

CHAPTER 21

ASSURANCE OF SALVATION, PROVIDED WE PERSEVERE AND CONTINUE ON "THE WAY"

¹³These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. *1 John 5:13 (NASB)*

²⁷ My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; ²⁸ and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. *John 10:27-29 (NASB)*

The Spirit of God came upon Azari'ah the son of Oded, ² and he went out to meet Asa, and said to him, "Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The Lord is with you, while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you. *2 Chronicles 15:1-2 (RSV)*

¹²Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. *Hebrews 3:12 (NASB)*

"These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling. *John 16:1 (NASB)*

¹⁵for some have already turned aside to follow Satan. *1 Timothy 5:15 (NASB)*

In this chapter we shall examine a complex and controversial question. That is whether a real Christian can lose his salvation after he has been *genuinely* justified and forgiven. It is a question which is not capable of a short answer.

We are not discussing a *false* Christian who has never really repented or believed at all. Such a person has never been saved in the first place. So, he cannot 'lose' his salvation because he had no salvation to begin with. We are discussing the position of a real Christian who has repented, believed, been baptised in water and even received the Holy Spirit. Can such a person "*fall away*" such that they cease to be a Christian? Is it possible for them to lose their forgiveness and justification and go to Hell and then the Lake of Fire when they die? That is the question and it is not an easy one to answer.

There are two main schools of thought about this and we will examine both:

A) People who emphasise assurance of salvation

This group tends to believe in the idea of "*Once saved, always saved*". By that they mean that a person who has been genuinely saved *cannot* lose his forgiveness and justification, even if he later turns away from the faith, or acts in a way which is very wrong or sinful. There are many Bible passages which indicate that a person can have assurance of salvation and can be confident that they have eternal life. For example, consider the following series of verses:

*The LORD redeems the soul of His servants,
And none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned.* *Psalms 34:22 (NASB)*

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. John 5:24 (NASB)

³⁹"This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰"For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day."

John 6:39-40 (NASB)

³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:33-39 (NIV)

As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

Romans 10:11 (NIV)

¹⁹Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; Hebrews 10:19-23 (NASB)

⁸who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:8 (NASB)

*¹⁸The LORD is near to all who call upon Him,
To all who call upon Him in truth.*

*¹⁹He will fulfil the desire of those who fear Him;
He will also hear their cry and will save them.*

Psalms 145:18-19 (NASB)

¹³These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. 1 John 5:13 (NASB)

⁹But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. ¹⁰For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. Hebrews 6:9-10 (NASB)

²⁴Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, Jude 24 (NASB)

²²so much the more also Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant. ²³The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing, ²⁴but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. ²⁵Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him,

since He always lives to make intercession for them. ²⁶For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the Heavens; ²⁷who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. ²⁸For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever.
Hebrews 7:22-28 (NASB)

These 'assurance passages' seem to be very clear and firm. Their meaning appears to be that if we are a genuine believer we are assured of going to Heaven when we die and of having eternal life. The question, therefore, is whether it is possible for such a genuine believer to *stop* being a believer. Before we seek to reach any conclusion about that, let us look at the other main school of thought:

B) People who emphasise the warnings in the Bible of the need to persevere to the end

This group tends to highlight those passages in the Bible which contain warnings about the need to persevere to the end. Those 'warning passages' do appear to say that our salvation could be lost if we deny Jesus Christ, or turn away from Him, or commit serious sins. Consider the following passages very carefully. Note that in the first passage, Jesus Himself is speaking:

³¹So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine;"
John 8:31 (NASB)

Then the writer of the letter to the Hebrews also tells us that we need to "hold fast"... "until the end".

¹Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession; ²He was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all His house. ³For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honour than the house. ⁴For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.

*⁵Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; ⁶but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house--whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end. ⁷Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, "today if you hear His voice, ⁸do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, ⁹where your fathers tried Me by testing Me, and saw my works for forty years. ¹⁰"Therefore I was angry with this generation, and said, 'they always go astray in their heart, and they did not know My ways'; ¹¹as I swore in my wrath, 'they shall not enter My rest.'" *Hebrews 3:1-11 (NASB)**

Then, having made the above points, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us in the next verse to "take care" not to have the kind of heart that "falls away" from God. His warning would surely be meaningless and absurd if it was not possible to fall away.

Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God
Hebrews 3:12 (NASB)

Note that in verse 12 above, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is not speaking to unbelievers. He refers to his audience as "brethren". That only makes sense if he already considers them to be genuine believers, at least at the moment. Yet, he still warns them of the danger of falling away. It cannot be that he is warning them of something that is purely hypothetical, and which could never happen to them. He warns them soberly against falling away because he views that as a real possibility, even for them.

Now look at how the writer to the Hebrews continues with his warning. He refers to the generation of Israelites who were rescued from Egypt but who went on to become ungrateful and unbelieving, despite all the miracles they had seen. Their attitude angered God, such that He did not let them enter the Promised Land:

¹³But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, ¹⁵while it is said, "today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked me." ¹⁶For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.

Hebrews 3:13-19 (NASB)

So, the writer, to the Hebrews urges us to learn from their experience and not to behave as that generation did, with ingratitude and unbelief. Instead, we are urged to fear God and to *avoid hardening our hearts*:

¹Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. ²For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard. ³For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, "as I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest," although His works were finished from the foundation of the world. ⁴For He has said somewhere concerning the seventh day: "and God rested on the seventh day from all His works"; ⁵and again in this passage, "They shall not enter My rest."

⁶Therefore, since it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷He again fixes a certain day, "Today," saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before, "today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts." ⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. ⁹So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. ¹⁰For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. ¹¹Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience.

¹²For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

Hebrews 4:1-13 (NASB)

Those are very worrying verses, and should not be brushed aside or ignored. However, we do still need to hold them in balance with the more reassuring words which the writer to the Hebrews goes on to say next. He draws our attention to the fact that although we have to remain faithful to Jesus, He is ready and willing to help us to do so. He fully sympathises with us in our struggles and is able to give us His grace and mercy:

¹⁴Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the Heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:14-16 (NASB)

Now let's look at what apostle Paul has to say on this theme of the need to continue in the faith. It too is sobering:

²²yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach-- ²³if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under Heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister. Colossians 1:22-23 (NASB)

Note how Paul emphasises above the need for us to “continue in the faith’.” And he says “if”. He does not assume that this is automatic or that we will inevitably do so. When writing to Timothy Paul is even more explicit:

¹But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, ²by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, 1 Timothy 4:1-2 (NASB)

Paul therefore advises Timothy to guard what he has:

²⁰O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called "knowledge"-- ²¹which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith. Grace be with you. 1 Timothy 6:20-21 (NASB)

Now see how Paul refers, in his letter to the Romans, to the nation of Israel. He describes them as an olive tree on which branches are grafted in, or broken off, depending on their own individual faithfulness:

¹⁷But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith Do not be conceited, but fear; ²¹for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. ²²Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. Romans 11:17-22 (NASB)

In this passage, apostle Paul is writing to the largely Gentile church in Rome. He says that that some of the Jewish people have been "broken off" for their unbelief, i.e. for not accepting their Messiah. Christians can, likewise, be cut off if they do not continue as they should.

Paul's point is that the Jewish people are like a natural olive tree into which we Gentiles have been grafted. So, if even the natural olive branches, the Jews, can be broken off, then so can we be cut off. That is a clear and very disturbing warning to us.

Now consider what Peter says:

²⁰ If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. ²¹ It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. 2 Peter 2:20-21 (NIV)

In this passage Peter goes further. He says that we are actually worse off if we believe and then fall away than if we had never believed. But, when we were unbelievers we were on our way to the Lake of Fire. That must mean, therefore, that a believer who falls away is, likewise, heading for the Lake of Fire. What else can it mean?

If it means anything less than that, then Peter's warning would be an inaccurate exaggeration. But we know that that cannot be the case. Therefore the possibility of our *'turning our backs'* on God has to be taken seriously.

Now let's consider some longer passages which give further warnings:

¹²"And you, son of man, say to your fellow citizens, 'The righteousness of a righteous man will not deliver him in the day of his transgression, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he will not stumble because of it in the day when he turns from his wickedness; whereas a righteous man will not be able to live by his righteousness on the day when he commits sin.' ¹³"When I say to the righteous he will surely live, and he so trusts in his righteousness that he commits iniquity, none of his righteous deeds will be remembered; but in that same iniquity of his which he has committed he will die.

¹⁴"But when I say to the wicked, 'You will surely die,' and he turns from his sin and practices justice and righteousness, ¹⁵if a wicked man restores a pledge, pays back what he has taken by robbery, walks by the statutes which ensure life without committing iniquity, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ¹⁶"None of his sins that he has committed will be remembered against him. He has practiced justice and righteousness; he shall surely live. ¹⁷"Yet your fellow citizens say, 'The way of the Lord is not right,' when it is their own way that is not right. ¹⁸"When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, then he shall die in it. ¹⁹"But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and practices justice and righteousness, he will live by them. ²⁰"Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways."
Ezekiel 33:12-20 (NASB)

In the passage above the prophet Ezekiel is saying that it is possible for a righteous man to change his path and become wicked. If he does then his previous righteous life will not be remembered. In other words, he will be condemned, despite having been righteous up to that point. There would be no point in Ezekiel giving such a warning if it could not occur.

Ezekiel also says that if a wicked man turns from his sin then, likewise, his past sinfulness will not be remembered against him either. It works both ways. But the operative point, for our purposes, is that it is possible for a righteous man to fall away.

Now let's hear what Jesus says:

²¹"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in Heaven will enter. ²²"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' ²³"And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.'
Matthew 7:21-23 (NASB)

In this grim passage Jesus Himself is directly warning us that on the Day of Judgment, many people will be told by Him that He never knew them. This verse would appear to refer to people who *never were genuine Christians in the first place*, because it says "I never knew you...".

We can deduce from this therefore that, at the very least, there must be many people who assume that they are real Christians, but in fact they are not, and never were. That must be so, because Jesus says He never knew them. That is a very worrying thought in itself, in addition to the quite separate danger of a *real* Christian falling away *after He has known them*.

It means that many of us will, one day, be told that we never were real Christians in the first place. That is very disturbing, especially as it comes from Jesus' own mouth. He is the One who will be judging us.

But, what about people who *have* been real Christians, at least for a time? Can such people fall away? If so, how does it occur? Let's look again at one of the most well-known parables Jesus told. We have discussed it earlier in chapter 14 concerning repentance.

The Parable of the soils - i.e. types of heart attitude

¹¹"Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God. ¹²"Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved. ¹³"Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. ¹⁴"The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity. ¹⁵"But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance. Luke 8:11-15 (NASB)

This is the famous parable of the sower. However, it ought to be called the parable of the *soils*, because that is what it really speaks about. The soils represent different types of heart attitude. The heart attitude we have, i.e. the quality of our 'soil', determines whether we properly respond to the gospel in the first place. It also determines whether we persevere and continue as Christians from conversion onwards. It is this post-conversion aspect of the parable that is most alarming.

In the parable there are four categories of person, or four types of heart attitude:

(1) **hard hearted people**

The hard ground beside the road, i.e. the path, represents the people whose hearts are so hard to begin with that they never respond at all when they hear the gospel. When the 'seed' of the gospel lands on these people it never even germinates. It just bounces off them. These people, therefore, never were Christians at any time, not even at the start.

(2) **shallow people**

The rocky soil (i.e. thin soil) represents shallow people. They believe for a short time, but the seed of the gospel takes no firm root. Therefore they germinate, but they quickly fall away. This group may, perhaps, have been real Christians very briefly. It's impossible for us to be sure. Only God knows. However, my impression is that they were real for a while. What we can say is that they do not persist. The seed of the gospel never puts down takes any deep roots in them. Therefore they quickly fall away, near to the start of the Christian life, assuming they ever got started at all.

(3) **people who get distracted**

The soil that is infested with thorns and weeds represents those people who allow their faith to be choked by various other pressures and distractions in the world. This third group is similar in many ways to the second group, where the seed fell on thin, rocky soil. This third group, whose hearts are like soil that is full of thorns and weeds, may or may not have been

real Christians to begin with. Again, only God knows. But the implication is that they were real for a time. At any rate, whatever they were to begin with, they clearly do not continue as Christians. As with the second group, this third group are clearly not saved in the end.

(4) **sincere and serious people**

These people's hearts are portrayed as good deep soil. Their hearts are genuine and honest. This is the only group where the person continues as a Christian to the end and becomes fruitful. This is the only group which is saved in the end. The three other groups are not. The first group never were saved to begin with. The second and third groups probably were genuine for a while, but fell away. The two distinguishing features of this fourth group are:

- (a) they persevere and they *continue* as Christians to the end, i.e. till death and
- (b) they *bear fruit*, i.e. their lives are productive and effective in God's service.

So, the point of the parable is that real Christians, can only be identified by those two features i.e.

- a) they continue as disciples until death and
- b) they bear fruit.

That means their lives change and they produce the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace etc). They are also effective, obedient and productive for Jesus. That is why Jesus warned His disciples that they could only ever know whether a person is a real or false Christian by looking at their fruit, as opposed to their words.

The vital importance of fruit from a person's life as an indicator of what that person really is

Let's now consider a series of verses, all of which focus on the question of fruit. These verses all address the crucial importance of what a person really is and what fruit their lives produce, if any. I have included a long series of passages because I want to demonstrate that the concept of fruit coming from a person's life is a major theme throughout the Bible. I could have chosen very many more.

A person is justified only as a result of their repentance and faith in Jesus. However, the test from that point onwards to determine whether their conversion was real, and/or whether they are still genuine believers, is the quality and quantity of fruit that their lives produce. Please read the following verses carefully. Note the emphasis that is repeatedly given to the subject of fruit:

¹⁵"Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶"You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷"So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸"A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹"Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰"So then, you will know them by their fruits. Matthew 7:15-20 (NASB)

³³"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. Matthew 12:33 (NASB)

⁷So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸"Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to

you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹"Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."
Luke 3:7-9 (NASB)

⁴³"For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. ⁴⁴"For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. ⁴⁵"The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.
Luke 6:43-45 (NASB)

⁴"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. ⁵"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. ⁶"If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. ⁷"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸"My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.
John 15:4-8 (NASB)

¹⁶"You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you.
John 15:16 (NASB)

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.
Galatians 5:22-23 (NASB)

³But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; ⁴and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. ⁵For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. ⁶Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷Therefore do not be partakers with them; ⁸for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light ⁹for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), ¹⁰trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them;
Ephesians 5:3-11 (NASB)

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.
Hebrews 12:11 (NASB)

So we can conclude from these passages that:

- a) the purpose and aim of our lives as Christians is that we should bear fruit
- b) real Christians do bear fruit
- c) false Christians don't bear fruit
- d) people who bear fruit will be rewarded and praised
- e) people who bear no fruit will be cut off, just as a farmer will eventually chop down a tree if it produces nothing of value

The warning to those who continue to sin wilfully, even after they know the truth of the gospel

Now let's examine a very grim passage. It clearly seems to be speaking about those who have been real believers but have ended up turning away from their faith. The Bible uses very stark language. It says they have "*trampled under foot the Son of God*".

²⁶For if we go on sinning wilfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. ²⁸Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰For we know Him who said, "vengeance is mine, I will repay " And again, "the Lord will judge his people." ³¹It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Hebrews 10:26-31 (NASB)

The passage above can presumably only be referring to Christians who have been real, at least for a time. It refers to them "*receiving the knowledge of the truth*" and, even more importantly, to them having been "*sanctified*". Sanctification can only occur in the life of a real Christian, not an unbeliever. Yet, the direct warning is given, even to such people, that they must not go on sinning wilfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth (i.e. after becoming a Christian).

Note how strong the warning is. It specifically warns of how much more severe the punishment will be for such people, i.e. as compared to how it will be for unbelievers who were never Christians in the first place. That has to mean that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is saying, as the apostle Paul also said above, that a real believer who falls away is in a substantially worse position than someone who has never believed at all.

Logically, that must mean that a real believer who falls away will go, in the end, to the Great White Throne judgment for unbelievers and from there to the Lake of Fire. What else can we possibly conclude? If it did not mean that, then how can it be said that such a person will be treated more severely than one who never knew the truth? We know for a fact that unbelievers are going to the Lake of Fire.

That means that for an apostate believer, (i.e. one who falls away and is unfaithful to Jesus), that somehow, whatever they experience in the Lake of Fire will be more intense than it will be for someone who had never believed. There are, evidently, degrees of punishment, even within the same Lake of Fire.

I don't know how that makes you feel, but it alarms me and increases my fear of the Lord. It makes me want to focus on God and on bearing fruit. I do not want to be classified as a worthless or unproductive servant, especially, given that it has such awesome significance in terms of how we will be judged.

People who fall away after knowing the truth find it very hard ever to repent again

If the previous passage was not enough to make you sit up and think, then consider this one. It indicates that a person who believes and then falls away will also find it very difficult to repent again later. Thus, if we do fall away, it will not be easy to find our way back:

⁴For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the Heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the

powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. ⁷For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; ⁸but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned.

Hebrews 6:4-8 (NASB)

This passage is clearly speaking of real Christians, not those who have never really believed to begin with. It says they *"have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit"*. How could that be the case if they were never real believers?

So, the additional warning given to us is that if we do ever fall away, then we cannot complacently assume that we can be restored by repenting again later. Subsequent repentance may prove to be impossible, or at least very difficult. Therefore, the moral of all this is that we need to persist, and not to throw away the faith that we have. We must endure whatever trials and difficulties we face and never give up the faith. Then we will be rewarded. But if we do give up our faith and fall away, then we face *"destruction"*. Whatever you believe that means exactly, you will have to agree that it cannot be said to be something positive:

³⁵Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. ³⁷for yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. ³⁸but my righteous one shall live by faith; and if He shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. ³⁹But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul

Hebrews 10:35-39 (NASB)

That same hardening of our heart and conscience that causes us to fall away also has the effect of making our hearts too leathery and insensitive ever to repent of doing so. We must take very careful note of that and let it affect how we live, so that we resolve to make sure never to fall away. Remember also that in this next passage, God is described as a *consuming fire*, and that is in a letter which is *addressed to Christians, not to unbelievers*:

²⁵See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from Heaven. ²⁶And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the Heaven."

²⁷This expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; ²⁹for our God is a consuming fire.

Hebrews 12:25-29 (NASB)

A more detailed look at both the assurance and warning passages in the Bible

Each of these two schools of thought, the people who emphasise assurance and those who emphasise warning, tend to focus only on the verses which support their view. They often ignore anything that doesn't suit them. There is something about human nature which causes us to zoom in on what we agree with and to ignore those things which contradict us or which make our position more complicated.

However, I would like to suggest that the right approach is to take seriously *both* the assurance passages and the warning passages. Both are true. They each need to be believed and understood in their proper context and then held, side by side, in a healthy tension. Let's now look at each position again and try to define them more clearly. Let's also look at how they can, and must, be fitted alongside each other simultaneously:

Assurance of salvation

When I first started out as a Christian it was really important to me to find reassurance that I had got eternal life. I wanted to be certain that I wasn't going to lose it due to my own failure to stay the course, or by not being faithful enough to Jesus. I had a deep fear of God's judgment and of going to the Lake of Fire. So, I wanted to be able to *know*, not just to *hope*, that I would never go there. Even the thought of one day going to the Lake of Fire horrified me. It should horrify all of us.

So, to someone like me, the various assurance passages were of great importance. I underlined and memorised them. I also felt that, as a matter of logic, if I had '*eternal*' life now, then how could it come to an end? It seemed to be a contradiction in terms for something which, at the moment, is classed as '*eternal*' to be able to come to an end at all, for any reason. Likewise, if I was already justified, how could I cease to be so?

Surely, if the promise of '*eternal*'. life meant anything, it seemed to me, logically, that it must be permanent. I also felt it ought not to be dependent on my ongoing faithfulness and avoidance of sin. However, I still wondered, what would happen if I did sin in a major way? What if I was to let Jesus down or even deny Him under pressure? Would I then be lost? Would I cease to be forgiven and justified? If so, then it seemed to me that I would surely be walking on thin ice throughout my whole life, hoping not to let Him down or lose His approval, but always wondering whether I would.

However, even as a new believer, I understood the gospel well enough to know that that isn't how God operates. I knew that my going to Heaven was not dependent on my complete avoidance of sin, at all times, because that would be impossible anyway. I knew that if I was justified and forgiven at all, it was because Jesus had died for me, in my place, not because of me constantly avoiding or reducing sin in my life. I could see that such an obligation, if it was true, would make me responsible for my own salvation. I would be like a hamster on a wheel, always afraid to stop working in case I lost my eternal life.

So, the assurance passages really helped me personally. They are in the Bible largely for the benefit of people who are sincere and anxious for reassurance. They are most meaningful to those who have a strong sense of the fear of the Lord. For such people, these assurance passages are a precious source of comfort.

God holds a Christian in the palm of His hand

A good way to look at the assurance passages is to consider yourself to be held in the palm of God's hand. He will never drop you or make any mistake with you. Nor will He ever forsake you or reject you merely because you have let Him down. He knows perfectly well that you will let Him down and that you will inevitably sin. He is totally realistic about you. So, the real question is not whether God will drop us, but whether we will *choose to throw ourselves out of His hand*.

No person will ever be cut off or lose their salvation solely because they let God down or made mistakes or failed Him. If it was based on that, we would all have to be cut off and rejected every single day, because that is how often we fail God or let Him down, at least in my case.

It is not, therefore, based on that. It works the other way round. As we have seen with the 'fruit' passages above, the real question is not whether you have let God down. It is whether you have produced, and are continuing to produce, any genuine, worthwhile fruit for Him.

Moving back, therefore, to the image of our being in the palm of God's hand, the point is that if you are a God-fearing, repentant, sincere, person, you would not even want to be presumptuous or complacent. If so you will not choose to throw yourself out of the palm of God's hand. Neither will you wander off, or show contempt for His forgiveness. On the contrary, you will want to produce fruit for Him.

The sort of person who is anxious for reassurance is like that precisely because he will not despise or become complacent about God's mercy and forgiveness. The very fact that it means so much to him, and that he so wants to be reassured, means that he is not likely ever to take it for granted.

Thus for such people, in those circumstances, it is true to say that they do *'have'* eternal life. It is also true to say that no man can snatch them out of God's hand. They are safe and can feel secure. It would be like a refugee who is fleeing from a violent regime. Imagine it is the summer of 1939 and he has crossed the border, from Nazi Germany into France. He is now on a train heading to a port and then a ship to England. That refugee could ask *"Am I safe now? Will this train definitely take me to the ship and to my new country?"* The answer would be *"Yes, you are secure. This train is definitely going to the coast and you are safe, You can be assured of that."*

What that refugee really means by his question is *"Will anybody make me get off the train against my will, or refuse to let me continue my journey?"* He isn't focusing on whether he himself will *choose* to get off the train. That's not what he is worried about. He fully intends to stay on board. Thus, for Him, the assurance given is correct and meaningful.

That illustration can also help us to understand the warning passages and to realise what kind of people are being addressed and in what circumstances:

The warnings against losing your salvation - the need to persevere

If we extend the train analogy, what would happen if, as time passed, the refugee got more and more relaxed and casual and chose to get off the train? What if he was to get out at a station and wander off to buy a newspaper? What if he just got out to stretch his legs on the platform? Is it possible that the train could set off again without him? What if he even chose to get off for a more lengthy period and go for a walk and then seek to get back on to a later train? Would there definitely be a later train? Even if there was, would he be able to get onto it?

That analogy also has relevance to the assurance passages. So, it would be true to say to that refugee that:

- a) the train he is currently on is definitely going to the destination
- b) he is guaranteed a seat
- c) no fellow passenger can throw him off the train
- d) he will not fall out of the train due to any accident.

However, it would also be true, and no contradiction, to say: *"But stay on the train and don't seek to get off and get back on a later train. Don't get off at all, even for a moment. Don't take any chances or be complacent. Don't even get out onto the platform at any of the stations along the way, not even for a second, in case you cannot get back on and the train leaves without you."*

In other words one could say to him: "*You need to persevere. Stay on the train and don't get off or go anywhere*". The same things can be said about persevering in the Christian life: We must continue to stand and to hold fast and we must never leave the Christian life. Otherwise, we may be judged to have believed in vain:

¹Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, ²by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.
1 Corinthians 15:1-2 (NASB)

The warnings in the train analogy do not contradict the promises or reassurance given beforehand. The two messages fit together perfectly well. A sensible, reasonable person can feel assured of his place on the train and yet still realise his own need to take care to stay on board and not wander off or leave the train.

Likewise, we can feel assured that we are going to Heaven when we die but, at the same time, know that we must continue on the Way, hold firm, bear fruit, and not throw away our faith or allow it to go cold.

To put it another way, you could say that your salvation cannot be lost by any kind of accident, or by the actions of any other human being. But you could decide to throw it away yourself, if you were to deny Jesus or to wilfully sin against Him, or to stop following Him. Or, you could gradually let it evaporate away by your own indifference, complacency and lack of reverence.

Over time, those casual attitudes turn into neglect, which steadily erodes your faith. You could end up no longer being a disciple, or no longer even a believer at all. However, if that happened, it would be *you* who brought it about, not God, and not other people.

That falling away need not have come from any decisive moment when you deliberately chose to reject Jesus. It could be that your love for Him just ebbed away, bit by bit, over a long period. If so, your faith ends up as a dry, empty shell with no life in it. That is not something which happens *to* you. It's something you *do yourself*, over a period of time.

It's no accident. It's the end result of many small decisions to ignore Jesus Christ or to put Him to one side and to focus instead on the trivial things of this world. Faith in Jesus Christ can ebb away, just as marriages often do. It happens by a thousand little decisions to neglect rather than cherish, and to focus on something, or someone, else rather than the one we are meant to love. That's how marriages are usually thrown away, by gradual decay, not by any sudden collapse or trauma. It works the same way with faith in God.

So, it is perfectly correct for God to say that you can be *assured* of going to Heaven when you die and that He will never accidentally drop you out of His hand or allow anyone else to snatch you out of His hand. It is also correct, at the same time, for God to *warn* you that *you* must not wander away from Him.

You must not choose to leave the palm of His hand or take yourself away from eternal life. Certain decisions or actions on your part could eventually result in you throwing away your place in Heaven. There is no contradiction in any of that. It isn't even particularly complicated. Any sincere person can quickly grasp it.

The assurance and warning passages are largely aimed at different character types

The assurance passages and the warning passages are generally aimed at different audiences, i.e. different types of person:

- a) The *assurance passages* are primarily aimed at the sincere, earnest, anxious, God-fearing, repentant, honest, tender-hearted person. He has no intention of neglecting, despising or throwing away his own salvation. He is only asking for reassurance that it will not be taken away from him by other people or by circumstances.
- b) The *warning passages* are generally directed towards those who have the tendency to be glib, complacent, careless, presumptuous, over confident, self-reliant, self-righteous, carnal, insincere, shallow, worldly, etc. God is warning all such people that His mercy is something to be treasured and received with gratitude. It's not to be despised or taken for granted in a presumptuous manner. The Bible therefore tells us that there is a way to throw away our own salvation through our own actions and decisions, but especially by neglect.

When that throwing away occurs it is very rarely ever done in an instant, or as the result of one sin or foolish decision. It is almost always the culmination of a long series of small choices which usually seem insignificant at the time. These many little decisions cause us to move steadily farther and farther away from God.

Each sinful choice or step causes our hearts to get harder and harder, and our love for Him to get colder and colder. Eventually we end up showing indifference to Him. Then we no longer even fear the prospect of falling away, as our mind is focused on other things. It is to such people, and there are many of them in the Church, that the warning passages are mainly directed. However, we are all to take very careful note of them and to be sobered, whatever type of person we may be.

There is a need for a *balanced* understanding of the assurance passages and the warning passages and to *believe both at the same time*

Various writers argue passionately in favour of one or other of these opposing positions, i.e. focusing either 100% on assurance or 100% on warning. Some of them are failing to realise that we actually need to hold both these positions at the same time in a proper balance.

We could summarise that balance between assurance and warning by the following series of statements:

- a) We are *held onto* by God's faithfulness. He is holding onto us firmly, with a steady grip. He is reliable and He can be trusted never to abandon or forget us. He will never forsake us. Therefore those of us who feel anxious about whether He is reliable can be reassured. We will never be let down by Him.

I am reminded of an occasion when we were out for a walk as a family. We had to cross a very high, very narrow, foot bridge. It had gaps in it so you could see the drop on either side. Our small dog, a Border terrier, was afraid of the bridge and was cowering and trembling as she crossed it. I therefore picked her up and carried her the rest of the way across.

As I held her tightly I felt all the tension and fear drain out of her and she relaxed. She had total faith *in me to hold on to her* and never to let her fall over the edge. She trusted me far more than she trusted herself. That is the kind of simple faith or trust that we should have in God.

- b) While ever we are sincere, remain in Him, and continue to put our trust in Him, God will never reject us. That is still the case *even when we fail or make mistakes*, as we inevitably shall do. Indeed, no genuine Christian will ever be condemned by God solely for failing or making mistakes, while sincerely trying to serve Him.

Even those of us who are failures in the eyes of others may be successes in God's eyes if we are faithfully doing what we can to the best of our ability. God does not judge solely by observable results, as men do. He judges by heart motives. So, being faithful is what really counts, not being visibly successful.

- c) We can have a real and meaningful assurance, right now, that when we die we will have eternal life and will not face God's wrath or go to the Great White Throne judgment or the Lake of Fire.
- d) But, if we take God for granted, lose respect for Him, cease to honour and love Him and drift away from Him, then it is possible, that our names will be blotted out of the book of life. We will then lose our place in the body of Christ, and lose our salvation.
- e) If so, then when we die we would not be counted as part of the Church, but as part of the unbelieving world. We would therefore be judged with the unbelievers at the Great White Throne judgment and go to the Lake of Fire.
- f) If so, the judgment upon us would be even more severe than for a person who had never believed. That's because we would have trampled under foot the precious truth of the gospel and the great sacrifice that Jesus made for us. We would have despised both it and Him.
- g) If our name is eventually removed from the book of life and we lose our salvation, it would not really be something that God has done to us. It would be more accurate to say it is something we have done to ourselves. It would be the end result of all our own decisions and choices, probably over many years. In my experience, I have never seen a real Christian fall away or reject Jesus overnight.

It is almost always the end product of a steady process of decay and neglect that has been going on for a long time. It is like when a rotten old tree falls over in a sudden strong wind. The inside of that tree had probably been rotting away for a long time, or it would not have fallen over. So, it is all our own fault if we fall away and give up the faith.

The need to accept the assurance passages and the warning passages at the same time

Let us consider another analogy which will, hopefully, make all of this clearer. Imagine a person who, in the 19th century, goes to work for the Christian chocolate manufacturer, George Cadbury. He was amazingly advanced and generous in the way he treated his staff. He provided good pay and working conditions plus all sorts of benefits such as schools, medical clinics and good homes for the staff to live in. He was many decades ahead of his time

Suppose that on that employee's first day at work the great man himself, George Cadbury, was to say *"If you come to work at Cadbury's then you will have a job for life. And, when you are too old or too sick to work any longer, you also have my promise of a cottage for life. Therefore you can continue to live on in your home even when you retire"*.

If he gave that promise or assurance to an employee it would be entirely valid and meaningful. It is not hollow or false. It really means something. That new member of staff can immediately feel a sense of assurance, even on their first day at the factory. They know that George Cadbury is a godly man whose word can be totally trusted. There is no question of *him* failing to honour *his* promises and deciding, for no reason, to give that job or cottage to someone else.

So, in terms of assurance, that new worker at Cadbury's has that cast-iron promise. He or she can feel reassured by it. That is precisely how we can, and should, feel in relation to God's promises to us. His word is His bond. God can be entirely trusted never to leave us or to let us down. The real question, however, is what if *we* let God down? What if *we leave Him*? What if *we deny Him*?

If we return to our Cadbury analogy, imagine that after a period of time that new worker becomes complacent, ungrateful and hard-hearted and begins to behave badly at the factory. Imagine they are regularly late for work, lazy, unproductive, disrespectful, disobedient, or neglect their duties. Or, imagine that they go further and even steal from the company or intentionally cause damage to company property. What would George Cadbury do then?

He would begin at a very early stage by giving *warnings* about attitude, performance and conduct. He would even be willing to give repeated warnings, escalating in seriousness and intensity. However, nobody would criticise George Cadbury if, eventually, he said "*Your repeated neglect and misconduct, and your indifference to your duties, have made you an unfruitful, unproductive employee. You are not fit to remain in employment here. Therefore I am dismissing you from the company.*"

Wouldn't his eventual response be entirely reasonable and understandable? How could he realistically do otherwise? So, if we neglect God, dishonour Him, persistently disobey Him, and produce no fruit for Him, then what other option does God have, in the end, but to remove us? If He does so then He is not, breaking His word to us. His assurances were all entirely genuine. They have not been broken or dishonoured. He has been entirely consistent and reasonable, just as with the George Cadbury illustration.

Or, taking the analogy even further, imagine that the worker at Cadbury's chooses, of their own free will, to leave their job and their cottage and to go away to work for some other company. Doesn't that obviously mean that they are no longer an employee of Cadbury's? Of course it does. In terms of contract law, they have terminated their own contract themselves by their own express words of resignation. It was not something which Mr Cadbury did. He played no part in it. The employee did it himself, unilaterally, when he wrote the resignation letter.

However such a departure from the company need not necessarily involve any formal or express decision to resign. The employee could just drift away, such that they do not turn up for work, day after day. Cadbury's would send out letters saying "*Where are you? Please report for work.*" But, eventually the contract of employment would end if the employee failed to return. It could be deemed to be an implied resignation by conduct, i.e. by being persistently absent. Or, it could even result in an express dismissal for absenteeism. Either way, Cadbury's would have done no wrong at all. The responsibility would be entirely on the part of the ex-employee.

I hope that extended analogy helps you to hold together, in proper balance and tension, these apparently contradictory concepts of assurance and warning. In short, if we become a Christian we work for someone infinitely more faithful, honest, trustworthy, and reliable than George Cadbury. Yet God has every right to make demands of us and to hold us accountable for the degree to which we are faithful to Him and for what fruit we produce, or fail to produce. He has told us very clearly, and

repeatedly, what He expects of us. Therefore, what basis do we have to complain if we are eventually 'dismissed' or removed because we are not faithful to Him and we ignore what He says?

Accordingly, it is not enough to adopt only one or other of these two approaches, i.e. assurance *or* warning. Both are true. Both apply to you and to me. They each apply more relevantly to some people than to others. It depends on our heart attitude, i.e. whether we tend to be sincere/tender/anxious types, or casual/self-assured/independent/complacent types.

Do not deny Jesus and He will not deny you. But, if you do deny Jesus, then He will deny you.

The first question is "Are you saved?" If you are, then resolve to remain so. Stay firmly rooted in Jesus Christ. Never leave Him and then He will never leave you. Never deny Him and He will never deny you. But, if you do deny Him, then He will deny you. The Bible warns us of that:

³²"Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in Heaven. ³³"But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in Heaven. *Matthew 10:32-33 (NASB)*

¹¹*It is a trustworthy statement:*

For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him;

¹²*If we endure, we will also reign with Him;*

If we deny Him, He also will deny us; 2 Timothy 2:11-12 (NASB)

Consider also this passage from the Old Testament which is addressed to the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Their king at this particular time was Asa, who was a very godly and faithful man. In other words, he was clearly a real believer. Yet this is what one of the prophets was sent to tell him. It was both a promise and a warning:

The Spirit of God came upon Azari'ah the son of Oded, ² and he went out to meet Asa, and said to him, "Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin: The Lord is with you, while you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you.

2 Chronicles 15:1-2 (RSV)

Someone might possibly object to this passage on the basis that it is from the Old Testament. However, the point is that the very same warnings are made in the New Testament. In one sense, therefore, I need not include it. However, I do so to underline the fact of the warning and to show that it is how God has always acted. Both now and in the past. In short, it illustrates the position for us very clearly.

The question then is whether passages such as those above apply to *believers*, who have already become part of the *Church*, or only to *non-believers*. In other words, does it mean that even a *real Christian* can 'deny' Jesus? We shall attempt to answer that question in the pages below. However, I would suggest to you that, if I understand the Bible correctly, it is entirely possible for a real Christian to deny Jesus, to turn their back on Him, and thus to lose their salvation and end up in the Lake of Fire.

The importance of fearing God and how the fear of the Lord keeps you alert and faithful

If you fear God and respect Him you will find it is very much easier to continue to honour and follow Him and not to deny Him. The fear of the Lord helps to sustain your faith. It keeps you from slipping into the sin and compromise that would, eventually, lead to you completely ignoring or even denying

Jesus. The fear of the Lord is, therefore, helpful to us. It keeps us close to Him and it promotes reverence and holiness.

Therefore if you are wise, you will actively seek to develop the fear of the Lord in yourself. Pray for more of it. Deliberately choose to soften your heart whenever you can. You do that by every little choice you make to honour and obey Him rather than not doing so. In the end, your eternal fate i.e. whether you stay the course to the very end or fall away, will be decided by the many small decisions you take over the years. Does each choice bring you a little bit closer to Him, or a little bit farther away? Does it soften or harden your heart? Does it honour or dishonour Him? Does it involve being obedient or disobedient? Does it help to produce fruit or does it produce nothing of value?

Ask yourself those questions daily. If you feel you have begun to drift away from God, however slightly or briefly, then put it right straight away by sincere repentance. Keep short accounts with God. Return to Him immediately whenever you wander off into sin or grow cold towards Him. Don't let such times of neglect or coldness be prolonged. Repent quickly. Make that a habit. Then you will never wander far away from Him.

However, if you have no fear of the Lord, or if you are casual or indifferent to things which God considers precious, or if you ignore His Word, then you are in grave danger. Whatever it is that we are becoming, whether good or bad, we have a tendency to become more and more that way. So, you will get more and more concentrated or intense, whichever direction you are going in. You will become either more and more holy, or more and more carnal.

You can't stand still. You have to choose a direction to travel in. So choose to pursue Him and to grow more like Him in every way. Take Him seriously and then you will be secure. However, if you don't, then you are in grave danger. I must warn you of that, most solemnly.

So, I have tried both to reassure you and to warn you at the same time. The Bible does the same. Therefore take all of it seriously, both the promises and the warnings. God will then respond to you in the same way that you respond to Him:

*"..... for those who honour me I will honour and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed."
1 Samuel 2:30(b) (NASB)*

Rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ

If we do honour Him, hold fast and persevere, and if we do bear fruit in our lives, then not only will we have assurance of salvation, but we will also be *rewarded* at the Judgment Seat of Christ. See how Paul spoke as he looked back at his life, just before his death, as he waited to be executed. He knew he was saved and would go to Heaven. He also knew, by this stage, that he would be rewarded:

*⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; ⁸in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.
2 Timothy 4:7-8 (NASB)*

Anxiety about whether you are saved - some further clarification

We have emphasised the need to take seriously both the assurance passages and the warning passages. Let us look now at some of the specific problems and worries that some of us experience:

Those who have made a weak or hasty decision to believe in Jesus, or who have not been properly taught about the meaning of repentance or discipleship, begin the Christian life semi-crippled. They can be plagued with doubt as to whether they have really been saved. Even if they have been saved, they often cannot feel any *assurance* about it. Does that apply to you?

Alternatively, if you lack assurance, it could be that the reason you don't feel any assurance of salvation is precisely because you aren't saved. If so, you need to put that right. On the other hand, if you are saved, but just can't ever feel sure of it, then you still need to put it right. Either way, you need to make sure, right now, that you really are a Christian.

It is perfectly valid, if for any reason you feel unsure of your salvation, to pray something like this:

"Lord, I don't know if I am already a Christian, but please help to make sure of it right now by repenting, believing and putting my trust entirely in you".

Then go carefully through all the steps set out in chapter 20, including baptism in water and receiving the Holy Spirit. Do everything the Bible commands us to do.

The part that demons play in either reducing our assurance or increasing our complacency

Often the doubt and fear about whether we are saved is caused, or intensified, by demons whispering into a *real* Christian's mind. They do it deliberately because they want to create extra anxiety and uncertainty. Alternatively, if you are already leaning towards being complacent, the demon will want to increase your complacency and get you to be even more casual. Thus the demon will do the exact opposite. They will try to *convince false Christians/unbelievers that they are saved*, whereas they try to get *real Christians to doubt their salvation*.

They will always try to get you to lean farther in whatever direction you are already leaning. So, if you are an anxious type to begin with, they will get you to be even more anxious. If however you are already a complacent type, they will seek to make you even more complacent.

This deceptive activity by demons is a major problem in both directions. See Books Seven and Nine in this series for more detail on demons and what they do. Are you in the sincere, earnest, tender-hearted group? Do you find you are demoralised by doubts about whether you are really a Christian? Do you feel useless, unworthy and, *"too sinful for God to forgive"* etc? If so, then take heart. Such thoughts are not your own. Neither are they from God.

They are just lies being planted in your mind by a demon. Their aim is to discourage and weaken you by robbing you of your assurance. The demon will whisper those unsettling thoughts to you precisely because he knows you are a tender, sensitive type and that you are likely to accept such lies and be made even more anxious.

God never speaks in those destructive ways or says such negative things. If God wants to tell you that you aren't a real Christian He does it by *'convicting'* you, not by *condemning* or *accusing* you. There's a vital difference. Conviction is healthy and leads you to *repent*. Condemnation is unhealthy and leads you to *despair*. So, ask God to guide you as to whether what you are feeling or hearing is from Him, or from a demon.

If your thoughts about yourself make you feel generally *useless, condemned and worthless*, then you can be sure it is based on demonic whisperings. If so, reject it all and press ahead in your Christian life with even more determination and zeal. If you do that then the demon's trick will have backfired on him. He will have overdone it, as they often do.

If however what you are feeling is a very *specific conviction* that you need to *repent* and stop doing a *particular sin*, then you can be sure that that is God's voice. He never tells you that you are a worthless failure. He says things like: "*What you just said was a lie. Put it right immediately and don't lie again*".

That's the *wholesome and constructive* way in which the Holy Spirit speaks. It is totally unlike what the demons say about you being a worthless, no good failure etc. The Holy Spirit would never use destructive words like that. Remember that fact next time you feel bombarded by such condemning or disparaging thoughts. The *tone and content* of the words will tell you where they are coming from. Then you will be better able to ignore what the demons say and to hold on to what God is saying.

Is it *arrogant* to feel sure that you're saved and will go to Heaven?

Being sure of your own salvation, i.e. justification, is not arrogance. It would only be arrogant if you thought that it depended on you matching up to a certain standard. That is not what Christianity is about. Justification is not based on our own good deeds, or merit, or anything else that we could boast about.

Ironically, it is the genuine believer who confidently puts all his trust in what Jesus did on the cross, rather than on his own merits, who is actually being humble. Such assurance is the opposite of being arrogant, because we are not puffing ourselves up or relying on ourselves. Neither are we claiming to have any kind of merit. Conversely the man who even hopes that his own deeds might be good enough to '*earn*' him a place in Heaven is both conceited and deluded.

I raise these points because over the years I have met many people who are involved in Roman Catholicism or Islam or cults such as the Mormons or the Jehovah's Witnesses. These groups share one common feature. They do not have any assurance of salvation i.e. that they will go to Heaven. They can only ever *hope* that their behaviour "*might be good enough*". That's because they all wrongly believe that salvation is earned by being a "*good person*". Hopefully you will agree with me, by now, that there is no such thing as a good person. Even the very best person is still just a sinner.

Thus, I can feel a genuine assurance that I am forgiven and will go to Heaven when I die. I know that I really have repented of my sins and have turned away from them. I know I have sincerely trusted in Jesus Christ alone, rather than in my own merit or virtue, and that I have been forgiven. I also know that I am deemed to have all the righteousness of Jesus Christ. That is what justification is all about. I know that all of my sin has been transferred on to Jesus Christ instead of me and that I have His righteousness. I can know those things because I believe the promises that the Bible makes, not because I am good.

In believing those promises, I am not showing any presumption or arrogance, because I am not claiming to have any merit whatsoever. Imagine that I was to put my trust in the Bank of England and to believe that it was solid and could be trusted. That would not be arrogance on my part, because I am not putting any trust in myself, but rather in the Bank of England. Likewise, the certainty that I have of my own salvation (justification) is not based on me, but on Jesus Christ Himself and on His faithfulness. In other words, I am trusting that His Word is His bond and that He will never let me down or lie to me. I am not trusting in myself at all.

Only a person who knows that they are forgiven and that they have eternal life can really want to wholeheartedly follow Jesus Christ and serve Him for the rest of their lives. A person who doubts that, or who has no basis for such confidence, is crippled. They are unable to properly follow the Lord Jesus as a disciple, even if they want to.

Let me just clarify this point. When I speak about being a disciple and following the Lord Jesus Christ I do not mean that salvation (justification) is dependent upon you being a good disciple or upon following Him in a sufficiently impressive way. Neither does it depend upon always avoiding sin in your life.

That is not how it works. We follow the Lord Jesus Christ as a disciple and we obey Him, because it is right and proper to do so. It also enables us to grow in holiness or sanctification. However, being an effective or successful disciple is not, and never will be, the *basis* for obtaining justification or forgiveness.

As explained earlier we are justified by God's grace and mercy through our faith, not by doing good works for Him. That also applies to the good works we will do later on, as we learn to be disciples. They are good and worthwhile things to do, and they have a direct bearing on the rewards that we will later receive. They also indicate what our heart is like and whether we are genuine or false. However, they are not, in themselves, what justifies us or what gives us forgiveness or eternal life.

What about people who are complacent?

Although I have said above that there are some people who struggle with doubt and uncertainly, they are much rarer nowadays. When I first became a Christian in 1981 it was common to hear sermons on assurance of salvation. That was because in those days very many more people worried about their eternal destiny and were anxious for reassurance. That was because when I first became a believer, the men leading churches had grown up in the 1930s – 1960s. They had been brought up with a much more genuine and biblical gospel. They had been taught as youngsters to fear God and to understand sin and judgment.

Thus when they preached, it frequently brought people under a strong conviction of sin. That caused many of those hearing them to feel a deep concern for their souls and a desire to know for sure that they really were forgiven and saved. However, most of the leaders of the church today grew up in a very different spiritual climate in the 1960's to 1990s. They never received the same grounding or absorbed the same values or priorities as the previous generation had. In short, many of the current generation of church leaders grew up without ever really knowing the fear of the Lord, even for themselves. Thus they cannot pass on or communicate to others something which they have never even known for themselves.

So, in the early 1980s, the preaching was, on average, very different from what it is today. When I first became a believer, it was fairly common for people, when listening to such godly men preach about sin and judgment, to need reassurance and teaching on how to be sure of their salvation. Today, given that so few leaders ever teach or preach about sin, judgment or Hell, or even mention the fear of the Lord, far fewer people struggle with feeling any lack of assurance. That is not a good development.

Most of us in the West are never even brought to a place of being concerned about our need for salvation to begin with. In fact, there is now the opposite problem, i.e. widespread complacency and apathy. Therefore many congregations feel no need for assurance, because the preaching they hear gives them no conviction of sin, no concern for their souls, and no fear of God.

This applies to many people who are nominal Christians or liberal Christians. They tend to just automatically assume that they will go to Heaven. They give it very little thought, other than to take it completely for granted. You often hear people speak like that at funerals. They will say of the deceased "*He's in a better place now*". But he may not be! He may be in Hell.

I spoke above about there being people who are saved, but who can never feel assured of salvation. They are now a small minority. So, let us now consider another much larger group, i.e. those who automatically presume they will go to Heaven and feel no anxiety about it. That is not a good thing. This second group is in a far worse situation than the first.

The fact that so many people in the past used to feel anxious and concerned about their own sin and God's judgment was beneficial. It had the effect of causing them to seek for God's forgiveness and to get right with Him. Then they could, in the end, have genuine assurance. Their concern about their eternal fate led to them taking the necessary steps to deal with their sin and thus to have a basis for genuine assurance.

Today, sin and judgment are rarely mentioned in the Western world and good preaching, which brings people to a place of conviction and repentance is rare. Therefore, it leaves countless people in the worst situation of all. What they really need is to be made *more* anxious, not less. Then they can face up to their need to repent. Instead, what they usually get is false reassurance, for which there is no proper basis. Strong, clear preaching, which produces healthy concern about one's own eternal fate is good and constructive. That is why there is so much of it in the Bible.

Few preachers today are willing to speak frankly and tell it like it is. They fear criticism, or unpopularity, or perhaps have no adequate understanding of the truth themselves. Thus, today, many people are being taught to feel assurance of salvation when they have no proper basis for it.

In other words such people are making glib, quick "*decisions to accept Jesus Christ*". But they do so without having truly repented or believed, let alone being baptised in water or receiving the Holy Spirit. They are then misguidedly told to accept that they are *definitely* saved and *never to question it* any further. But, the problem is they may not be saved.

If so, that is a very serious matter indeed, because those people are being misled on the most important issue there is. We end up with many misguided preachers wrongly reassuring and affirming people who are not, in fact, saved at all. This false assurance is preventing them ever getting to the place where they question whether they really are saved, so as to seek genuine assurance. What we all need is the real thing, not fake assurance which has no proper foundation.

The way that even king Solomon let himself down and pursued other gods, despite his great wisdom.

You might imagine that making a shipwreck of your life, or even falling away, can only happen to foolish people, not to people like yourself. However, it happened to King Solomon, and he was the wisest man who ever walked the earth, with the exception of Jesus. But Solomon was carnal. He foolishly married many wives. Even worse, many of them were non-Israelites and unbelievers. Indeed, some of them were even idolaters and worshiped false gods and statues etc.

They therefore led Solomon astray and eventually he even cooperated with his wives' idolatry. He probably did it for a quiet life, to avoid arguments with them. The point is that in doing so, he became unfaithful to God:

⁴For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. ⁵For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians and after Milcom the detestable idol of the Ammonites. ⁶Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and did not follow the LORD fully, as David his father had done.

⁷Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable idol of Moab, on the mountain which is east of Jerusalem, and for Molech the detestable idol of the sons of Ammon. ⁸Thus also he did for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their gods.

*⁹Now the LORD was angry with Solomon because his heart was turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, ¹⁰and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods; but he did not observe what the LORD had commanded.
1 Kings 11:4-10 (NASB)*

If all of that could happen to someone as wise as Solomon, who was way above our league, then it could happen to you. And it could happen to me. The only way for us to avoid such wrong decisions and wrong behaviour is to live faithfully day by day, to fear God, and to stay close to Him. We do that by regularly repenting, praying for His help, and diligently reading the Bible.

NB I should add that it does appear that, in his later years, King Solomon repented of all his folly and wrong deeds. Thus, in the end, it seems that he personally was saved. Even so, that is no argument for behaving as he did, or for being unfaithful. His eventual repentance was an exception to what most people do, as was that of King Manasseh many years later. It gives us no basis for any complacency.

Those two kings, Solomon and Manasseh, both went astray but managed to repent later and find salvation. However, most of the Kings of Israel and Judah who went astray never came back to God. That is the more usual outcome and that fact needs to sober us. We cannot assume that there is an easy way back, or indeed any way back, if we fall away.

Salvation is a process as well as an event - it means travelling along "the Way"

In some ways, it can be unhelpful and confusing to think of becoming a Christian in terms of passing over a line, in the sense that at one moment you are not a Christian and the next moment you are. There is some truth in that. There has to be such a moment, at some point. Our problem is that, because we are not God, we don't always necessarily know exactly when that point is. We don't always even know it for ourselves, let alone others.

A more helpful and more authentic way to speak of "*becoming a Christian*" or "*getting saved*", is to use the biblical expression for a Christian, namely a follower of "*the Way*". Look at this series of sample verses (there are others too) where that phrase, "the Way", is used. I have underlined it in each verse.

"The Way" is a helpful phrase which has dropped out of the Christian dictionary. That is a shame, because it is a good one. We ought to use the phrase today. It more accurately conveys what it means to become and remain a Christian. It suggests that you become a person who is on a path, or a road. It also correctly implies that you are someone who is travelling, developing and learning, not someone who has already arrived or finished:

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me . *John 14:6 (NASB)*

"For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.
Matthew 7:14 (NASB)

¹Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, ²and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

Acts 9:1-2 (NASB)

²⁵This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; ²⁶and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.

Acts 18:25-26 (NASB)

But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus.

Acts 19:9 (NASB)

About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the way.

Acts 19:23 (NASB)

"I persecuted this way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons,

Acts 22:4 (NASB)

It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them.

2 Peter 2:21 (NIV)

To say that we have "become a follower of the Way" is, in many ways, more accurate and more helpful than to say we have "become a Christian". It is how the apostles spoke. It implies, correctly, that the Christian life is an *ongoing process* of growth, development and change, rather than an instantaneous transformation. It is very true to say that we are instantly forgiven and justified. However, we are not instantly sanctified or made mature. Neither do we instantly bear fruit.

Sanctification matters. It is an essential part of the long, slow process of "*being saved*". As we saw above, the Bible says that without holiness (which is what the process of sanctification produces in us) we will never see the Lord, i.e. we will not go to Heaven. Apostle Paul also speaks of the ongoing need to be rooted in Jesus Christ, as if we were a plant. He also speaks of the need to be built up or to grow in Him over time:

⁶Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, ⁷having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.

Colossians 2:6-7 (NASB)

So, sanctification and growing to maturity as a disciple are crucially important. They are key indicators of the reality or falseness of our position. They show whether or not we truly are continuing on "the Way". Only God knows whether another person is genuine. The rest of us can only go by what we see and hear when considering whether another person really is a Christian.

We can only tell by looking at the 'fruit' of that other person's life and asking: "*Are they rooted in Jesus Christ and growing, or aren't they? Are they producing the fruit of the Spirit or aren't they? Are they changing? Are they becoming more holy in their day to day life or not?*"

That is all you or I can do to tell whether someone else is real. However, those questions are also very important in helping you to see whether you are real yourself. Ask yourself "*What fruit is my own life producing?*"

Can we go to Heaven if we aren't fully sanctified during this life?

Can we go to Heaven if we aren't fully sanctified? The short answer to this is yes, we can. That's because during this life nobody is ever fully sanctified or fully holy. That state of perfection will only come after we die. The Bible does command us to be sanctified and the writer to the Hebrews says that "*without sanctification, no man will see the Lord*". However, that does not mean that we must achieve perfection. Indeed there is no particular level of sanctification that we need to achieve, even at a point lower than perfection. What does it all mean then? What level or standard do we have to achieve?

The answer is that there is no such arbitrary level or standard. We simply have to stay "*on the Way*". We have to continue in the process of being sanctified and pursuing holiness. Whilst ever we continue on the Way and are still in the process of being sanctified, bit by bit then, despite all our faults and mistakes, we are safe. We are secure because we are *continuing*. We are safe because we have not turned aside, or denied Jesus Christ, or abandoned Him, or betrayed Him, or ceased to follow Him. That is what matters.

Please let me re-emphasise as well, for the avoidance of doubt, that it is entirely possible to be, and to remain, on the Way, i.e. to be a real Christian, while making many ongoing mistakes. Making mistakes and falling into sin does not mean that you are no longer on the Way or that you have ceased to be saved. Far from it. We will all sin and we will all make mistakes and get bogged down at times. The question is whether we are *still continuing to follow Jesus*, despite all our faults and mistakes.

The Lord Jesus doesn't have any *perfect* or *sinless* followers. He doesn't expect to have any and He has never had any. What He does expect, and insist on, is our *faithfulness*. He demands that we do not desert Him or cease to follow Him. There is no question of Him ever deserting us. That is a certainty. We can be assured of that.

So, just keep on keeping on - for your whole life. Never turn away from Him. Never stop pursuing holiness or seeking to know and serve Jesus. Then, whenever you die, or whenever Jesus returns, He will find you faithfully walking along "the Way". He will then reward you for still being on the Way and for the fruit you have produced, even if others have gone ahead of you and have achieved more.

For the avoidance of doubt, sanctification is not what saves us, in the sense of taking away our guilt and giving us eternal life. We are saved in that sense when we are made righteous and forgiven due to being *justified*. That is the moment when we receive all of the righteousness of Jesus. We can never achieve that kind of righteousness for ourselves by the process of being sanctified. Sanctification and justification are two quite separate concepts. If you are still unclear as to the difference between them, refer to chapters 10 and 12 again and see also chapter 22.

What if a person dies without having been baptised in water and/or without receiving the Holy Spirit?

What happens if a person has truly started out on "the Way", having truly repented and believed, and then dies before realising the need for water baptism or before receiving the Holy Spirit? My firm belief is that they would go to Heaven. That person would have died while they were "on the Way".

The point is that that person did not yet know, and perhaps had no opportunity to learn, the truth about being baptised in water and/or receiving the Holy Spirit. I once explained the gospel in hospital to a dying man aged 93. I had never met him before. His name was Stanley. He died ten minutes after I left him. I believe Stanley was saved that day even though he was never baptised in water or baptised

in the Holy Spirit. The point is that he had *no opportunity* to do either of those things. But Stanley had set out on the Way, even though his journey was only for ten minutes. That man never had a chance to do anything more than that.

The difference is that you do have the chance to be baptised in water and to seek to receive the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Also the excuse of ignorance about water baptism or baptism in the Holy Spirit or His gifts is not open to you. I do not know what the fate is of a person who ignores or disobeys biblical commands which they do know about. My own feeling is that I would not want to presume on God's mercy by disregarding His known commands. So, again, it comes back to this - it is an obedience issue. And it is one that I would not want to take any chances on.

As the excellent Bible teacher, David Pawson says, "*Why would you want to approach Christianity by asking 'What's the minimum I have to do to be saved?'*" " Why would you seek to do only the minimum? Why not ask instead "*What does God require of me?*" Then, whatever it is, why not do all of it willingly?

Conclusion - making sense of the need to balance the assurance and warning passages

Let us seek to draw the threads together and to make sense of this topic which so many people find confusing. If you read the books written on assurance of salvation and the warnings of the need to persevere, you will see that many authors seem to be unable to hold these concepts in balance. They generally go either to the '*North Pole*' or to the '*South Pole*'. They either adopt and emphasise one, or the other, but rarely both. Yet both are in the Bible. We cannot get away from that fact.

So how can we summarise it all? I would say this - we can be sure of God's faithfulness, but can He be sure of ours? We can have assurance that our salvation will never be lost due to any failure or betrayal on God's part. God will never let us down. But that assurance, which is real, needs to be held in balance alongside an understanding of the fact that people frequently betray or abandon Him. In doing so, they could throw their own salvation away.

Therefore we have every reason to have confidence in Him. We can look forward with assurance to spending eternity with Him. We can and should rejoice at that, and should not be tormented by doubt or anxiety. But, at the same time, we have every reason to think soberly and realistically about our sinful nature and our tendency to be selfish, carnal and rebellious.

That's the way we are. Those tendencies are in us, and if they are not dealt with by the process of sanctification, they will eventually be our undoing. We can bring about our own downfall and be lost eternally if we allow ourselves to drift, and to keep drifting, in the direction that our fleshly, carnal nature wishes to go. Our sinful nature will never lead us in the right direction. It will never bring us closer to Jesus or make us desire to follow Him. Our flesh will always want the opposite of what Jesus wants.

Unless we are determined to die to self, crucify our flesh nature, and live for Jesus Christ, and unless we fear God and realise that He will judge us, then we are likely to drift away. That is not just a possibility, but a likelihood. If so, then we would be throwing our own salvation away. We would be walking away from the One who died for us and who paid the penalty for us, and throwing all of that back in His face.

We may never do it dramatically or decisively. It probably would not all happen in one day, though I suppose it could. It generally happens over time by the slow process of neglect. It is like tooth decay. There is no single day when the decay happens. Even so, a day is eventually reached where the tooth is so decayed it is beyond treatment and has to be removed.

So if, you know that you are a real Christian then rejoice and be assured that God has justified you. Have confidence *in Him* to finish the job. But, do not have any confidence *in yourself*. Do not presume. Do not take God for granted. Do not neglect or despise Him. Do not stop walking along the Way. Keep going. Keep on learning, studying and growing. Keep on and on putting your old self, your sinful nature, to death. Deny your flesh. Refuse to give it what it craves for. Refuse to be mastered or controlled by it. Choose instead to submit yourself to Jesus Christ and to resist the Devil.

The importance of the fear of the Lord

You will never start to do any of this, or continue doing so, unless you fear the Lord. Therefore ask God to give you a healthy and powerful fear of Him. But don't just leave it to Him. Pursue it for yourself. Read His Word. Learn the Bible. Listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Soften your heart. Humble yourself. Be obedient to any of God's commands that you already know about. Then He will open your eyes further and teach you more. But if you disobey Him then He will, eventually, leave you on your own to pursue the foolish path you have chosen.

Therefore, stay on the narrow path. Do not wander, even for a moment, onto the broad path that leads to destruction. If you do stray onto it, then repent quickly and return, while you still have time, to the narrow path. Let's take seriously what Jesus said on this point:

¹³"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. ¹⁴"For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it. Matthew 7:13-14 (NASB)

The part God plays in keeping you from falling away

I have spoken of the need to remain faithful and of the part you have to play in that. However, if you are a sincere believer who genuinely wishes to remain faithful to the end, then you are not going to be left to do that all by yourself. God is able, and very willing, to help you to hold on to Him and to enable you to stay faithful:

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, Jude 24 (NIV)

We can take great comfort from this verse and hold it in balance, alongside the many warning passages. It helps to explain how it can be possible to hold firm, despite all our weaknesses and the many temptations we face. It is possible to remain faithful precisely *because He helps us*. He gives us *the grace we need to persist*. It is He who can be trusted to help us to complete the process of becoming a disciple:

And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:6 (RSV)

Moreover, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us that we have Jesus, our High Priest, making intercession for us. That means that *He is praying for us* to God the Father. His prayers help us to remain faithful:

²⁴but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. ²⁵Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. Hebrews 7:24-25 (NASB)

If I thought it all depended on me and on my own faithfulness and perseverance, I would be very alarmed. Thankfully, it doesn't. We can trust Him to help us, if we sincerely ask Him to do so. Sincere people tend to seek His help. Complacent people tend not to.

So, even in the light of all the warning passages, I can still rejoice and feel assured of my eventual destination. Despite all my many weaknesses and failings, I know that He is holding onto me and that He is enabling me to hold onto Him.