, humanistic sense those unbelievers are. Believers, even poor, persecuted believers, have hope and a future that will be blessed beyond anything we can imagine in this age. They will be rewarded to the extent they exhibit spiritual faithfulness and for the work they do that glorifies the Lord. There is another side to this for the born again believer, however, because he can stunt his own quality of eternal life through disobedience, rebellion, sin and so on. This behavior doesn't negate the quantitative aspect of eternal life; such believers are still born again, regenerated, and adopted into the family of God, but it does sever fellowship with God and absent restoration, their quality of spiritual life suffers. Their relationship to God within the family of God remains intact even as their fellowship with God and their quality of spiritual life suffers. Even at that they are still much better off in the spiritual sense than is any unbeliever. The quantity of eternal life, that is the quantitative aspect of everlasting life, is never compromised but the quality of eternal life in this age may vary from believer to believer but even in the most compromised believer's life that quality is still far superior to the quality of spiritual life possessed by unbelievers.

There are a number of words in Hebrew that express the concept of eternity but the main word is עולם. It means a very long time. The word usually refers to looking forward but also expresses the idea of looking backward. It often describes the things of God. It has a range of meanings including forever, ever, everlasting, evermore, perpetual, old, and ancient. It is "probably derived from [a word meaning] 'to hide,' thus pointing to what is hidden in the distant future or in the distant past. The Ugaritic cognate [means] 'eternity'" [Harris, Archer, Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s. v. "עולם"]. In the NASB, it is translated "eternity" only twice but it is translated "everlasting" 177 times. The Septuagint translates the word using αἰώνιος.

Genesis 9:16 ¹⁶"When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting [עולם] [αἰώνιος] covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth."

Daniel 12:2 ²"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting [עולם] [αἰώνιος] life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting [עולם] [αἰώνιος] contempt.

Jeremiah 5:22 ²²'Do you not fear Me?' declares the LORD. 'Do you not tremble in My presence? For I have placed the sand as a boundary for the sea, An eternal [עולם] [αἰώνιος] decree, so it cannot cross over it. Though the waves toss, yet they cannot prevail; Though they roar, yet they cannot cross over it.

Secure/security. Now let's examine the security aspect of eternal security.

The concept of security in relation to Soteriology is evident in neither the New nor the Old Testaments. Our general understanding of what it means to be secure is attested in those books. In the Old Testament, the underlying idea is that Israelite national and personal security is due to the protection afforded the nation by God.

Several words in Hebrew are translated "secure" or "security." For example, בְּטָחָה, means confidence; it is a belief or feeling of safety and security. That is a general reflection of the Hebrew words that are translated with the meaning of secure or security.

In Greek, only one word is translated "secure" and that is in conjunction with securing the Lord's tomb after His death and burial. The word is ἀσφαλίζω and it means to make safe or secure; it is to cause something to be secure in the sense of something which could not be tampered with or opened.

In English we understand secure to be certain or to continue safe and unharmed and security is defined as the state of being free from danger or threat [*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, s. v. "secure" and "security"].

In Soteriological terms, what does eternal security mean? It simply means that once a person places their faith in Christ Jesus and is regenerated by God into an everlasting relationship with Him, that relationship can never be broken by anyone for any reason. Nothing can remove a person from the family of God once they have been adopted into that family of God. God's promise is that He will not remove anyone and no one can remove themselves. It is a promise fulfilled in a moment in time that results in eternal life which is not just an everlasting life in terms of quantity or length of days but a quality of life as well. Dennis Rokser has a good working definition of eternal security. "Eternal security means that those who have been genuinely saved by God's grace through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone shall never be in danger of God's condemnation or loss of their salvation, but God's grace and power keep them forever saved and secure" [Dennis M. Rokser, *Shall Never Perish Forever: Is Salvation Forever or Can it be Lost?*, p. 11].

As I have studied the issues of assurance and eternal security, I've realized they are not the same thing; when I started this section I somewhat equated them. Eternal security

depends only on God and His promise to give eternal life to all who believe in the Son. Everyone who believes receives the grace gift of eternal life at the very moment they believe and are born again. "A person becomes eternally secure when he believes in Christ alone and this is true regardless of the extent of conscious realization of this truth at any subsequent moment. It's true when we think about it, and it's true when we don't. It's true when we sin and it's true when we're in fellowship with Christ and are not sinning. One need not *feel* eternally secure in Christ to actually *be* secure. This unchanging, unending, and eternally safe positional relationship with God as Father is an outcome of faith in Christ. It is essentially *eternal life* framed in terms of God's promise regarding such an unending and unchangeable state. A believer *has* eternal life and *is*, therefore, secure in that eternal life forever" [Anthony B. Badger, *Confronting Calvinism: A Free Grace Refutation and Biblical Resolution of Radical Reformed Soteriology*, p. 312].

Assurance is the individual's belief that he is born again and knows without doubt that he is eternally secure. All of the theological systems that add works, faithfulness, obedience, sinlessness and anything else to the Christian life as conditions for salvation or for proving salvation breed a lack of assurance. They have to do that. If salvation depends on what a human being does or does not do, then no one can be certain. If eternal security resides in God alone, then we can be absolutely certain we are saved because it is His doing and not ours. No born again Christian should lack assurance of salvation. Assurance is the fruit of understanding biblical truth concerning the definition of the gospel, belief, and eternal life.

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

For those in Christ, nothing can separate them from God once they are in Christ. This Scripture is an amazing promise and it puts to the lie the doctrine that a person can lose justification salvation due to sin or apostasy. It also presents as truth the fact that we cannot remove ourselves from God. His promise of eternal life does not depend on what we do or do not do; eternal life depends only on God's faithfulness. We are secure from the moment of belief. We can become unfaithful and fail to progress or even regress in our sanctification salvation, but we still retain eternal life. We may be subjected to temporal discipline for our disobedience and rebellion and we may lose rewards at the judgment seat of Christ, but we retain eternal life. The quality of our life as Christians will be less than it could and should be, but we still have life. Once we are born again, we can never again experience death.

2 Timothy 2:13 ¹³If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.

Zane Hodges did not believe that Romans 8:38-39 was dealing with the issue of eternal security but instead was referring to God's love being present and with us even in the face of persecution. Contextually, that is an accurate assessment. "The thrust of Rom 8:18-39 is to motivate committed believers to endure suffering, knowing that victory is already accomplished through Christ" [Rene A. Lopez, "Romans" in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, p. 2:669]. However, eternal life is a present and ongoing fact whether persecution is present or not so the truth that we cannot lose eternal life has to be a secondary application to this Scripture as well. None of the events, things, or persons listed can cause us to be separated from God or lose eternal life which is what a separation would entail. We may lose our physical life but we cannot lose our eternal life. We may forsake God and even cease to love Him but once we are born again He will never forsake us or cease to love us. Even if a believer denies God in the face of persecution, God will not abandon him; he will still be safe in the hands of the Father and the Son. In the same way, even if a believer walks away from God in this life, God remains faithful to His promise that eternal life once imparted can never be removed.

Dr. David Anderson wrote about the impossibility of being separated from God both now and in eternity. "Not only are 'things' like sins unable to separate us from the love of Christ; neither can 'any other created thing' (*tis hetera ktisis*) like an angel or demon separate us from God's love. And 'any other created thing' includes *me*—not even I can separate myself. Nothing I can say or do can separate me from the love of God. Oh, He may well be disappointed in the child. But we must distinguish between *acceptance* and *approval*. Approval is separate, and Paul takes up such 'family matters' in Romans 12-16; however, we will always be accepted 'in the Beloved' (Eph. 1:6). We will always belong. Birth into a family is irreversible. He is our heavenly parent, and what can separate a child from a parent's love?...?" [Dave Anderson and Jim Reitman, *Portraits of Righteousness: Free Grace Sanctification in Romans 5-8*, p. 232]. Another commentator recorded this: "Paul concludes the list with the phrase nor any other created thing, which includes both the devil *and* the believer. It is inconceivable that a true believer, who at times might not be able to keep his own shoe tied or balance his checkbook, could undo the eternal purposes of God that include his foreknowledge and their glorification. The believer is not nearly that powerful, nor the Spirit and the Savior so incompetent" [Michael G. Vanlaningham, "Romans" in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, p. 1759].

Calvinists deny that a believer can depart from God and even reject Him; in their mind, that is "proof" that the person was never saved. This stance is due to their theology. Their thinking is that a true believer was elected by God in eternity past and predestined to believe and to persevere to the end of life. If a person who claims to be

a believer falls away or denies Christ, then they have proven they were never saved and thus not one of the elect. These verses in Romans 8 aren't saying that. They are saying that even if you deny Christ for whatever reason and if you are truly born again, God will never forsake you despite your failure. Thomas Schreiner wrote a commentary on Romans and he presented this Calvinist scenario in his commentary on Romans 8:38-39. I simply want to illustrate the difference between what the Bible is saying and what this representative of this theological system is saying about it.

“Some scholars have argued that although nothing in creation can separate one from the love of God, people can themselves choose to depart from God and thereby fall outside the scope of the saving love of Christ. [There are two issues here. One is departing from God and the other is either losing salvation as a result or proving you are unsaved to begin with. We would say departing from God is possible but that God will never depart from us. Believers who depart from God do not fall outside the scope of the saving love of Christ. No one loses their salvation by departing from God and it is not proof of the absence of justification salvation in that person's life nor is the concept of losing salvation biblical.] This interpretation should be rejected. [He is not rejecting this because he thinks a born again person can depart from God; he is rejecting it because he thinks no elect person can possibly depart from God. That would prove they are not elect and God cannot fail to bring the elect to glorification. I agree that God cannot fail to achieve His purposes. But I define the elect as those who have believed in Christ and once that happens they will be glorified whether they fall away or not.] As we have seen, Rom. 8:28-30 constitutes an unbreakable process. All those who are foreknown end up being glorified. No possibility is extended that some of those who are justified may not be glorified. [I agree with that; everyone justified will be glorified. The problem is he is saying that no justified person can ever depart from God. That is simply untrue.] Such an interpretation makes sense because those upon whom God set his covenantal love before creating the world are those he predestined to share the eschatological image of the Son. Those whom he has chosen before history began will surely persevere and attain to glorification. These comments should not be interpreted as a denial of the necessity to meet conditions in order to obtain eschatological salvation (cf. 8:17). [He is apparently speaking about suffering here.] The point is that God will grant sufficient grace so that believers will inevitably and surely be enabled to meet those conditions. [In other words, the elect will not deny God in the face of persecution. The theological system that Schreiner represents cannot admit that a born again believer could deny God in the face of persecution. They think this is contrary to their definition of God's sovereignty and since God chose who would believe then that believer can never fall away even under life threatening persecution.]

Those who defend the view that believers may possibly forsake their salvation note that nothing is said here about the impossibility of believers separating themselves from Christ's love. [No one is saying that a believer can forsake his salvation. This Scripture explicitly tells us that we cannot separate ourselves from Christ's love because

He is faithful. We can depart from Him; He will never depart from us. He has this backwards. He is saying it is impossible for believers to separate themselves from God; the Scripture is saying that God will never separate Himself from the believer.] Gundry Volf, however, is correct in arguing that the objective of the text is to rule out that very eventuality. Affliction, persecution, famine, death, and so on are mentioned because those are the sorts of things that would cause a believer to renounce faith in Christ. Paul is not only saying that Christ still loves believers when persecution arrives, although that is doubtless true. He is also saying that the love of Christ is so powerful that believers will not forsake him despite the sword, persecution, famine, and so on. There is no need to mention the will of the believer in this text because Paul canvasses every possible thing that could provoke believers to apostatize. None of these threats will succeed, for the love of Christ is stronger still and he will see to it that what has been started will be finished" [Thomas R. Schreiner, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*, p. 466].

This exegesis of these verses by Schreiner is completely untrue, unbiblical, and false doctrine. Of course believers can and do deny Christ when persecution arises. We see that today when Muslims take Christians captive. Not everyone denies Christ under those circumstances but many do and that's been true throughout history. Muslims always try to force Christians to say the Shadaha, "Allah is god and Mohammed is his prophet" because in their mind that makes a person a Muslim. Most Christians don't mean it when they say it, they are just trying to save their lives, and the Muslims know that but it gives them a powerful propaganda tool and it reinforces their derision and their disdain for western Christians. Muslims are proud of the fact that they will gladly die for Allah and that stands in contrast to most Christians who will deny Christ in order to keep their head connected to their shoulders. That is one reason Christians are held in contempt by Muslims; they think we don't have the courage to die for what we believe in. For Schreiner and others like him to self-righteously and proudly claim that those who deny Christ with a knife to their throat cannot be true Christians is the height of arrogance and ignorance. No one knows what they will do until they are placed in that situation and that includes Thomas Schreiner. He might stay true to Christ but he might not either. My point is that true Christians can and do deny Christ when faced with persecution but Christ will not leave them. That is part of life now and that is part of eternal security and Paul is applying that truth in Romans 8:38-39. It may well be that there are consequences for denying Him because "If we deny Him, He also will deny us" (2 Tim. 2:12) but those consequences cannot include the loss of salvation nor does that denial prove a person lacks saving faith. This truth is presented in the context of ruling with Him, so it seems reasonable to conclude this is referring to losing rewards at the judgment seat of Christ. Conversely, endurance or perseverance relates to reigning with Him. Faithfulness will be rewarded.

2 Timothy 2:12 ¹²If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us;

Most commentators believe Paul is referring to unbelievers being those who deny Christ. The context does not support that. Timothy is the pastor of the church at Ephesus and Paul is encouraging him to impart sound doctrine to faithful men. Only a few commentaries present the truth of this Scripture. "The important thing is that we not 'disown' our Lord; for if we disown Him here, He will disown us before the Father (Matt. 10:33). In that great 'roll call' in glory, when the 'medals' are given out, we will lose our reward if we disown His name" [Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, p. 2:245].

Matthew 10:33 ³³"But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.

Luke 12:9 ⁹but he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.

Thomas Constable writes, "If the believer departs from following Christ faithfully during his or her life (i.e., apostatizes), Christ will deny him or her at the judgment seat of Christ (Matt. 10:33; Mark 8:38; Luke 12:9; cf. Luke 19:22; Matt. 22:13). The unfaithful believer will not lose his salvation (1 John 5:13) or all of his reward (1 Pet. 1:4), but he will lose some of his reward (1 Cor. 3:12–15; cf. Luke 19:24–26). To deny Christ clearly does not mean to deny Him only once or twice (cf. Luke 22:54–62) [he is referring to Peter and his denial of the Lord] but to deny Him permanently since the other three human conditions in the couplets are permanent" [Thomas L. Constable, "2 Timothy" in *Thomas Constable's Notes on the Bible*].

Robert Wilkin puts it this way: "If we deny Him, that is, if we fail to endure in our confession of Christ, then He will also deny us the privilege of reigning with Him" [Robert N. Wilkin, "2 Timothy" in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, p. 2:1001].

Clearly, denying the Lord before men is a serious matter and I don't want to minimize that fact, but it does not prove a person to be an unbeliever and it does not cause a person to lose their salvation.

This very issue was dealt with early in church history during one of the Roman persecutions of Christians in North Africa. Christians who, under threats to their personal safety, poured a libation to the Roman emperor or turned in a Bible to be burned were branded as heretics and they were forever outside the visible church unless they were rebaptized which to the church authorities of the time meant being saved all over again [V. L. Walter, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2^d ed., s. v. "Donatism"]. We

know that people cannot lose their salvation but instead once they believe they are eternally secure in Christ. It is Christ who is faithful even when individual Christians are unfaithful. We know those people in North Africa did not lose their salvation. We know there is no salvific efficacy in water baptism. We know the visible church is not the true church; the true church is composed of only born again believers. Obviously, it was a sin to acknowledge the emperor as a god but we know that specific sin was a forgivable sin just like any other sin is a forgivable sin and that restoration to fellowship within the family of God was possible for those people just as restoration is possible for any other Christian who commits a personal sin. The doctrine that no true believer can deny Christ is simply untrue. That untrue doctrine has been with the church for a very long time; it is nothing new today.