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**Are God’s New Testament Promises
Assuring Final Redemption
Ultimately Contingent Upon Human Obedience**

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Introduction

This paper seeks to answer the question of whether or not God’s New Testament promises assuring final redemption are ultimately contingent upon human obedience. By considering four of the most explicit New Testament promises that address final redemption, this

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paper will attempt to show that final redemption is ultimately contingent upon the obedience of Jesus Christ as mediator of the New Covenant.

This paper is written from an evangelical perspective that fully embraces the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978). The reader should presuppose the doctrinal positions that are articulated in the above-mentioned document to be a fair representation of the doctrinal positions that are assumed in this paper.

A. Exegesis of the Relevant Passages

In the book, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Bruce Demarest identifies four passages as “promises” of God “to keep his own people secure to the end.”² For the purposes of this paper, the following four passages have been expanded to include their immediate context:

1. John 6:35-40³

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ 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.”

2. John 10:22-30

²² At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. ²⁴ So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” ²⁵ Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and

² Bruce A. Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation* (Foundations of Evangelical Theology; Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 439.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version

no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.³⁰ I and the Father are one.”

3. 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus,⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ,⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

4. Philippians 1:3-11

³I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,⁴ always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy,⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.⁸ For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment,¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Of these four passages, most consider John 10:22-30 to be the most explicit statement regarding the assurance of final redemption for those who have trusted in Jesus Christ. Other systematicians mention passages such as Romans 8:30-39, 11:29, 1 Corinthians 13:7, 13, Ephesians 1:13, 4:30, 2 Thessalonians 3:3, 2 Timothy 1:9, 12, 1 Peter 1:5, Jude 1, and 24 as “direct scriptural evidence” for the assurance of the final redemption of the believer.⁴ There should be little debate regarding whether or not there are promises in the New Testament that speak of the assurance of final redemption in light of the biblical testimony. The question, therefore, is not whether the New Testament makes such promises, but rather, what, if anything, are these promises contingent upon to be fulfilled. In order to answer this question, a closer exegetical look at these promises and their

⁴ See Robert Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical & Historical* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2005), 768–769 for more on these passages.

theological context is necessary. For the sake of brevity, the four passages enumerated above will be considered exemplary for the New Testament witness.

In the first passage, John 6:35-40, Jesus addresses an audience that had been following him around since the miraculous feeding of the five thousand.⁵ According to Jesus, this crowd was following him around “not because *they* saw signs, but because *they* ate *their* fill of the loaves.”⁶ It is in this context that Jesus moves into the “bread of life” discourse where he says, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” By saying this, Jesus draws a parallel between himself and the bread from the previous day. Jesus, of course, is speaking in figurative terms about himself when talking about the “bread of life”, but this fact escapes the crowd as is evidenced in verse 34 where they say, “Sir, give us this bread always.” The crowd was looking for a constant, miraculous source of physical bread, but Jesus was speaking to them about “coming to him and believing in him.”⁷ This is further revealed to be the case when Jesus uses the adversative *alla* (“but, rather”) to show how the crowd had failed to perceive his true person and believe in him.⁸ Having addressed the crowd, Jesus goes on to speak of a people that the “Father gives” him who will most certainly “come to” him.⁹ Given the fact that verse 35 parallels “coming to Jesus” with “believing in Jesus,” it is clear that those that the “Father gives” Jesus are those that will “believe in Jesus.”¹⁰ This is seen further in verses 39 and 40, with verse 39 emphasizing the sure fulfillment of the Father’s will in Jesus’ perfect work of safeguarding those given to him by the Father while verse 40 emphasizes the sure experience of the one who believes in Jesus, which results in eternal life and resurrection in the last day. In summary, Jesus obeys the will

⁵ John 6:1-15, 22.

⁶ John 6:26.

⁷ John 6:35.

⁸ John 6:36.

⁹ John 6:37.

¹⁰ Passages like John 6:35-40 and John 10:22-30 tend to bring the debate regarding election to bear on the topic of eternal security. Engagement in the debate regarding election is beyond the scope of this paper. However, advocates of conditional election, unconditional election, or congruent election should all be able to embrace the sure and final redemption of the elect regardless of one’s position on how someone comes to be considered a member of the elect.

of the Father by safeguarding those given to him that in turn enjoy eternal life by believing in him. Therefore, the surety of final redemption for the “believing one”¹¹ is based upon the obedience of Jesus Christ to the will of the Father.

The second passage, John 10:22-30, as mentioned earlier, is one of the most explicit text in the New Testament regarding final redemption. In this passage, Jesus finds himself in the temple during the Feast of Dedication. Jews clamored around him “in suspense” wondering if he was the Messiah. In similar fashion to John 6, yet in more direct terms, Jesus tells the Jews that surrounded him that the “works that *he does* in *his* Father’s name bear witness about *him*.” The healing at the pool of Bethesda, the miraculous feeding of five thousand people, and the healing of a blind man among other things should have been enough to convince them that he was the Messiah, yet, they persisted in their unbelief. Jesus again uses the adversative *alla* (“but, rather”) to explain the condition of their unbelief. According to Jesus, these Jews did not believe because they were “not part of *his* flock.”¹² Jesus continues and says, “*his* sheep hear *his* voice” and are known by him. In parallel to this affirmation, one remembers Jesus’ words from John 6 where he told the crowd that they failed to recognize him and believe in him. In like manner, the Jews in John 10 have failed to recognize the voice of God’s shepherd and follow their Messiah. The language of “hearing and following” in verse 27 points to the act of believing in Jesus as the Messiah. In response to “hearing and following,” Jesus acts by giving eternal life, which he additionally describes by use of the copulative *kai* (“and, also, even) as a life that “never perishes.” Syntactically, verse 28 contains one of the strongest emphatic constructions in the New Testament, which is the double negation (*ou meæ*) with the aorist subjunctive form of *apollymi*. Wayne Grudem states that this phrase could be translated, “and they shall certainly not perish forever.”¹³ Jesus continues after affirming the nature of the eternal life

¹¹ *Pisteuoæn* is a present active participle in the nominative singular form used to describe the one who is in the state of believing.

¹²

John

10:26

¹³ Wayne A Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press ; Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 790.

[Footnote continued on next page ...]

that is possessed by the believer saying, “And no one will snatch them out of my hand.” In verse 28, Jesus is shown to be active in the work of “giving” and “possessing,” while man is the receiver of eternal life. The initiative of Christ in securing his sheep is exceedingly clear. In verse 29, Jesus changes the focus from his active work of possessing to the active work of the Father, “who is greater than all,” to possess those that he has given to the Son. In other words, to suggest that one can be snatched from the hands of the Son or the Father is in essence to call into question the power of God. Here, just as in John 6, the assurance of final redemption is contingent upon the work of the Son to keep those whom the Father has given him. If Jesus were to fail to do so, then the “eternal purpose of God in Christ” would not be fulfilled, which destroys all confidence in the power of God.

In the third passage, 1 Corinthians 1:4-9, the apostle Paul roots the promise of final redemption in the “grace of God that was given *to the saints*¹⁴ in Christ Jesus.” Paul’s common phrase, *en Christo* (“in Christ”), which is used in verse 4, most often refers to the believer’s union with Christ. The doctrine of union with Christ is key to understanding the relationship between final redemption and the obedience of Christ. One of the most extensive statements on the subject is found in Ephesians 1:3-14, where Paul writes,

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸ which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹ making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the

¹⁴ “To the saints” is provided in this quotation with the presupposition that Paul assumes that the “you” in 1 Corinthians 1:4 is synonymous with the saints from 1:2.

promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

These references to union with Christ (“in Christ”) are found throughout the New Testament and highlight “the core principle of salvation: union with Christ is not one phase or aspect of salvation; it is the whole of salvation in which all other aspects are subsets.”¹⁵ As Grudem notes, “Every aspect of God’s relationship to believers is in some way connected to our relationship with Christ.”¹⁶ If, therefore, Ephesians 1:3 states that “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” is enjoyed by the one who through faith is united to Christ and Ephesians 1:6 states that believers have been “blessed” with God’s glorious grace, then it is only fair to the apostle Paul to conclude that union with Christ blesses the believer with grace from God. If this is the case, then, in light of 1 Corinthians 1:4-9, God’s sustaining work to present believer’s guiltless to the end is the result of the grace that comes through union with Christ. This means that Christ’s work as the believer’s representative in “his life, death, burial, and resurrection”¹⁷ effectively secures for them the grace of perseverance.¹⁸ In summary, the “grace of God that was given to the saints in Christ Jesus” manifests itself in Christ’s work to sustain them to the end. If Christ fails to sustain them to the end, then he has failed as the vessel through which God’s grace comes to the believer, but this cannot be the case. Thus, one must conclude that because of what Christ has done, he is able to fulfill his work of delivering the grace of perseverance to all who are united to him.

In the final passage, Philippians 1:3-11, Paul uses language similar to that of 1 Corinthians 1:4-9, when he refers to the completion of a good work in his readers “at the day of Jesus Christ.” At first, it might appear that this passage does not support the thesis of this paper, which states that final redemption is ultimately contingent

¹⁵ Kenneth Keathley, “The Work of God: Salvation,” in *A Theology for the Church* (ed by. Daniel L. Akin, David P. Nelson, and Peter R. Schemm; Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2007), 687.

¹⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 840(emphasis original).

¹⁷ For other passages that speak of Christ’s active as the believer’s representative on the basis of their union, see Romans 6:2-8 and Colossians 2:18-3:4.

¹⁸ For more on the doctrine of union with Christ, see Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical & Historical*, 664–670; Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 961–967; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 840–850; Keathley, “The Work of God: Salvation,” 687–690.

on the obedience of Jesus Christ. This tension exists because the key verse¹⁹ in the passage points to God’s activity to complete a good work, instead of Christ’s action. Most Pauline scholars acknowledge that when Paul refers to “God,” he has God the Father in view. If this is the case, then doesn’t this passage credit the Father with the completion of one’s salvation and not Jesus? In a narrow sense, yes; but in a broad sense, both are active.²⁰ In the narrow sense, the work of God the Father is in view in verse 6. Paul boldly confesses that God the Father has begun a work in the believers at Philippi that will be brought to completion. In Paul’s mind, there is no uncertainty about the completion of this work. Yet, Paul does not stop here with his discussion of these believers and the “day of Christ.” In verses 10-11, Paul speaks of the believers being “pure and blameless for the day of the Christ, filled with fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.” In other words, Paul does not only see the Father at work in verse 6, but he also see his readers being “pure and blameless for the day of Christ” on account of being “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” The exact nature of this filling is not described in this passage, but it would be wrong to assume that the fruit spoken of in verse 11 is that of the believer’s personal acts of righteousness. Instead, this is the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, which is spoke of elsewhere in Philippians 3:8-11, where Paul writes,

⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

In the above passage, Paul speaks of being “found in *Christ*, not having a righteousness of my own, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” In

¹⁹ Verse 6.

²⁰ In a canonical sense, all three persons of the Godhead are active in the preservation of the believer unto final salvation. (See Ephesians 1:4-13).

summary, then, when Paul speaks of God the Father bringing a good work to completion at the day of Jesus Christ, he understands that the completion of that work is contingent upon the “fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ,” which elsewhere in the letter of Philippians is understood to be the righteousness that secures Paul’s knowledge of Christ and the power of Christ’s resurrection. Therefore, when the reader takes the entire letter of Philippians into consideration, Christ’s obedience, which secures for the believer the righteousness upon which basis they are accepted before God, is revealed to be part of the good work that Paul is sure the Father will bring to completion. Without the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, there is no completion of the good work of salvation.

B. Exegetical Summary

Each of the four passages in the section above demonstrate that final redemption is contingent upon the obedience of Christ in the follow ways:

1. In John 6:35-40, Jesus states that he will not lose anyone that the Father gives him, because by implication, it would be in direct disobedience to his Father’s will.
2. In John 10:22-30, Jesus states in the most emphatic way that those who are possessed by him will never perish. This passage emphasizes what was already revealed in John 6, namely, Jesus’ promise will not be broken, because the integrity of God himself is at stake. In a sense, then, Jesus promises to act consistent with his nature as the one who is ontologically equal to his Father.²¹
3. In 1 Corinthians 1:4-9, Paul relates the sustaining work of Christ to the believer’s union with him by faith. As was explored above, Christ serves as the believer’s representative in his life, death, burial and resurrection, thus secure for those who are in him the grace of perseverance.
4. In Philippians 1:3-11, Paul rightly asserts the surety of the Father’s work to complete the good work that he had begun in the believers at Philippi and concludes his thought by

²¹ John 10:30.

connecting God’s work of completion to the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the sake of the believer’s pure and blameless presentation on the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 3 helps the interpreter understand the meaning of Paul’s phrase regarding the “righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ” by further explaining it as the righteousness that is counted as belonging to the believer on account of faith.²²

Having considered each of the four passages, this paper will conclude with a theological analysis that attempts to summarize the New Testament’s teaching on the relationship between Christ’s obedience and the believer’s assurance in final redemption by considering how the four passages from above relate to Jesus’ work as the mediator of the New Covenant.

C. Theological Analysis of the Relevant Passages

All four of the passages above are found in the New Testament, which is an explicitly New Covenant context. The New Covenant was revealed to Jeremiah by God in Jeremiah 31:31-34, which says

³¹ “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

According to this passage, the New Covenant would in some sense be discontinuous with the former covenant, which is a reference to the Sinaitic Covenant.²³ The former covenant’s promises were based upon obedience to the stipulations of the covenant. Hence, in Exodus 19:5-6, one reads, “⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among

²² Romans 4 is a helpful historical example of this concept.

²³ Also known as the “Mosaic Covenant,” see Exodus 19:1-6.

all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Throughout much of the prophetic literature in the Old Testament, there are multiple examples of YHWH promising to either bless or judge the people on the basis of their obedience to his law.²⁴ However, in Jeremiah 31, YHWH declares that something new is coming for the people of Israel and Judah. According to the promises in this passage, YHWH is going to guarantee their obedience to his law by writing on their heart, while all members of the covenant community will truly “know the LORD.” This guarantee (or promise) of obedience is one of the key differences between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant.

The idea of the New Covenant is taken up again in the New Testament in Luke 22:20, where Jesus declares his own blood to be the blood of the New Covenant. Though it is not immediately clear from Luke 22 why this is significant, Hebrews 8 brings clarification by revealing that Jesus is the mediator of the New Covenant. The mediatorial work of Jesus on behalf of those that believe in him is absolutely vital to understanding the New Covenant. It is important to note that God has not lowered his standard of holiness for the sake of mankind. This is simply not the point of Jeremiah 31 or Hebrews 8. Instead, God knows that mankind, in and of itself, cannot fulfill the stipulations demanded by the New Covenant. So instead of articulating those stipulations in Jeremiah 31, where only the blessings are spoke of, the stipulations are placed upon the one who mediates the covenant between God and man. Jesus is the mediator of the New Covenant that must fulfill all that the Father requires in order to give the blessings of the New Covenant to those that trust in Jesus Christ. The stipulations of the New Covenant are those that are seen being fulfilled in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This can be seen in John 17:4, where Jesus says, “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.” Jesus came to earth with a purpose to accomplish the work that his Father gave him, which is later spoken of in the letter to the Hebrews in terms of Jesus’ work as a regal priest that is uniquely qualified to mediate the blessings of the New Covenant to all who are found in

²⁴ See Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Cambridge, England; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991) for a complete study on prophetic forms of speech.

him. In his role as New Covenant mediator, he not only offers as priest the sacrifice that secures final and eternal redemption,²⁵ but he suffers as the sacrifice that inaugurates the New Covenant.²⁶

In fulfilling this work, Jesus procures for all believers the blessings of the New Covenant through union with himself. In other words, the blessings of the New Covenant are mediated blessings that come through union with Christ. Christ, therefore, secures the enjoyment of the blessings of the New Covenant for the believer by virtue of his work as priest, which is perfect because of the sinless obedience of his indestructible life that qualifies him to ever live as an intercessor for those who have trusted in him. The blessings of the New Covenant come to believers because they are based on the perfect obedience of the New Covenant mediator, Jesus Christ. Hence, the implicit promise of final redemption that is contained in the blessings of the New Covenant is contingent ultimately upon the person and work of Jesus Christ.

At point, the intersection between the four passages and New Testament theology should be clear. The four passages that were considered earlier in the paper point to the one of two aspects of Christ's work as New Covenant mediator. John 6 and John 10 reveal how Christ's fulfilled the stipulations of the New Covenant by perfectly obeying the will of his Father. 1 Corinthians 1 and Philippians 1 reveal how Christ functions as the New Covenant mediator by securing the final redemption of believers. Thus, Christ fulfills the demands of the New Covenant while those who are found in Christ by faith experience the blessings of the New Covenant on account of Christ's work as mediator.

Conclusion

In conclusion, for one to suggest that final redemption is ultimately on the basis of human obedience strips Christ of his rightful places as both the obedient Son of God and the mediator of the New Covenant. If one could perish after having been possessed by Christ, Jesus would be disqualified both in his person as the Son of God and in his work as the New Covenant mediator. Hence, the only

²⁵ Hebrews 9:12.

²⁶ Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25.

Biblical conclusion to draw from the New Testament is that the believer's final redemption is assured on the basis of the another's obedience; the obedience of Jesus, the obedient Son of God who mediates the blessing of perseverance to all who are united to him by faith for the sake of the integrity of the glory of God as it is revealed in the work of Christ.

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