

WHAT IS SAVING FAITH?

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What Is Saving Faith? is an excerpt from the book *Confident in Christ: Living By Faith Really Works (Second Edition)*

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SAVING FAITH IN FOCUS

Confusion over salvation (i.e., regeneration) abounds. I hear it from people all over the country and around the world. They don't know what to believe. They aren't sure what God requires. Is it turning from sins or commitment of life? Inviting Jesus into their hearts? Obeying the Golden Rule? Confessing their sins? Being baptized?

There is only one way to be born again. The key is to discover and believe it. However, that isn't necessarily easy to do, because many different ways are being preached and it is hard to determine which one is correct.

Most forms of the evangelical message being preached today are what I call *faith-plus* gospels. These say that faith in Christ for everlasting life is *necessary*, but that it is *not enough*. Works must accompany faith, according to faith-plus gospels, in order for a person to make it to heaven. There are two versions of the faith-plus gospel.

Salvation by faith plus works. Some say that one must have faith plus works in order to obtain salvation. A person lacking sufficient good works, or guilty of major sins, will not make it to heaven, even if he believes in Christ.¹

¹One evangelist who has been in the ministry for 51 years recounted his testimony by quoting from a letter he wrote shortly after his conversion: "It has been over nine days since I smoked a cigarette...I am now taking part in all the church work I can...I have been born again. You may think I will get over this in a few days and be back to normal but I will never be the same again. I had not been born again before now. *I did believe but I did not have the love of God*" (*Challenge to Evangelism Today* [Fall

Salvation by faith that works. Others say that one must have faith *that* works. They claim that one is saved by faith in Christ plus nothing, but that *true* faith in Christ results in commitment, obedience, turning from sins, etc.² This may sound significantly different than salvation by faith plus works. However, it is actually another way of saying the same thing.

There is no real difference between saying that to be saved you must turn from sins, commit your life to Christ, and believe in Him, and saying that believing in Christ necessarily results in turning from your sins and committing your life to Him. Both insist that turning from sins and commitment of life is necessary to obtain everlasting life that can never be lost.

Salvation apart from faith or works. In addition to faith-plus gospels, there is one gospel requiring no faith at all! That is the gospel of universalism, which teaches that all are already saved, or will ultimately be saved. According to this view no one will spend eternity apart from God, even those who never believed in Christ. This view can surface anywhere, even in very conservative, evangelical churches. The motive may seem to be good—an abhorrence of people going to hell—but it is a direct contradiction of God’s Word. The way to keep people from hell is by proclaiming the message of everlasting life that they might believe it and be saved, not by distorting the saving message.

THE BIBLE IS THE ONLY RELIABLE GUIDE TO THE WAY

Understanding the way is not a matter of taking a poll. The majority is rarely right and that is especially true in terms of the way to God. Jesus said, “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult³ is the way which leads to

1997]: 1, emphasis added). Clearly for this evangelist believing, while necessary, is not enough. One must also love God by living an obedient life.

²This is sometimes called Lordship Salvation. It is the view that to be saved you must not only believe in Christ for everlasting life, but you must also yield to His Lordship over your life. While Lordship Salvation typically refers to Calvinists who believe in salvation by faith that works, it applies equally well to Arminians who believe in salvation by faith plus works.

³The word translated *difficult* (*thlibō*) actually is better translated as *confined* or *narrow*. See *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early*

life, and there are few who find it” (Matt 7:13-14). Jesus unequivocally said that the majority of people are on the wrong road. *Many* are on the broad way. *Few* are on the narrow way.

The way is contrary to our expectations. Very few things in life are received simply by believing. (Actually, I can't think of anything, other than everlasting life, which is received by faith alone.) Thus, the gospel seems to be “foolishness to those who are perishing” (1 Cor 1:18).

To be saved you must resist the impulse to follow the crowd. There is only one reliable guide to spiritual truth and that is the Bible.

When the Apostle Paul went to the city of Berea, he began teaching in the Jewish synagogue. Paul's traveling companion, Luke, reports that the Bereans “were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Every person should study the Scripture to see whether the message they are hearing is correct. We should all be like the Bereans, searching the Scriptures, so that we will know what to believe.

The only condition of everlasting salvation is faith in Christ. Even a casual reading of the Gospel of John, the only book in Scripture whose purpose is evangelistic (John 20:31),⁴ makes this clear. “He who believes in Me has everlasting life” (John 6:47). “He who believes in Him is not condemned” (John 3:18). “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (John 5:24). “Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die [spiritually]” (John 11:26).

The Bible is God's Word. As such, it is without contradiction. We can be sure that if these and many other passages list faith in Christ as the sole condition of everlasting life and freedom from condemnation, this is indeed true. There are no other conditions.

Christian Literature, by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, Second edition, revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer's Fifth Edition, 1958 (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 362. Both the gate and the road to which it leads are narrow. Since a different Greek word, *stenē*, is used for the gate, a word which also means *narrow*, it is probably best to refer to the way as *confined*, a synonym for narrow.

⁴Books such as Galatians and Romans present the gospel to Christians to make sure they hold fast to it and live in light of it. However, no other book is written to tell unbelievers how they might have everlasting life. All other books in Scripture are addressed to believers.

WHAT IS FAITH IN CHRIST?

Let's begin by considering what *faith* is. Once we determine that, we will consider what *faith in Christ* is.

Faith is the conviction that something is true. We all exercise faith every day. For example, most of us believe that George Washington was the first President of the United States because we have recognized that the evidence is convincing.⁵

Do you believe that you exist? That is, are you *convinced* that you are alive? I once met a college student who doubted his existence and that of everything in the universe. I was tempted to punch him to give him some tangible evidence! Most rational people are certain they exist, no doubt about it. The evidence is overwhelming.

Though long past her childbearing years, Abraham's wife Sarah believed that she was going to have a son. God had said she would: "By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, *because she judged Him faithful who had promised*" (Heb 11:11, emphasis added). Ninety-year-old Sarah was positive that God would keep His promise, and would do what He said. Abraham too was "*fully convinced* that what [God] had promised He was also able to perform" (Rom 4:21, emphasis added). Faith is being convinced or persuaded (the KJV has "fully persuaded" here) of the truth of something—in this case, the promise that a son would be born to an elderly couple.⁶

⁵Of course, some don't think of it in these terms. They may think they believe it simply because they were told that it was true. Their elementary school teacher told them that George Washington was the first president and they believed her. However, that is believing evidence. Taking a teacher at her word is not really any different than taking God at His word. The issue is the trustworthiness of the one making the statement or promise. Of course, elementary school students have lots of additional evidence to convince them that Washington was the first president. Our textbooks say so. Our national capitol and one of our States are named after him. And his likeness appears on the dollar bill and the quarter.

⁶Jesus is called the Son of Abraham in Matt 1:1. The promise that Abraham believed did not merely concern the birth of Isaac. It also concerned the birth of Abraham's ultimate Son, the Messiah, the Savior, and the Giver of everlasting life. Abraham believed in this coming Son for everlasting life (Gen 15:6; John 8:56; Rom 4:21-22; Gal 3:6-14). That is, Abraham believed in Christ long before the incarnation. That is why Paul could rightly say that Abraham is the father of all who believe in Christ. And that is why Jesus Himself could truly say, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day" (John 8:56).

The key to believing something is the proof in favor of it. Thus, despite popular opinion, faith is not really a choice. You don't "choose" to believe that George Washington was the first President, that you exist, that two plus two equals four, etc. Similarly, Sarah and Abraham didn't "choose" to believe that God would keep His promise to them regarding a son. When the evidence that something is true persuades people, they believe it. When they aren't persuaded, they don't believe it.

Let's say you were on a jury. After listening to all of the evidence, you concluded that the defendant was guilty. Could you *choose to believe* that he was innocent? Of course not. You could *vote* not to convict, but that would be acting dishonestly, contrary to what you believed. The only way you could move from belief to unbelief or the other way around is if you came to perceive the testimony differently.⁷

Doesn't this mean, then, that the evidence traps us? In a sense, yes. However, two people can look at the same evidence and draw different conclusions because they have different opinions on whether the evidence is trustworthy. We are guided by our perception of the evidence. We believe evidence that we perceive as true. We don't believe evidence that we perceive as false.

Therefore, faith is not a decision. It is the conviction that something is true. It is especially important that we understand this, for much confusion about the message of life has resulted from the mistaken idea that we can be convinced that the promised life is true and yet not be saved until we decide to believe it.

Faith in Christ is the conviction that He is the Guarantor of everlasting life for every believer. Faith in Christ is sometimes called *saving faith*, since the Bible teaches that all who believe in Him have everlasting salvation. There are many things that Jesus promised. When the Bible speaks of "faith in Christ," it is talking about believing a specific promise that He made. Jesus explained that saving promise to His friend, Martha:

⁷There is one sense in which continuing in *unbelief* can be a choice, when one refuses to even look at the evidence. A person raised in another religion might choose not to read the Bible, attend church, listen to Christians, or read Christian books. While, of course, God could upset those plans and bring a witness into one's life that was unexpected and unavoidable, apart from such intervention a person might indeed be able to choose to remain in unbelief. However, even then, the unbelief is based on a conviction that Christianity is wrong.

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?” She said to Him, “Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world” (John 11:25-27).

“Do you believe this?” Jesus’ question to Martha cuts to the heart of the promise. While Jesus promised many things in the course of His ministry, this one promise is the key to gaining everlasting salvation. Jesus is claiming to be “the resurrection and the life.” Anyone who believes that has everlasting life and will never die.

First, as “the resurrection,” He guarantees, “He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.” That is, He insures bodily resurrection from the dead to all who believe in Him. Since we know from other Scriptures that both believers and unbelievers will be resurrected (Dan 12:2; John 5:29; Acts 24:15), this must refer to the resurrection of the righteous, also called the first resurrection (Rev 20:5-6). Jesus is promising that death will not keep a believer from bodily participation in His everlasting kingdom. All believers will live everlastingly in glorified bodies in Jesus’ kingdom.

Notice that this promise has no other conditions. Many add to what Jesus said and end up with this distorted message: “He who believes in Me and turns from His sins and perseveres in good works, though he may die, he shall live.” That is not what Jesus promised. A person who believes this altered message does not believe what Jesus said.

Second, as “the life,” He certifies, “Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.” This is another way of reinforcing what He has just said. In verse 25 He confirms that *physical* death cannot keep the believer from bodily participation in the everlasting kingdom. In v 26 Jesus affirms that no believer will ever experience *spiritual* death. As “the life,” Jesus is the Guarantor of everlasting life: “Whoever lives and believes in Me *shall never die.*” He guarantees the believer will never lose everlasting life. All who believe in Him are secure forever.

Some say, “Yes, He is the Giver of everlasting life; however, to be saved takes more than just believing. You must also commit your life to Him, turn from your sins, confess Him, obey Him, be baptized, etc., etc., etc.” Once again, if a person is convinced that this distorted message is true, then he doesn’t believe what Jesus is saying. Jesus made it clear that the *only* condition is being convinced that He

guarantees everlasting life to all who believe in Him. Add anything to that and you have a different evangelistic message.

Martha believed Jesus' promise. In answer to the question, "Do you believe this?" she said, "Yes, Lord, I believe." She then went on to acknowledge Him as "the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." She knew that Jesus was the Messiah and as such, He certainly fulfills His promise to give everlasting life, life that is forever secure, to every believer (compare John 20:31). Martha understood that there were no strings attached. She knew that she had everlasting life and that she would never lose it because Jesus, as the Son of God, was trustworthy.

The Apostle Paul sums up what Martha, and every Christian, believes when they come to faith in Christ: "However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all long-suffering, as a pattern to those who are going to *believe on Him for everlasting life*" (1 Tim 1:16, emphasis added). In order to be saved, we must believe on Jesus *for everlasting life*. On the basis of His death and resurrection, He always fulfills His guarantee to give everlasting life to all who believe in Him for it.

Martha did not *decide* to believe in Jesus for everlasting life. She was convinced of the truth of what Jesus said and hence she believed in Him in the Biblical sense.

Faith in Christ does not erase every problem. It greatly saddens me when I hear some evangelists tell the unsaved to believe in Jesus for benefits other than everlasting life. "Believe in Jesus and He will heal your broken marriage." "Believe in Him and He will turn your finances around." "Become a Christian and all your depression will vanish." People who believe in Jesus for a better marriage, for financial prosperity, or for emotional well-being, are not guaranteed everlasting salvation.

Many today think they are saved because they went forward at some meeting and gave Jesus their life, believing in Him for something other than everlasting life. While it is true that He can help us with all issues in life, that is not the promise of the gospel. He doesn't guarantee a happy marriage, good finances, or freedom from depression to every believer. There are many factors other than faith in Christ, which influence these things. However, the only condition of everlasting life is faith in Christ!

WHAT SAVING FAITH IS NOT

It is sometimes helpful to consider what something is *not*. This is particularly true of saving faith. Contrary to popular understanding, none of the following are a part of or a synonym for saving faith: believing general Bible truth, promising to serve God, praying, walking an aisle, being sorry for your sins, turning from your sins, inviting Jesus into your heart, believing with a special kind of faith, doing good works, or having heart faith.

Believing general Bible truth. You can believe many Biblical concepts and still miss the one truth that is saving—the truth of the gospel. For example, you can attest to Jesus’ deity, His virgin birth, and His bodily resurrection, and yet not believe Jesus’ promise to give you everlasting life freely if you just believe in Him for it. There is only one truth that will save: Jesus’ guarantee that anyone who believes in Him for everlasting life has it.

Promising to serve God. Promises, promises! Almost every child who goes to a Christian camp makes some sort of commitment in front of a campfire. If all the young people who promised to become missionaries had done so, there would never be a lack of workers on any mission field in the world.⁸ Many have vowed to serve God in the hope that their commitment would cause God to save them. Because it is possible to promise sincerely to serve God, and yet not be convinced that Jesus freely gives everlasting life to all who just believe in Him, commitment isn’t an absolute indicator of saving faith. (Many cult members are radically committed.) Pledges to serve God in hopes of gaining salvation actually become a stumbling block, for to be saved one must believe in Christ *alone* for everlasting life, not Christ *plus commitment*.

Praying. A very popular evangelistic technique today is to ask unbelievers to pray to become Christians. However, there is not one Biblical example of anyone ever praying to be saved. Jesus never led anyone in a prayer of salvation, nor did any of the apostles or

⁸There might even be more workers on the mission field than there are in the home churches!

evangelists mentioned in the Bible. A person is saved by *believing in Christ* for everlasting life, not by praying.⁹

Walking an aisle. Asking unbelievers to come forward—to walk the aisle or come to the front of the auditorium—in order to be saved is another popular evangelistic practice without Biblical precedent. A person may stand before others with complete sincerity and with a strong desire to be saved and yet return to his seat not having believed in Christ for everlasting life. Coming forward will not save. Only believing in Christ will save.¹⁰

Being sorry for your sins. A popular song of years past contained the phrase, “Cry me a river.” You may indeed shed many tears, be extremely sorry for your sins, and yet not believe in Christ for everlasting life. No amount of anguish over sin can open the way to heaven. Only believing in Christ alone can.

Recognition of one’s sinfulness shows a person that he needs a Savior, and this acknowledgment may result in tears. But the presence or absence of tears is not the point. Nowhere does the Bible say that being sorry for your sins is a condition of everlasting life. There is but one requirement: believing that Jesus is the Guarantor of everlasting life to all who just believe in Him.

Turning from your sins. Can someone undergo radical changes in his or her life without believing the gospel? Of course. Often, for example, unbelieving alcoholics give up drinking. Moral reform is certainly possible. And it is a good thing to do in the sense that it is always best to follow God’s blueprint for living, whether or not you are a Christian. Yet, moral reform will not save.

In fact, if people think that turning from sins is a condition of salvation, their faith in moral reform can actually *prohibit* them from

⁹If a person came to believe in Christ for everlasting life while he was praying a prayer, he would be saved. However, it is not a good idea to ask a person to pray something that he doesn’t already believe. And, if he already believes it, then he is already saved without the prayer.

¹⁰Of course, if a person comes forward and a counselor is used of God to convince him that Jesus guarantees everlasting life to all who believe in Him, then he would end up being saved. However, coming forward is not a condition, any more than coming to church in the first place is a condition. A person can be saved at school, at work, in a car, in a foxhole, on a basketball court, or anywhere, with or without an aisle or a preacher!

being saved. To be saved, a person must believe that Jesus guarantees everlasting life to all who believe in Him.

Inviting Jesus into your heart. Another very common and unfortunate evangelistic appeal is telling people to invite Jesus into their hearts in order to be saved. The problem here is that they can invite Jesus into their hearts and yet not believe in Him for everlasting life.¹¹

Some individuals have invited Jesus into their hearts hundreds of times. Whenever they doubt the efficacy of what they did (with good reason), they just repeat the invitation, thinking: *Maybe I didn't invite Him in sincerely enough the last time.*¹² Jesus enters the lives of people the moment they believe in Him for everlasting life.

Believing with a special kind of faith. Some pastors today teach that saving faith is different than everyday faith.¹³ This, however, is just not true. All faith is the conviction of the truth of some proposition. What makes saving faith *saving* is not the uniqueness of the faith, but its object. Saving faith results instantly in everlasting salvation because it believes in the right object: the guarantee of life made by the Lord Jesus Christ to every believer.

Doing good works. Saving faith should not be confused with doing good works. In their zeal to call people to godliness, some pastors and theologians today mingle the two.¹⁴

¹¹In my early days in evangelism I used this appeal. I remember one student at my college who invited Christ into his life. I gave him some material to read and scheduled an appointment for the next week. When we met for follow-up, he told me that the material I had given him said that Jesus was the only way to God, but that he didn't believe that. "Really," I said. "Then why did you invite Jesus into your heart?" He told me that he was a Bahai and that he had invited Jesus into his heart because he wanted all of the prophets in his heart.

¹²Of course, this approach is futile. Each time the person doubts, he invites Jesus in "one last time." It becomes more difficult to do this sincerely since it seems so hypocritical. The only way to be sure that Christ is in your life and that you are eternally secure is to believe Jesus' promise that all who simply believe in Him have eternal life.

¹³John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1993), 42.

¹⁴Bernard Koerselman, *What the Bible Says About a Saving Faith* (Chandler, AZ: Berean Publishers, 1992), 138-39, 143, 160. Note: the cited statements are all headings of sections in a chapter entitled "A Saving Faith." See also Curtis I. Crenshaw, *Lordship Salvation: The Only Kind There Is! An Evaluation of Jody Dillow's The Reign of the Servant Kings And Other Antinomian Arguments* (Memphis, TN: Footstool Publications, 1994), 58-59; James Montgomery Boice, *Christ's Call to*

A desire for godliness is admirable. However, it is simply not true that in order to believe in Christ for everlasting life you must also do good works and forsake bad works. Works have no place in saving faith. Saving faith is based solely on what the Lord Jesus has already done (by dying on the cross in our place and rising from the dead) and what He promises to do for us. It is not based even in part on what we might do for Him.

The thief on the cross was a terrible sinner who was at death's door. He had only hours left to live. He couldn't offer Jesus a life of good works, service, or any moral reform. He could only believe in Him, and that he did. Even though Jesus' own disciples were disheartened and had lost faith in His return to set up the kingdom, the thief boldly said, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). Jesus' response shows the freeness of everlasting life for all who believe in Him: "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).

HEAD FAITH, HEART FAITH, AND MIND GAMES

How do you convince someone that saving faith is not just faith in Jesus' promise of life, that it includes commitment, turning from sins, perseverance in obedience, and the like? Since there is no verse in Scripture that identifies saving faith as anything other than believing in Christ, you'd have a hard time proving your view from the Bible. However, there is an easier way.

The best way to sell the idea that saving faith includes the kitchen sink is through the use of pejorative terms like *intellectual faith* or *head faith*. Some preachers and teachers tell people that just believing the facts of the gospel is *intellectual faith* or *head faith*. Then they espouse the idea that the Bible teaches that the faith that truly saves is *heart faith*.¹⁵

Heart faith can include almost anything. However, heart faith raises potential problems. *How much* commitment, turning from

Discipleship (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1986), 113-14; Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Lord of the Saved: Getting to the Heart of the Lordship Debate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1992), 19.

¹⁵There is a tract called "Missing Heaven by Eighteen Inches." It argues that you would miss heaven if you believed the gospel with your *head* rather than with your *heart*. *Head faith* is dangerous, it suggests, because you may think you are saved simply because you believe the facts of the gospel. Yet without the heart commitment, that "faith" is not saving faith at all.

sins, obedience, and the like is enough? The Biblical evidence demonstrates that this supposed distinction between head faith and heart faith is really a mind game.

First, the Scriptures never refer to the *head* as the source of thinking and feeling. In addition, the word *head* is never associated with faith in the Bible.¹⁶

Second, of the two remaining words, *heart* and *mind*, the Scriptures often use them interchangeably.¹⁷ Both refer to the inner self where one thinks and believes¹⁸ and feels.

Third, the mind is not viewed as being inferior to the heart in Scripture. In one of the most famous verses on sanctification in the Bible, Paul exhorted the believers in Rome, “Be transformed by the renewing of your *mind*” (Rom 12:2, emphasis added). Similarly, he exhorted the Ephesian believers, “Be renewed in the spirit of your *mind*” (Eph 4:23, emphasis added). Paul spoke to the Corinthian believers of having “the *mind* of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16, emphasis added). Luke said that the Lord “opened [the disciples’] understanding [literally *mind* in Greek], that they might comprehend the Scriptures,” that is, the Old Testament Scriptures, concerning His resurrection (Luke 24:45).

¹⁶The word *head* occurs approximately 330 times in the Bible. Of those, the vast majority refer literally to the head. The figurative uses include *lifting up the head*, which refers to being placed in a position of honor or having one’s former status reinstated (Gen 40:13; Job 10:15), *blood* or *wickedness* being *on the head*, which refers to guilt and judgment coming against persons for their wicked deeds (1 Kgs 2:37, “your blood shall be on your own head,” 1 Sam 25:39, “the Lord has returned the wickedness of Nabal on his own head”), and *head* as ruler or authority over others (2 Sam 22:44, “head of the nations,” 1 Cor 11:3, “the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God”). There is absolutely no Biblical warrant for speaking of *head faith*.

¹⁷For example, “Thus my *heart* was grieved, and I was vexed in my *mind*” (Ps 73:21). There is synonymous parallelism here. That is, the two halves of the verse are saying the same thing using synonyms. To be grieved in your heart is to be vexed in your mind. The same thing is evident in Heb 8:10, “I will put My laws in their *mind* and write them on their *hearts*.” *Mind* and *heart* are used synonymously there.

¹⁸The *mind* is associated with believing in at least three passages (Luke 24:45; Rom 14:5; Eph 4:17-18). In these three passages the words *believe* and *faith* do not occur. However, synonyms are present. Luke 24:45 is discussed in the immediately preceding note. In that text, opening of the mind is shown to be antithetical to being “slow of heart to believe” (v 25). Romans 14:5 reads, “Let each be *fully convinced* in his own *mind*.” Eph 4:17-18, which, like Luke 24:45, equates the heart and mind, says, “The Gentiles walk in the futility of their *mind*, having their *understanding* darkened...because of the blindness of their *heart*.”

Fourth, while the words *believe* and *faith* occur approximately 450 times in the Bible, only a few passages specify where belief takes place.¹⁹ They speak of believing as though the reader of Scripture knows what that means and where it occurs.

Believing in Christ is the sole condition of everlasting life. There is no such thing as special types of faith called *heart faith* and *head faith*. Saving faith doesn't include commitment, obedience, or turning from sins. It is merely the conviction that Jesus is speaking the truth when He says, "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" (John 6:47).

THERE IS NO ADDITIONAL STEP

Many well-meaning people unintentionally introduce a lot of confusion when they say something like this, "Do you believe that Jesus, by His death on the cross for our sins and by His resurrection, freely gives everlasting life to all who believe in Him?" Then, if you respond positively, they say, "Great! Now would you like to *trust* Him?"

This two-step approach to saving faith is confusing. How does a person who already believes something choose to trust it? What is the difference between the two? Does trusting Jesus mean having an

¹⁹One passage, Rom 10:9-10, directly speaks of "believ[ing] in your heart." That is set in contrast with "confess[ing] with your mouth." The former is internal; the latter external. The former is by faith alone. The latter includes works. "Confessing with your mouth the Lord Jesus" is the action that involves commitment, obedience, and turning from sins, not "believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead." Nor is believing with your heart defined as some special kind of faith that might rightly be called *heart faith*. Paul is merely indicating that saving faith takes place internally, as opposed to confessing Christ in word and deed, which takes place externally. Romans 10:9-10 is dealing with salvation from the wrath of God here and now. Believing in Christ is the condition of justification ("with the heart one believes unto righteousness"). Confessing Christ is the condition of escaping the wrath of God here and now ("with the mouth confession is made unto salvation [from God's temporal wrath]"). For a discussion of Rom 10:9-10, see Zane C. Hodges, [*Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation, Second Edition*](#) (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1989, 2014), 175; Zane C. Hodges, [*Romans: Deliverance from Wrath*](#) (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2013), 298-301.

Four other passages, none of which is dealing with saving faith, indicate indirectly that belief takes place in the heart (Mark 11:23; 16:14; Luke 8:12; 24:25). However, in each of those verses the point is just that belief takes places internally. And, as we have already seen, in the last of those passages believing in the heart is equated with believing with the mind.

See also note 19 for three passages that indicate that believing takes place in the mind.

emotional response to the message of life? Or is it a spiritual experience that happens apart from faith? Or does it mean following Christ in a life of obedience?

The supposed distinction between believing in Christ and trusting in Him isn't clear. And because it isn't clear, people are left confused about the condition of having everlasting life. People who have believed in Jesus suddenly begin to doubt whether or not they have subjectively trusted Him. They don't understand what else they are being asked to do.

Remember John 3:16? It says that "whoever believes in Him" has everlasting life. Over a hundred verses in the Bible say the sole condition is believing in Him. Not a single verse says that the one who believes and trusts in Him has everlasting life. So let's be clear: The only condition of everlasting life is belief in Jesus for it. Once you do that, you have everlasting life as a present possession. You can never lose it. There is no additional step involved.

YES, BELIEVING IN CHRIST IS ENOUGH!

Saving faith means believing in Christ alone for everlasting life. Nothing else is saving faith. Not only is believing in Him enough, but it is the only way to salvation. Jesus guarantees everlasting life that can never be lost to all who believe in Him for it. Do you believe this?

CHAPTER 2

THE ORIGINAL NIC AT NITE (JOHN 3:16)

You may have memorized John 3:16 as a child. It has only twenty-five words, but is one of the most beautiful sentences in the English language.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

This wonderfully simple verse of good news tells how sinful people can gain a relationship with God that is secure for eternity. However, simple though it may be, many fail to grasp its meaning. While working on my Master’s thesis, I ran across an article in which an author cited a pastor who said he never preached on John 3:16 because it was such a difficult verse!¹ John 3:16 *is* a difficult verse if you think, as that pastor did, that it takes more than faith in Christ to gain everlasting life.

¹The pastor tells new converts: “You must be saved for at least three years before you have accumulated enough good works to be sure that you are truly saved and not just a stony-ground hearer” (Donald Dunkerly, “Hyper-Calvinism Today,” *The Presbyterian Journal* [Nov. 18, 1981]: 15). Such a mistaken view of John 3:16 and of assurance stems from a faulty view of the gospel itself. The pastor in question did not believe that a person is saved merely by believing in Christ for eternal life. He felt that commitment and obedience were also required. As a result, a verse like John 3:16 seems very difficult, for it contains only one requirement—believing in Christ for eternal life.

Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews (John 3:1), a member of the Sanhedrin, which was somewhat of a cross between our Senate and Supreme Court. He came to Jesus by night—the original Nic at nite. Every time the Apostle John mentioned Nicodemus, he reminded the reader that he came to Jesus by night (John 3:2; 7:50; 19:39).

In his Gospel, John loves to stress opposites like love and hate, light and darkness, night and day, belief and unbelief. For John, night and darkness often have ominous overtones as the realm of evil where people hide their evil deeds. While his coming to Jesus was not an evil deed, Nicodemus was cloaking his inquiry with the dark of night. He didn't want his fellow rulers to know that he was seeking an audience with Jesus for fear of their negative reaction. Nicodemus might have faced expulsion from the Sanhedrin as a result of this visit (John 12:42-43).

Nicodemus was a learned man. Jesus refers to him not merely as “a teacher,” but as “the teacher of Israel” (John 3:10). He was the Albert Einstein of theology in his day, yet he came to Jesus seeking a primer on salvation.

Nicodemus was open to the truth. That is a wonderful attitude to have. So many people are close-minded, unwilling to be influenced. “Don't confuse me with the facts,” they say.

In spite of the attitude of his fellow rulers, Nicodemus came to Jesus and began with these words, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with Him” (John 3:2). The use of the first person plural, *we*, by Nicodemus was hyperbole, since most of the rulers did not share that view.

BORN AGAIN

Before Nicodemus could even voice a question, Jesus responded, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). In His wisdom Jesus realized that Nicodemus wanted to know what he needed to do to take part in the kingdom of God.

The concept of being born again was new to Nicodemus: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” (John 3:4). Thinking of a second physical birth, this brilliant man asked a ridiculous question—because he didn't have a clue what Jesus was talking about.

Jesus expanded on His earlier statement, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:5-6). The new birth of which Jesus spoke was spiritual. Physical birth is “of water.” Spiritual birth is “of the Spirit.”

Birth is a beginning of life. Spiritual birth is thus the start of spiritual life. All people begin this life physically alive, yet spiritually dead. Until a person experiences spiritual birth, regeneration, he is cut off from God’s life and kingdom. Once a person is born again, he is secure forever since he has *everlasting* life, God’s kind of life.

Nicodemus didn’t get this. Since he was a teacher, he knew that the only truly dumb question is the one left unasked. Therefore, he unashamedly revealed his lack of understanding, “How can these things be?” (John 3:9).

We would all do well to learn from Nicodemus. He responded to what he had heard by seeking more information. When he received that information and didn’t understand it, he asked for clarification. None of us would ever seek God if left purely to our own initiative (Rom 3:11); but since God is seeking each and every one of us, we are free to respond to the light God gives us.

Jesus began His final response to Nicodemus with mild rebuke, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” (John 3:10). The Old Testament offered sufficient background so that all the rulers of Israel, and all who diligently studied the Scriptures, should have understood about the new birth (cf. John 5:39-40). However, Nicodemus, like his contemporaries, was, until this day, caught up in “tradition.” Rather than asking God to show them what the Old Testament meant, they read it through the lens of rabbinical thought. They accepted traditional views without challenging them in light of prayer and meditation upon the Word of God.

The rabbis taught that good Jews, and also good proselytes, would get into the kingdom (Luke 18:9-12). However, if a Jew soiled his life with major sin, he would forfeit the right to the kingdom. Harlots and tax collectors were held up as examples of those who would never make it.

There really is nothing new under the sun. The notion of gaining salvation by works has been with us since the beginning. All religions, including Judaism and Christianity, are filled with people who believe that if their good deeds outweigh their bad, they will make it to heaven.

THE SERPENT IN THE WILDERNESS

Until this point in the interview, Jesus had not stated the condition for the new birth. He now turned to that vital truth:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:14-18).

Jesus began with an Old Testament incident which Nicodemus would have known very well, the lifting up of a bronze serpent in the wilderness to save the nation from a deadly plague (Num 21:4-9). This bronze serpent on a wooden pole is the source of the American Medical Society’s symbol, an uplifted serpent that healed all who looked upon it.

The bronze serpent was a *type*, that is, it was a divinely intended picture, of Christ. God told Moses to lift up the bronze serpent on the pole specifically to foreshadow the death of the Messiah on the cross for the spiritual healing of all who would look to Him in faith. Jesus expected that Nicodemus, and all students of the Old Testament, would understand this.

The condition is simple: believe in Jesus, the Son of Man: “Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:15).²

In John 3:16 Jesus summarized the lesson of the bronze serpent. Salvation begins with God’s love: *For God so loved the world*. That love motivated Him to give His Son, the Lord Jesus, to die on the cross in our place: *that He gave His only begotten Son*. The intended result is that all might believe in Him for everlasting life: *that whoever*

²The condition for Nicodemus and for us today is no different than it was for Abraham: “[Abraham] believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Gen 15:6). Abraham believed what the Lord said about giving him an Heir, from his own body, who would provide eternal salvation to all who believed in Him. Compare John 8:26; Rom 4:1-8; and Gal 3:6-14.

believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. That life does not begin at death. It begins at the point of faith! The believer has already passed from death into life (John 5:24). And, since that life is everlasting, it never ends.

Jesus paid the complete penalty for our sins by His death on the cross. It made us *savable*. Yet, it doesn't automatically result in salvation. To *actually* be saved, to receive everlasting life, we must "believe in Him."

Saving faith is the conviction that "whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16), and that "he who believes in Him is not condemned" (3:18). Jesus promises to give everlasting life to all who merely believe in Him for it.

Some stumble over what it means to "believe in Him." They realize that there are multitudes who believe that He was a good man, yet who are not born again. As we saw in chapter 1, to believe in Jesus is not merely to acknowledge that He was a good man, or even that He is God and died on the cross for us. It is to accept that He is the Guarantor of everlasting life to all who come to Him (John 11:25-27; 20:30-31).

The promise simply stated is this: by virtue of His death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus Christ gives everlasting life to anyone who just believes in Him for it. If you are convinced of this, you have believed His promise of life. This message is hard for people to believe because it seems too simple. How could it be so uncomplicated? How could so many people be so wrong? What about turning from sins, commitment of life, and doing good works?

Whether it seems too simple or not, that is what the Lord promises. No matter how many people reject it, that is the message of life. Though it doesn't include turning from sins, commitment of life, and doing good works, that is the way. Whether that is the way we would have done it or not, that is God's promise. God is God and He is perfectly within His rights to determine what we must do to have everlasting life.

John doesn't tell us how Nicodemus responded. In light of the openness he displayed to this point in the dialogue, it is extremely likely that Nicodemus was born again that very night. When John next tells us of Nicodemus, he is standing up for Jesus before his colleagues in the Sanhedrin (John 7:48-52). At that time Nicodemus implies that he believes in Jesus, yet he is still unwilling to come completely out in the light. When Jesus died on the cross, Nicodemus came forward to

claim the body for burial, along with Joseph of Arimathea, a fellow ruler of Israel and another secret disciple of Jesus (John 19:38-39).

The reason why so many people stumble over the simplicity of John 3:16 is that it contradicts their traditions—the teachings of their church or denomination.

Jesus *has* the answer, and *is* the answer, to the questions of everyone seeking everlasting life. If we are open, the Spirit of God will show us that there is but one condition: believing in Jesus for everlasting life.

I have found a question, one popularized by Pastor James Kennedy, to be helpful in getting people to reflect on why they think they should go to heaven. It goes like this: “If you were to die tonight and stand before God and He asked, ‘Why should I let you into My heaven?’ what would you say?” I have asked that question to scores of people. Far and away most people point to their good deeds and to the effort they are putting in. Very few say that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but has everlasting life. Their tradition causes them to stumble over the simple beauty of the good news.

Nicodemus learned the message of life that night two thousand years ago. Jesus guarantees everlasting life to all who believe in Him. Nothing else is added. Faith is the sole condition. If you add any other condition, you don’t believe Jesus’ guarantee. A friend in Florida, Pastor Tim Kelley, likes to tell his congregation, “There’s no bill in the mail.” That’s right. Everlasting life is free, free to all who merely believe in Jesus for it.

While knowing you are secure forever won’t eliminate all of life’s problems, it will solve the biggest one. What joy and peace there is in knowing that you will spend eternity with God in His kingdom! And all it takes is to believe what Jesus said. It’s really that simple.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). *Whoever* includes everyone. Only believe in Jesus for everlasting life and you will have it, for He is completely trustworthy. He does what He promises.

CHAPTER 3

FAITH ON THE ROCKS (LUKE 8:11-13)

Linda was driving down the freeway with her radio tuned to a Christian station. She heard the gospel clearly proclaimed and joyfully received the message, believing in Christ for everlasting life. Tragically, one minute later a drunk driver crossed the median and hit her. She died instantly.

Most would agree that Linda went to heaven, since she had believed in Christ. Everlasting life is granted to a person *at the very moment of faith*. It isn't bestowed after you have believed for a certain length of time. When you place your faith in Christ for everlasting life, you are born again right then.

What if instead of dying in that car accident, Linda had been badly hurt and subsequently became very depressed? Eventually, she even began to doubt that Christianity was true. How could it be true, when God had let this happen to her? If she had died in this state of unbelief and bitterness, where would she go—to heaven or hell?

Some say that under those conditions (since she stopped believing in Christ) she would go to hell. Yet, this is odd, since Linda would have gone to heaven if she had died in that crash. Did surviving the crash turn out to be an everlasting disaster for her? If she lived long

enough for her faith to falter, was she in danger of failing to make it to heaven?¹

Have you ever experienced hardship that shook your faith? Even if you haven't, you probably realize this as a possibility. None of us can be sure that our experience of faith will remain intact until we go to be with the Lord. Thus, it is vital that we know what the Bible declares about believers whose faith falters.

Jesus' Parable of the Sower is the perfect place to consider the issue of faith on the rocks.

THE SOWER, THE SEED, AND THE SOIL

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus told of a man who sowed seed in his field. Some of the seed fell on the footpaths between the rows. It never germinated because the birds ate it (Luke 8:5, 12).

Of the seed sown in the rows, some fell on very shallow soil with a layer of rock only inches below the surface. Some of this seed germinated and began to grow. However, because it had an insufficient root system, the growth was stunted, and the plants withered away (Luke 8:6, 13).

Some of the seed fell in soil filled with weeds. The seed germinated and began to grow. However, the weeds grew even faster and stunted the growth of the plants. They, too, did not come to maturity (Luke 8:7, 14).

Finally, some of the seed fell in good soil with no rocks or weeds. The seed germinated, grew to maturity, and brought forth a good crop (Luke 8:8, 15).

When Jesus explained the parable, He indicated that the seed falling on rocky soil represented those who "believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away" (Luke 8:12). Note Jesus' explanation of the meaning of the parable in regard to the first two soils:

"...The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away" (Luke 8:11-13).

¹Some would say that those who lose their faith also lose their salvation. Others would say that those who lose their faith never had real saving faith in the first place. Both would agree, however, that if faith fails, heaven is out of the question.

The seed sown by the wayside represents those who hear the saving message but don't believe it and hence remain unsaved. The seed sown on the rocky soil represents those who hear and believe the message of life, yet they only believe for a time. Eventually they fall away. That heaven is the spiritual destiny of those who fall away is clear when we carefully consider Jesus' words.

EVEN TEMPORARY FAITH RESULTS IN EVERLASTING SALVATION

The question raised by this passage is whether a person who believes in Jesus might ever stop believing. Many Bible teachers mistakenly reason that since the faith that is mentioned in Luke 8:13 does not endure, it is not genuine. John Martin, for example, writes:

The second group are those who listen and rejoice but then do not stick with the truth of the message for they have no root (verse 13). The fact that they believe for a while but...fall away means that they only accept the facts of the Word mentally and then reject it when "the going gets rough." It does not mean that they lose their salvation, for they had none to lose.²

According to this view, a person proves that he was never really saved in the first place if he stops believing in Christ.

There are many problems, however, with this reasoning. It is contradicted by the words of Jesus in this very passage! In the first place, the Lord Jesus clearly said that the people represented by the rocky soil *believed*. How can we conclude that they didn't believe, when Jesus said that they did? To say that they believed "mentally" is to skirt the clear meaning of the text.

What these people believed is nothing other than the saving message, the promise of everlasting life. When Jesus said that the devil takes away the word "lest they should believe *and be saved*" (v 12), He was talking about *saving faith*. He said that whoever believes in Him is saved the very moment he believes. There is no minimum time requirement on saving faith.³ Thus, when Jesus said that these rocky-

²John Martin, "Luke," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament Edition (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 225. See also, Walter L. Liefeld, "Luke," in *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary*, Vol. 2, New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 238.

³See, however, Bernard Koerselman, *What the Bible Says About a Saving Faith* (Chandler, AZ: Berean Publishers, 1992), 223. He writes, "Jesus taught that to be

soil people believed, we have no choice but to conclude that they were saved, since according to verse 12 all who believe are saved.

In the second place, in verse 13 the Lord indicated that the rocky-soil people *received the word*. Luke used the same expression⁴ twice in Acts to refer to the growth of the church: “Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had *received the word* of God, they sent Peter and John to them” (Acts 8:14). “Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also *received the word* of God” (Acts 11:1). Those who *receive the word* are born again.

In the third place, Jesus said that the seed sown on the rocky soil *sprang up*: “Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture” (Luke 8:6). Springing up refers to initial growth. Only a seed that has germinated can spring up. Germination and growth are proof that life has begun.

The people represented by the rocky soil exercised saving faith. Whether they believed for a second or for a century, they were saved the very moment they believed in Christ for everlasting life.

In the fourth place, when Jesus said that “the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, *lest they should believe and be saved*” (v 12), He was talking about *everlasting salvation*. He wasn’t talking about some type of temporary salvation that could be lost.⁵ He was speaking of a *fait accompli*. Satan wouldn’t have such a sense of urgency if he could snatch the word away later and still keep people from heaven. Once the word germinates, everlasting life has begun, and since it is everlasting, nothing—not even Satan—can stop it.

Believers are held by the promise of God, not by their faithfulness or by the endurance of their faith. If Satan can’t stop someone from believing the saving message, he loses the battle for that soul. Everlasting salvation occurs the moment one believes the promise of the gospel. Thus it cannot and does not depend on continuing to believe.

saved we must persevere, standing firm to the end. The cowardly do not stand firm. Jesus predicted such falling away in the parable of the sower: “Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in time of testing they fall away” [Luke 8:13]. These are the cowardly.”

⁴The Greek expression is *dechomai ton logon*.

⁵For Jesus’ teaching on eternal security, see John 5:24; 6:38-40; 10:25-30; 11:25-27.

CALLED TO BE PRODUCTIVE

Clearly the main point of this parable is that every believer in Christ is called to be productive. We should give attention to the quality of the “soil” in which our lives are growing. That soil must be cultivated, fertilized, weeded, and watered. We do this by reading, studying, and meditating on the Bible, praying, having fellowship with other believers, and developing a spiritual mind-set and worldview.

However, this parable also shows that our everlasting salvation is not dependent on *our* faithfulness. It is rooted in *God’s* faithfulness. The moment we believe, we are saved forever. Our faith may fail, but God will never turn His back on His promise to us: “If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim 2:13).

What *is* at stake are our everlasting *rewards*: “If we endure, we shall also reign with Him” (2 Tim 2:12). Enduring in our confession of faith in Christ⁶ until the end of our lives is the condition for ruling with Christ and for having the other rewards which only persevering saints shall receive.⁷

Just as ships sometimes crash into rocks near the coastline, so the faith of some Christians fractures against the rocks of temptation and hardship that line the shores of their lives. Not all believers successfully navigate their way through this life. Yet God guarantees all believers everlasting life, even those believers who suffer shipwreck concerning the faith (1 Tim 1:19).⁸ There is no time requirement on saving faith. At the moment of faith the believer receives everlasting life once and for all—whether he dies shortly thereafter or whether he lives for 100 more years. Even if a person believes only for a while, he still has everlasting life.

⁶That the endurance spoken of concerns continuance in our profession of faith is clear from the second half of verse 12: “If we deny Him, He will also deny us.” That is an allusion to Matt 10:33. The first half of the verse is an allusion to Matt 10:32, which says, “Whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.” It is thus clear that “if we endure” refers to enduring in our confession of Christ before men. The author of Hebrews similarly urged his readers, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering” (10:23). The believer who endures in his confession of Christ will be confessed by Christ at His Judgment Seat as one who is indeed worthy to reign with Him (compare Luke 19:16-26).

⁷See chapter 16 for a discussion of what I call *perseverance prizes*.

⁸For a discussion of 1 Tim 1:18-20 and the issue of apostasy see Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1989, 2014), 98.

You don't need to wait until you die to discover your everlasting destination. Jesus gives everlasting life to all who believe in Him for it. And He gives this gift at the very moment of faith.

CHAPTER 4

WILL THE REAL BELIEVER PLEASE STAND UP? (JOHN 12:42-43)

In the old television show “To Tell the Truth,” celebrity panelists would quiz three contestants who all professed to be the same renowned person (an inventor, a son or daughter of a famous individual, etc.). One of the three individuals really was this person. The panelists would ask the contestants questions to determine which one really was who he or she professed to be.

Many people think that faith in Christ is similar. There are lots of professors, they say, but few are the real thing.¹ They believe that a key (or *the* key) to discerning the true from the false is whether a person regularly confesses his faith in the Lord Jesus both in word and deed, regardless of the persecution which he must endure for doing this.

Have you ever heard a pastor or evangelist say that in order to be saved you need to come forward and publicly confess Christ? “The buses will wait” has become part of the gospel message for some evangelists! They view walking the aisle as the start of a life of confessing

¹Or, lots of professors, but few possessors.

Christ. However, adherents to this belief have a problem when they come to a passage such as this:

Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God (John 12:42-43).

On the one hand, they see that inspired Scripture says that these rulers “believed in Him.” Based on John 3:16, *whoever* does that has everlasting life and shall not perish. This leads them to conclude that these people were genuine believers.

On the other hand, they see that these believers were not confessing Christ because of their fear of persecution. If all true believers confess Christ, these people whom the Apostle John calls believers couldn’t be genuine. This is a sticky problem. Were these rulers true believers or not?

There are really only three options regarding believers in Christ who fail to confess Him: 1) they lose their salvation; 2) they prove that they didn’t *really* believe in Christ in the first place; or, 3) they remain everlastingly secure, since believing in Christ is the only condition of salvation.

The first option is impossible. Everlasting life cannot be lost. If it could, it would not be *everlasting* life.²

The second option is advanced by a number of pastors and theologians who suggest that those who believed in Christ in John 12:42 had a type of belief that is less than saving faith. For example, D. A. Carson, a seminary professor and Bible scholar, writes:

The leaders themselves (same word as in 3:1) seem at this point to fit the pattern of inadequate, irresolute, even spurious faith that John repeatedly describes in this Gospel (e.g., 2:23-25; 6:60; 8:30ff). Nicodemus was willing to stand up for Jesus in the Sanhedrin (7:50-52); he and Joseph of Arimathea publicly identified themselves with Jesus’ cause by providing decent burial for him. Doubtless there were other leaders, less courageous even than this, who maintained some distant attachment to Jesus, who believed in Him in some sense, of whose faith the Pharisees knew nothing (7:48). Sadly, their faith was still so weak that they would not take any step that

²See John 6:38-40; 10:28-29; 11:25-27 for more information on the security of the believer.

would threaten their position in the synagogue; *they loved praise from men more than praise from God*, and therefore fell under Jesus' searing indictment (5:44), here repeated by the Evangelist (cf. Mt. 6:1-21; Rom. 2:29). They still knew nothing of the powerful new birth that could make them children of God and enable them to enter the messianic kingdom (3:3, 5; 1:12, 13; cf. 12:26).³

MANY BELIEVED IN HIM

Let's evaluate this second position. Is it true that the faith of the believers of John 12:42-43 was "inadequate, irresolute, even spurious"?⁴ Scripture tells us that these rulers believed in Christ. No qualifying word or phrase is employed. John doesn't indicate that they "believed in Him *in a sense*." He makes a direct and unequivocal statement: They believed in Him.

The same expression is used in the negative in the preceding paragraph. Writing about the vast majority of Israel in Jesus' day, John says, "But although He had done so many signs before them, *they did not believe in Him*" (v 37). This explains the first word in verse 42, *nevertheless*. That is a contrast word. Most of the nation did not believe in Him. "*Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him.*"

The contrast between the unbelievers of verse 37 and the believers of verse 42 reminds us of the pinnacle of the prologue in John's Gospel, "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name" (John 1:11-12).

³D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 450-51.

⁴There isn't space here to give a detailed response to the various passages cited by Carson in the preceding note. For a discussion of John 8:30-32, see Chapter 7. For a discussion of John 2:23-25, see my article, "[Saints: Spurious or Secret](#)," *Grace in Focus* (November-December 1996).

Regarding the "searing indictment" of John 5:44, whatever it means, it doesn't contradict John 12:42-43. Most likely John 5:44 is the statement of the general principle that seeking honor from God moves Him to open one's heart to the gospel (Cornelius in Acts 10:1-48 and Lydia in Acts 16:14) and that seeking honor from men disinclines Him to do so. However, there are exceptions. Saul of Tarsus, of course, fell under this indictment, yet came to faith in Christ. So did the rulers in John 12:42-43. In His grace He sometimes opens the eyes of even His most ardent opponents.

Although the nation was filled with unbelievers, many of its leaders were believers, even though they were secret ones.

It is possible, of course, to believe facts about Christ and yet not be saved. If John had said that many of the rulers “believed that Jesus was a good man” or “believed that He was from God,” we wouldn’t know if they were saved.

However, John said that many of the rulers “believed in Him” (*pisteuō eis auton*). In John’s Gospel, the expression *pisteuō eis auton* is used only to refer to those who believed savingly (see John 2:11; 3:16, 18; 4:39; 6:29, 40; 7:31, 39; 11:45).⁵ Since the rulers “believed in Him,” then they must have received everlasting life just as Jesus promised in John 3:16⁶ and elsewhere in the Fourth Gospel.

John even gave two specific examples of rulers who believed in Jesus, yet were not confessing Him. Immediately after Jesus died on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea came to Pilate and asked him for the body of Jesus so that he might give Him a proper burial before Passover began. John indicates that Joseph was “a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews” (John 19:38, emphasis added).⁷ Also along was another member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus. Referring to the private conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus (John 3:1ff), John now wrote, “And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came...” (John 19:39).⁸

⁵The other uses of this expression in John are in 7:5, 48; 8:30; 9:36; 11:48; and 12:37. All of these also refer to saving faith—two negatively, in reference to those who didn’t believe savingly (7:5; 12:37), one hypothetically (11:48), and two interrogatively (7:48; 9:36).

In addition, the related expression “he who believes in Me” refers to saving faith as well. See 6:35, 47; 7:38; 11:25-26; 12:44, 46—immediately following 12:42(!); 16:9 (used negatively); and 17:20.

⁶John 3:16 has an articular present participle and John 12:42 has an aorist indicative. The former is referring *generally* to anyone who comes to faith in Christ. The latter is referring *specifically* to a group of people who had already come to faith in Him.

⁷While it is hypothetically possible that he was an unbelieving disciple (see John 6:64), there is no hint of this in the context. Indeed, the unbelieving disciples of John 6:64 were openly following Jesus until that point. Nicodemus had never done this. Yet he is called a disciple of Jesus. This naturally suggests that he was one of the rulers spoken of in John 12:42 who “believed in Him, but...did not confess Him.”

⁸Nicodemus is John’s prime example of a secret believer. All three times John speaks of him he mentions that he came at night (3:2; 7:50; 19:39). Nicodemus evidently came to faith in Christ during his night interview with Jesus (John 3:1-18). While he never comes right out and directly asserts his faith in Christ, there is a gradual opening of the door evident in 7:45-52 and 19:38-42.

The notion that John was speaking of some special kind of faith in Christ, which was less than saving, is contradicted by the text. While some people might falsely profess to believe in Christ,⁹ Scripture never makes a false profession!

BUT THEY DID NOT CONFESS HIM

The third view, that all who believe in Jesus for everlasting life are everlastingly secure, whether they confess Christ or not, is the simplest and most obvious understanding of the text. After all, John told us that many of the rulers “believed in Him” and that “they did not confess Him.” The obvious conclusion is that it is possible to believe in Christ and yet not confess Him. In fact, to suggest any other option is to distort the plain sense of the words.

Nowhere in John’s Gospel, or anywhere else in the Bible,¹⁰ is confessing Christ given as a requirement of everlasting salvation.

The conclusion of some that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were not yet born again is not derived from the text of John. It is based on a theological presupposition that all truly saved people confess Christ. If that presupposition is wrong, and John 12:42-43 shows that it is, then the reader of John’s Gospel is free to draw the obvious conclusion that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were secret disciples of Christ.

⁹There are two ways in which this can occur. Some false professors really think they are believers but are not, because they don’t understand and believe the true gospel. Other false professors are con artists who know they don’t believe, but profess to believe so that they can gain an advantage in panhandling, in business, etc.

¹⁰Some do, however, suggest that passages like Matt 10:32-33 (which is parallel with Luke 12:8-9; see also Mark 8:38 and Luke 9:26) and Rom 10:9-10 teach that confessing Christ is indeed a condition of eternal salvation. Yet a careful consideration of these texts proves otherwise, as I have shown in articles, which are available at our website at www.faithalone.org. Briefly, in the former passage the Lord says that He will confess before the Father and the angels those believers who confessed Him before men. This refers to the public praise of those believers who, by their words and deeds, confessed Christ and proved to be worthy to rule with Him. Those whom Jesus does not confess, those He denies, are believers who will not reign with Him, as Paul makes clear in 2 Tim 2:11-13, especially verse 12. While all believers will be in the kingdom, only those who endure in the faith will rule with Christ.

Romans 10:9-10 can only be rightly understood if we recognize that Romans is about deliverance from God’s temporal wrath. One escapes eternal condemnation by believing in Jesus. One escapes God’s wrath here and now by confessing Christ in word and deed on an ongoing basis. This is precisely what Rom 10:9-10 says. When one believes in Christ he is immediately declared righteous: “For with the heart one believes unto righteousness.” There are no righteous people in hell. However, added to this internal act must be ongoing external actions if one is to obtain continuing deliverance from God’s *temporal* wrath: “and with the mouth confession is made

According to John's Gospel there is but one condition of everlasting life: believing in Christ and Him alone for it (see John 1:12; 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25-27; 20:30-31).

John clearly shows that everlasting life is a completely free gift. In John 4:10 he cites Jesus' claim that everlasting life is "the gift of God." John speaks of the same idea also in Rev 22:17: "Let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life *freely*" (emphasis added).

If a person has to confess Christ in order to have everlasting life, then faith is not the sole condition of everlasting salvation, and salvation is not really a gift. It does not come to us simply by grace through faith (Eph 2:8). And thus Paul was wrong, salvation really is of works and there is room for boasting (contra Eph 2:9).

The good news collapses if any condition other than childlike faith is added to it. Yes, this does leave room for failure in the Christian life. Believers may abuse grace. However, the gospel of grace does not need our help, and we dare not change the message of life in a well-intentioned effort to make it impossible for anyone to abuse grace. God is perfectly willing and able to discipline disobedient believers.

FOR THEY LOVED THE PRAISE OF MEN MORE THAN THE PRAISE OF GOD

Sadly, these believing rulers were more concerned with their social standing than with God's praise. Some today have no room in their theology for Christians like this. John, however, did.¹¹ These verses are a challenge for all believers to confess their faith in Christ,

unto salvation [deliverance]." Verses 13-14 clarify the latter half of verse 10: "For 'whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed?" Clearly, the ones doing the calling upon the Lord are *believers*. Thus the salvation of verses 10 and 13 is the salvation of believers from God's temporal wrath. Larry Moyer has a very helpful discussion of Rom 10:9-10 in his book, *Free and Clear: Understanding & Communicating God's Offer of Eternal Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997), 116-23.

¹¹So did the Lord Jesus and John's fellow Apostles. There are many commands, explicit and implicit, for believers to love God's praise and to confess Christ. These commands are often linked with eternal rewards which faithful believers will receive at the Judgment Seat of Christ. See Matt 10:32-33; John 12:42-43; 1 Cor 9:24-27; 2 Cor 5:9-10; Gal 1:10; 6:6-10; 2 Tim 1:8, 12; 4:6-10; 1 Pet 5:1-4; 2 Pet 3:14-18; and 1 John 2:28. There would be no need of this if all believers automatically confessed Christ, sought God's praise, and received eternal rewards.

regardless of the cost. God's praise is much more important than man's, and His rewards are far more lasting.

Every Christian will one day appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:9-10) where our works will be evaluated and we will be recompensed. Some believers will be praised and some will be rebuked (see Luke 19:16-26; 1 John 2:28). Those believers who have confessed Christ in word and deed will be praised (see Matt 10:32-33; 2 Tim 2:12).

Wouldn't you love to have your epitaph read, "This person loved the praise of God more than the praise of men"? That should be our aim in life (2 Cor 5:9).

WILL THE REAL BELIEVER PLEASE STAND UP?

Since the Apostle John was not constrained by some modern theological construct, he was free to write about believers who did not confess Christ, since they valued the praise of men more than the praise of God. While that doesn't fit some forms of theology, it does fit the theology of the Fourth Gospel and of the New Testament as a whole (Gal 2:11-21; 2 Tim 2:12-13). That is the theology of the cross. The sole condition of everlasting salvation is to believe the Lord Jesus for it.

Confessing Christ is both a wonderful privilege and an awesome responsibility. All Christians are ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor 5:20). How well we do in our role as His representatives is determined by how well we heed the warning in John 12:42-43. If we love the Lord Jesus and desire His praise, then we will confess Him in word and in deed.

Don't be a secret disciple. Be a beacon for the grace of God and someday you will hear the Lord Jesus say to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant."¹²

¹²That praise will not be received by all believers. Only those who persevere in confessing Christ in word and deed will be so honored (Luke 19:11-26; 2 Tim 2:12, compared to Matt 10:32-33).

CHAPTER 5

FREE AT LAST! (JOHN 8:30-32)

Toward the end of my doctoral work at Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS), after I had completed my course work, I faced the dreaded *written exams*. Like all doctoral students at DTS, I was required to take six different three-hour written examinations within two weeks. The tests for doctoral students in the New Testament department covered Greek grammar, translation, exegesis in the Gospels, exegesis in Paul's epistles, exegesis in the rest of the New Testament, and the history of New Testament interpretation.

One of my questions on the exam covering the Gospels concerned John 8:30-32:

As He spoke these words, many believed in Him. Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

The following is my recollection of that question:

The expression *pisteuō eis auton* is used by John to refer to saving faith in passages like John 3:16-18, 36, and 6:47. Thus we might be inclined to think that when John uses the same expression in 8:30, he was referring to true believers who had everlasting life. However, in the verses which follow, Jesus came into conflict with the audience and said, "You are of your father the devil" (John 8:44) and "You do not believe

Me” (John 8:45). This would lead us to conclude that these weren’t true believers and that they didn’t have everlasting life. Which is it? Were these true believers or not? Defend your answer.

One way to interpret John 8:30-32 is that those mentioned believed in Christ, but not with the right kind of faith. I call this understanding of the passage the false professor view. Let’s begin by seeing why that view is inconsistent with the context.

INSPIRED SCRIPTURE SAYS THESE AREN’T FALSE PROFESSORS

Ed Sullivan used to start his variety shows with the line, “Tonight we have a *really big show* for you.” Some people view saving faith that way. They believe there is standard everyday faith and then there is saving faith. Saving faith is *really big faith*. It is persevering and obedient.

Many pastors and theologians suggest that the belief mentioned here by John is not saving faith. However, this is impossible for two reasons. In the first place, saving faith is not some special kind of faith. What makes saving faith saving is its *object*, not the *faith itself*. The object of saving faith is Jesus Christ as the Guarantor of everlasting life to everyone who just believes in Him. Anyone who believes that has everlasting life, whether or not they persevere.

In the second place, if inspired Scripture tells us that someone has exercised saving faith, we are bound to agree with that assessment. And that is exactly the case here: “As He spoke these words, many believed in Him” (John 8:30).

But why, then, did Jesus call His listeners “children of the devil”?

JESUS CALLED THE UNBELIEVERS IN THE CROWD “CHILDREN OF THE DEVIL”

A heated exchange between Jesus and the crowd (John 8:33-43) gave rise to His searing indictment, “You are of your father the devil” (v 44). What a charge to be leveled against someone!

While we might imagine that He was merely indicating that their words truly came from Satan, as when He rebuked Peter saying, “Get behind Me, Satan!” (Matt 16:23), Jesus was saying more than that here. He was saying that these people had Satan as their spiritual father, that they were unsaved. Twice Jesus declared, “You do not

believe Me” (John 8:45-46). Jesus’ antagonists in verse 33 and following were clearly *not* believers. However, this in no way intimates that the people He spoke to in verses 30 to 32 were false professors. Actually, it suggests the opposite.

In verses 30 and 31 John twice indicated that some of the Jews in the crowd believed in Christ. In contrast, twice in verses 45 and 46, Jesus told some gathered there that they did *not* believe Him. How do we harmonize these facts? The obvious solution is that the group referred to in verses 30 to 32 was different from the one referred to in verse 33 and following.

Jesus was speaking to a large crowd made up primarily of Jews who rejected Him and His message (see John 8:3, 13, 21-22, 37, 40, 44-47, 48, 52, 59). Verses 30 to 32 are a digression from the main flow of the chapter. In the midst of a sea of people who rejected Jesus was a small pool of people who came to believe in Him.

To illustrate this, picture a presidential candidate in New Hampshire campaigning for his party’s nomination. During a speech before a rather large crowd in an outdoor meeting, he spots a small group of people wearing T-shirts and carrying placards that display pro-life slogans. Being strongly pro-life himself, the candidate turns to this group and encourages them to remain true to the cause. Suddenly some pro-choice advocates in the larger audience begin to challenge him. A heated verbal exchange ensues during which the candidate chides them for their pro-choice stand.

Would anyone recounting this event later conclude that the pro-life group at the rally was not really pro-life at all? Of course not.

Because of the care taken in audience selection, politicians almost never face a crowd that is largely adversarial. However, Jesus wasn’t a candidate running for office or looking for votes. The King of kings was never intimidated by speaking before a crowd comprised largely of the opposition, some of whom even sought His death.

But two other questions yet remain about verses 30 through 32. The first question concerns the relationship between everlasting salvation and discipleship.

IT TAKES MORE THAN SAVING FAITH TO BE A DISCIPLE OF THE LORD JESUS

Jesus invited the new believers of John 8:30 to follow Him in discipleship: “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you

abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed” (John 8:31). Some feel that this is additional evidence that the believers of verse 30 were not yet true believers. After all, if all true believers are Jesus’ disciples and these believers are not yet His disciples, then they must not be true believers, right?

Wrong! The premise is absolutely wrong and this very passage proves it. More than belief in Jesus is required to be His disciple. Jesus said so here.

Believing in Christ for everlasting life occurs at a point in time and results in instantaneous and irreversible spiritual life. Being a disciple is an ongoing experience and is conditioned on abiding in Jesus’ word (studying it, meditating on it, and applying it).

To read these verses in such a way that implies one is not saved until he is abiding in Christ’s teachings is to tragically misunderstand and garble the Word of God.

If a believer doesn’t abide in the teachings of Christ, then he is not truly following Christ—no matter how religious he may seem. He is a believer, yes. He has everlasting life. However, he isn’t living as he should.

It is vitally important to realize that there is a difference between everlasting salvation and discipleship. One who thinks that he must follow Christ to be saved, to stay saved, or even to prove he is saved does not believe the Biblical promise. Jesus promises everlasting life to all who merely believe in Him.

The second question concerns the relationship between discipleship and freedom from sin.

TO EXPERIENCE FREEDOM FROM BONDAGE TO SIN REQUIRES MORE THAN FAITH IN CHRIST¹

In verse 32 Jesus asserts that only the believer who is abiding in His word knows the truth and shall be set free from bondage to sin—the

¹It is true, *in a positional sense* that all believers are free from bondage to sin. Romans 6:18 says, “Having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.” However, that doesn’t mean that believers are free from sin’s bondage *in their experience*. Romans 6 makes this clear by commanding those who are already free, “Do not let sin reign in your mortal body” (6:12); “Do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God” (6:13); and “Now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness” (6:19).

freedom spoken of here (compare v 34). Some feel that this too shows that the believers of verse 30 were not yet true believers. The reasoning goes like this:

Major premise: All true believers are free from sin.

Minor premise: The people in question are not yet free from sin.

Conclusion: The people in question are not yet true believers.

Again, the major premise is wrong and this passage proves it. More than belief in Jesus is required to know the truth and to be set free from sin. An experiential knowledge of the truth of God's Word does not happen at the moment of regeneration. And an experience of deliverance from bondage may not occur overnight. There really is no surprise here. Habits that took years or decades to develop don't often disappear with one session of Bible study and prayer. It takes time before a new believer is so grounded in God's Word that he becomes spiritually minded (Rom 8:6) and experiences freedom from bondage to sin.

God didn't stop pointing out wrong attitudes in my life the moment I was born again. Quite the opposite. Forty-two years later, to my chagrin, I am regularly discovering wrong attitudes toward money, possessions, time, etc. For example, it took several decades before I realized that I am sinning when I embrace thoughts like "I can't take this," or "This shouldn't be happening to me," or "This is more than I can bear." God says that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Phil 4:13). He says that with every temptation He also gives the way of escape (1 Cor 10:13). When I am bombarded by such thoughts, my response should be to reject them, meditate on Scripture, and pray. I am reminded of Luther's remark—you can't stop the birds from flying overhead, but you can keep them from making a nest in your hair!

The Apostle Paul urged *believers* to transform their thinking and behavior by abiding in God's Word. He wrote, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). He admonished *believers*, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom 12:2). To the Corinthian *Christians* he wrote, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the

glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor 3:18).

Regular intake of the Word of God is just as vital for believers as eating food. Indeed, it *is* their spiritual food. While it is true that all believers are *positionally* free from bondage to sin, they *experience* that freedom only if they are abiding in Christ’s teachings. Following Christ in obedience is the only way to be truly free of the bonds of sin and to experience life as God meant for it to be. The believer who fails to abide in Christ’s word is enslaved to various sins. He is not experiencing the abundant life that God wants him to enjoy.

FREE AT LAST!

A person who is saved by believing in Christ should then follow Christ in discipleship by abiding in His teachings. To confuse or combine these points is to distort the saving message. Good news loses its goodness if you change the message. With only the elimination of a space, “God is now here” becomes “God is nowhere.” Likewise, remove the space between salvation and discipleship and the good news becomes bad news.

There is no such thing as a faith in Christ, in the Biblical sense, which will not save from everlasting condemnation (John 3:16). If you have believed in Christ for everlasting life, then you are a believer and you have everlasting life.

Positionally every believer is already free from sin. Ultimately one day soon when the Lord returns or when we go to be with Him, we will have a total experience of freedom. However, we can experience a measure of that freedom right now. While we cannot attain sinlessness yet, we can and should experience freedom from bondage to sin.

The freedom of discipleship is the wonderful privilege of every believer. Won’t you take advantage of that privilege? It makes no sense to be enslaved by sin when God is ever ready to set you free: “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

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