



KEPT — • FOR • — JESUS

WHAT THE NEW TESTAMENT
REALLY TEACHES ABOUT
ASSURANCE OF SALVATION
AND ETERNAL SECURITY

SAM STORMS

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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INTRODUCTION

Meet Charley. On second thought, you probably already know him—or someone whose life bears a striking resemblance. Perhaps Charlene would be a more suitable name for some of you. In any case, his (her?) life will pose for us a painful and difficult dilemma. Let me explain.

Charley was born into a Christian family. His parents were devout followers of Jesus, and both of his siblings, an older brother and a younger sister, came to faith in Christ and remained vibrant and deeply committed to him throughout their lives.

Charley was raised in the church and was usually present whenever the doors were open, whether at a Sunday service, a youth meeting, special events throughout the week, or a summer retreat. When he turned twelve, he professed faith in Jesus, largely through the influence of his parents and older brother. He was baptized soon thereafter and was discipled by his youth pastor over the course of the next few years. Charley's faith appeared to be quite vibrant and joyful. He endured the same trials and temptations as do virtually all teenaged boys, but he never wandered far or failed to repent when he sinned. He prayed every day and read his Bible and was growing in his understanding of God.

Following graduation from high school, he fell in with a different group of friends at college. They challenged his faith and insisted that he was being naïve to believe in Jesus. The arguments they regularly threw in his face were fairly typical:

Only ignorant and uneducated people believe that Jesus was really born of a virgin and rose physically from the dead.

Evolution is a proven scientific fact and makes the existence of God unnecessary.

If there is really an all-powerful and good God in charge of the universe, why is there so much evil and injustice?

If you keep this “faith” that you obviously inherited from your parents, you’ll never be able to drink and sleep around and experience the really fun stuff in life.

It wasn’t long before Charley stopped attending church and eventually declared himself to be an atheist. He grew increasingly angry at the institutional church and nurtured a deep resentment toward those who influenced him while growing up, having become convinced that they hid the truth from him and only wanted to control his life.

Charley is now thirty, already twice divorced, an alcoholic, and painfully bitter and unpleasant to be around. He wants nothing ever again to do with Christianity.

So what’s up with Charley? What happened? Without getting too technical, it’s important that you understand how Christians from various traditions and denominations explain this.

The majority of those who identify with the Nazarene, Methodist, Assembly of God, Church of Christ, and Free-Will Baptist traditions, among others, insist that Charley was, in all likelihood, genuinely born again at the age of twelve. He truly trusted Christ and was truly saved. He was justified or declared righteous in the sight of God. He became an adopted son of God and was forgiven all his sins. The Holy Spirit came to indwell Charley and to empower him for godly living. But through a variety of factors and for a whole host of reasons, Charley willfully repudiated everything he once affirmed, denied his faith, and *apostatized*. Notwithstanding all that

friends, family, and even God himself could do to persuade him to stay true to Christ, he walked away in denial of the Lord he once embraced. Charley forfeited his salvation. He is now, at the age of thirty, a child of the Devil and headed for eternal condemnation, cut off from Christ.

Although no one really likes to be labeled, we will call people who embrace this view “Arminians,” named after the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Dutch theologian James Arminius. Be it noted, however, that not all Arminians deny the eternal security of the believer.¹ More on this later.

There is another view that some of you have never encountered. People who embrace it come from a wide variety of backgrounds, including some Southern Baptists, dispensationalists, and others from so-called independent Bible churches. They insist that once Charley was truly saved, he was forever saved. Even though he walked away from faith and repudiated Jesus, he is still safely secure in the arms of his heavenly Father and will, *regardless of how he lives and dies*, end up in heaven for eternity. Charley *ought* to have walked in obedience and faithfulness, and we *should* encourage him to do so. But he doesn’t have to. If he chooses to live a life in unbelief and immorality, he is still saved.

However, whereas he doesn’t lose his salvation, his denial of Jesus and his sinful behavior will lead to the loss of rewards in heaven. He gains entrance into the eternal kingdom of God, but he will not experience the joy of knowing his heavenly Father’s approval, and he will suffer the loss of rewards that other, more faithful Christians, will receive.

While not affiliated with any particular denomination or tradition, that view has come to be known by many of its critics as “anti-

¹Arminius himself wrote, “I never taught that a true believer can either totally or finally fall away from the faith, and perish; yet I will not conceal, that there are passages of Scripture which seem to me to wear this aspect.” *The Writings of James Arminius*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 254 (emphasis original). Arminian scholar Roger E. Olson concludes that “Arminius himself never settled the matter.” *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 187.

nomianism.” Now, please understand, those who advocate this view would never call themselves “antinomians.” The term *antinomian* comes from two Greek words that together mean “against the law.” It has often been used to describe those who say that although you ought to obey the principles and moral laws of the Scriptures, you won’t lose your salvation if you don’t. You’ll only lose your reward. In other words, you *should* persevere in holiness of life, but if you don’t, you’re still a child of God.

Those whom I’m calling “antinomians” argue that if you are once saved, you are always saved, regardless of how you live or what you believe after you initially come to saving faith in Jesus.

Finally, those who typically come from Presbyterian as well as Southern Baptist and other traditions associated with what is known as “Calvinism” or the “Reformed” faith (because of their close association with the Protestant Reformation and its leaders Martin Luther and John Calvin) look at Charley and draw one of two conclusions.

First, some conclude that if Charley was truly saved at the age of twelve, he is still saved at the age of thirty, and will, by God’s grace and the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, eventually come to his spiritual senses and return to the Lord. This may come only after enduring severe discipline from his heavenly Father, but eventually God will bring him back. In some cases, people like Charley are disciplined straightway into heaven; that is to say, the discipline of the Lord results in their physical death. They die prematurely under the discipline of God, but they are saved eternally.

Second, others conclude that the likely explanation for Charley’s departure from his professed faith in Christ is that he was never genuinely born again. His so-called faith was spurious. His apparent life of obedience was prompted by factors other than a genuine love for Jesus. He was self-deluded and deceived everyone who knew him. If he had been truly born again, he would have persevered in his faith.

As you can see, the Arminian says that Charley was truly saved,

apostatized from the faith, and is now lost. The antinomian says that Charley was truly saved, is still truly saved, but will suffer the loss of rewards in the age to come because of his disobedient lifestyle. The Calvinist says Charley may have been truly saved, and if so, he will come under the discipline of the Lord, who will either restore him to his walk with Jesus or take him home to heaven prematurely. Alternatively, says the Calvinist, Charley was never truly saved, and his failure to persevere in a life of obedience is evidence that his profession of faith was just that, a verbal profession, and not the genuine faith that possesses forgiveness of sins.

As you will quickly see, I hold to the Calvinist or Reformed view. I agree with the Arminian when he says that perseverance in faith and holiness is necessary for final salvation, but I disagree with him when he says that a born-again person can fully and finally apostatize from the faith, thereby losing his salvation. Likewise, I agree with the antinomian that all those truly born again are eternally secure in their salvation, but I disagree when he says that a born-again person can live in unrepentant sin throughout the course of his life, be encouraged with the assurance of salvation, and expect to find himself in heaven.

I will strive to be as objective as I can in explaining what others believe, but there is no escaping the fact that I am solidly, energetically, and passionately committed to the view that when a man or woman is born again by the Spirit of God and justified by faith in Jesus Christ alone, he or she will persevere in faith unto life's end, even though that perseverance may be a bit bumpy and inconsistent along the way. That person, however, will never utterly abandon Christ because the Father has promised never to utterly abandon us but to keep us safe and secure through faith.

WHY DO PEOPLE REJECT THE DOCTRINE OF ETERNAL SECURITY?

Many of you live with deep-seated anxiety about eternity, an anxiety that occasionally degenerates into outright fear. "Am I *really* saved?

I think I'm saved. I hope I'm saved. But these doubts are driving me insane. What if I sin again today, just like I did yesterday and the day before that? Will I eventually cross the point of no return? Will God, at some point, cease to love me and just give up on me?"

Some of you live confidently in the assurance of your salvation. You're even happy and joyful about it. Others who aren't saved are persuaded they are. Their so-called assurance is little more than presumption and arrogance. Then, of course, some are convinced that although they are saved today, that may change. What are we to make of this, and what does the Bible say about it?

As a Calvinist who believes in the eternal security of God's elect, I often ask, Why do people disagree and embrace the Arminian view? Why do people doubt or deny the doctrine of eternal security? Why do so many insist that they've known friends or family members who once were genuinely born again but through some sin or backslidden rebellion have lost their salvation? There are several reasons for these beliefs.

Often the culprit is *tradition*: "That's what I was raised to believe. I can't bring myself to believe that Mom and Dad and the preacher and all my friends were wrong." This is a far more powerful influence, subtle and unconscious though it be, than most of us realize. I'm not immune to it any more than you are. To be open to another view seems like we are saying, "The past was all for naught. It meant nothing." To some it feels as if they must question the integrity or value of people and pastors whom they love and respect and who've been a powerful influence in their lives. That is difficult for many to cope with.

Undoubtedly a major contributing factor is the presence in the New Testament of several so-called problem passages. Two such texts are found in Hebrews 6 and 2 Peter 2, both of which I attempt to explain later in the book. Let's be honest: every view has problem passages! There are biblical texts that seem to run counter to each of the three views I presented. We have to deal honestly and fairly with

them and ask, Which view does the best job of accounting for everything the Bible says on this topic? That being said, many are Arminians simply because they believe that's what the Bible teaches.

I also think many fear that if people are told they can't lose their salvation, they will indulge in gross immorality. They fear it will lead people to think: "If I can't lose my salvation, I'll do whatever I please" (see Rom. 6:1-4). In other words, the legitimate concern for holiness leads some to an illegitimate rejection of security.

As noted, others have known people like Charley (or Charlene), whom they are convinced are Christians, who later give every indication of having fallen away. Believing them to have truly been born again, the only explanation is that they have lost their salvation.

Part of the blame can also be laid at the feet of certain religious leaders who need people to be insecure in their salvation in order to retain control over them. They cultivate anxiety and doubt in the hearts of people in order to exert greater control over their lives (and often their money). Fear is a powerful means by which to keep people under one's religious thumb.

Many believe that eternal security diminishes a person's moral responsibility. It places too much emphasis on God's sovereignty and not enough on human free will.

Finally, for some, the exhortations and warnings in Scripture to be holy, to persevere, and to endure make sense only if the possibility exists that one may choose not to do so.

So my aim in the pages ahead is twofold. First, I want to convince you who embrace either the Arminian or antinomian view that you are mistaken in your belief. I make no apologies for that. Second, I want to deepen everyone's confidence in the supremacy of God's saving and preserving grace. I want you to conclude each chapter more joyful and grateful than when you started reading, because you know that your sins are forgiven and that God will never, ever leave you or forsake you.

HOW DEEP THE FATHER'S LOVE FOR US

Among the many things we say about God, nothing is more foundational than the declaration “God is love.” Nothing else in Christianity makes sense apart from the belief that God is love. God’s love explains everything, whether it be the incarnation of Christ, his sinless life, his atoning death, his resurrection, and his return to earth, not to mention the very existence of heaven and eternal life.

Why is it, then, that so many Christians struggle to believe it? Why is it that our boldest and loudest assertion concerning God is often embraced and believed with the least degree of confidence? Why is it that simultaneous with our public declarations of God’s love, there is a lingering, private doubt concerning its reality? We don’t typically have problems with the other divine attributes. I rarely hear Christians express anxiety over the notion that God is truth or that he is holy or that he is just and omnipresent and all-powerful. But it’s another matter entirely when his love is mentioned.

Let me be clear about this. I’m not saying that Christians deny that God is love. Rather, it’s that they often doubt, in the depths of their soul, that he loves them individually, that his love for them is the sort that endures despite their many sins and failures. The anxiety that grips their hearts is borne of a fear that one day God will quite simply count his losses and cut them loose. After all, isn’t that

what happens in so many human relationships, whether in marriage or between what we thought were lifelong friends? So how can I be sure God's love isn't cut from the same cloth? How can I know that the love he has shown sinners in the death of his Son, Jesus Christ, isn't suspended upon how well I perform in the aftermath? How can I be assured that God won't turn out like so many others who once pledged their love for me only to bail out at the first sign of trouble?

The answers to those questions are addressed in a variety of ways in this book, based on a variety of biblical texts. But nowhere are they more explicitly set forth than in the words of Jesus himself in the Gospel of John. It's the perfect place to begin our exploration of eternal security.

JOHN 6

We are going to look at two passages in John's Gospel. In the first, John 6:37–44, Jesus tells us explicitly that the will of the Father is that he “should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:39–40).

Jesus's argument in these verses must be carefully noted. On several occasions in John's Gospel, divine election is described in terms of God the Father *giving* certain persons to God the Son (6:37, 39; 10:29; 17:1–2, 6, 9, 24). In each of these cases the giving of men to Christ precedes and is the cause of their receiving eternal life. Those who are given to the Son include not only the present company of disciples who believe in Jesus but also the elect of future ages who will come to faith through the gospel. Jesus looks upon them as already his (John 17:20–21; see also John 10:16; Acts 18:10), even though they have not yet believed in his name. They are his because they were given to him by the Father in eternity past.

Of special importance to us is what Jesus says about how those whom the Father has given to him come to him and whether those

who come can ever lose their salvation. It will prove helpful to look at this in terms of three impossibilities.¹

First, Jesus says it is morally and spiritually *impossible* for a person to come to Christ apart from the “drawing” of that person by God the Father (6:44, 65).

Second, Jesus says it is *impossible* for someone whom the Father draws *not* to come to him. He says in verse 37, “All that the Father gives me *will* come to me.” In other words, just as it is impossible for people to come to Christ apart from the Father drawing them, so also is it impossible for people *not* to come to Christ if the Father *does* draw them.

To these two impossibilities Jesus adds a third: he says that when people do come through the drawing of the Father, it is *impossible* for them to be cast out. Look again at verse 37: “And whoever comes to me I will never cast out.” The point is that those whom the Father gives to the Son, who therefore come to the Son, will be received by the Son and shall never perish. The verb translated “cast out” in verse 37 is used several times in John (2:15; 6:37; 9:34–35; 10:4; 12:31) and always means to cast out someone or something already in. Thus the emphasis here is not so much on receiving the one who comes (although that is true enough in itself) but on preserving him or her.

Who would suggest that Jesus Christ would refuse to accept what his Father has given him? If the Father was pleased to make a gift of certain sinners to his most blessed Son, you may rest assured that the Son will neither despise nor deny his Father's gracious generosity. The certainty of ultimate and absolute salvation for those who come to the Son is reaffirmed in verses 38–40. Their life in Christ is eternal and irrevocable because that is the will of the Father, a will or a purpose that the whole of Christ's person and work was designed to secure and that shall ultimately be fulfilled (Pss. 115:3; 135:6; Dan. 4:34–35; Eph. 1:11; Acts 4:28).

¹ Some of what follows has been adapted from my book *Chosen for Life: The Case for Divine Election* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007). Used by permission of Crossway.

So what did Jesus come to do? He came to do the Father's will (v. 38). What is the Father's will? The Father's will is that all those he has given to the Son be fully and finally saved (v. 39).

Before we leave John 6, it's important to understand that searching and studying Scripture is not simply a matter of asking, "What is it saying?" but also, "Is what it's saying compatible with what *we're* saying?" Let me explain.

To deny eternal security means the possibility exists that some who come to the Son will in fact be cast out. It means the possibility exists that the will of the Father and of the Son that all born-again believers be raised up on the last day will not, in fact, be fulfilled. It means that although Jesus is determined to ensure that every born-again Christian is fully and finally saved, the possibility exists that every born-again Christian might be fully and finally damned for eternity. Are you prepared to say that?

To deny eternal security means that when Jesus said he *will* raise up finally and forever all those given to him by the Father, he was misleading us. He should have said, "*I hope to do so,*" or "*I'll give it my best shot,*" but the fact remains that he *won't* raise up all those given to him by the Father. Some of them, based on the Arminian view, will have apostatized.

How can Jesus say he will raise up all the Father gives him if in fact he will not, because some who truly believe in him finally and forever fall away and forfeit eternal life?

JOHN 10

Now look with me at Jesus's words concerning his sheep in John 10:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (John 10:27-30)

Jesus grounds his confidence in the safety of his sheep in the incomparable omnipotence of his Father. It is because there is no one greater or more powerful than God the Father that the sheep are secure. Was Jesus mistaken in his assessment of the Father's power and purpose?

What will you do with his declaration that his sheep "will *never* perish" (John 10:28)? A more literal translation is, "They shall not, by no means, ever perish." This is an absolute, unassailable negative. Would Jesus have said this if in fact *many* of his sheep *will* perish? If so much as one true child of God can ever perish, Jesus has deceived us.

"And no one will snatch them out of my hand" (v. 28). Not the attacking wolf (v. 12), or the thieves and robbers (vv. 1, 8), or anyone.

Can we agree on one thing before going further? Will you concur that "no one" means *no one*? You don't have to go to seminary or be able to read Greek to figure that out. "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." God the Father himself stands behind God the Son in keeping the sheep in the fold. Jesus holds us tightly. God holds us tightly. Who can steal from God? Who has the strength or the cunning or the power to outwit and outmuscle almighty God?

In verse 28 Jesus says, "No one will snatch them," whereas in verse 29 he says, "No one *is able* to snatch them." Some may attempt to snatch them, but they cannot succeed because the Son and the Father are united in purpose and power to keep them secure.

Some may reply, "Okay, perhaps no one *else* can snatch me from God's hand. But what if *I myself* through my sin and selfishness and stupidity wriggle free and jump out of my own accord?"

Is your power of choice greater than God's? Is your will more powerful than his? Look again at Jesus's words: "No one" is all inclusive. If eternal security is false, then Jesus is saying, "No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand; oh, that is, except for every one of the sheep." But if you mean *everyone*, you don't say *no one*.

“No one” is the opposite of “everyone.” Jesus doesn’t say, “No one except for the person himself.” In Romans 8:38–39 all creatures are excluded as a threat to loss of salvation. In John 10 the Creator himself is excluded as well.

Ask yourself this question: If Jesus wanted to teach eternal security, how could he have done it better or more explicitly than the way he does it here? If you yourself wanted to assert eternal security, how could you do it better than by using the words of Jesus in John 10? Someone might object, “They won’t perish so long as they remain sheep.” But the text doesn’t say that, does it? The assertion of the text is precisely that sheep always remain sheep. The point of the text is: “Once a sheep, always a sheep.”

If Jesus wanted us to believe that some of his sheep could cease being sheep and suffer eternal death, why did he say his sheep will never suffer eternal death and no one can snatch them from him or from his Father? Surely Jesus is not guilty of the crassest form of double-talk. In other words, “They will never perish” = “They shall always stay sheep.”

Another might ask, “But what if some sin I commit or a failure in life or a weakness or a lapse of faith occurs repeatedly?” How much sin does it take to lose one’s salvation? What does a good shepherd do with wandering sheep? He wouldn’t be a good shepherd if he didn’t restore them when they wander. Our security is ultimately dependent on God’s character and commitment, not on ours. People say, “If we change, we lose our salvation.” No. We can’t lose it, not because we can’t change, but because God can’t.

In the final analysis, the only reason I affirm the perseverance of the saints is that I believe in their preservation by the Savior. We persevere only because he preserves us in faith. Praise be to God!

CONCLUSION

Now, how might we think of Charley, and what should we say to him?

First, I would never say to him what the antinomian would: “Hey,

Charley. You really shouldn't be living this way. You are missing out on tremendous blessings. Please return to the Lord and his church. But if you don't, if you remain unrepentant in your sin, you will still spend eternity with me and all other Christians in heaven. After all, you made a decision for Christ and that's all that matters. Once saved, always saved, even though you will lose out on those spiritual rewards that you otherwise might have received. As grieved as I am by your lifestyle choices, I rejoice in knowing that you are my brother in Christ now and forever, even if you refuse to acknowledge that it is true."

No! Never, ever, give assurance of salvation to someone who is persisting in unrepentant sin, regardless of how allegedly sincere they were when they allegedly believed in Christ. I may not have the right to tell Charley that he isn't saved. After all, only God knows our hearts. But I certainly will never give him the assurance that he is.

Second, I would never say to him what the Arminian would: "Hey, Charley. I'm brokenhearted over the fact that you have turned your back on your Savior and have forfeited the blessings of the new birth, adoption, and justification. Turn from your sin, repent, and you can receive forgiveness and be saved yet again from your sins."

The simple fact is that I don't know whether Charley was ever truly born again. I don't know with complete certainty if his professed faith in Christ was authentic and life giving. Only God knows. What I do know is this: if Charley is among those whom the Father gave to the Son, if he truly came to Christ in faith and embraced him as Lord and Savior, Jesus will never, ever cast him out. Jesus *will* raise him up on the last day in fulfillment of the Father's will. No one will ever snatch Charley out of the loving hands of the Father and the Son.

But if Charley persists in unrepentant sin and hard-hearted unbelief, he will by his lack of perseverance demonstrate that in all likelihood, he never knew Jesus, and Jesus never knew him. On that basis you can rest assured that I will never give him a false assur-

ance of salvation simply because he claims once to have genuinely trusted Christ. As Jesus said, "You will recognize them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:20).

In any and every case, I will pray for Charley (or Charlene), as I hope you will.