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Eternal Security and the Missionary Message

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Abstract: Our doctrine concerning the eternal security of the believer is based on Scripture, and our hope for salvation depends on Christ alone. This author presents case studies from a pioneer mission field that put doctrinal discussion into the realm of the everyday. Here you see not only the struggle of a missiologist to reconcile Bible passages that speak of the perseverance of God in man's salvation and the necessity of personal faith, but also the exposed heart of a missionary who longs to see the Gospel take firm root in new believers. Balance will be the key in the missionary message.

“He saved me ... He saved me not ... He saved me ... He saved me not,” so muttered Catherine as she picked her psychological daisy petals and wondered if her childhood salvation experience really would hold up in the end.¹

How many of us have had similar doubts and how many have actually fallen away from active faith that perseveres?

If we are to be saved, God is the One who must do the saving. If we are to be justified and saved from sin and eternal separation from God, a Divine Being more powerful than we are must be the One to do it. And there is no doubt that the Lord God is able to save us, even

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though our own disposition to sin is strong. He does it through the atoning death of Jesus Christ, His Son.

Then why do we continue to doubt? Why do we still discuss and argue and worry about whether our salvation is utterly secure for all eternity?

Perhaps it is because our continuing tendency to sin leaves us with nagging guilt, or perhaps it is because some Bible passages seem to give us indication that we may in fact be in some danger of falling away. If not in real danger, they seem at least to say that we have some responsibility to ensure our salvation.

The issue of eternal security can pose problems in missions, especially perhaps for us who appreciate the Calvinist position. Some missionaries find motivation in the assurance that converts they find through their evangelistic efforts will never be lost; the fact that they will not ever turn back makes whatever sacrifice they face worth it all.

The doctrine of election tells us that God has chosen certain individuals to be saved; the missionary's own calling is to go and find those persons. Once having been found, their converts should never perish, so the missionaries' job and hardship will be rewarded.

I have just returned from the dedication of the Alamblak New Testament in Papua New Guinea.ⁱⁱ My husband and I began the translation of their Scriptures several years ago. We saw the first twinges of faith begin in the Alamblak community, and we were there when the first ravages of doubt came through.

We lived among them when the first Alamblak villagers heard the Gospel, and we witnessed the first Alamblak believers being baptized and giving testimony to Christ's saving power.

Then we listened and encouraged young Alamblak pastors when they faced strong temptations and wanted to give it all up. We sat and talked with some of the women about what it would mean for them to renounce their ways of prostitution, or how they would follow Christ when their husbands refused to make the same kind of commitment. We discussed the meaning of salvation with eager teenaged boys, and we saw them choose to follow Christ.

Today faith is strong in the Alamblak church. They are memorizing Scripture, praying for each other, believing God for salvation, and reaching out to unreached people in their country.

But some of the early converts have turned back. Some ignore the claims that Christ has on their lives and their early dedication to Him. One close friend has even died opposing the gospel.

BAGIOPA HEARD THE GOSPEL FIRST WHEN HE WAS ABOUT 30 YEARS OLD. AN AGGRESSIVE AND AMBITIOUS ALAMBLAK MAN, HE WAS IMPRESSED WITH THE PREACHING AND ORATORY ABILITIES OF THE NATIVE EVANGELISTS WHO EXPLAINED THE WAY OF SALVATION TO HIM. HE MADE AN APPARENT COMMITMENT TO CHRIST, AND IN DESCRIBING IT TO US, HE INDICATED HIS OWN DESIRE TO BECOME A GREAT PREACHER. HE TASTED OF THE HEAVENLY GIFT OF SALVATION, AND HIS ENTHUSIASM WAS UNMISTAKABLE, BUT AS THE MONTHS PASSED, HIS FAITH AND LUSTER WANED, AND WITHIN SEVERAL YEARS HE HAD GONE BACK TO SELFISH AMBITION, HE WAS DABBLING IN ANIMISM AND IDOLATRY, AND HE HAD BECOME AN ADVERSARY OF THE YOUNG CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY. SEVERAL TIMES HE TRIED TO REPENT AND STRAIGHTEN OUT THE MESS OF HIS LIFE, BUT LAST YEAR HE DIED, AN ENEMY OF THE FAITH.

Who knows? Was Bagiopa ever really saved? Was the Holy Spirit still convicting him and drawing him back to abiding in Christ, or did he, in fact, turn his back irrevocably on his Savior?

Just the other day I asked Salmo, his indifferent younger brother, “What about you? What happened to your own faith in Christ?”

His answer was, “Well, the door is not closed to me; I may yet turn back.”

Easy enough it is to say that probably Bagiopa and Salmo never were saved, even though they confessed Jesus as their Lord, but this too is a disturbing thought. Did God not receive them when they turned to Him?

It would have been my preference that every person that once named the Name of Christ would stand strong through thick and thin and that each would continue to grow spiritually. I hope the door is not yet closed to them, but the reality is, the Bible gives me only hope. I have difficulty saying with confidence that these Alamblak friends are saved if they are no longer claiming Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Let us look at some of the Scripture passages that help us formulate our beliefs.ⁱⁱⁱ

First, there are strong statements in the Bible that present the permanency of our salvation as being based on the perseverance of the Lord alone:

John 10:38 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. The Father and I are one.

Jude 24 To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forever more! Amen.

Matt. 7:21-23 Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord,, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!

II Cor. 5:5 Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

John 15:16 You did not choose me, but I chose you.

Romans 5:9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

Eph. 1:11-14 In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

NOTICE THAT OUR JUSTIFICATION AND SALVATION IS BASED ON GOD'S SOVEREIGN AND LEGAL ACT OF ATONEMENT. GOD ALSO HAS THE STRENGTH AND ABILITY TO KEEP US SAFE. OUR SALVATION DOES NOT IN ANY WAY DEPEND ON OUR OWN ABILITY. THAT IN ITSELF IS REASSURING.

However, undeniably, there are some New Testament passages that put some of the responsibility on our own shoulders:

Mt. 24:13 You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but *he who stands firm to the end will be saved.*

Jas. 1:12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because *when he has stood the test*, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Heb. 10:26-29 If we deliberately *keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth*, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the *blood of the covenant that sanctified him*, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?

Heb. 6:4-6 It is *impossible* for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, *if they fall away*, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

Gal. 3:22 ... what was promised being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

These two sets of Scriptures pose a dilemma for us. We want to honor the Biblical teaching that God is sovereign and able to keep those who have entrusted their lives to Him. But when Scripture also

insists that a perseverance of faith ultimately is required for salvation, we experience some dissonance.

Scripture is where we must get our theology. Life experiences must not ever form the basis for our doctrine, but living case studies can illustrate and bring theology down to reality.

Pretty, petite Kamias, a young Alamlak woman, found herself married to a greedy old man. She was called upon to gather food from the forest for him, to raise his other children, and to meet his every need. As civilization encroached on their tropical village, her husband felt the need of clothes and things that only foreigner's money could buy. Without any livelihood other than hunting and gathering, he began to sell his own wife to anyone who would pay a small pittance. Kamias obeyed and submitted to numerous immoral liaisons, but then came the day when she met the Savior, who not only convinced her that this lifestyle was wrong, but He forgave her sin and asked her to clean up her life. Her angry husband made life extremely difficult for Kamias, but she rejoiced in her own forgiveness and in the strength that she found in Christ, and she was content to live without the "bare necessities" that others enjoyed. We encouraged her that since she belonged to Christ, He would keep her safe and supply her needs.

YEARS PASSED, AND KAMIAS' FAITH GREW STRONG AND STOOD THE TEST OF TIME. WHEN HER AGED HUSBAND DIED, SHE WAS PURCHASED BY ANOTHER ANGRY, GREEDY MAN YOUNG ENOUGH TO BE HER OWN SON. HE TOO HAS MADE LIFE ALMOST INTOLERABLE FOR HER, BUT KAMIAS CLINGS TO HER SAVIOR IN SPITE OF INCALCULABLE DISCOURAGEMENT. OLD AND FRAIL NOW, KAMIAS WILL SOON MEET HER LORD, AND HE WILL UNDOUBTEDLY SAY, "WELL DONE, GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT!"

Although God chooses those whom He will save, somehow God seems to receive particular delight in being chosen Himself. He is pleased with those who continue to live with faith in Him. He apparently decided before the world began to create a race of creatures that can choose to honor and obey Him or they can choose to believe they don't need Him. In His sovereign wisdom, He

decided to ultimately save only those with lasting faith—a lifelong faith that includes obedience.

MERGUMARO WAS A TEENAGER WHEN HE WAS FIRST PRESENTED WITH THE CLAIMS OF CHRIST. HE BELIEVED, AND HE WAS BAPTIZED, AND HE BEGAN TO SERVE THE LORD IN EARNEST. BUT THIS YOUNG MAN HAS FACED MANY TEMPTATIONS, AND HE HAS FALLEN INTO SIN SEVERAL TIMES. EACH TIME, WITH INCREASING REMORSE, HE HAS TURNED BACK FOR FORGIVENESS AND RESTORATION. AT THIS POINT, HE IS SERVING GOD, BUT WITH TREPIDATION. HIS INABILITY TO AVOID SIN AND WALK IN PURITY DRIVES HIM TO HUMILITY AND DEEPER FAITH IN HIS SAVIOR.

MERGUMARO’S FRIEND, NOYI, ALSO PROFESSED CONVERSION AT A YOUNG AGE AND COULD HAVE GONE ON TO SERVE CHRIST SUCCESSFULLY, BUT HE TURNED INSTEAD TO A LIFE OF MURDEROUS CAROUSING AND IMMORALITY. WE WOULD LIKE TO TELL HIM THAT ASSUREDLY GOD HAS KEPT HIM SAFE, AND THAT HIS SALVATION IS SECURE, BUT ATTEMPTS TO TALK OF RESPONSIBILITY ARE MOCKED. THE END HAS NOT YET COME FOR NOYI, BUT HE IS SHOWING NO SIGNS OF RETURNING TO HIS FIRST LOVE OR HONORING HIS COMMITMENT TO CHRIST.

What shall we do with this paradox? Surely no one can be saved and then be snatched out of the Father’s Hand! But we see people who have apparently, as Scripture puts it, failed to “endure to the end.” How can we have full assurance of our salvation if any of it depends on our own choices? We greatly fear our own psychological and spiritual frailty -- rightly so. After only a few weeks of glorious transforming salvation, we ourselves find we are easily led astray, if not by physical lusts, then by mental contortions or social pressures.

Stories of early Christians who withstood terrible persecution encourage me. I think of Perpetua, an early Christian woman in North Africa, who was captured and imprisoned for her faith. The mother of a young baby, she was only allowed to see the child briefly each day to nurse the infant and breathe fresh air herself. Her father

visited her in prison to beg her to renounce Christ, but she refused to be persuaded, and said, “God’s will must be done.”

When she was summoned to appear before the judge, Perpetua was offered freedom if she would offer a sacrifice for the emperor. “I will not sacrifice; I am a Christian,” was her resolute answer. She was led to her place of execution to be hung up in a net, where a wild bull would gore her to death. Perpetua could have avoided her grisly end if she had denied Christ, or simply found an easier way to be a Christian, but her faith lasted to the end through horrendous maltreatment--an example to us today of God’s great grace and her own persevering belief.^{iv}

Any biblically informed person who is intellectually honest must admit that he faces doubts at times. We do not doubt that God can save us, but we genuinely fear that we cannot persevere to the end. We can hardly bear the pressure if our salvation depends on us.

“If God can keep me from being plucked out of His hand,” we ask, “why does He repeatedly tell me to “endure to the end?”

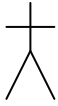
“If He can keep me from falling, why does he warn me about falling and being worse off than I was to begin with?”

As I, in faith, have pondered these questions, I have become very aware of the puny finite-ness of my own mind. And I have gained an appreciation of the infinite Divine Mind of God. I have a mental picture of myself standing between two opposing doctrines. I can look to the right and see the sovereignty of God and His desire and ability to keep me saved. Then I look to the left, and I see the responsibility He has placed on me to keep myself in the center of His plan, to maintain a strong faith in Him alone as the Savior.

Back and forth I stare, trying to comprehend first one truth and then the other. But I cannot see them both at one time. They seem in opposition one to the other. Eternal security and man’s responsibility do not line up with each other, so how can I reconcile the two doctrines? I feel I must choose one position and move to that camp.

MY VISION NEEDS GOD’S PERSPECTIVE. God lives above both systems of thought. These two doctrines are man’s attempt to systematize and explain the ultimate truth about God’s design, but He originated the ideas, *and He alone can see the big picture, which includes both truths.* He alone knows how the puzzle fits together.





GOD’S MIND IS INFINITE. MY MIND IS FINITE. I MUST SOMEHOW BELIEVE GOD FOR BOTH PARTS OF THIS PICTURE. I MUST BELIEVE THAT GOD GIVES ME FAITH IN HIS ABILITY TO KEEP ME SAVED. I MUST ALSO BELIEVE THAT HE REQUIRES MY FAITH TO BE TESTED AND TO ENDURE TO THE END OF MY LIFE. I HAVE TO EMBRACE TWO OPPOSITES, EVEN THOUGH I CANNOT RECONCILE THEM THIS SIDE OF ETERNITY, BECAUSE GOD HAS SPOKEN BOTH.

Even though I do not stand where God does and I cannot see the whole picture, I must believe that He sees all and understands this conundrum. To Him the picture makes sense. Each doctrine is part of a perfect whole.

In admitting my finiteness this way I find great comfort. To rest in God and not be required to sign on to one or the other exclusive doctrine is TRUE FAITH. I need not argue either against God’s sovereignty or against man’s responsibility. I do not need to see the big picture for now; I just need to believe that God sees life and salvation better than I do.

Each of us knows people who have professed a commitment to Christ and have subsequently forgotten to live it out. We don’t know whether those persons were ever genuinely saved or not, whether they have simply backslidden, or whether a spiritually horrifying renunciation has taken place. But we dare not attempt to formulate our theology from our human anecdotes and examples. We must base our understanding of Scripture on Scripture, rather than on situations we see.

According to the Bible, a person who believes in Christ is saved to the uttermost, and God is able to keep him safe, even in weakness. But what about a person who once believed and now who refuses to believe? What does the Scripture say about him? Even if he once obeyed in faith, he has not kept the faith and no longer meets the conditions for salvation. He is lost, but it is not the fault of God for letting him be plucked away. God was able to keep him secure, but faith is ultimately required for salvation. The warnings in Hebrews are meaningless if there is no true danger.

Jesus too seemed to believe that one person who had followed Him would be lost eternally. Even while He prayed to His Father for his disciples, Jesus had a horrifying thought about Judas, “(My disciples) were Yours; You gave them to me, and they have obeyed Your word;...they knew with certainty that I came from You, and *they believed* that You sent me.... While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that Name You gave me. *None has been lost except the one* doomed to destruction.” John 17:6-12

The Apostle Paul admitted to a certain wrestling with this issue, too. In I Thessalonians he declares that he knows the Thessalonian Christians were chosen by God.^v A few verses later, though, he acknowledges that he was “afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted (the converts) and our efforts might have been useless.”^{vi} I do not take from his confession that people may lose their salvation, but only that Paul refused to be dogmatic, choosing rather to humbly pray that the “Lord might direct their hearts into God’s love and Christ’s perseverance.”^{vii}

Although this logic may only represent the product of a finite mind, the best I can do to understand the intent of an infinite God is to recognize that I cannot truly and fully understand Him or His plan. Surely God sees the picture entirely differently, in a way I haven’t even considered. Even at my best I cannot confidently claim that I have figured the puzzle out.

So I must give in and finally believe only in God, who is bigger and wiser than I am.

Furthermore, I rejoice in the fact that God is not only big and wise, He is just. He is the one who, in the end, will sort out who is saved and who is not. (Frankly, I am glad I do not have that responsibility either now or in eternity.) God is the righteous judge of all the earth, and He will do right.^{viii}

I am called only to faith in God, not to full understanding. I can only see dimly, as through a smoky glass,^{ix} but my salvation only comes through the atoning death of Jesus Christ and the mercy of a wise and loving God, and He is fully aware of what is happening. I could not attain salvation even by faith if Jesus had not first come to me in mercy.

And we can be sure that it is God who keeps us secure in His hand.

Still, God requires faith; He is pleased with faith; He rewards faith; He even gives faith. I cannot know how He deals with insufficient faith, with lack of faith, or with lost faith. Someday I will know fully how God's saving and sustaining power fits with man's need to hold on, but for now I must believe that both sides of the picture are true because God has spelled them out in His infallible Word. So I must not ignore one side of this issue or the other.

Salvation comes by grace through faith, and it is given to those who endure to the end. God alone can keep us from falling, and He rewards those who come to Him in faith. We must have a balance of doctrine and teaching.

Hebrews 10:23 gives us that *balance* of teaching: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." We NEED that balance!

The Doctrine of Eternal Security is our best human re-formation of what we understand as God's sovereign ability to elect and keep his children saved from eternal punishment. But let us not place more faith in our doctrines than in the sum of what Holy Scripture says.

In any missionary thrust, an overemphasis on the Doctrine of Eternal Security would be detrimental to the understanding of the Gospel among new converts. They must hear that they are required to endure in faith to the end. Likewise, an overemphasis on the responsibility of man would also be injurious. Their faith must be firmly planted in the God who can keep them from falling. Both sets of Scripture must be given; the whole counsel of God must be preached, even when we cannot wrap our finite minds around it.

That is why I have dedicated my life to giving translated Scripture to those who do not have it. Both the Scripture passages which emphasize God's sovereignty and those which focus on human responsibility are necessary. People need the *whole* counsel of God!

To the Alamlak, my only message can be, "Believe in Jesus; don't give up! Keep your faith. God will hold on to you; you hold on to God and His promises. Don't take God's grace lightly! God has obviously called you to Himself; believe in Christ before the door is closed to you!"

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- i Catherine Painter, “Encouraged by Sure Salvation,” *Family Bible Study, Life Ventures: Learner Guide*, LifeWay Church Resources. Summer 2004
- ii About 2000 individuals in the Alambalak people-group live in the Sepik swamplands of Papua New Guinea. Alambalak case studies stem from my personal interaction with members of the community.
- iii All Scriptures passages are quoted from the New International Version
- iv *Foxe’s Christian Martyrs of the World*. By John Foxe. Chicago: Moody Press. Originally published c. 1570 AD.
- v I Thes. 1:4
- vi I Thes. 3:5
- vii II Thes. 3:5
- viii Genesis 18:25
- ix I Corinthians 13:12