

## True Saints Keep Walking 1 John 2:18-19

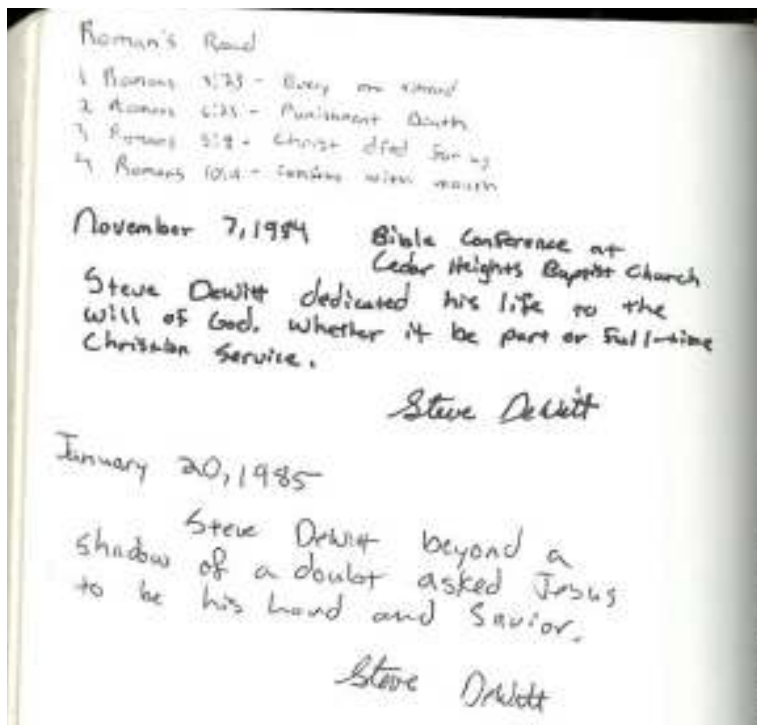
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I would say that over the years of pastoring, if there is one area that I observe real confusion in the church, it is how real Christians stay saved. This comes in lots of questions at various gatherings and when new people come, they want to know where we stand on this. Christian jargon is thrown out: "What do you believe about 'eternal security'?" "Do you believe you can lose your salvation?" Questions like that. This area is not simply a debated doctrine, it has very personal implications for people we know and care about.

I suspect 1 John has made some people nervous. He says of his purpose in writing, *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.* (1 John 5:13 ESV) It's a letter about assurance, yet the evidences of salvation John points us to are not where many of us were taught to go.

Maybe you can relate to my background where our church taught that your basis of confidence was the prayer you prayed. How do I know if I am a genuine follower of Jesus? Did you pray the sinner's prayer? If so, you're in. For me in my youth, this led me to a spiritual torture chamber because I was wracked with doubt. How could I know if I was truly genuine when I prayed the prayer? What if I was only 50% genuine and God requires 75%? Or what if I didn't say the prayer right? Did I miss something in the formula? This led me to pray the sinner's prayer over and over again, hoping each time would stick and I would "feel" saved. I was told the solution was to put a stake in the ground, pray the prayer, and write it down when I did.

So I did that. Below is the Bible of my youth. Look at the schizophrenia I experienced.



Notice the dates. I commit myself to God's plan for my life. Then a year later I'm in anguish over whether I'm even a Christian or not. My struggle through this is one reason this subject is so dear to me. When our assurance is set upon the wrong thing, lasting assurance will be hard to find. We don't want anyone to have false assurance.

Today John addresses one of the common misconceptions about salvation, one that I think will help with assurance.

*Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:18-19)*

This is the beginning of a larger section through verse 27 dealing with John's third major test of genuine salvation, the doctrinal test. What do we believe? Specifically, what do we believe about Jesus? We will get into that larger question in the future. Within this broader test, is an important verse and another indicator of whether or not we are under the grace of God. That is verse 19. To get to verse 19 though, we have to understand verse 18 and what had happened in John's local church.

### **When Leaving the Church was Leaving Christianity**

The Apostle John was pastoring the church of Ephesus in the late first century and acting as a kind of bishop over the churches of Asia Minor. At the time of this writing, he was likely the only living apostle. Within his church, there arose a group, how many, we don't know, led by a few influencers who were teachers and rising leaders. What they taught is much of what John addresses and condemns in 1 John. We've seen some already: sin can be enjoyed and celebrated because we are under grace (1:6). Christians can reach a point of moral and spiritual perfection (1:8). In the verses following, they denied key doctrines of the person and nature of Christ, even denying that Jesus was the Christ.

There was conflict between them and John. No doubt there was conflict throughout the church. Schism. Harsh words. The painful things that happen when this kind of thing goes down. Eventually these teachers and their followers left the church. This was also painful. These were people who had once had fellowshiped together and sang and prayed and served side by side. Now they were gone. Also realize, in the early church you didn't have 20 churches in town and various denominations. The church was struggling to plant just one church in each city. To leave the church was to leave the only expression of Christianity in that city.

What was really behind that whole mess and who were they really? John throws political correctness and niceties out the window: *Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. (1 John 2:18)*

He begins again with a very fatherly tone, "Children."

*It is the last hour* – John wants them, and us, to realize that we are living in important and precarious times. He calls it *the last hour*. You may think, if it's the last hour and he wrote this 2,000 years ago, that is a long hour. What he is referring to is not a chronological set-your-clock-by-it "last hour," but in terms of redemptive history and the big unfolding story, it is the last hour. Other passages like 2 Timothy 3:1 and Acts 2:17 call these "the last days."

We think "hour" means 60 minutes. The Bible's perspective has to do with the significance that the Son of God has entered into the world and inaugurated his new kingdom. The cross and the empty tomb symbolize that the end of all things is upon us. The next great events will culminate redemptive history with judgment and the new heaven and earth. Ever since the cross, it's all the last days and the last hour. We are living in the last days.

*As you have heard that antichrist is coming.* Scripture speaks of a coming embodiment of evil and opposition to God at the end of the story. John calls him Antichrist. Paul calls him "the man of lawlessness" (2 Thessalonians 2:3); this final archenemy of God; a man of enormous world influence who is in total opposition to Jesus. We will have more on him in a future message.

What is important to understanding what verse 19 says is that Antichrist isn't simply one future individual but anyone who opposes Christ. *And as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come.* (Verse 18)

John wants his people to realize the spirit of Antichrist is here already. Indeed, there are many antichrists. Anyone who denies or opposes Christ is an antichrist. Who might he be referring to? Hmm...perhaps these divisive and doctrinally errant leaders?

Verse 19 is our focus: *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*

John says that these individuals' leaving was actually very helpful. It showed something plainly. It showed that back before this whole church split, there were some they thought were with them, who were not actually with them. His logic here is airtight but it's based on a doctrinal presupposition that I want us to get firm in our minds. *If they had been of us, they would have continued with us.*

What is John's doctrinal assumption? All genuine Christians will continue in true faith. They will endure. They will persevere. In terms of talk and walk, they will keep walking in the faith. But these individuals didn't. Therefore, their leaving the only true expression of Christianity in Ephesus meant that they weren't just leaving the church, they were leaving the one faith and gospel that saves.

Chew on that a little. Perseverance shows genuine faith. Non-persevering reveals non-genuine faith. Here is where people stumble. "So does my perseverance save me?" No. It is another evidence of genuine faith because on our own, none of us would persevere. This is a work of God in us known as "preservation."

***The perseverance of the saints means that all true believers are preserved by God in their salvation; the result is that they persevere in their faith until they die.***

This truth properly understood is a massive help to people like me who have struggled with assurance.

### **The Preservation of God**

**The preservation of God—God's eternal promise and actions to save completely and finally all who believe in the Lord Jesus as their Savior.**

There are many verses that speak to this, some famously so.

- *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. (John 10:27-29)*
- *While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. (John 17:12)*
- *Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy... (Jude 24)*
- *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)*
- *And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:30)*

God makes promises to us. Most Christians get that. What we often fail to realize is how God fulfills those promises to keep us saved. His preservation is dynamic and involves means by which he keeps us secure.

The means he uses come primarily through the Holy Spirit, by whom we have been "sealed" unto salvation (Ephesians 1:13). The Spirit teaches us, convicts us, and sanctifies us. He uses the Word of God, the church of God, and the people of God. God disciplines us, encourages us, nourishes us, and humbles us. He brings trials and pain, joys and sorrows. "Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come, 'tis grace hath brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home." (John Newton, *Amazing Grace*) We are no less secure because God uses means than Fort Knox is secure because the US uses means to keep the gold safe.

Our salvation is utterly of God from beginning to end. We are saved by God's grace. We stay saved by God's grace. Salvation is completely of God. It is because of God's promise to preserve us that John can say so confidently that these folks who have left the church have left the faith as well. They did not persevere and the only conclusion is that God did not preserve them and if God did not preserve them, they were never truly saved in the first place.

### **The Perseverance of the Truly Saved**

Here is where people make a mistake, one that John addresses in verse 19: *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*

What would some say to these antichrist teachers who apparently had joined the church and were for all practical purposes fully functioning members? What would they say to them after they left? Would they say, "Hey, you prayed the prayer so don't worry that now you are teaching antichrist doctrines." How many people who say "once saved always saved" would call these people antichrists? I think many would rush to reassure them because they are only viewing this through the lens of God's preserving work and are missing that God's preservation means our perseverance.

God preserves all who are his. What does that look like? It looks like a Christian who keeps walking directionally toward the will of God. The walking doesn't save us and the will to do so isn't from us. But the enduring lifelong walk shows that we are preserved by God. If I

stop walking, or worse, walk in the other direction and continue on that path without God's intervention, I can't be saved because I'm not persevering and if I'm not persevering it's because God isn't preserving.

Look a few verses later: *If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father.* (1 John 2:24) How can John say that so confidently? Are these super Christians in Ephesus? No. His confidence for our abiding is in God's commitment to keep us abiding. Here are some more:

- *For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.* (Hebrews 3:14)
- *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.* (Philippians 2:12-13)

You can add to these the very strong warning passages in Hebrews about hardening our hearts and falling away. Why are those there? Taken as a whole, we see that salvation is completely of God, which is wonderfully assuring. But do not look at this superficially. All who are truly under the grace of God are kept there by the power of God. That means we will never ultimately and finally give up on Jesus. We will never finally and ultimately deny him. No genuine Christian will do that.

Does that mean our assurance is based on our works? No and yes. No, in that if our assurance rests in us, our performance, and the quality of the sinner's prayer we prayed, we will always wonder because we know the feebleness of our own hearts. Our confidence has to be in God, his truthfulness, his reliability, his love demonstrated in Christ. That's the bottom line. We are filled with so many contradictions and inconsistencies. Don't seek assurance in you.

Yet there is also this helpful indicator called perseverance. God preserves us, and we persevere because of it. As we directionally walk in the faith and remain there, we see in the general course of our lives a direction that would not come from our sinful selves. It can only come from God. There is an enduring love for Christ; a desire to please him and obey. There can be seasons of dryness and wandering but not for too long. God won't let us. This endurance in the ups and downs of life reassures us, not of our perseverance, but of the power of the preserving work of God.

So when John says that they left us because they were never truly among us, he is also implicitly saying to those who remain, "Your remaining, your abiding, your refusal to deny or distort Christ, shows that you are truly among us with and in a salvation that comes wholly from God."

God preserves. We persevere. We are absolutely secure in our salvation, yet that salvation changes the direction of our lives and by God's grace and power, we keep walking in that direction until we die. If we don't, while God is the final judge, we should not feel any assurance of our final salvation.

## Questions for Reflection

- *If I struggle with assurance, to what or whom am I looking for my confidence?*
- *Am I wrongly using God's promise as an excuse to be lazy or distracted in my spiritual walk?*
- *Do I realize my role as a means of preservation in the lives of fellow Christians?*
- *Am I humbled that God would graciously keep me saved to the end?*

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