



Volume 6 – 2018

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**Warning Passages and Irrevocable Salvation  
in Johannine Soteriology: A Case Study on John 15:6**

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**Introduction**

Much ink has been spilled on the debate regarding the security of the believer, especially in interpreting the tension between passages that seem to promise irrevocable salvation and those that seem to warn against losing it.<sup>2</sup> Arminians generally argue that *salvation can*

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<sup>2</sup> The controversy on eternal security extends beyond Calvinist versus Arminian, and it can be traced back even before Augustine and Pelagius. For a brief history, see Sellers’ published dissertation in C. Norman Sellers, *Election and Perseverance*, College Studies Series (Miami Springs, FL: Schoettle, 1987), 1–20.

*be lost if a believer fails to persevere.*<sup>3</sup> The classic works on the defense of this view are Robert Shank's monograph in 1961 and I. Howard Marshall's dissertation written in 1963 and later published both in the United Kingdom (1968) and the United States (1974).<sup>4</sup> Another thorough work defending this view is by Frederick Claybrook, who makes his proposition at the onset:

The Bible writers, and Christ himself, teach that an individual, after having become a believer in Jesus Christ and having received the Holy Spirit, can renounce his faith, causing (a) the Holy Spirit to depart, never to return, and (b) that individual to be lost for eternity.<sup>5</sup>

A second view argues that *salvation can never be lost despite the lack of perseverance in the believer's life*. This view, known as the "once-saved-always-saved" view, maintains that the conditional warning passages pertain to loss of rewards, not loss of salvation. Charles Stanley, for example, makes this claim:

The Bible clearly teaches that God's love for His people is of such magnitude that even *those who walk away from the faith* have not the slightest chance of slipping from His hand.<sup>6</sup>

A third view, the Reformed view, argues that *all true believers persevere*. True believers heed the conditional warnings, persevere in the faith, and will never fall away based on divine promises and protection. Bruce Demarest posits that "God secures the final salvation of every true believer by effecting his free perseverance in

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<sup>3</sup> It is acknowledged that variation of interpretation exists among those who hold that salvation can be lost, particularly in the interpretation of the warning passages in Hebrews. Stephen Ashby, for example, defends what he calls "Reformed Arminianism" and distinguishes his views from "Wesleyan Arminianism." See Stephen Ashby and J. Steven Harper in J. Matthew Pinson, ed., *Four Views on Eternal Security*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> See Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance*, 2d ed. (Springfield, MO: Westcott Publishers, 1961) and I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Frederick W. Claybrook, *Once Saved, Always Saved? A New Testament Study of Apostasy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), 1. See also Guy Duty, *If Ye Continue* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1966) and J. Kenneth Grider, *Entire Sanctification* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Charles F. Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 74. Emphasis mine. See also Dennis M. Rokser, *Shall Never Perish Forever* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), and Michael A. Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

faith and obedience.”<sup>7</sup> Tom Schreiner and Ardel Caneday emphasize that the warnings (and promises) function as God’s means of saving his people (true believers) to the end.<sup>8</sup>

The task of this paper is to interpret the tension between warning passages and promises of irrevocable salvation in John’s Gospel and Letters. With an assumption that the Johannine literature has a single author and is a coherent body of literature, this paper takes John 15:6 as a case study to demonstrate how a single text must be interpreted in light of the overall soteriology of its author.

In John 15:6, Jesus said, “If anyone does not abide in me he is *thrown away* like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, *thrown into the fire, and burned.*”<sup>9</sup> This passage seems to suggest that believers who don’t abide in Jesus are thrown away into the fire and burned, which alludes to eternal punishment. To interpret John 15:6, one must consider the following. First, is John 15:6 really in tension with other passages in John’s soteriology? Does John really teach that the promises of salvation are irrevocable? Second, are there other Johannine passages outside John 15:6 that support the idea that believers have lost their salvation? Third, if John indeed teaches that salvation is irrevocable, how does one understand John 15:6? What then is the purpose of John 15:6 if not a warning to true believers?

### **A. Analysis of Irrevocable Salvation Passages**

In Johannine literature, the irrevocable nature of salvation is affirmed, while conditional command/warnings are made to audiences that include believers. Often, both passages are even in juxtaposition.

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 445. Wayne Grudem makes a similar argument: “It seems hard to avoid the conclusion that everyone who truly believes in Christ will remain a Christian up to the day of final resurrection into the blessings of life in the presence of God.” Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 789. See also G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, trans. Robert D. Knudsen, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) and Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001). Schreiner and Caneday distinguish their view from the classic reformed view, but for our purposes we categorize them with the broader group. For a more accessible summary, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Run to Win the Prize: Perseverance in the New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version, 2011. Emphasis mine.

In passages that speak of either a promise of eternal life or of divine protection, various points of interpretation can be observed.

### 1. Promises of Eternal Life

Several passages in John teach this core idea: whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life.<sup>10</sup> John highlights the variety of words Jesus used to convey “believe” and “eternal life” by employing synonymous parallelism. So, hearing the words of Jesus (John 5:24), coming to Jesus (6:35), looking to Jesus (6:40), obeying Jesus (3:36), and having Jesus (1 John 5:11-13) are synonymously parallel with “believing in Jesus.” Likewise, “eternal life” is equated with several concepts stated positively or negatively. To have “eternal life” is to not come into judgment but to pass over from death to life (John 5:24), to be raised up in the last day (6:40, 44), to not perish (3:16; 20:28), and to not remain in darkness (12:46). The promises are also stated in the form of a warning: those who do not believe are “condemned already” (3:18), “shall not see life,” (3:36), remain in God’s wrath (3:36), die in their sins (8:34), and do not have life (1 John 5:12). These parallel ideas must be kept in mind when interpreting Johannine teaching on eternal security and warning passages. Furthermore, it must also be observed that the promises of eternal life, when stated negatively, become a form of a warning. This shows the juxtaposition of promises of eternal life and the conditions of receiving it in John.

Another point of interpretation has to do with John’s use of the present tense for the verb πιστεύω and ἔχω. The present tense use of πιστεύω is in an aspect that indicates ongoing action. Claybrook argues that “these verses only promise eternal life to those possessing a present, continuing belief in Christ.”<sup>11</sup> The promise of eternal life is conditioned by a continued faith in Christ. This implies that anyone who is not currently believing in Christ cannot have the guaranteed promise of eternal life.

Those who hold the once-saved-always-saved view push back against this principle. Stanley points out that in John 4:39-41, the verb

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<sup>10</sup> This is a repeated theme in John (cf. 3:15, 16, 36; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 20:31).

<sup>11</sup> Claybrook, 212.

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πιστευώ is in the aorist tense.<sup>12</sup> A few points need to be made. First, the present tense use of πιστευώ in the passages mentioned above is functioning as a substantive participle— “the one who is believing.” The aorist verbs that Stanley cites are indicative verbs that are not functioning substantively.<sup>13</sup> Second, whenever the phrase “has (or may have) eternal life” occurs, the subject is always a present substantive participle. In other words, the subject of the phrase “has eternal life” is always “the one who is continually believing.” Third, the fact that an aorist form of πιστευώ is found in John does not necessarily nullify the significance of the use of the present tense.

The present tense use of ἔχω, if consistency is assumed, must have the same significance as the present tense use of πιστευώ. Should this imply that, for “the believing ones,” eternal life is their current, continual possession?<sup>14</sup> Perhaps a better reading of the present tense-form of the verb ἔχω is to view it as a gnomic present.<sup>15</sup> The use of the present verb ἔχω has nothing to do with continual activity, but it merely teaches a timeless truth that everyone who is believing *has* eternal life. In other words, what is always true about those who are continually believing is that they have eternal life.

This leads to the last point of interpretation on the promises in John, viz. the duration of eternal life. No position argues that eternal life has an expiration date. Often, the Arminian position could be misrepresented. Rokser argues,

And how long is “eternal” or “everlasting” life? Of course, it is *forever!* So how could you possibly lose “eternal” life? *Impossible!* If you could lose eternal life in five years because of a particular sin; or in ten years because of a pattern of

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<sup>12</sup> Stanley adds, “Here *believe* is used in the aorist tense. Unlike the present tense, the aorist tense is more indefinite. Its focus is not so much on the time of an event or the continuation of an event as it is the fact of the event.” Stanley, 88.

<sup>13</sup> The aorist substantive participle of πιστευώ occurs only once in John 7:39. The occurrence of the aorist actually strengthens the argument for the ongoing belief based on the present tense. By using the present, though the aorist is readily available to refer to “the believing ones,” John intends to communicate the ongoing action of believing. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 620–21.

<sup>14</sup> Commenting on John 3:16, Rokser says, “If your faith has rested on Jesus Christ alone, verse 16 guarantees that you ‘have’ (present tense) ‘everlasting life.’” Dennis M. Rokser, “Is Salvation Forever or Can It Be Lost?,” in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Free Grace Theology*, ed. Jerry Blaine Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 265.

<sup>15</sup> Wallace observes that “the present participle, especially in such formulaic expression as πᾶς ὁ + present participle and the like, routinely belong” to the gnomic category. Wallace, 523.

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sinning; or in fifteen years because of your unfaithfulness, was eternal life then “eternal”?<sup>16</sup>

Shank, in defense of the Arminian view, explains that the duration of eternal life is not the issue, but one’s participation in that life. He says, “If we fail to abide in Him, the eternal life continues; but our participation in that life ceases. We share that life only as we continue to abide in Him ‘who is our life.’”<sup>17</sup> Shank makes a valuable comment here: the possessor of eternal life is the one who abides in Jesus. Truly, eternal life cannot possibly be possessed apart from the Son.<sup>18</sup> Someone who is not believing in Jesus does not have eternal life. For John, “believing Jesus” is equated with “having Jesus” so much so that he says,

“Whoever *has the Son* has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who *believe in the name of the Son of God* that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:12-13).<sup>19</sup>

So, if someone ceases to believe in Jesus, he does not have eternal life. He either lost it, or he never had it in the first place. However, here is where Shank’s comment falls short. The language that John uses does not communicate *participation* in eternal life; rather, it talks about *possession* (ἔχω) of eternal life. Because eternal life, by nature, is eternal, one can either have it or not have it; but no one can have a limited possession of it. Thus, (1) ongoing belief in Jesus is a requirement for possessing eternal life, and (2) those who truly possess eternal life cannot lose it since (3) it is eternal. If eternal life cannot be lost and the requirement for possessing eternal life is ongoing belief in Jesus, then how should someone who stopped believing in Jesus be categorized? At least two things can be said. First, because he stopped believing, it is evident that this person does not possess eternal life. Second, he could not have possibly possessed

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<sup>16</sup> Rokser, “Is Salvation Forever?,” 265. Emphasis his.

<sup>17</sup> Shank, 54.

<sup>18</sup> Commenting on John 3:15, Carson suggests that the phrase “in him” is connected with “eternal life” instead of the “believes.” He argues that the typical phrase after πιστεύω is εἰς αὐτόν (cf. 3:16), but in 3:15 it is ἐν αὐτῷ, which makes it connected with “eternal life.” So he would translate it as “everyone who believes may have eternal life *in him*.” D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Emphasis mine.

eternal life because eternal life—by nature—cannot be possessed in a limited amount. One is left, then, with the only viable conclusion: the person who abandons the faith cannot possibly have been a true believer from the beginning.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the one who truly has eternal life is the same as the one who continuously believes and abides in the Son, and those who fail to continually believe in the Son never possessed eternal life since eternal life, by nature, is eternal.

## 2. Promises of Divine Protection

Three key passages in John affirm divine protection from falling away, and these passages include three key elements: 1) the irrevocable promise of divine protection; 2) the conditions (or warnings when negatively stated); and 3) the identity of those who can meet these conditions.

The first passage, John 6:35-40, teaches that those who come to Jesus will never be cast out. As pointed out above, the parallelism in v35 equates “those who are coming to Jesus” with “those who are believing in Jesus.” Once again, believing in Jesus is the condition for receiving the promise of divine protection. The irrevocable nature of this promise is indicated in at least three ways in the text. One, the use of the double negative, οὐ μὴ + future indicative or subjunctive, is emphatic. In v35, Jesus said that those who believe in him will—οὐ μὴ διψήσῃ—not ever thirst. A similar construction is found in v37: all those that come to Jesus would—οὐ μὴ ἐκβάλω ἔξω—certainly not be cast out. Two, Jesus’ use of universal language seems to imply that the certainty of not being cast out applies exhaustively to everyone who comes to him. In other words, Jesus is saying that among *all* that the Father gives, *none of them* would be lost (6:39). Finally, Jesus grounds the certainty of his assertion on the will of the Father himself. God the Father will make sure that *none* of those whom he has given to Jesus will be lost. Who are those who will come to Jesus? Twice it says that they are those whom the Father gives to Jesus (6:37, 39).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This seems to be John’s logical conclusion in 1 John 2:19 (cf. Hebrews 3:14).

<sup>21</sup> Carson comments, “Jesus’ confidence does not rest in the potential for positive response amongst well-meaning people. Far from it: his confidence is in his Father to bring to pass the Father’s redemptive purposes: *All that the Father gives me will come to me*. Jesus’ confidence in the success of his mission is frankly predestinarian.” Carson, 290. Emphasis his.



A typical response to the irrevocable nature of salvation taught in this passage is to relegate the Father's will to an ideal that may or may not be met. Shank argues that, on the basis of the two aspects of God's will—perfect will and permissive will—that the Father's will may or may not take place (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9).<sup>22</sup> A thorough discussion on the two aspects of God's will is beyond the scope of this paper. Two brief responses, however, can be offered.<sup>23</sup> First, other indicators (e.g., emphatic negation) in the text affirm that not one that was given to Jesus will be cast out. Second, while men often fail to accomplish God's perfect will and their failure is part of God's permissive will, can these categories be used in reference to the work of Christ? The perfect Son of God has done the perfect will of the Father perfectly so that surely none of those who believe in him will be cast out.<sup>24</sup> This leads to the second key passage on divine protection.

In John 17, the Lord prayed for the Father to keep his disciples and all those who would later believe in him just as Jesus did (17:11-12, 20). This is connected with the Lord's statement in chapter 6 that none of those whom the Father had given him was lost (6:37-40). Those who are kept are those who would believe in Jesus (17:20). The point of emphasis here, for our purposes, is the mentioning of an exception—none was lost except for the son of destruction (17:12). Regarding the case of Judas, Marshall comments,

This raises the baffling question of divine choice in relation to human faith. Judas was one of the twelve, chosen by Jesus, and yet he was not kept by Jesus, since he had given himself up to evil. *It remains obscure whether he believed at first and then fell from unbelief, or never believed at all.* All that we may say is

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<sup>22</sup> Shank, 360–61. Marshall makes a similar argument: "Yet exegetical honesty compels us to ask whether the will of God can be frustrated by human sin, just as His will for the salvation of all men does not in fact lead to the salvation of all men. Does the power of Jesus prevent men from falling away, or does it preserve only those who continue in belief?" Marshall, 181.

<sup>23</sup> In addition to these two responses is that argument against Shank's interpretation of 1 Tim. 2:4 and 2 Pet. 3:9. For an alternative interpretation, see Thomas R Schreiner, "'Problematic Texts' for Definite Atonement in the Pastoral and General Epistles," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 376–79, 392–94.

<sup>24</sup> For further discussion, see Shawn L. Buice, "The Security of the Believer as the Son's Fulfillment of the Father's Will (John 6:38-40)," *Testamentum Imperium* 1 (2007).



that one person chosen by Jesus failed to believe, but only this one case is mentioned.<sup>25</sup>

Marshall raises the question: was Judas a case of someone who stopped believing in Jesus, or did he never believe at all? The answer is the latter, based on hints that John himself places throughout the Fourth Gospel. It was not until the last supper that Jesus explicitly revealed that one of the twelve would betray him (13:21-30), but John places clues as early as John 6. After Jesus said that there are some who did not believe, John makes this parenthetical comment: “For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him” (6:64). Jesus places the one “who would betray him” in the same category as “those who did not believe.” Six verses later, John mentions Judas for the first time.

Jesus answered them, ‘Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.’ He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him. (John 6:70-71).

Clearly, Judas was not an example of someone who stopped believing; rather, he typifies many who outwardly appear to be following Jesus but will later betray Jesus because they have never believed at all.

Lastly, in John 10:27-29, Jesus and the Father guarantee that no one will snatch the sheep from their hands. The promise of divine protection is grounded on the superior ability of the Father so that no one can snatch a believer from both the hands of Jesus (10:28) and the hands of the Father (10:29). This passage is one of the clearest promises of Christian assurance; so much so that those who do not hold to the perseverance of the saints rarely argue against it. Instead, the condition by which the promise becomes true is pointed out. Shank observes,

Thank God for such a precious promise from our Savior.... [but] We must not overlook verse 27, which is an integral part of the statement and quite essential. It sets forth the specific condition governing our Saviour’s promise.... *It is obvious that Christ’s giving of eternal life to his sheep is commensurate with their habitual listening and following.* This is an essential truth affirmed many

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<sup>25</sup> Marshall, 181–182. Emphasis mine.

times in the New Testament; but a truth, alas, which many somehow have failed to observe.<sup>26</sup>

Once again, the promise of irrevocable salvation is in juxtaposition with conditions or warnings. The promise of divine protection is for those who continually hear the voice of Jesus and follow him. While Shank's observation is correct, he too is guilty of overlooking other portions of the text. One must ask, who hears and follows Jesus? Who are the sheep? The previous verses indicate that the true believers are the sheep. Jesus said that he knows his sheep, the sheep know Jesus, and Jesus gives his life for the sheep (10:14-15). The sheep will listen to the voice of Jesus, and they will be one flock (10:16). Who else would this be, but the true believers? Furthermore, those who do not believe reveal that they do not belong to Jesus' sheep (10:25-27). If the promise of divine protection is given to those who hear and follow Christ, and those who hear and follow Christ are his sheep, then the promise of divine protection is intended for all of Jesus' true sheep.

## **B. Analysis of Warning Type Passages**

Since John 15:6 is not a passage in a vacuum, but is part of a coherent body of literature, analyzing similar passages is informative for understanding John 15:6. Are there other Johannine passages that support the idea that believers can lose their salvation? Two possible kinds of texts can be observed. First, the conditional statements in Johannine literature, as hinted above, seem to imply provisional salvation. Second, the Fourth Gospel and John's letters include accounts of those who once believed but later walked away.

### **1. Conditional Commands**

In addition to John 15:6, other conditional statements in John's writings seem to imply that salvation is conditional instead of an irrevocable promise. In John 8:51, Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, *if anyone keeps my word*, he will never see death." A few verses before that he says, "*If you abide in my word*, you are truly my disciples." The negative counterpart is in John 15:6, "*If anyone does not abide in me* he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the

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<sup>26</sup> Shank, 56–57. Emphasis mine.

branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” In 1 John 2:3, John says, “We know that we have come to know him *if we keep his commands*” (NIV).

Unlike the conditional statements mentioned previously, these statements are not parallel to πιστεῦώ; they seem to be commands one must keep.<sup>27</sup> These, commands, however, all have to do with abiding or keeping God’s word. These conditional commands could be summarized as commands for obedience. Is obedience necessary for salvation? Two observations must be made to answer this question. First, it must be established that these conditional commands are not calling people to come to Christ; rather, they seem to be addressing those who already believed in Jesus. In John 8, Jesus is speaking to a mixed crowd that includes “Jews who had believed him” (8:31a). John 15 is part of the Upper Room Discourse with the eleven disciples, and 1 John is a letter written to believers (1:4; 5:13). Secondly, it is also noteworthy to point out that the results of the commands are salvific. Those who obey Jesus “will never see death” (John 8:51), are “truly his disciples” (8:31), will not be “thrown into the fire” (15:6), and “have come to know Jesus” (1 John 2:3).

In light of these two observations, is obedience then necessary for salvation? Since Jesus is addressing those who already claim to be believers, then in one sense obedience is not necessary for the *basis* of one’s salvation. But, obedience is necessary for salvation in the sense that obedience serves as the *evidence* of salvation. Tom Schreiner puts it this way:

Our obedience could never function as the basis of our righteousness because God demands perfect obedience, and only Christ obeyed perfectly. We are justified before God because we are united with Christ by faith, because we belong to the second Adam rather than to the first Adam. It is correct, however, to say that obedience is necessary for salvation as the fruit or evidence of faith.... If good works do not follow, they demonstrate that faith was not genuine.<sup>28</sup>

This seems to be the function of the conditional commands in Johannine literature. They are not conditions for someone to be saved

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<sup>27</sup> See “Passages on Promises of Eternal Life” above.

<sup>28</sup> Schreiner, *Run to Win the Prize*, 71–72.

or for someone to remain saved; rather, they are written to encourage a demonstration of genuine faith. The adverb “truly” (ἀληθῶς) in John 8:31 supports this view. If someone abides in the words of Jesus, then it shows that he is truly his disciple. This implies that true believers meet the conditional commands, and those who do not continually abide are not true disciples.

## 2. Believed, but Walked Away

In addition to the falling away of Judas (discussed above), other passages in John include accounts of disciples who believed but later walked away from Jesus. In John 2:23-25, many believed in Jesus because they saw the signs, but Jesus did not entrust himself to them. In John 6:66, it says that “After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.” I. Howard Marshall also includes the passage in John 7:31, “Yet many of the people believed in him. They said, ‘When the Christ appears, will he do more signs than this man has done?’”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps even John 12:42-43 falls into this category,

Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. (John 12:42-43)

In 1 John 2:19, John laments about those who abandoned the faith,

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.

The main question about these passages is this: do not these passages demonstrate multiple cases of someone losing their salvation by abandoning the faith? To answer this question, several points need to be made.

First, the word “believe” does not necessarily guarantee genuine faith. So, the narratives in John demonstrate a superficial faith. Other New Testament passages show evidence for using “believe” to indicate less than saving faith. In the parable in Luke 8, Jesus says that the seeds that fell on the rocky soil “believe for a while” (Luke 8:12-13). In this parable, Jesus is contrasting genuine faith (seeds

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<sup>29</sup> See Marshall, 182.

planted on the good ground) with superficial faith (seeds planted in thorny and stony ground). In James 2:19, even the devils believed. Certainly, the devils' belief is short of saving faith.<sup>30</sup> If the word "believe" does not guarantee genuine faith, then it is possible that those who "believed" in Jesus then walked away had a merely superficial faith.<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, having narrative accounts that some who believed eventually walked away affirms the necessity of abiding in Jesus (John 8:31). This is compatible with the passages teaching that the promise of eternal life is given to those who continually believe in Jesus. Thus, those who abandoned their faith were never truly saved. Stanley, however, argues that once someone believes, he is a recipient of an irrevocable salvation regardless whether he abides in Jesus or not. He says that,

A Christian who has expressed faith in Christ and experienced forgiveness of sin will always believe that forgiveness is found through Christ. *But even if he does not, the fact remains that he is forgiven!*<sup>32</sup>

Stanley seems to assume mistakenly that mere *expressing* faith results to forgiveness of sins and that one who truly experienced forgiveness could cease to believe. John's record of people walking away from Jesus shows the necessity of abiding in Jesus as demonstration of genuine faith.

Lastly, a closer reading of the apostasy in 1 John 2:19 validates the view that those who have left the faith were never true believers. Marshall argues that it is possible to read 1 John 2:19 as men who have fallen from the faith instead of men who had never really possessed eternal life.<sup>33</sup> Marshall, however, seems to be begging the question when instead of dealing with what the text says, he uses other warning passages outside 1 John 2:19 as evidence for the

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<sup>30</sup> Perhaps Acts 8:12-13 could be another example.

<sup>31</sup> Based on the use of πιστεῦν, Debbie Hunn argues that faith in John 2:22-23 is genuine; the context, however, leads to the opposite. See Debbie Hunn, "The Believers Jesus Doubted: John 2:23–25," *Trinity Journal* 25, no. 1 (2004).

<sup>32</sup> Stanley, 79. Emphasis mine.

<sup>33</sup> Marshall, 187.

possibility that the false teachers were lapsed believers. Here is his somewhat lengthy argument:

In 1 John 2:24 the readers are admonished to abide in the truth. Although the author feels fairly confident that they will do so, he warns his readers against being led astray by the false teachers; they are to look to themselves lest they lose what they have worked for, i.e. eternal life. Anybody who presses on to advanced doctrine and does not remain in the doctrine of Christ does not have God (2 John 7-11). These verses express the possibility that John’s readers may go astray and lose their salvation—and we note that the warning is addressed to people described as ‘elect’ (2 John 1).<sup>34</sup>

Based on other warning passages, his conclusion is that,

We must allow the possibility that believers might lapse from the true faith through following the false teachers, whether or not the group of teachers were themselves regarded as lapsed believers.<sup>35</sup>

Three propositions from the text indicate that these false teachers were never true believers, and that the pattern of departing from the faith is a telling sign of spurious faith. One, John distinguishes “those who left” from “those who remain” by using the same phraseology: “they went out *from us* (ἐξ ἡμῶν), but they were *not of us* (οὐκ...ἐξ ἡμῶν).” John is literally saying that those who left “from us” were really “not from us.” In other words, those who left never really belonged to the community of faith to begin with. Two, John explains his point even further – if they were truly saved, they would have remained. The verb for “remain” (μένω) here is the same verb translated as “abide” elsewhere in John.<sup>36</sup> This is another indication that the identity of those who truly abide—those who meet the conditional requirements—are genuine believers. Three, John states the providential purpose (ἵνα + subjunctive) of the departure of some, which is to make clear that those who left were false brethren.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> The phrase “with us” does not indicate the object of “abiding.” In John, the object of “abiding” in the context of Christian faith is either in God/Jesus or in the words of Jesus. The phrase “with us” indicates that “abiding in Jesus” is never divorced from the community of faith. Following Jesus is never meant to be a solo ride.

### C. Analysis of John 15:6

An interpretation of a difficult text, like John 15:6, must be informed by the overall teaching of John, both in the Fourth Gospel and Letters. Thus, a summary of the previous discussion is in order. Several passages in John indicate that God’s promise to those who believe in him is “eternal life.” For John, the requirement for this promise is a *continual* faith in Jesus. In addition to the promise of eternal life are promises of divine protection that none of those who follow Jesus will be cast out. This is true for all who hear and follow Jesus, who are identified as Jesus’ sheep. The characteristic of these sheep is that they abide in Jesus and in his words, which is an evidence of genuine belief in Jesus. Those who abide in Jesus are truly his disciples (John 8:31). Thus, those who once believed, but walked away, demonstrate that they were not truly Jesus’ disciples because they failed to abide in Jesus.

Assuming a coherency in Johannine soteriology, an interpretation of John 15:6 must be found consistent with other Johannine passages related to eternal security. A few more questions from John 15:6 need to be answered: (1) What does it mean to be thrown away and burned? Is the metaphor used here referring to eternal punishment or not? (2) Who are the branches? Are the branches that were burnt referring to believers or unbelievers? and (3) What is the point of this warning passage?

#### 1. The Burning of the Branches

John’s description of the consequence for not abiding in Jesus is sequentially detailed. This person will (1) be thrown away like a branch and wither; (2) be gathered; (3) be thrown into the fire; (4) and be burned. Is this metaphorical description referring to eternal punishment or not? Those who argue that this is not referring to eternal damnation have various alternative interpretations. Waterhouse argues that the taking away is referring to “physical death” (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:30). He explains the burning this way:

Burning could be an agricultural metaphor. Farmers burn a field to purify it from weeds and increase productivity. Those who will not abide will face God’s purifying chastisement. This is not the loss of salvation but rather troubles



designed to improve the believer. Also, there could be a reference here to loss of rewards.<sup>37</sup>

The language used by John, however, is severe enough that more than just chastisement, trials, or loss of reward are in view here. Elsewhere in Scripture, the same burning metaphor is used within the context of eternal judgment.<sup>38</sup> In Exodus 9:23, fire came down to the earth against Egypt along with thunder and hail. Fire consumed Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:2) and the 250 men with Korah (Num. 26:10). More convincing is Carson's argument that John 15:6 is an allusion to Ezekiel 15:6-7, where God said that,

Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And I will set my face against them. Though they escape from the fire, the fire shall yet consume them, and you will know that I am the LORD, when I set my face against them.<sup>39</sup>

One must conclude that nothing short of eternal damnation is in view here.<sup>40</sup>

## 2. The Identity of the Branches

If the fire in John 15:6 refers to eternal damnation, then the important question becomes “who are the branches”? Who are the ones who fall into the imminent danger of eternal punishment? This

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<sup>37</sup> Steven Waterhouse, *Blessed Assurance: A Defense of the Doctrine of Eternal Security* (Amarillo, TX: Westcliff Press, 2000), 35–36. See also Stanley, 129–130.

<sup>38</sup> Christopher David Bass, “A Johannine Perspective of the Human Responsibility to Persevere in the Faith through the Use of *Μενω* and Other Related Motifs,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69, no. 2 (2007): 316.

<sup>39</sup> Carson further says that “When Ezekiel appealed to vine imagery, he warned that if a vine failed to produce fruit its wood was good for nothing but a fire (Ezk. 15:1-8); Jesus assumes the same thing, and by thus alluding to Ezekiel, where the vine stands for Israel, he is warning his contemporaries of their imminent danger.” Carson, 517.

<sup>40</sup> Contra Rokser: “Jesus Christ explains that a believer’s failure to abide in fellowship with Him will have definite consequences. He will be unable to bear fruit...and he will regress spiritually...so that he is like, in a figurative sense, a worthless branch (no fruit and testimony) that people throw into the fire. The fire must be interpreted as physical, earthly fire that men burn branches in, since “men” cannot cast anyone into eternal hell.” Dennis M. Rokser, “Can You Know for Sure You Are Saved Forever?,” in *Freely by His Grace: Classical Free Grace Theology*, ed. Jerry Blaine Hixson, Rick Whitmire, and Roy B. Zuck (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2012), 325. In response to Rokser, the “men” who gathered the branches for burning parallels Matthew 13:41-42, 49-50. The branches that are attached to Christ that do not bear fruit lack a genuine, organic relationship with the vine because they do not bear fruit since only by abiding in Christ can someone bear fruit.

teaching is part of the upper room discourse with the Lord's eleven disciples. As the original audience, the warning was for them. But the generic  $\tau\upsilon\varsigma$  in v6 signifies a broader audience, extending beyond just the disciples. The generic  $\tau\upsilon\varsigma$  refers to anyone who does not abide in Jesus. Who are the branches that are to be burned? These branches are the ones who fail to abide in Christ. The more appropriate question, then, is who are the ones who will succeed in abiding in Christ? The entire theology of John, as previously discussed, indicates that those who truly believe in Jesus are the ones who will abide in Jesus to the end. Those who truly believe in Jesus will bear fruit, and their fruit will remain (cf. John 15:16).<sup>41</sup> Thus, they will never be thrown away and burned.

But do not let that conclusion weaken the warning. While those who are truly Jesus' disciples abide in him (cf. John 8:31), the entire warning is nevertheless addressed to all who claim to be followers of Jesus. This is for all who claim to be connected to the vine, either genuinely or artificially. Thus, the warning must be taken seriously.

### 3. The Point of the Branches

The warnings in John, including John 15:6, have at least two purposes: (1) to identify and distinguish genuine believers from superficial believers and (2) to function as means for true believers to persevere. The first purpose is in keeping with 1 John 2:19, which was discussed above. Demarest observes that,

The dry and fruitless branches cut off signify professed believers whom Christ rejects because their relation to him was not genuine. The Lord referred to the perdition of unregenerate professors such as Judas in v. 6.<sup>42</sup>

The second purpose demonstrates how God uses his Word as one of his means in guaranteeing the perseverance of his people. For it is in his Word that we find the warnings of falling away. These warnings are real (not hypothetical) and addressed to genuine believers so that one can biblically use these warnings to exhort all who claim to be believers. If that person would not repent or would not continue in

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<sup>41</sup> Contra Rokser, who argues that the believer's practical sanctification is not guaranteed, implying that believers who are not progressing in sanctification exist. See *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>42</sup> Demarest, 456.

Jesus, then he is going to be burned in eternal punishment. If that event takes place—meaning, he actually ended up in eternal torment—then one can conclude that he was indeed never protected by Christ. He never had eternal life. He stopped believing, which means he never truly believed.

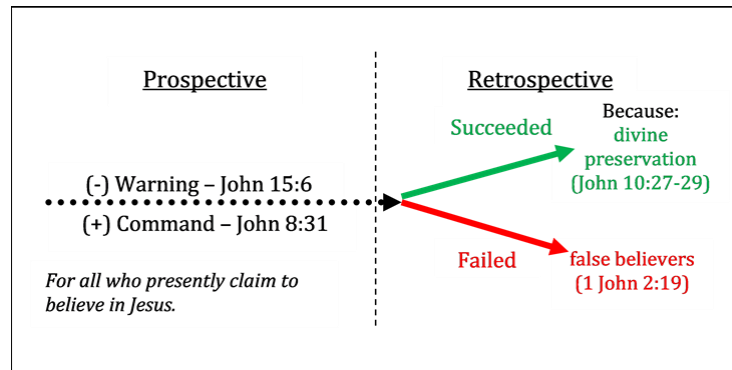
Conversely, if someone rebukes a professing believer with these warnings, and he repents and continues abiding in Jesus, this person shall never see death. The reason he continued believing is because Jesus promised eternal life and divine protection to his true sheep. Schreiner puts it this way:

If the warnings are directed to Christians, do they quench and dampen our assurance? Certainly not. The admonitions are the means God uses to keep believers on the path of faith. Believers are even more assured of their salvation as they heed the warnings, because their response to the warnings demonstrates that they truly belong to God.<sup>43</sup>

By abiding in Jesus and heeding the warnings, true believers gain assurance that they indeed have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

### Conclusion

Four key passages serve as an appropriate summarizing conclusion of John’s theology of eternal security (see figure below).<sup>44</sup>



<sup>43</sup> Schreiner, *Run to Win the Prize*, 113.

<sup>44</sup> I am indebted to Tom Schreiner for demonstrating the prospective/retrospective aspect of the eternal security passages. The following concluding thoughts and figure are this author’s interpretation of Schreiner’s conclusion applied to Johannine literature. See Schreiner, *Run to Win the Prize*, 105-106.

Both John 15:6 (representing the warnings) and John 8:31 (representing the commands to abide) are prospective. These are addressed to all who claim to believe in Jesus. Positively, the command is to abide in the words of Jesus to show genuine faith (John 8:31). Negatively stated, the warning cautions that if one fails to abide in Jesus he will be unfruitful, and he will receive eternal punishment. The other passages in John are retrospective. Those who fail to heed the caution and to obey the command signify that they were false believers (1 John 2:19). Those who heed the caution and abide in the words of Jesus succeed, not by their good works, but because they inherited the promise of eternal life and were protected by the mighty hand of the Father and of Jesus (John 10:27-29).<sup>45</sup>

The promises of irrevocable salvation and protection from falling away must not weaken the warning passages; nor should the warning passages reduce the promises of God. When read as a coherent whole the warning passages enforce the promises of God. The warnings and commands are the means by which God enables perseverance and fulfills his promise of preservation.

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<sup>45</sup> To be clear, God's divine preservation is *not* dependent on the believer's will to obey and heed the warnings (contra Molinism); rather, divine preservation is part of God's good work to bring to completion what he began in the believer through providing the will and enablement to obey and heed the warnings (cf. Philippians 1:6; 2:13).

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