THE GOSPEL LESSON 25

THE SECURITY OF THE BELIEVER

Why Eternal Life Cannot Be Lost

John 10:28 – *and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.*

WHERE WE ARE

We have now heard two systems on the question of whether a believer's eternal life is secure. Reformed Theology says that the true believer will certainly persevere in faith and obedience to the end, and that one who does not was never a believer. Arminian Theology says that the believer must persevere in faith and obedience to the end, and that one who does not was a believer but lost it. The two systems disagree on whether God guarantees the perseverance. They agree that final salvation belongs to those who continue in faithfulness, good works, and sin avoidance.

Both answers leave the believer with an assurance that is conditional. Under one, he cannot be certain he is among the elect until his perseverance is complete. Under the other, he can be certain he has eternal life today and cannot be certain he will have it tomorrow.

This lesson sets out what Scripture teaches in place of both. The believer's possession of eternal life is secure because of what eternal life is, who God is, what the Father, the Son, and the Spirit have done, what the believer now is, and the one condition God set. The result for the one who understands and believes these things is an assurance that does not change.

I. THE TERMS

The common phrase "once saved, always saved" is not used here, because the word "saved" carries more than one meaning in Scripture. σῴζω *sōzō* names a deliverance, and the context names what the deliverance is from. In James 2:14 it is deliverance of a believer from the temporal consequences of sin. In Philippians 2:12 it is an assembly kept from shame. In Hebrews 5:7 it is deliverance from death. A phrase built on that word can be heard to promise more than Scripture promises, or to be overturned by a text that uses the word in another sense.

The doctrine is better named **eternal security**. What is secure is eternal life and the believer's standing before God, received at the moment of faith. What Scripture does not promise as secure is the believer's walk, his fellowship, his reward, or his freedom from the consequences of sin. Each of those are dependent upon performance, and Scripture warns believers about each of them. We have already found that the warnings concern reward, discipline, and usefulness. None of them are about the gift of eternal life.

The keeping of that standing is God's work, and Scripture names it **preservation**. Perseverance is something a man does. Preservation is something God does. The security of the believer rests on God and God alone.

II. SECURE BECAUSE OF WHAT ETERNAL LIFE IS

It is a gift. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23). The word is χάρισμα *charisma*, a gift of grace. Romans states the difference between a gift and a wage: "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:4–5). And it states that the two cannot be mixed: "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Romans 11:6).

A gift that must be kept by conduct is a wage paid in installments. Eternal life is not received on the basis of merit, and so it cannot be withdrawn on the basis of demerit. If failure could remove it, success would be what retains it, and grace would no longer be grace.

It is possessed now. "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). The verb "has" is ἔχω *echō* in the present indicative. The believer has the life now. "Has passed" is μεταβαίνω *metabainō* in the perfect: the crossing is complete, and its result stands. The same verse says the believer "does not come into judgment." John's first letter says the same: "And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life" (1 John 5:11–12).

It is eternal. The adjective is αἰώνιος *aiōnios*. Life that can end after it is given was not eternal life. Life that lasts only as long as the believer's faithfulness is conditional life. Scripture never offers conditional life. It offers eternal life, and it says the believer has it.

III. SECURE BECAUSE OF WHO GOD IS

God is faithful. "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). The word translated "faithless" is a verb, ἀπιστέω *apisteō*, in the present indicative: "if we do not believe." It is the same verb Romans uses: "If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be!" (Romans 3:3–4). The condition supposes the case of a believer who stops believing. The answer is not that the man is lost, and it is not that he was never a believer. The answer is about God. "He remains faithful." The reason is His own character: "He cannot deny Himself." For God to cast off one to whom He gave eternal life would be for God to deny His own word.

The same faithfulness is the ground of the believer's standing at the end. Christ "will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:8–9). The verb "confirm" is βεβαιόω *bebaioō*, to establish beyond doubt. The word "blameless" is ἀνέγκλητος *anenklētos*, not open to accusation. These words were written to the Corinthians, an assembly divided and acting carnally (1 Corinthians 3:1–3). What made them blameless at the day of Christ was not their record. "God is faithful."

God cannot lie. Eternal life is "the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago" (Titus 1:2). Hebrews adds an oath to the promise:

> *In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil. (Hebrews 6:17–19)*

The two unchangeable things are the promise and the oath. Both are God's. The anchor is fixed "within the veil," where Christ has entered, and it holds because of where it is fixed.

IV. SECURE BECAUSE OF WHAT GOD HAS DONE

Scripture assigns the keeping of the believer to each Person of the Godhead.

The Father keeps. "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:29). The verb is ἁρπάζω *harpazō*, to seize by force. No one is excepted, and the believer is included in "no one."

> *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3–5)*

The inheritance is "reserved," τηρέω *tēreō* in the perfect: kept, and still kept. It cannot be removed, lessened, or diminished. The heirs are "protected," φρουρέω *phroureō*, a military word for a guarded city. The verb is passive, and the agent is "the power of God." The salvation is "ready to be revealed in the last time," the future completion of what was received at faith. 1 Peter does not argue the keeping. It states it as fact.

Jude ends on the same note: "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy" (Jude 24).

The Son has finished. "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:14). The verb "has perfected" is τελειόω *teleioō* in the perfect, and its reach is "for all time." The sins in view are all of them: "AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE. Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin" (Hebrews 10:17–18). There is no sin left to bring the believer back into condemnation, because the offering that dealt with sin was made once and is not repeated.

The Son also gives the life and keeps the one to whom He gives it. "I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish" (John 10:28). The verb is ἀπόλλυμι *apollumi*, to perish, in the aorist subjunctive with the double negative οὐ μή *ou mē*, the strongest denial Greek can form. "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:39–40). The keeping is the will of the Father and the work of the Son. For one believer to be lost, the Son would have to fail to do the Father's will.

Romans gathers the Son's work into one answer to every accusation: "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us" (Romans 8:33–34). The Judge has already declared the verdict, and the One who died for the believer is the One who speaks for him.

The Spirit seals. "In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory" (Ephesians 1:13–14). Heard, believed, sealed. The verb is σφραγίζω *sphragizō* in the aorist passive. The seal was applied at the moment of faith, by God, to the believer. A seal marks ownership and secures what it closes.

The Spirit is also the "pledge," ἀρραβών *arrabōn*, a down payment that obligates the one who gives it to pay the rest. "Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge" (2 Corinthians 1:21–22). The pledge is God's, given by God, and it binds God.

The seal has a stated duration. "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30). The command concerns the believer's walk, and a believer can grieve the Spirit. The seal concerns his standing, and it lasts until the day of redemption. The verse holds both in one sentence: the believer who grieves the Spirit is still sealed.

The Spirit has also placed the believer into the body of Christ. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). The verb βαπτίζω *baptizō* is aorist passive, done to the believer by the Spirit. Scripture gives no case of a member being removed from that body.

V. SECURE BECAUSE OF WHAT THE BELIEVER NOW IS

Born of God. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12–13). A birth is not undone. A son may dishonor his father, but he does not become unborn. "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26).

Raised and seated with Christ. "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:4–6). All three verbs are aorist and all three are God's. The believer's position is described as already given. To lose eternal life, the believer would have to be removed from a seat God gave him in Christ.

Hidden with Christ. "For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Colossians 3:3–4). The verb "is hidden" is κρύπτω *kruptō* in the perfect passive. The believer's life is kept where Christ is, and its future is tied to His appearing.

VI. SECURE BECAUSE OF THE CONDITION GOD SET

God set one condition for eternal life, and it is belief. "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). The condition is met when a person believes. Ephesians 1:13 dates the sealing to the moment of it: "having also believed, you were sealed." Scripture does not place a second condition at the end of life.

Jesus used the picture of a single drink. "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life" (John 4:13–14). The verb "drinks" in the promise is aorist, a drink taken. The result is "shall never thirst," again with the double negative. The water becomes a well "in him." It does not depend on his returning to the source.

The phrase "he who believes" is ὁ πιστεύων *ho pisteuōn*, an articular present participle (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47). The construction names a class of people, as "those who are perishing" and "those who are being saved" name two classes in 1 Corinthians 1:18. It does not describe a performance that must be sustained to remain in the class. The class is the believers, and the promise attached to the class is "has eternal life" and "shall not perish."

That is why 2 Timothy 2:13 can suppose that a believer stops believing and still say "He (God) remains faithful." The condition was met, the gift was given, and God does not take back what He gave on the condition He set.

VII. SECURE WHEN THE BELIEVER FAILS

Scripture does not hide the failures of believers, and it does not remove eternal life from any of them.

Lot. The narrative in Genesis gives little in Lot's conduct to commend him. He chose Sodom, lived among its men, and lingered when he was told to leave. Yet 2 Peter calls him righteous three times in two verses: "righteous Lot," "that righteous man," and "his righteous soul" (2 Peter 2:7–8). The righteousness was God's verdict, the same righteousness credited to Abraham when he believed (Genesis 15:6). Lot's conduct did not earn it, and his conduct did not remove it.

The Corinthians. The assembly at Corinth was divided, thinking like the natural man, and arrogant (1 Corinthians 3:1–3; 5:2). 1 Corinthians still addresses them as "saints" (1:2) and promises that God will confirm them to the end, blameless in the day of Christ (1:8). The same letter states what failure costs: "If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15). The work can be lost. The reward can be lost. The man is saved.

The consequences Scripture names for a believer's failure are real, and we have already set them out: the natural results of sin, the Father's discipline, and loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ. Not one of them is the loss of eternal life. "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

VIII. PERMANENT ASSURANCE

The result of eternal security is assurance, and the assurance is as permanent as its ground.

Scripture was written so that the believer would have it. "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). The knowledge rests on what God has written about His Son, not on what the believer finds in himself.

A believer can lose sight of what is true. 2 Peter describes one who "lacks these qualities" and so is "blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins" (2 Peter 1:9). He was purified, and he has forgotten it. A believer who wavers from the truth of God's promise will struggle with assurance, because he has taken his eyes from the only thing that gives it. The ground has not moved. The promise reads the same on the day he forgot it as on the day he believed it. The believer who understands and believes what God has said about the security of eternal life has an assurance that does not change, because what it rests on does not change.

That is what separates the assurance of Scripture from the assurance of both systems. Reformed Theology gives an assurance that waits on the evidence of a persevering life. Arminian Theology gives an assurance that lasts as long as the believer continues. Scripture gives an assurance that rests on the promise of God, the finished work of Christ, and the seal of the Spirit. None of these depends on the believer, and so the assurance built on them is permanent.

Romans 8 ends with the whole case in one sentence. Every possible threat is named, and the list closes on a category with no exceptions:

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

"I am convinced" is πείθω *peithō* in the perfect passive: persuaded, and still persuaded. The believer is a created thing. Nothing created, the believer included, is able to separate him from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Do you believe this?