

# The Assurance of the Believer

A Statement of the Commission on Ministry and Doctrine with contributions from Bishop Eduardo Llanes and John Arthur Brubaker. April 2009.

Throughout the New Testament both Jesus and the apostles taught that those who believe in Christ receive eternal life. This eternal life is both a present reality, a new life in Christ, and a future prospect that will be fully realized in the last day. Jesus offers these words of assurance to his followers, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand."<sup>1</sup> Paul taught that as believers we are adopted as God's children<sup>2</sup> and marked with a seal which is the Holy Spirit<sup>3</sup>; that nothing can separate us from God's love.<sup>4</sup> Jude assures us that God is able to keep us from falling.<sup>5</sup>

There is no doubt that those who receive Christ as Savior and remain in him are eternally secure, protected by God's power. Those who stumble in their walk with the Lord or stray from their faith, like the sheep that was lost, have a defender before the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous One<sup>6</sup>, and a way back to full fellowship with God through repentance, confession and restoration.<sup>7</sup> God in his grace will go out of his way to bring back to himself one of his own who has strayed.<sup>8</sup>

While it is true that born again believers are eternally secure in Christ, they, by choice, can forfeit their security. God is quite able to keep true believers from falling but he will not keep them against their will. From creation God has endowed humans with freedom of

choice.<sup>9</sup> By choice one responds in saving faith to God's offer of salvation, and one's life in Christ continues by choice. Those who receive Christ do not by that choice forego the right to make subsequent choices. If for some reason a child of God should choose to abandon or renounce his or her faith, God will respect that choice.<sup>10</sup>

The scriptures also speak of those who appear to have a faith in Jesus Christ and identify with his followers but never become true believers. They are described in various ways. Jesus at one point referred to them as wolves in sheep's clothing.<sup>11</sup> He also spoke of those who say "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" The Lord's reply is, "I never knew you." John speaking of antichrists observed, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us . . . Their going showed that some of them belonged to us."<sup>12</sup> These sobering words add significance to Peter's admonition, "be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure."<sup>13</sup>

The Christian life is meant to be a delightful walk with the Lord in a maturing faith and growing life of obedience, but it is not without its pitfalls and challenges. There can be severe trials, subtle temptations or the lure of false teachings. Any of these can undermine the faith of a believer. In the face of life-threatening persecution a wavering believer may choose to renounce a faith once

professed. Disappointment with the ways of God could lead to a bitter, blatant rejection of the divine love and grace once embraced. Persistent and willful sinning without repentance can lead to a hardness of heart. Choosing to entertain intellectual doubts or the influence of false teaching can take one down a slippery slope that ends in unbelief or apostasy. In such instances the return to a state of unbelief would be a matter of choice or more likely a sequence of choices. Hymenaeus, Alexander and Philetus serve as examples from scripture of early believers who rejected the faith and became apostate.<sup>14</sup>

In this light we come to understand more fully the biblical call to faithfulness and perseverance. Jesus, speaking of the persecution and rise of false prophets that will become prevalent in the end times, warns that many will turn away from the faith. But he also offers the assurance that those who stand firm to the end will be saved.<sup>15</sup> Similarly John the Revelator gives the divine promise that those who are faithful unto death will receive a crown of life.<sup>16</sup> He also gives words of caution noting the possibility of having ones share in the tree of life taken away.<sup>17</sup>

The perspective from which the book of Hebrews is written suggests that it was directed to believers facing the severe stress of persecution. Apparently some were wavering in their faith. Under relentless pressure denying one's faith became an appealing option and a distinct possibility. Thus a prevailing theme in the book is that of perseverance along with words of warning regarding the consequences of apostasy. In explicit language the writer warns, "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away to be brought back to repentance."<sup>18</sup>

In a similar vein Peter, referring to those who having once known our Lord and Savior Jesus

Christ, are later entangled in and overcome by the corruption of this world, writes, "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 back on the sacred covenant that was passed to them."<sup>19</sup> This strong word of caution adds impact to Peter's earlier word of encouragement. After naming a list of godly virtues he concludes, "Therefore, my brothers and sisters make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."<sup>20</sup>

This is the assurance in which we live; an assurance found in the abundant provisions and promises of God. While the warnings concerning a possible return to unbelief, and the urgent call to faithfulness are not to be taken lightly, our confidence rests in God's power to keep those who trust him and walk in his ways. Jude assures those who keep themselves in God's love that God is able to keep them from falling.<sup>21</sup> God is at work in the life of believers enabling them to act according to his good pleasure.<sup>22</sup> God will preserve faithful believers without blame for the day of his coming. They are destined to receive a crown of life.<sup>23</sup>

As believers we rejoice in this assurance. God's power is more than adequate to keep us from falling. In Christ we are secure; nothing but our own rebellion can separate us from God's love. He will enable the faithful to endure to the end; to finish the race and so win the prize which is eternal life.

### Scripture References

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| 1. John 10:27-28   | 13. 2 Peter 1:10                                 |
| 2. Ephesians 1:5   | 14. 1 Timothy 1:19-20; 2 Timothy 2:16-18         |
| 3. Ephesians 1:13  | 15. Matthew 24:9-13                              |
| 4. Romans 8:37-39  | 16. Revelation 2:10                              |
| 5. Jude 24         | 17. Revelation 22:19                             |
| 6. 1 John 2:1      | 18. Hebrews 6:4-6                                |
| 7. 1 John 1:9      | 19. 2 Peter 2:20-21                              |
| 8. Luke 15:4-6     | 20. 2 Peter 1:10-11                              |
| 9. Genesis 2:16-17 | 21. Jude 21 and 24                               |
| 10. 1 Timothy 4:1  | 22. Philippians 2:12-13                          |
| 11. Matthew 7:15   | 23. 1 Corinthians 1:8-9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 |
| 12. 1 John 2:19    |  |