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Warning Texts and the Irrevocable Nature of God’s Election

Carl Judson Davis
Chairman of Christian Studies & Philosophy
Professor of Greek
Bryan College, Dayton, Tennessee

The vigour, and power, and comfort of our spiritual life
depends on the mortification of the deeds of the flesh.¹

John Owen (1616-1683)

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Introduction: God’s Election and Inadequate Faith

How should Christians understand God’s election in light of passages about apostasy? Can a truly saved person abandon their faith and thus go from being truly saved to truly lost? Or is apostasy from

¹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 9.

Christian faith proof that such faith was never truly saving faith in the first place? And what of the idea that warning texts are a means of grace preserve the elect?

A. Confident but Inadequate Faith

1. Matthew 7:22-23 Lord, Lord, Did We not . . .

Jesus describes a person with inadequate faith in Matthew 7:22-23. Such a person claims to be a follower of Jesus, but that person's confident, self-profession is not true.

πολλοὶ ἐροῦσίν μοι ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ· κύριε κύριε, οὐ τῷ σῷ ὀνόματι ἐπροφητεύσαμεν, καὶ τῷ σῷ ὀνόματι δαιμόνια ἐξεβάλομεν, καὶ τῷ σῷ ὀνόματι δυνάμεις πολλὰς ἐποιήσαμεν. καὶ τότε ὁμολογήσω αὐτοῖς ὅτι οὐδέποτε ἔγνω ὑμᾶς· ἀποχωρεῖτε ἀπ' ἐμοῦ οἱ ἐργαζόμενοι τὴν ἀνομίαν.

On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, **did we not** prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then will I declare to them, “**I never knew you**; depart from me, **you ones continually working lawlessness.**”²

Jesus says that many people fall into this category (πολλοὶ ἐροῦσίν). Notice that these rejected people are certain they are saved (οὐ . . . ἐπροφητεύσαμεν . . . δαιμόνια ἐξεβάλομεν . . . δυνάμεις πολλὰς ἐποιήσαμεν). In Greek, οὐ with a question in the indicative implies a positive answer: “Did we not . . .?” expecting the answer, “Yes, we did .” Thus, such people are certain that they will not and could not fall short.

These false believers address Jesus as “Lord.” They have prophesied in Jesus' name. They have cast out demons. They have worked miracles in Jesus' name. In other words, they have spent their lives as leaders in Christ's church. At the same time, Jesus says that they continually work (notice the participle) and that he never knew them. Their lives are characterized by nothing but continually working iniquity. They thought themselves essential leaders in Christ's church, but their lives are characterized fully by secret and constant sin. They made a great outward show, but the inward reality was not there. Jesus presents this teaching as a command for all Christians to examine themselves whether this be true of themselves or not.

² Author's translation. All other translations of the Bible are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

Notice these three points: 1) The lives of false believers give no evidence of the holiness of an inward change, and without that work of God in inward holiness, no one will see God (Heb. 12:14; Matt. 5:8; Rom. 6:22; Ezek. 36:22-36). 2) They felt they had a relationship with Jesus, but Jesus did not have a relationship with them. He never knew them. They were never Christians. 3) For false believers, their faith rests in themselves, “Lord, Lord, did we not . . .” and not in Christ. The faith of false believers stands in their own accomplishments and not in the merits and righteousness of Christ. Their faith was a faith in their ability to prophesy, their ability to cast out demons, and their ability to work miracles. They acknowledge that such works were “in Jesus’ name.” But that confession according to Christ was lip-service only. John Gill (1697-1771) rightly notes,

It may be observed, that these men lay the whole stress of their salvation upon what they have done in Christ’s name; and not on Christ himself, in whom there is salvation, and in no other: they say not a syllable of what Christ has done and suffered, [but] only of what they have done.³

Are there examples in Scripture of these people? Matthew Poole (1624-1679) thinks so when he remarks,

*We have prophesied in thy name; that is, revealed thy will unto people; and in thy name, that is, by thy authority and power, cast out devils, and done many wonderful works, that is, wrought many miraculous operations. In the Old Testament we find Baalam and Saul prophesying, who were both wicked men. Judas was sent out (under the New Testament) both to preach and to work miracles. So as none from gifts, no, not the most eminent and extraordinary gifts, can conclude the goodness of his state, or any special favour with God. I will profess, that is, I will openly declare to them, I never knew you, that is, so as to approve you, or take pleasure in you. Depart from me, ye that work iniquity: see Matt. 25:41.*⁴

Leon Morris (1992) avers,

³ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, (The Baptist Commentary Series; London: Mathews and Leigh, 1809), 1:73.

⁴ Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853), 3:32.

“I never knew you” (cf. 25:12) does not, of course, mean that he was ignorant of their existence, but rather that he never acknowledged them; he never recognized them as what they claimed to be.⁵

So how does this relate to God’s sovereignty in election? Hagner (1998) opines,

Behind the free and responsible deeds of human beings lies always the sovereign will of God (cf. 11:27; 13:11). These have shown by their conduct that they have not been chosen by Jesus (cf. John 13:18; 15:16).⁶

All of this shows, that the New Testament affirms the idea of a confident but false faith for many who are in the visible church. Thus, membership in the visible church is no guarantee of election by God unto salvation. The duty of every Christian is self-examination according to the Scriptures.

2. Matt. 13:24-30, 36-40 The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares

Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the tares also points to a group with seemingly genuine faith but who in fact were never true believers. Tares look like wheat until the time of harvest when their fruit shows what they were all along. Consider Matt. 13:24-30, 36-40:

Ἄλλην παραβολὴν παρέθηκεν αὐτοῖς λέγων· ὁμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἄνθρωπῳ σπείραντι καλὸν σπέρμα ἐν τῷ ἀγρῷ αὐτοῦ. ἐν δὲ τῷ καθεύδειν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἦλθεν αὐτοῦ ὁ ἐχθρὸς καὶ ἐπέσπειρεν ζιζάνια ἀνά μέσον τοῦ σίτου καὶ ἀπῆλθεν. ὅτε δὲ ἐβλάστησεν ὁ χόρτος καὶ καρπὸν ἐποίησεν, τότε ἐφάνη καὶ τὰ ζιζάνια. προσελθόντες δὲ οἱ δούλοι τοῦ οἰκοδεσπότου εἶπον αὐτῷ· κύριε, οὐχὶ καλὸν σπέρμα ἔσπειρας ἐν τῷ σῶ ἀγρῷ; πόθεν οὖν ἔχει ζιζάνια; ὁ δὲ ἔφη αὐτοῖς· ἐχθρὸς ἄνθρωπος τοῦτο ἐποίησεν. οἱ δὲ δούλοι λέγουσιν αὐτῷ· θέλεις οὖν ἀπελθόντες συλλέξωμεν αὐτά; ὁ δὲ φησιν· οὐ, μήποτε συλλέγοντες τὰ ζιζάνια ἐκριζώσητε ἅμα αὐτοῖς τὸν σῖτον. ἄφετε συναξάνεσθαι ἀμφοτέρα ἕως τοῦ θερισμοῦ, καὶ ἐν καιρῷ τοῦ θερισμοῦ ἐρῶ τοῖς θερισταῖς· συλλέξατε πρῶτον τὰ ζιζάνια καὶ δήσατε αὐτὰ εἰς δέσμας πρὸς τὸ κατακαῦσαι αὐτά, τὸν δὲ σῖτον συναγάγετε εἰς τὴν ἀποθήκην μου. . . . Τότε ἀφείδους τοὺς ὄχλους ἦλθεν εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν. καὶ προσῆλθον αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ λέγοντες· διασάφησον ἡμῖν τὴν παραβολὴν τῶν ζιζανίων τοῦ ἀγροῦ. ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν· ὁ σπείρων τὸ καλὸν σπέρμα ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ὁ δὲ ἀγρός ἐστὶν ὁ κόσμος, τὸ δὲ καλὸν σπέρμα οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας· τὰ δὲ ζιζάνια εἰσιν οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ πονηροῦ, ὁ δὲ ἐχθρὸς ὁ σπείρας αὐτά ἐστὶν ὁ διάβολος, ὁ δὲ θερισμὸς συντέλεια

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 181.

⁶ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1–13*, vol. 33A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 188.

αἰῶνός ἐστιν, οἱ δὲ θερισταὶ ἄγγελοὶ εἰσιν. ὥσπερ οὖν συλλέγεται τὰ ζιζάνια καὶ πυρὶ [κατα]καίεται, οὕτως ἔσται ἐν τῇ συντελείᾳ τοῦ αἰῶνος·

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" . . . Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age."

Notice that Jesus sows “good seed” and the enemy sows “tares.” The good seed are those who, when they produce wheat, prove what they were all along. Good seed in this parable are Christians; bad seed are those who claim to be Christians but are not. Satan has placed them among true believers. Tares contain poison.⁷ These false Christians, thus, are poisonous members among the people of God. The servants want to root them out, but Jesus refuses to allow this for fear that even one true Christian be harmed in the process. Thus, the parable affirms that we must treat everyone who professes to be a Christian as a true Christian. Jesus and Jesus alone will separate the true from the false at the final judgment. So how might apostasy texts fit in with Jesus’ teaching of the wheat and the tares?

⁷ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 254, writes, “Its poison comes from a fungus that is frequently found in it.”

3. 1 John 2:19 and Christians Who Leave the Faith

Those who leave the Christian faith prove by their leaving that they never were Christians. John says in 1 John 2:19,

ἐξ ἡμῶν ἐξῆλθαν ἄλλ' οὐκ ἦσαν ἐξ ἡμῶν, εἰ γὰρ ἐξ ἡμῶν ἦσαν, μεμενήκεισαν ἂν μεθ' ἡμῶν- ἄλλ' ἵνα φανερωθῶσιν ὅτι οὐκ εἰσὶν πάντες ἐξ ἡμῶν.

They went out from us, **but they were not of us**; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

In other words, God ordains difficulties to distinguish the true children of God from the pretenders. When a person leaves in difficulty, John did not think of that person as a true believer who then ceased to be true believer. Rather, via Jesus' category in the wheat and tares parable, when false Christians leave, it proves the inadequacy of their faith all along. The battle simply causes each person to show his true colors. Augustine (354-430), *On the Gift of Perseverance*, 8.19, states,

It seems to us that all who appear to be good and faithful ought to receive the gift of final perseverance. God, however, has judged it better to mingle some who will not persevere with the certain number of his saints, so that those for whom security in the temptations of this life is not helpful cannot be secure.⁸

Bede (672-735) says,

John says that the antichrists have gone out from us but then adds the comforting words that they were never really with us beforehand. In fact, he is saying that no one except an antichrist would even leave us, for those who are not against Christ will cling to his body. In the body of Christ there are those who are still being healed and who will not be fully well again until the resurrection of the dead. But there are also others who are malignant tumors, and when they are removed the body is spared. Thus it is that the departure of such people is of great benefit to the church.⁹

Kruse (2000) rightly comments,

As he looks back on their act of secession, the author understands its purpose to have been that the true colours of the secessionists might be revealed.¹⁰

⁸ Gerald Bray, *James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 187.

⁹ Bray, James, 188.

¹⁰ Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 102.

These comments from John show that the early church was familiar with the idea of false faith, and that temptations, trials and actions will always show the legitimacy or illegitimacy of one's faith. Implicit here is the call for self-examination whether faith is real.

B. New Covenant and the Preservation of God

The key issue in this debate is “Does the Bible teach perseverance of true saints because of God's grace?” If so, warning texts are simply a call for all Christians to examine themselves if they be in the faith or not. So where does the idea originate that all the elect will be saved? The answer to this question requires a very careful look at God's new covenant promises in Jer. 31:31-34 and its fuller exposition in Ezek. 36:22-37:10.

1. Jeremiah 31:31-34

הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְכָרַתִּי אֶת־בְּרִית יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־בְּרִית יְהוּדָה
בְּרִית חֲדָשָׁה: לֹא כַבְרִית אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתִּי אֶת־אֲבוֹתָם בְּיוֹם הַחֲזִיקִי
בְיָדָם לְהוֹצִיאָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר־הִקְמָה הִפְרוּ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי וְאֲנֹכִי
בַּעֲלַתִּי בָם נְאֻם־יְהוָה: כִּי זֹאת הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר אֶכְרַת אֶת־בְּרִית יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֲחֲרַי הַיָּמִים הֵהֱם נְאֻם־יְהוָה נִתְּתִי אֶת־תּוֹרָתִי בְּקִרְבָּם וְעַל־לִבָּם
אֶכְתְּבֶנָּה וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם לֵאלֹהִים וְהִמָּה יְהִי־לִי לְעָם: וְלֹא יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד
אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו לֵאמֹר דַּעוּ אֶת־יְהוָה כִּי־כֹלְכֶם יִדְעוּ
אוֹתִי לְמִקְטָנָם וְעַד־גְּדוֹלָם נְאֻם־יְהוָה כִּי אֶסְלַח לְעֹנְוֵם וְלֹחֲטָתְכֶם לֹא
אֶזְכֹּר־עוֹד: ס

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, 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. 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. 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.

Jeremiah promises that God will put his law in his people (31:33). He will write it on their hearts (31:33). In other words, God will make it so that this covenant is unbreakable. For the recipients of the grace

of this covenant, transformation is certain because God is doing it. This is the replacement for the Mosaic covenant.

Jesus alone is obedient Israel (Rom. 2:25-29) therefore all the promises are his (2 Cor. 1:20). Those ethnic Jews who remain in Christ receive blessing because of Christ (John 15:1-6); Gentiles receive the new-covenant blessing by being grafted into the true Israel, Jesus (Rom. 11:17-20). Thus, they become Israel too by being in Jesus.

It is important to notice that Jesus applied the new covenant promises to his disciples at the institution of the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:20). By extension, all those who receive the supper participate in the benefits of the new covenant. Thus, Paul applies new-covenant promises to Gentile believers in 1 Cor. 11:25 and 2 Cor. 3:6. According Heb. 9:15, Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant. In other words, he is the one who guarantees the outcome. All this means that Jesus is extending the promises of the new covenant to Gentile believers as well as ethnic Jewish-Christian believers. Thus, Christians are the beneficiaries of God's unilateral unconditional promise. It will happen because God will do it.

2. Ezekiel 36:22-37:10

Enter Ezekiel 36:22-36. This passage is Ezekiel's extended commentary on Jeremiah 31:31-34. As we go through this text, notice the connections and the expansions of Jeremiah 31 and the new covenant.

36:22-23

לֵאמֹר לְבֵית־יִשְׂרָאֵל כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה לֹא לְמַעַנְכֶם אֲנִי עוֹשֶׂה
בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי אִם־לְשֵׁם־קִדְשִׁי אֲשֶׁר חִלַּלְתֶּם בְּגוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר־בָּאתֶם
שָׁם: וְקִדַּשְׁתִּי אֶת־שְׁמִי הַגָּדוֹל הַמְּחֻלָּל בְּגוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר חִלַּלְתֶּם בְּתוֹכָם
וְיָדְעוּ הַגּוֹיִם כִּי־אֲנִי יְהוָה נְאֻם אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה בְּהַקְדִּישִׁי בְּכֶם לְעֵינֵיהֶם:

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.

Verse 22 makes it clear that God's grace is not something that Israel deserves or that anyone else deserves. YHWH is acting for his name's

sake and not for anything else. He is acting in spite of what Israel has done. Notice here that God making his name holy. In LXX , that promise is καὶ ἁγιάσω τὸ ὄνομά μου, “I will make my name holy.” This recalls the Lord’s prayer, “Thy name, be made holy!” In Greek, that is ἁγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου (Matt. 6:9). Notice that this is an aorist passive imperative. Jesus instructs his followers to pray a command for God’s new covenant work to be done in all those connected to Christ. In effect, this prayer is for God to do his new covenant work.

The new covenant continues in Ezek. 36:24-27:

וְלָקַחְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִן־הַגּוֹיִם וְקִבַּצְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל־הָאֲרָצוֹת וְהִבֵּאתִי
אֶתְכֶם אֶל־אֲדַמְתְּכֶם: וְזָרַקְתִּי עָלֵיכֶם מֵיִם טְהוֹרִים וְטָהַרְתֶּם מִכָּל
טִמְאוֹתֵיכֶם וּמִכָּל־גִּלּוּלֵיכֶם אֲטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם: וְנָתַתִּי לָכֶם לֵב חֲדָשׁ וְרוּחַ
חֲדָשָׁה אֲתֵן בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְהִסְרֹתִי אֶת־לֵב הָאֲבָן מִבְּשָׂרְכֶם וְנָתַתִּי לָכֶם
לֵב בָּשָׂר: וְאֶת־רוּחִי אֲתֵן בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְעָשִׂיתִי אֵת אֲשֶׁר־בְּחַקְלִי תֵלְכוּ
וּמִשְׁפָּטֵי תִשְׁמְרוּ וְעָשִׂיתֶם:

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart (=Jeremiah 31:31-33), and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and I will cause you to walk in my statutes and I will cause you to be careful to obey my rules.¹¹

God will take his people and gather them from the nations (36:24). God (like Moses before) will sprinkle consecrating water the people (36:25). God will cleanse them from all their defilements (36:25). One might ask, “Is unbelief a defilement?” If unbelief defiles the people, is God then not thus promising to cleanse them from their unbelieving hearts? Does this not imply God is orchestrating their faith? God will purify them from all their idols (36:25). Is self-reliance an idol? God will give a new heart and spirit (36:26). Is this the promise of God circumcising Israel’s heart so that all Israel would know him, love him and obey him fully (Deut. 30:6)? God will turn aside the old heart (Ezek. 36:26). God will give his Spirit to his people (36:27). God will cause his people to walk in his ways (36:27). Does God’s way include faith and obedience? If it does, God is promising faith and obedience. God will

¹¹ Author’s translation and notes.

cause his people to carefully follow his judgments (36:27). The result of God's work is that his people will do what he requires (36:27).

The result of this new covenant work is that God will restore the relationship he had with his Adam and Eve in Eden. The difference now is that the people will love him enough to freely embrace him as absolute king. They will embrace the rule of God as their greatest good, and the result will be the restoration of a garden-like land of Eden. Look at 36:28-30:

וּישְׁבַתֶּם בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְאַבְתֵּיכֶם וְהִייתֶם לִי לְעָם וְאֲנִי אֶהְיֶה
לְכֶם לֵאלֹהִים: וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל טִמְאוֹתֵיכֶם וְקִרְאתִי אֶל־הַדְּגָן
וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֹתוֹ וְלֹא־אֶתֵּן עֲלֵיכֶם רָעָב: וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶת־פְּרֵי הָעֵץ
וְתִגְוַבַּת הַשָּׂדֶה לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר לֹא תִקְחוּ עוֹד חֲרַפַּת רָעָב בְּגוֹיִם:

You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations.

The Edenic language is clear here. The Mosaic covenant does not bring one back to Eden. The threatenings and punishments of the Mosaic covenant did not and will not produce a people who will freely love God. God must do more than threaten. He must create a new, untemptable people and a new covenant which cannot not be broken. What he will do is give his people a new heart and a new spirit. He will restore Eden.

The result of that restoration is first a people who will acknowledge their sin and their misery apart from God and at the same time, they are so in love with God that they delight to obey him. Consider 36:31.

וְזָכַרְתֶּם אֶת־דַּרְכֵיכֶם הָרָעִים וּמַעַלְלֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־טוֹבִים וְנִקְטַתֶּם
בְּפִנְיֵיכֶם עַל עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם וְעַל תּוֹעֵבוֹתֵיכֶם:

Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations.

The result of the new covenant is a great, profound spiritual humility. YHWH encourages this humiliation. Jonathan Edwards speaks of this

as evangelical humiliation.¹² It is a gift that causes the new covenant believer to see in a fuller way just how miserable is their flesh and just how gracious is God’s mercy towards all believers.

According to Ezekiel, what follows is a promise of faithful witness to the world in 36:32-36:

לֹא לְמַעַנְכֶם אֲנִי־עֹשֶׂה נְאֻם אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה יִנְדַע לְכֶם בְּיֹשֵׁב וְהַכְּלָמוּ
 מִדְּרָכֵיכֶם בְּיַת יִשְׂרָאֵל: ס כֹּה אָמַר אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה בְּיוֹם טְהַר אֶתְכֶם
 מִכָּל עֲוֹנוֹתֵיכֶם וְהוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת־הָעָרִים וְנִבְנוּ הַחֲרָבוֹת: וְהָאָרֶץ
 הַנְּשֻׁמָּה תִעֲבֹד תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר הָיְתָה שְׂמֵמָה לְעֵינַי כְּל־עֹבֵר: וְאָמְרוּ
 הָאָרֶץ הַלְזֹז הַנְּשֻׁמָּה הָיְתָה כְּגֹ־עֵדֶן וְהָעָרִים הַחֲרָבוֹת וְהַנְּשֻׁמּוֹת
 וְהַנְּהָרָסוֹת בְּצוֹרוֹת יָשָׁבוּ: וַיִּדְעוּ הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׂאֲרוּ סְבִיבוֹתֵיכֶם כִּי
 אֲנִי יְהוָה בְּנִיתִי הַנְּהָרָסוֹת נִטְעַמְתִּי הַנְּשֻׁמָּה אֲנִי יְהוָה דִּבַּרְתִּי וְעָשִׂיתִי: ס

It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel. "Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. And the land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. And they will say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden, and the waste and desolate and ruined cities are now fortified and inhabited.' Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I am the LORD; I have rebuilt the ruined places and replanted that which was desolate. I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it.

Notice that the end note is emphatic that all this is God’s doing. It has nothing to do with the willpower, the commitment, or the resolve of Israel. It is all about God’s actions. He promised it; he will do it.

To illustrate God’s actions in the new covenant, YHWH outlines this truth to Ezekiel in a vision (37:1-3). This section is connected to the previous one because of the “spirit/wind” ruach, רוח.

הָיְתָה עָלַי נִדְ־יְהוָה וַיּוֹצֵאֵנִי בְרוּחַ יְהוָה וַיְנִיחֵנִי בְּתוֹךְ הַבְּקָעָה וְהִיא
 מְלֵאָה עֲצָמוֹת: וְהֶעֱבִירֵנִי עֲלֵיהֶם סְבִיבוֹ סְבִיבוֹ וְהִנֵּה רַבּוֹת מְאֹד עַל־

¹² Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections: In Three Parts* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), 137, writes, “Evangelical humiliation is a sense that a Christian has of his own utter insufficiency, despicableness, and odiousness, with an answerable frame of heart.”

פָּנִי הַבְּקֻעָה וְהִנֵּה יְבֻשׁוֹת מְאֹד: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי בְּרוּחַ הַתְּהִינָה
הָעֲצָמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וַאֲמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה אַתָּה יַדְעָתָּ:

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."

The picture is of a grand army who fought and lost. This multitude lies dead in the valley of vision and thus raises the question: Who fought here? Why did so many people die? What was the tragedy which caused so massive a carnage? Ultimately, God reveals that that this army is once rebellious Israel. They fought against God's rule just as Adam and Eve did. However, in grace, God raises that army from the dead. When God asks Ezekiel if this army can live, he is emphasizing that this is impossible except by God's power. YHWH commands Ezekiel to preach to the dead. The prophet obeys and miraculously that army begins to reform. Consider 37:4-8:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי הִנְבֵּא עַל־הָעֲצָמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וַאֲמַרְתָּ אֲלֵיהֶם הָעֲצָמוֹת
הַיְבֻשׁוֹת שְׁמַעוּ דְבַר־יְהוָה: כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה לְעֲצָמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה הִנֵּה
אֲנִי מְבִיא בְכֶם רוּחַ וְחַיִּיתֶם: וְנָתַתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם גְּדִים וְהָעֲלֹתִי עֲלֵיכֶם
בָּשָׂר וְקָרַמְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם עוֹר וְנָתַתִּי בְכֶם רוּחַ וְחַיִּיתֶם וַיִּדְעַתֶּם כִּי־אֲנִי
יְהוָה: וַנִּבְאֲתִי כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי וַיְהִי־קוֹל פְּהִינָבְאִי וְהִנֵּה־רָעַשׁ וַתִּקְרְבוּ
עֲצָמוֹת עֶצֶם אֶל־עֶצְמוֹ: וַרְאִיתִי וְהִנֵּה־עֲלֵיהֶם גְּדִים וּבָשָׂר עָלָה
וַיִּקְרָם עֲלֵיהֶם עוֹר מִלְמַעְלָה וְרוּחַ אֵין בָּהֶם:

Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and I will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and I will put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD." So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath (ruach) in them.¹³

Ezekiel preaches, and there are miraculous results. Bodies begin to reform, but it does not result in the new covenant people predicted in

¹³ My translation.

Ezekiel 36:22-36. They are physically remade, but the promised “ruach” of Ezekiel 36 is missing. This ruach is the key to the new covenant. When the ruach comes, Israel is reborn. Look at Ezek. 37:9-10.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי הַנְּבִיא אֶל־הַרוּחַ הַנְּבִיא בְּנ־אָדָם וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל־הַרוּחַ כֹּה אָמַר אֲדַגְּנִי יְהוָה מֵאַרְבַּע רוּחוֹת כִּי־אֵי הַרוּחַ וּפָתִי בַּהַרְוִיגִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּחְיֶי: וְהַנְּבִיאִי פָאָשָׁר צָנְנִי וַתָּבוֹא בָהֶם הַרוּחַ וַיִּחְיֶי וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ עַל־רַגְלֵיהֶם תִּיל גָּדוֹל מְאֹד־מְאֹד:

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath (ruach), Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath (ruach), and breathe on these slain, that they may live." So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath (ruach) came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Ezekiel preaches to the ruach, and the result is the new covenant people, an army ready to do YHWH's bidding.

The interesting part in all this is Jesus' use of this new covenant language. Luke 22:20 says, "This cup that is poured out for you all is the new covenant in my blood" (my translation). Thus, in the supper, Jesus promises that it is his blood shed on the cross which inaugurates the new covenant.

After Jesus rose from the dead, according to John 20:12, he breathes onto the 11 disciples, καὶ τοῦτο εἰπὼν ἐνεφύσησεν καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· λάβετε πνεῦμα ἅγιον, "and having said this, he breathed into them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" Notice that this word, ἐμφυσάω, is the same word of God's bringing Adam to life, ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον χοῦν ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς καὶ ἐνεφύσησεν εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ πνοὴν ζωῆς (LXX Gen. 2:7); it also is the same word of Ezekiel's promise, ἐμφύσησον εἰς τοὺς νεκροὺς τούτους καὶ ζησάτωσαν (Ezek. 37:9). God made man from the dirt, and God breathes into the dirt man, Adam, and the dirt man lives. The God-man, Jesus, breathes into the representative heads of new Israel, and they are reborn.

Jesus' death inaugurates the new covenant. Notice here that there are no "if" clauses in Ezekiel 36-37 or Jeremiah 31. The picture is of the dead being brought back to life. These dead are beyond human hope, but they are not beyond God's sovereign grace. God uses human means; Ezekiel's preaching is the proximate cause, but the ultimate

clause is God's purpose. This purpose has nothing to do with man's effort or ability. It is God raising the dead.

All this fits perfectly well with Paul's view in Ephesians 1-2. All believers, both Jew and Gentile, were once spiritually dead. There was no spiritual life in them. They were beyond hope. But God in mercy chose to raise the elect with Christ. The result is the one, new-covenant people of God. A plethora of verses fits such a view (Isa. 26:12; John 3:21; Heb. 12:12; 1 Cor. 4:7; Eph. 2:8-9; Acts 11:18; 13:48; John 6:37-44; 17:1-10; Rom. 8:28-30 to name just a few).

The mystery revealed in the New Testament is that in Jesus, the true Israel, these new covenant promises extend to Gentiles just as they do to ethnic-Christian Jews. And the new covenant is an unconditional, unilateral covenant to Israel. God has promised it; God will do it. It is in no way conditioned on anything in man. It promises the total transformation of the true Israel. So how does this all relate to the warning texts in the New Testament?

C. Paul's Warning Passages in Light of the New Covenant

1. Paul's Analogy of Old Testament Israel in 1 Corinthians 8-11

Paul addresses the issue of meat sacrificed to Idols in 1 Corinthians 8-11. However, the real issue in that section is the Corinthian church's dabbling in the immortality rampant in the pagan idolatry at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul forwards the idea of ancient Israel and states that many people were within that group. However, the vast majority of them were not believers and were thus rejected by God because of sexual immorality. There were visible Israelites and true Israelites.¹⁴ Paul offers this Old Testament narrative as a measuring rod for the Corinthian church. Everyone should examine themselves whether they truly believe or not. Are they members of the visible Church only or also the spiritual one as well?

Paul commands every person to examine themselves in this regard. He takes his own advice in examining himself; he never let his high privileges within Christianity remove him from self-examination. Thus, for Paul, a healthy, robust Christianity includes real self-examination. It is the opposite of the presumptuous faith of Matt. 7:22-23.

¹⁴ Paul makes this exact point in Romans 9.

So who is the weaker brother of 1 Cor. 8:11? Paul warns the Corinthians that their actions may lead their fellow Christians into grave sin. Such relapse would destroy fellow members of the visible church in Corinth. He is envisioning relapse into the gross sexual idolatry that characterized Corinth before Paul came. 1 Cor. 8:11 says,

ἀπόλλυται γὰρ ὁ ἀσθενῶν ἐν τῇ σῆι γνώσει, ὁ ἀδελφὸς δι' ὃν Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν.

And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.

Similarly, in Romans 14:15, Paul is speaking of this same problem at Rome.

μη τῷ βρώματί σου ἐκεῖνον ἀπόλλυε ὑπὲρ οὗ Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν.

By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

Notice that Paul is speaking of the visible church in 1 Corinthians 8-11. In Romans 14, he believes that God will preserve the weaker brother (Rom. 14:4; see too Phil. 1:6; 1 Cor. 1:8; and Eph. 2:10). Here is Paul's very pastoral point: Was membership in physical Israel a guarantee of life with God? No. So for Paul, membership in the visible Christian church is the same. It will not guarantee salvation. Paul knew that God uses means in saving other people, and Paul believed those means are necessary in God's evangelism plan (1 Cor. 9:19-23). Profligacy and immorality in the Corinthian church could massively harm weak believers just escaping from idolatry. However, the key for Paul is whether God has known the person or not; 1 Cor. 8:3 states,

εἰ δέ τις ἀγαπᾷ τὸν θεόν, οὗτος ἔγνωσται ὑπ' αὐτοῦ

But if someone loves God, this one has been known by him.

If some has a heart to love God, it is only because God has acted. I.e., love of God is not something which springs from a natural heart. Loving God is evidence of God's redemptive work in the heart of the believer. Loving God is evidence of the new covenant heart. So is the desire to obey God as Paul argues in Rom. 2:12-29. Thus, I agree with Louis Berkhof (1873-1957) who writes,

A third class of passages which seem to militate against the idea of a limited atonement consists of those which are said to imply the possibility that those for whom Christ died fail to obtain salvation. Rom. 14:15 and the parallel passage in 1 Cor. 8:11 may be mentioned first of all. Some commentators are of the opinion

that these passages do not refer to eternal destruction, but it is more likely that they do. The apostle simply wants to bring the uncharitable conduct of some of the stronger brethren in the Church into strong relief. They were likely to offend the weaker brethren, to cause them to stumble, to override their conscience, and thus to enter upon the downward path, the natural result of which, if continued, would be destruction. While Christ paid the price of His life to save such persons, they by their conduct tended to destroy them. That this destruction will not actually follow, is evident from Rom. 14:4; by the grace of God they will be upheld. We have here then, as Dr. Shedd expresses it, “a supposition, for the sake of argument, of something that does not and cannot happen,” just as in 1 Cor. 13:1–3; Gal. 1:8. Another, somewhat similar, passage is found in 2 Pet. 2:1, with which Heb. 10:29 may also be classed. The most plausible explanation of these passages is that given by Smeaton, as the interpretation of Piscator and of the Dutch annotations, namely, “that these false teachers are described according to their own profession and the judgment of charity. They gave themselves out as redeemed men, and were so accounted in the judgment of the Church while they abode in her communion.”¹⁵

Others take the view that “destroyed” is temporary harm or retarding a brother’s usefulness.¹⁶ David Garland (2003) writes,

The verb ἀπόλλυται (*apollytai*, led to ruin, perish [middle voice]) is placed first in the clause for emphasis. It connotes utter ruin, destruction, and annihilation; but some interpreters reject this extreme meaning and soften it to mean moral ruin from a lapse into paganism (D. Black 1984: 112). They interpret it to mean that the person is led to sin (Grosheide 1953: 197) or is stunted in the Christian life (Bruce 1971: 82). But Paul always uses the verb ἀπόλλυσθαι (*apollysthai*) to refer to eternal, final destruction (Barrett 1968: 196; Conzelmann 1975: 149 n. 38; Fee 1987: 387–88; Schrage 1995: 265; Cheung 1999: 129). If salvation means that God has “rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col. 1:13), then returning to idolatry and the regime of darkness means eternal ruin. He fears that the individual will rejoin the ranks of the perishing (1 Cor. 1:18; 10:9–10; 15:18; 2 Cor. 2:15; 4:3).¹⁷

Compare Kistemaker who states,

Two additional observations on this passage. First, Paul is not teaching that a strong Christian can cause a spiritually weak brother to perish, for he writes “brother” instead of “sinner” or “man.” He implies that Christ continues to protect this person from harm and will enable him to stand (Rom. 14:4). In brief, loving this brother so much that he died for him, Christ will also make him withstand

¹⁵ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing co., 1938), 397.

¹⁶ See Ronald Trail, *An Exegetical Summary of 1 Corinthians 1–9* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 329, for a great summary of the different views and who holds them.

¹⁷ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 389.

temptation. Second, some translators introduce the helping verb *could* (JB) or *would* (SEB) to convey the probability of experiencing ruin but not the actuality of being lost eternally. The weak brother is stunted in his spiritual growth by the lack of love from fellow Christians. Nonetheless, Christ has redeemed and sanctified him (1:2) and regards him as his brother (compare Heb. 2:10–11).¹⁸

Whichever view is correct, believers are called to examine themselves. This is the primary lesson here. Culver has this helpful note,

Christians are admonished to strive for this inward assurance of salvation as a means to final perseverance: ‘Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall’ (2 Peter 1:10 RSV). They are also frequently warned against falling away. These numerous warnings of Scripture are frequently cited by opponents of the doctrine of perseverance as arguments against it while proponents regard them as indispensable means to the goal of perseverance (Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 8:11; 2 Peter 2:20–22; Heb. 10:26–31 are examples).¹⁹

The secondary lesson is not to put a stumbling block in a fellow Christian’s way. Paul knew that though God elected, and though all whom God predestined would be glorified, Paul also knew that God uses means. Paul determined to not hinder belief of anyone in any way. 1 Cor. 9:12,

Εἰ ἄλλοι τῆς ὑμῶν ἐξουσίας μετέχουσιν, οὐ μᾶλλον ἡμεῖς; ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐχρησάμεθα τῇ ἐξουσίᾳ ταύτῃ, ἀλλὰ πάντα στέγομεν, ἵνα μὴ τινα ἐγκοπὴν δῶμεν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Thus, God is asking Christians to hold these two ideas in tension. Yes, election is sure, but that does not lead to a hyper-Calvinism which says that we should not think or even care about how our actions relate to others. Christians must continually examine themselves in regard to each one’s own individual faith. Paul applies this to himself in the following.

¹⁸ Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 18, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 275.

¹⁹ Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2005), 766.

2. 1 Cor. 9:27

ἀλλ' ὑποπιάζω μου τὸ σῶμα καὶ δουλαγωγῶ, μή πως ἄλλοις κηρύξας αὐτὸς ἀδόκιμος γένωμαι.

But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Paul knew that someone who claims Christ and lives a profligate life is not a true believer. Therefore, he worked because he knew that it was God who was at work in him. He worked because he knew that it was proof of what God had already done. Poole (1624-1679) writes,

And this he tells us that he did, *lest*, while he *preached to others*, he himself *should be a castaway*: from whence we may observe, that Paul thought such a thing possible, that one who all his life had been preaching to others, to bring them to heaven, might himself be thrown into hell at last; and if it had not, our Saviour would never have told us, that he would at the last day say to some, Depart from me, I know you not, you workers of iniquity; who for their admittance had pleaded, We have prophesied in thy name, Matt. 7:22, 23. Nor must we question but Judas, whom our Saviour calls a *son of perdition*, was a lost man as to eternity, though it be certain that he, as well as the other apostles, was a preacher of the gospel. . . . We may also further observe, that such ministers as indulge their body, giving themselves liberties, either more externally in meats, drinks, apparel, pleasures; or more internally, indulging themselves in sinful speculations, notions, affections, inclinations; take a quite contrary road to heaven than Paul took, and think they have a great deal more liberty to the flesh than St. Paul thought he had, or than he durst use.²⁰

David Garland (2003) opines,

Paul's statement about being disqualified ("lest somehow after preaching to others I myself am disqualified") is rather startling because it suggests that "his conversion, his baptism, his call to apostleship, his service in the Gospel, do not guarantee his eternal salvation" (Barrett 1968: 218). Any implication that one may forfeit one's salvation may cause theological dyspepsia for some, and the Geneva Bible renders the adjective ἀδόκιμος "reproved," "lest I myself am reproved." Gundry Volf (1990: 237) contends that Paul does not mean that he might be "rejected from salvation" but instead refers to being "rejected as an apostle" (see also Pfitzner 1967: 92 n. 3, 96). Schrage (1995: 371 n. 548) notes that this view assumes that this section is primarily a defense of his apostleship and downplays its parenetic function. The immortal crown to be won (9:25) is not a good job-approval rating as an apostle, but salvation. It can be won only if one exercises self-control and abstains from many things that may bring physical delight but ultimately will doom success in the contest.

²⁰ Poole, *Annotations*, 3:570.

Paul is engaged in moral exhortation and not discoursing on the security of the believer, and the word ἀδόκιμος is much stronger than “reproved.” It means “proven false,” as with coinage, “to be shown as counterfeit.” Hebrews 6:8 contains a vivid picture of what “failing the proof” entails: “But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless [*adokimos*] and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.” Paul fears that the Corinthians will fall short and fall by the wayside in the race as the wilderness generation did in the following example because of their contact with idolatry. The problem for many Corinthians is that they have disconnected their personal salvation from their calling to service and absolute allegiance to God. Moffatt (1938: 125–26) rings the changes in drawing the application that “to secure a share in the gospel, it is not enough to please oneself in the Church, to assert one’s freedom, or to be easy-going.”²¹

Many in the Reformed tradition read the warning texts as a means of grace to call Christians to continued belief. The *Reformation Study Bible* (2005), offers,

This statement has often been used as evidence that Christians can lose their salvation. The witness of the New Testament and of Paul in particular is that those whom God has brought to Himself are His forever (Rom. 8:28–30) because the life they have been given is eternal in character (John 5:24; Heb. 7:16). What God has begun He will bring to completion (Phil. 1:6). However, it would be wrong to dismiss or minimize Paul’s concern (cf. 15:2; Phil. 3:11; Col. 1:23) by suggesting that it is merely hypothetical or relates only to rewards and not salvation. Paul was confident that absolutely nothing would be able to separate him from God’s love (Rom. 8:38–39), but he never presumed that he was saved regardless of what he did. No Christian can afford to take lightly the warnings of Scripture (10:12).²²

Hendriksen offers this helpful note,

God elects a person in Christ and grants him or her the assurance of salvation. Conversely, God expects the believer in a test of faith to demonstrate a sincere desire to know his will, to obey his commands, to be thankful for his gift of salvation, to love God and one’s neighbor, to have faith in God and hope to overcome trials.

If the Christian’s desire is cold and his heart callous, does he run the risk of losing his salvation? Paul does not teach that God’s electing love exempts the believer from all responsibility and that without a test of faith God grants him or her the crown of eternal life. Not at all, for Paul exhorts the believers to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, because it is God who works in them to will and to work (Phil. 2:12–13).

Could Paul himself fall from grace and be disqualified? No, because he spared no effort to serve the Lord, preach the gospel, and live honorably before God and

²¹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 444–445.

²² R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Orlando, FL; Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), 1656.

man. Elsewhere Paul warns the Corinthians to examine themselves so that they will not fail the test (see 2 Cor. 13:5–7). Then he adds that he and others have not failed it. Near the end of his life, Paul writes that he will receive the crown of righteousness that is in store for him (2 Tim. 4:8).²³

Pink writes,

Mortification is a task to which every Christian must address himself with prayerful and resolute earnestness. Nevertheless it is a task far transcending *our* feeble powers.²⁴

Perhaps the most articulate presentation is that of Michael Horton who writes,

Whereas most people think that the goal of religion is to get people to become something that they are not, the Scriptures call believers to become more and more what they already are in Christ. Because they were definitively sanctified or set apart as holy to the Lord, the Corinthians must reestablish proper relationships, order, and behavior in the church. Their practice must be brought in line with their identity. Here again the indicative is the basis for the imperative. We are holy (definitive sanctification); therefore we are to be holy (progressive sanctification).²⁵

In this light we are better able to understand the dire warnings against apostasy or falling away in Hebrews 6. The writer describes those who belong only outwardly to the covenant community as “those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away ...” (vv. 4–6a). Those who apostatize have been beneficiaries of the Spirit’s ministry through the means of grace—even as *merely formal or external members of the covenant community*. Having been baptized (“enlightened”), they have also “*tasted the heavenly gift*” in the Supper and “*tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,*” but they have not actually received or *fed upon* Christ for eternal life, which Jesus linked to faith (John 6:27–58, 62–65).²⁶

So these warning passages themselves target those who are visible members of the covenant community, in some sense benefiting from the Spirit’s ministry, who have nevertheless failed to embrace the gift of salvation and, in this case, have returned to Judaism.²⁷

²³ Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 18, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 315–316.

²⁴ Arthur Walkington Pink, *The Holy Spirit* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, n.d.).

²⁵ Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 313.

²⁶ Horton, *Pilgrim*, 322–323.

²⁷ Horton, *Pilgrim*, 323.

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints I have defended here is not exactly the same as the view commonly known as eternal security. It is not the case that those who are born again by making a decision for Christ are secure because of that one-time act of faith. Rather, it is that the God who begins a good work will complete it (Phil 1:6). This gives all glory to God alone, for electing, redeeming, calling, and keeping his people to the end. In spite of the weakness of our faith and repentance, we are “more than conquerors through him who loved us,” so that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:37, 39).²⁸

Thus, the warning texts are a means of grace whereby a person who believes himself or herself a Christian can make that calling and election sure. This is necessary because there are many who believe themselves Christians and are not; Scripture teaches that they were never part of God’s work in the new covenant.

D. God Preserving and Enabling Christians to Persevere as They Look to Christ

Reformed Christians understand the warning and apostasy texts this way: true Christians will work to obey the warning texts,²⁹ realize their utter inadequacy apart from Christ,³⁰ look to Christ as the one who starts and finishes a Christian’s faith,³¹ and thank God for the totality of any obedience performed, knowing that God obligates himself to preserve the elect. Isa. 26:12 supports such a view:

הִיא תְּשׁוּפָת שְׁלוֹם לָנוּ כִּי גַם כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂי־נוּ פָּעַלְתָּ לָנוּ:

O LORD, you will ordain peace for us, for you have indeed done for us all our works.

Humans have indeed acted, but the redeemed acknowledge that the only reason they have acted is because God has done their work for them. They work knowing that any truly pleasing act is only because God accepts it by grace (partial as if it were full and perfected in

²⁸ Horton, *Pilgrim*, 323-324.

²⁹ Paul says, “Ὡστε, ἀγαπητοί μου, καθώς πάντοτε ὑπηκούσατε, μή ὡς ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ μου μόνον ἀλλὰ νῦν πολλῶ μᾶλλον ἐν τῇ ἀπουσίᾳ μου, μετὰ φόβου καὶ τρόμου τὴν ἑαυτῶν σωτηρίαν κατεργάζεσθε· θεὸς γάρ ἐστιν ὁ ἐνεργῶν ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ τὸ θέλειν καὶ τὸ ἐνεργεῖν ὑπὲρ τῆς εὐδοκίας (Phil. 2:12-13). I.e., work because it is God who is working.

³⁰ Rom. 7:18 Οἶδα γὰρ ὅτι οὐκ οἰκεῖ ἐν ἐμοί, τοῦτ’ ἐστιν ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου, ἀγαθόν· τὸ γὰρ θέλειν παράκειται μοι, τὸ δὲ κατεργάζεσθαι τὸ καλὸν οὐ. John 3:21 ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα φανερωθῇ αὐτοῦ τὰ ἔργα ὅτι ἐν θεῷ ἐστιν εἰργασμένα.

³¹ Heb. 12:2, ἀφορῶντες εἰς τὸν τῆς πίστεως ἀρχηγὸν καὶ τελειωτὴν Ἰησοῦν, ὃς ἀντὶ τῆς προκειμένης αὐτῷ χαρᾶς ὑπέμεινεν σταυρὸν αἰσχύνης καταφρονήσας ἐν δεξιᾷ τε τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ κεκάθικεν.

Christ); Christ has fully obeyed and his obedience is imputed to all those who are his. He has also obliged himself to totally transform the elect. Bede (672-735) comments,

Whoever walks a straight path composed of human steps does so not by the freedom of human judgment but by the governance of him to whom Isaiah said, “All of our works were accomplished by you.” “What man can understand his way?” In this it becomes clear that whatever goodness anyone possesses from himself he does not have except through the grace of God, because no one is able to understand through the freedom of his own judgment either what kind of future he will have or the quality and duration of conquests to come.³²

Luther (1483-1546) adds,

This is our solid boast, because all works of the church in word and act are not its own, but those of God Himself. Therefore they will endure, because the church trusts in God and not in itself, let the devil assail it as he will. For all the gifts of the Spirit—the Word, faith, love, power, righteousness—this wealth is not the church’s own; it is divine and of God Himself.³³

God is the one who gets all the glory. Those who reject the Reformed view make a case based on individual texts divorced from the grand sweep of Scripture. They reject the idea that man truly is spiritual dead. Culver writes,

The Semi-Pelagians agreed that all Adam’s descendants received a fallen, corrupt human nature from Adam, but were only weakened by sin, not dead in sin. This appears in extracts from pertinent ancient reports.³⁴

Thus, the Bible is clear; man is not spiritually sick. Man is spiritually dead in Adam (Eph. 2:1-9; Rom. 5:12-21), a bad tree which will always bear bad fruit (Luke 6:43) until someone makes it a good tree (Matt. 12:33). God has mercy on whom he wills and he hardens whom he wills (Rom. 9:18). It is about God choosing to show mercy (Rom. 9:16).

Therefore, the traditional Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is the truest exegesis of the particular texts in the light of a whole Bible, Biblical Theology. God saves and that work is certain and true. God demands every person’s utmost care to make his or her

³² Steven A. McKinion, *Isaiah 1–39*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 10 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 177.

³³ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 16: Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 16 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 206.

³⁴ Culver, *Systematic*, 386.

calling and election sure. No one, not even Paul, may say, “I am so certain of my salvation that I need not examine myself.”³⁵ Rather, assurance this side of Heaven is always variable. The warning texts are a means of grace for God’s power to bring Christians safely to the end. The unredeemed will always presume on God’s grace. The redeemed will always thank him for the totality of their salvation. This is the truest explanation of the totality of Scripture.

Conclusion

Jesus promises that he will lose none of those given to him (compare John 6:44, 65; 17:12). Thus, one asks, “How can we systematize the warning texts with the new covenant?” The answer is that the number is certain, and it is the duty to all who think themselves believers to make their calling and election sure. Peter commands in 2 Pet. 1:10:

διὸ μᾶλλον, ἀδελφοί, σπουδάσατε βεβαίαν ὑμῶν τὴν κλησιν καὶ ἐκλογὴν ποιῆσθαι· ταῦτα γὰρ ποιῶντες οὐ μὴ πταίσητέ ποτε.

Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.

The New Testament does not teach a view of salvation which would say, “Trust in a past, one-time event.” It is not teaching, “once saved, always saved.” Rather, “faith” and “repentance unto life” are continual things. Believers are encouraged to make their calling and election sure by daily repenting and daily believing. Christians will experience ups and downs in the Christian life. The warning passages are a means of grace for the believer to test the legitimacy of his or her faith. Believers will persevere. None should say I am beyond such things. Perhaps the best summary is that of Culver who writes,

The ‘punch line’, the best illustration I ever heard of the true relation of security to Christian effort, was shouted by a telephone line crew foreman to a timid new hired hand trying to work on a crossbar forty feet above ground but who refused to trust his spurs and leather safety belt: ‘Hey up there! Lean back in your belt and trust it so you can work with both hands’.³⁶

If the Bible teaches perseverance clearly in John 10 and Romans 8, then these other texts, correctly understood, will not contradict it. Most can be legitimately

³⁵ 1 Cor. 9:27 ἄλλ’ ὑποπιάζω μου τὸ σῶμα καὶ δουλαγωγῶ, μὴ πως ἄλλοις κηρύξας αὐτὸς ἀδόκιμος γένομαι. Jesus told Peter that he would not be saved unless he forgave (Matt. 18:35 οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν, ἐάν μὴ ἀφήτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν).

³⁶ Culver, *Systematic*, 770.

interpreted in a manner consistent with perseverance (note: not explained away!) on one of the following grounds: (1) *lip profession is being put in opposition to heart faith*. For example, 2 Peter 2:1 does not affirm that teachers who surreptitiously introduce false teaching lose their salvation thereby. They are rather ‘false prophets’ at heart to start with. They were insincere professors of true religion all the time. There are many texts of this type. (2) Some treat the subject of *loss of reward for service rather than loss of salvation*. First Corinthians 9:27, ‘lest ... I myself should be disqualified’ (‘a castaway’ KJV; Greek *adokimos*, disapproved) simply cannot be made to teach that Paul, the author of Romans 8, was fearful of losing his salvation. It should rather be connected with his words about rewards and loss of rewards for Christians earlier in the same Epistle (1 Cor. 3:12–15).

Warnings and exhortations are issued which are *thought to imply the contingency* that some truly regenerate can and do fall away. There are six or seven such in the book of Hebrews. Personally, I think several of these to be addressed to Jewish readers who are being warned of the peril to their souls in any return to Judaism and hence fall into the category already suggested of warning against false profession. Galatians is in large part a similar sort of argument. A. H. Strong makes five points about the ‘commands to persevere and warnings against apostasy.’

- (a) They show that some, who are [only] apparently regenerate, will fall away [Matt. 18:7; 1 Cor. 11:19; 1 John 2:19].
- (b) They show that the truly regenerate, and those who are only apparently so, are not clearly distinguishable in this life [Mal. 3:18; Matt. 13:25, 47; Rom. 9:6, 7; Rev. 3:1].
- (c) They show the fearful consequences of rejecting Christ, to those who have enjoyed special divine influences but who are only apparently regenerate [Heb. 10:26–29].
- (d) They show that the perseverance of the truly regenerate may be secured by these very commands and warnings [1 Cor. 10:12].
- (e) They do not show that it is certain or possible, that any truly regenerate person will fall away. [He cites Spurgeon: ‘The believer, like a man on shipboard, may fall again and again on the deck, but he will never fall overboard’.]

Many theologians would add another point, possibly the most important, that the warnings, exhortations and promises are, under God, the very appointed means, whereby God preserves the believing saint and whereby he perseveres.

Those who have embraced this doctrine in a knowledgeable way have found it helpful to piety and genuinely an aid to that rest spoken of in Scripture as birthright of the children of God (Heb. 3:12–4:11). The writer well remembers the permanent effect for Christian joy and steady faith in the life of his father when at about thirty-eight years of age he came to be convinced of perseverance through a series of sermons by the local pastor. This is not to say piety cannot and does not flourish among evangelical believers who see the matter differently. Like every truth, it is capable of perversion even by its friends with invariably unhappy

results. This is not because there is something wrong with the doctrine but because there is much wrong with human beings.³⁷

May God make it so in our lives as we obey him and look to Christ as the author and finisher of the faith he has given to us.



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³⁷ Culver, *Systematic*, 770-771.