

# The Case for Eternal Security from Five Key New Testament Passages

**Dr. Kenneth M. Gardoski**

Associate Professor of Systematic Theology  
Baptist Bible Seminary  
Clarks Summit, Pa.

## Introduction

Within the broad Evangelical community one encounters two approaches to the doctrine of salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism.<sup>1</sup> Each incorporates many theological concepts—aspects of theology proper (God’s sovereignty, grace, and justice) and anthropology (sin and the ability and responsibility of a fallen human race to please God). Under soteriology fall discussions of election (how God chooses the believer), redemption (the work and extent of the atonement), conversion (the divine-human dynamic of salvation), sanctification (the life of the believer), and glorification (the final salvation of the believer).

Also within soteriology is the matter of security—that is, whether there is any guarantee that genuine believers will stay in the faith. Calvinists and Arminians each have their own take on the security issue. The Calvinist holds to the doctrine of unconditional or eternal security. The doctrine of eternal security means that, having experienced true conversion, the believer will be preserved until the end of his life by the power of God (Phil 1:6; 1 Pet 1:5), and will not ultimately fall away from God (Rom 8:38–39; 1 John 3:9). The Calvinist bases his position on a firm view of God’s sovereign superintendence of the believer’s salvation experience from start to finish (John 10:28–30; Rom 8:28–29).

The Arminian, on the other hand, embraces the doctrine of the conditional security of the believer. A genuine conversion experience is not sufficient to guarantee the final salvation of the believer. Only “the one who endures to the end ... shall be saved”<sup>2</sup> (Matt 24:13; cf. Rev 21:7). The Arminian’s position rests on a strong view of human freedom and the believer’s responsibility to persevere in his faith in order ultimately to be saved (Col 1:22–23; Heb 3:14). Consequently, the true believer can fail to persevere, lose his faith, and suffer eternal judgment (Heb 6:4ff; 10:26ff).

A highly influential work on the issue of eternal security from the Arminian point of view has been Robert Shank’s *Life in the Son*.<sup>3</sup> In his view there are numerous passages of

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<sup>1</sup>I realize that some dislike these labels. I. Howard Marshall, for example, prefers not to be called an Arminian. Likewise, I am sure there are proponents of eternal security who would rather not be known as Calvinists. Nevertheless, for the sake of convenience, and because these terms historically have represented the two sides of the issue of eternal security, I will use them in this paper.

<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations in this paper are taken from the NASB.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Shank, *Life in the Son* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989).

Scripture that support the doctrine of conditional security.<sup>4</sup> He accuses Calvinists of forcing these “plain, explicit” passages to “‘conform’ to an incomplete comprehension of the supposed proof passages of the erroneous doctrine of unconditional security.”<sup>5</sup>

Another important work on the subject has been I. Howard Marshall’s *Kept By The Power Of God*.<sup>6</sup> While Marshall acknowledges that “no outside power can separate those who love God from Him ... we [can] separate ourselves from that love.”<sup>7</sup>

In the estimation of Dale Moody, another well-known Arminian scholar, the combined works of Shank and Marshall are an effective “refutation of the Augustinian-Calvinistic tradition that has twisted Scripture for centuries.”<sup>8</sup> Moody goes on, “If Shank and Marshall are in error, they should be answered by appeal to Scripture, not ignored or rejected by majority vote as was done in the case of the Remonstrants at Dort in 1618.”<sup>9</sup>

This paper delivers what Moody demands: a response to the Arminian doctrine of conditional security in the form of a direct appeal to Scripture. Are there any NT passages that teach the unconditional eternal security of the believer? I believe a strong case can be made for eternal security on the basis of the following five key NT passages.

### 1. *John 10:27–30*

The context of this passage is the Jews’ demand for Jesus to identify Himself (v. 24). Jesus declares His identity (v. 30), but concentrates on the human response. These Jews do not believe because they are not of Jesus’ sheep (v. 26). Jesus’ sheep, on the other hand, hear His voice, are known by Him,<sup>10</sup> and follow Him (v. 27). Verse 28 reveals three benefits enjoyed by Jesus’ sheep: (1) He gives them eternal life; (2) they shall never perish; and (3) no one shall snatch them out of His hand. The second is expressed emphatically (οὐ μή plus subjunctive) and may be rendered “they shall certainly not perish forever.”<sup>11</sup> The third is also strong, stating categorically that *no one* will snatch

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<sup>4</sup>In his Appendix A, Shank lists eighty-five passages that in his mind establish the doctrine of conditional security (*Life in the Son*, 334–37).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>6</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *Kept By The Power Of God*, rev. ed. (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1995). The first edition of this book was published in 1969 in London by Epworth Press.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>8</sup>Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 358, n. 69.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>We might have expected Jesus to say that the sheep know Him, but “Christ’s knowledge of the sheep, his recognition that they are his, is the determinative thing” (D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* [London: Marshall Pickering; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 190).

<sup>11</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 789.

them from the hand of Jesus. Jesus' words in this passage "constitute a powerful declaration of security."<sup>12</sup>

Arminians have responded to this passage in two ways. First, Shank understands v. 27 to be the *condition* upon which the promise of v. 28 is realized: *if* the sheep keep listening to and following Jesus, *then* they shall never perish.<sup>13</sup> But the statements of v. 27 are not conditions, which Osborne concedes.<sup>14</sup> However, Osborne's approach is also problematic: He simply declares them "conditions in light of John's total theology."<sup>15</sup> In response, one cannot will these statements to be what they are not. Jesus is stating what *is and will be* the case: His sheep hear His voice; He knows them; they follow Him; He gives them eternal life; they shall never perish; no one shall snatch them out of His hand. Since Jesus is stating what *will be* the case, the outcome is guaranteed: "those who are born again will certainly persevere to the end."<sup>16</sup>

There is another problem with Osborne's discussion of the conditionality of Jesus' promise. Osborne agrees that this passage teaches election and security;<sup>17</sup> however, it is not "absolute, i.e. accomplished apart from man's decision."<sup>18</sup> There are two problems with this approach. First, Osborne is attempting to negate eternal security simply by asserting human responsibility and the need for perseverance.<sup>19</sup> D. A. Carson's observation of the same tendency in I. Howard Marshall is instructive:

How strong are the passages that seem to affirm the ultimate preservation and perseverance of God's people? This is something that Marshall, for instance, does not directly address. He fairly expounds some of the passages that affirm that God's people continue in salvation to the end, but then diminishes their weight by setting over against them those passages that emphasize human responsibility to persevere ... The resulting formulation always makes the preservation of God's people unto consummated salvation absolutely contingent: God is the one who faithfully

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<sup>12</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1003; cf. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 783.

<sup>13</sup>Of course Shank's implication is that the converse is also true: if the sheep *stop* listening and following, they *shall* perish (*Life in the Son*, 58–59).

<sup>14</sup>Grant R. Osborne, "Exegetical Notes on Calvinist Texts," in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975): 172.

<sup>15</sup>Osborne has in mind the conditional statements in John 6:35, 45, and 15:1–7 ("Exegetical Notes," 172).

<sup>16</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 791, n. 6.

<sup>17</sup>It is a "declaration of security ... built on Jesus' sovereign control ... anchored in the Father's sovereign control" (Grant R. Osborne, "Soteriology in the Gospel of John," in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989]: 250).

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 791, n. 6. John Miley takes the same approach (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1989], 269).

preserves his people, provided they do not defect. But what warrants such diminution of the apparent weight of the perseverance passages?<sup>20</sup>

It seems to Carson, then, “that the strong New Testament emphases on the security of the believer should not be qualified by mere subtraction, unless there is the strongest exegetical warrant for doing so.”<sup>21</sup>

The second problem with Osborne’s approach is his begging the question regarding the term *absolute*: his assertion that “not absolute” equals “not accomplished apart from man’s decision” is not the only possible explanation. As a compatibilist, I believe that the believer’s security is *both* absolute *and* accomplished through the believer’s will.<sup>22</sup> Osborne’s statement is misleading because it purports to rule out the absolute security of the believer’s salvation when in fact it does not.

The second way Arminians have responded to John 10:27–30 centers around the meaning of v. 28c. According to Osborne, those who “snatch” the sheep are thieves and wolves (vv. 8, 12); therefore, “it is erroneous to read into this the impossibility of personal apostasy.”<sup>23</sup> Grudem dismisses such reasoning as “pedantic quibbling over words—does not ‘no one’ also include the person who is in Christ’s hand?”<sup>24</sup> But the stronger argument comes from the previous clause: “they shall never perish.” This *does* eliminate even personal apostasy.<sup>25</sup>

In his discussion of John 10:27–30, Erickson concludes that “this passage is as definite a rejection of the idea that a true believer can fall away as could be given.”<sup>26</sup> But Marshall insists that “exegetical honesty compels us to ask whether the will of God can be

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<sup>20</sup>Carson makes his case from John 6:38–40, but the same point could be made with reference to John 10:28: “it is exceedingly difficult to diminish the finality of this statement” (“Reflections on Assurance,” in *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will*, vol. 2, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995]: 399).

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>“Compatibilism is the view that the following two statements are, despite superficial evidence to the contrary, mutually compatible: God is absolutely sovereign but his sovereignty does not in any way mitigate human responsibility; human beings are responsible creatures (i.e., they choose, decide, obey, disobey, believe, rebel, and so forth), but their responsibility never serves to make God absolutely contingent” (Carson, “Reflections on Assurance,” 405).

<sup>23</sup>Osborne, “Soteriology in John,” 251. Shank also takes issue with the view that sees v. 28c as a “guarantee against ourselves” (*Life in the Son*, 59). James Leo Garrett, a proponent of eternal security, agrees with the Arminians in this case that vv. 28–29 “do not necessarily exclude the possibility that believers can cast themselves out or take themselves out of his hand” (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 421).

<sup>24</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 789.

<sup>25</sup>Grudem notes that in all his discussions of v. 28, Osborne “gives no alternative explanation for the phrase ‘they shall never perish,’ and gives no reason why we should fail to understand it to mean that these people will certainly have life with God forever in heaven” (*Systematic Theology*, 790, n. 3).

<sup>26</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1003.

frustrated by human sin.”<sup>27</sup> Is it exegetical honesty in regards to the passage at hand, or is it theological presupposition brought in from without, that gives rise to the question? But once raised, the question is put to rest by the text: the sheep of Jesus Christ “shall never perish.”

## 2. Romans 8:28–30

Romans eight presents the Christian life as one of victory in the Lord Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>28</sup> This victory is assured by God, who “causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (v. 28).<sup>29</sup>

The reason why the promise of v. 28 is sure is found in v. 29: it is because (ὅτι) those God foreknew (οὓς προέγνω), He also predestinated (καὶ προώρισε) to be conformed to the image of His son. With this phrase Paul begins to forge a “golden chain” of five aspects of God’s saving work in believers: (1) He foreknew them; (2) He predestinated them; (3) He called them; (4) He justified them; (5) He glorified them.<sup>30</sup>

Three things are important to note. First, the center link in this chain of God-wrought salvation is God’s call. In v. 28, believers are defined as those “called” according God’s purpose. Verse 30 describes how this call comes about, and how it is worked out, thus expanding it in two directions.<sup>31</sup> Looking backward, the call is *based on* God’s previous foreknowledge and predestination (the first two links in the chain). Looking forward, the call *results in* justification and glorification (the last two links in the chain).

Second, Paul begins (conformity to the image of Christ) and ends (glorification) the chain on the same note—the final salvation of the believer—which is “the goal of God’s saving

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<sup>27</sup>Marshall, *Kept By The Power Of God*, 178; cf. Osborne, “Soteriology in John,” 250.

<sup>28</sup>It has been observed that the chapter begins with “no condemnation,” ends with “no separation,” while in between there is “no defeat” (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 299).

<sup>29</sup>According to Shank, it is for “those who keep on loving Him” that God works all things for good (*Life in the Son*, 211). The implication is that God works only as we “keep on loving Him.” But Shank ignores Paul’s further identification of those who love God as ones “called according to His purpose.” Who loves God? Those whom He calls. On what basis does He call them? His own purpose. This is what we saw in John ten. Who follows Jesus? His sheep whom He knows (v. 27). On what basis does He know them? The Father’s having given them to Him (v. 29). Shank wants to make God’s work contingent upon our continued love for Him, but according to the text the opposite is true: our love for God is ultimately due to God’s purpose in calling us to salvation (Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 450). Paul uses the same term *purpose* (πρόθεσις) in Eph 1:11 and 2 Tim 1:9, in the latter stating clearly that our salvation is not “according to our works,” but rather “according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.”

<sup>30</sup>Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 9.

<sup>31</sup>Donald J. Westblade, “Divine Election in the Pauline Literature,” in *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will*, vol. 1, 70.

work.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the security of the believer’s final salvation is rooted in the sure call of God, which is based on God’s past sovereign work in foreknowing and predestinating the believer, and which invariably leads to God’s present and future sovereign work of justifying and glorifying the believer.

Third, Paul ties the entire chain together with a deliberate and powerful structural marker: οὐς (δέ) + aorist indicative, (τούτους) καί + aorist indicative. Gundry Volf captures well the force and significance of this presentation:

The chain gains momentum not only from the repetitious, rhythmic structure but also from the themes announced in the verbs which advance from one aspect of salvation to the next until they reach the climax: God foreknew, predestinated, called, justified, glorified! Paul portrays salvation as a series of divine initiatives snowballing toward fullness. He links these initiatives so tightly that each is born of the former and bears a promise of the one which follows. Glorification is thus the finishing touch on the indivisible divine work of salvation which originated in God’s foreknowledge and predestination of Christians and has come to historical expression in their calling and justification. These verses truly do form a “chain” of interconnected divine salvific works and so imply a continuity in Christians’ salvation.<sup>33</sup>

The Arminian response to Rom 8:28–30 has been four-fold. First, Shank holds that the election in view is corporate, referring to the church in general rather than to particular individuals.<sup>34</sup> But Osborne counters, “While this has a certain attraction, it is hardly the answer here. ... The phrase ‘conformed to the image of his Son’ undoubtedly has a personal application and presupposes an individual thrust.”<sup>35</sup>

The second claim is that because the passage speaks of believers rather than unbelievers, “the election here is not unto salvation but unto conformity.”<sup>36</sup> But is it possible to exclude salvation from the expressed goal of divine election in this passage? As we saw, Paul’s statement regarding conformity to the Son in v. 29 anticipates the promise of glorification in v. 30. But this is only the climax of the saving work of God initiated in justification. Predestination to glory must include the work of salvation.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance*, 12.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>34</sup>Shank, *Life in the Son*, 366.

<sup>35</sup>Osborne, “Exegetical Notes,” 178.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*; cf. Marshall, *Kept By The Power Of God*, 102.

<sup>37</sup>I agree with Marshall and Osborne that the passage discusses believers rather than unbelievers, but when do believers become so? They are not yet believers when God foreknows, predestines, and calls them, but only become so when God justifies them. It is not correct, therefore, to claim that the goal of the election here excludes salvation. What is instructive about these first two Arminian responses is that they both attempt to circumvent unconditional individual election to salvation in this passage. Shank attempts by positing corporate election, an untenable position. Osborne tries by arguing for election only unto conformity, but this ignores the link of justification in the chain of divine works. In both cases, the unconditional nature of the election is apparently conceded.

The third Arminian argument, similar to what we saw in John ten, is simply to add the warnings of Scripture to mitigate the security indicated here.<sup>38</sup> In response, I assert again with Carson “that the strong New Testament emphases on the security of the believer should not be qualified by mere subtraction, unless there is the strongest exegetical warrant for doing so.”<sup>39</sup> Romans 8:29–30 itself offers no such warrant.

The fourth Arminian response is to break the chain of continuity in the passage: Paul is not claiming exactly the same number of individuals from start to finish, but rather merely describing generally how salvation occurs.<sup>40</sup> This argument ignores the force of Paul’s carefully structured presentation: “*whom* [God] foreknew, He *also* predestined ... and *whom* He predestined, *these* He *also* called; and *whom* He called, *these* He *also* justified; and *whom* He justified, *these* He *also* glorified” (vv. 29–30). The clear indication is that there *is* in fact an exact correspondence between those foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. “This leaves little room for the suggestion that the links in this chain are not firmly attached to one another, as if some who were ‘foreknown’ and ‘predestined’ would not be ‘called’, ‘justified’, and ‘glorified’.”<sup>41</sup>

In conclusion, “There is no flaw in this chain.”<sup>42</sup> According to Rom 8:28–30, the God who has secured the justification of His people will see them through safely all the way to glory.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Both Osborne (“Exegetical Notes,” 188, n. 49) and Shank (*Life in the Son*, 366–67) use this argument.

<sup>39</sup>Carson, “Reflections on Assurance,” 399.

<sup>40</sup>John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1966), 551; cf. Marshall, *Kept By The Power Of God*, 103; Osborne, “Exegetical Notes,” 188, n. 49. If Marshall and Osborne agree with Wesley that Paul is describing the salvation process here, how can they at the same time deny that the election in view here is unto salvation?

<sup>41</sup>Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 535.

<sup>42</sup>Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 111.

<sup>43</sup>“Salvation is a ‘package deal’ embracing the whole of God’s action from election in eternity past to glorification in eternity future” (Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, three volumes in one [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 3:199). I might add here that Romans 8:31–39 only serves to strengthen the argument in Romans eight for the security of the believer. After describing how God works resolutely on behalf of those He has called—from foreknowing them in eternity past to glorifying them in eternity future (vv. 28–30)—Paul asks, “What then shall we say to these things (v. 31a)?” Paul then fires off a salvo of questions meant to challenge potential naysayers:

If God is for us, who is against us? (v. 31b)

Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? (v. 33a)

God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? (vv. 33b–34a)

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (v. 35)

All of these questions call for the same response—No one! Combined with vv. 28–30, Rom 8:35–39 makes a virtual lock-tight case for eternal security, for neither

tribulation [nor] distress [nor] persecution [nor] famine [nor] nakedness [nor] peril [nor] sword ...

[nor] death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor

powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

How could Paul state it any stronger? There is absolutely no *thing* or no *one* capable of separating the believer from God’s love. Could any other NT passage teach otherwise?

### 3. Ephesians 1:13–14

While John 10:27–30 and Rom 8:28–30 relate eternal security to the work of the Father and Son, Eph 1:13–14 focuses on the contribution of the Holy Spirit in securing the believer’s salvation.<sup>44</sup> Backing up to the beginning of the letter, we note that v. 3 begins a long, majestic sentence in Greek that concludes only at v. 14. Paul’s chief purpose is one of exclamation: “Blessed be the God ... who blessed us ... in Christ” (v. 3).<sup>45</sup> Paul then takes the remainder of the paragraph to delineate those blessings, including those of the Spirit (vv. 13–14).

As a direct result of having listened to (ἀκούσαντες) and having believed (πιστεύσαντες) the gospel, believers were sealed (ἐσφραγίσθητε) in Christ with the Holy Spirit of promise (v. 13).<sup>46</sup> The seal of the Holy Spirit is further described as the “pledge of our inheritance” (v. 14). *Pledge* (ἀρραβών) is a legal and commercial term used for the first installment, deposit, or down payment “that obligates the contracting party to make further payments.”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the Holy Spirit acts as pledge “until the redemption of the purchased possession” (KJV).<sup>48</sup> In other words, God has granted to us who have believed the Holy Spirit as a pledge, thereby guaranteeing<sup>49</sup> our full inheritance in the day of our final redemption in glory.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, “All who have the Holy Spirit within them, all who are truly born again, have God’s unchanging promise and guarantee that the inheritance of eternal life in heaven will certainly be theirs.”<sup>51</sup>

For Osborne the security in this passage is “very real,” yet not unconditional and final. Because Paul later warns believers not to grieve the Spirit who sealed them (Eph 4:30), God’s protection in the Spirit is tempered by personal responsibility. “The danger of apostasy is real.”<sup>52</sup> In response, I simply note with Grudem that Osborne “provides no alternative interpretation to the verse at hand, but simply refers to other verses that teach personal responsibility,” a truth that no Calvinist denies.<sup>53</sup> The warning against grieving

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<sup>44</sup>Hence, the validity of Lewis Sperry Chafer’s Trinitarian model in his argument for eternal security (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948], 315–39).

<sup>45</sup>Εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεὸς ... ὁ εὐλόγησας ἡμᾶς ... ἐν Χριστῷ.

<sup>46</sup>Sealing is a means of identification. This mark not only denotes ownership but also carries with it the protection of the owner (*BDAG*, 980).

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. NIV, “until the redemption of those who are God’s possession.”

<sup>49</sup>According to F. F. Bruce, the pledge of the Spirit “may be understood as the initial down payment as well as the guarantee” (*The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984], 266, n. 102).

<sup>50</sup>Paul speaks of redemption as both present (Eph 1:7) and future (Eph 4:30), the latter being in view here (cf. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 265).

<sup>51</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 791; cf. John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 209.

<sup>52</sup>Osborne, “Exegetical Notes,” 181.

<sup>53</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 791.

the Spirit neither cancels the security of the Spirit's seal nor carries with it the possibility of apostasy.

Shank's response is similar. On the one hand, "The Holy Spirit is the official seal of God's ownership, and the believer's God-given earnest of his promised inheritance as a son and heir of God. Wonderful! But there is more ... the Holy Spirit can do nothing for those who refuse His ministry."<sup>54</sup> One notes here a confusion of what the Spirit *does* in *sanctification* with what the Spirit *has done* in *salvation*. According to Paul in 1:13, after we believed (πιστεύσαντες, aorist active participle) we *were sealed* (ἐσφραγίσθητε, aorist indicative passive) with the Holy Spirit. This is accomplished fact. Even in the warning of Eph 4:30, we are not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God by whom we "*were sealed* (ἐσφραγίσθητε, aorist indicative passive) *for the day of redemption*." We are simply not to grieve in the present the Spirit by whom we were sealed in the past.

In conclusion, there is no indication here in Ephesians or anywhere else that the once-for-all sealing with the Holy Spirit that God accomplished at the moment of our salvation can or ever will be broken.<sup>55</sup> Blessed be God who sealed us in Christ with the Holy Spirit of promise for the day of our redemption!

#### 4. 1 Peter 1:5

After the salutation, Peter opens his first letter as Paul does Ephesians: he blesses God for His work of salvation.<sup>56</sup> God in His mercy has caused believers to be born again (ἀναγεννήσας) unto (εἰς) a living hope. There is reserved in heaven for those born again an inheritance characterized as imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (1:3–4).

While this full and final salvation has already been prepared (ἐτοίμην) by God, it will not be revealed (ἀποκαλυφθῆναι) until the last time (v. 5). How, then, do born again believers get from point A to point B, from past experience of new birth to future possession of full inheritance? Peter answers this question at the beginning of v. 5: believers are "by the power of God being kept through faith unto salvation."<sup>57</sup> Four things are noteworthy here. First, it is by *God's power* (ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ, placed first for emphasis) that those born again are kept. *God* does the keeping, and that by *His* power. Second, those born again are *being kept* (φρουρουμένους, present passive participle). This keeping or guarding is God's *constant, continuous* work. God keeps keeping them. Third, God keeps those who are born again *through their faith* (διὰ πίστεως). Faith is "the means

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<sup>54</sup>Shank, *Life in the Son*, 105.

<sup>55</sup>"If salvation can be lost, then His sealing would not be until the day of redemption but only until the day of sinning, or apostasy, or disbelief" (Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* [Winona Lake, In.: BMH Books, 1986], 332).

<sup>56</sup>In fact, the opening phrase of Eph 1:3 and 1 Pet 1:3 are identical in Greek: Εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

<sup>57</sup>My translation of ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ φρουρουμένους διὰ πίστεως εἰς σωτηρίαν.

God uses to guard his people.”<sup>58</sup> Fourth, born again believers are kept by God *unto salvation* (εἰς σωτηρίαν). God’s powerful work of keeping those born again will not stop short of full and final salvation. Grudem draws the following conclusion:

This last phrase makes it difficult if not impossible to see any end to God’s guarding activity. If God’s guarding has as its purpose the preservation of believers until they receive their full, heavenly salvation, then it is safe to conclude that God will accomplish that purpose and they will in fact attain that final salvation. Ultimately their attainment of final salvation depends on God’s power.<sup>59</sup>

Shank’s response centers around the words “through faith,” which he claims “do not seem to register in the minds of many.”<sup>60</sup> They are crucial for Shank who thinks they present faith as “the essential condition governing the keeping grace of God.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, God will keep keeping us as long as we keep believing in Him. If we stop believing, and we certainly can according to Shank and other Arminians, then God will stop keeping.

In response to Shank, it is highly unlikely that διὰ plus the genitive indicates cause or result here.<sup>62</sup> This is instead the very common construction for means.<sup>63</sup> Rather than being the *condition* under which God *may* or *may not* keep us, faith is the *means* by which God *does* and *will* keep us unto salvation.

Osborne likewise flags the words “through faith,” concluding that Peter is calling upon his readers “to persevere in their faith-belief.”<sup>64</sup> But there is no such call here, only a stated *fact*: God by His power *is* continually keeping those born again unto salvation *by means of* their faith. This is not to discount faith, or make it optional. What Peter is telling us in this great verse is that while our faith is *essential* and *ours*, it is *anchored* in the person and power of *God*. It is through our faith that we are saved (Eph 2:8); however, “Ultimately [our] attainment of final salvation depends on God’s power.”<sup>65</sup> That is security!

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<sup>58</sup>Grudem paraphrases v. 5 this way: “God is continually using his power to guard his people by means of their faith.” To Grudem this “seems to imply that God’s power in fact energizes and continually sustains individual, personal faith” (*Systematic Theology*, 792).

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Shank, *Life in the Son*, 272.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.; cf. 279.

<sup>62</sup>J. N. D. Kelly translates διὰ πίστεως “as a result of their faith,” but offers no support (*A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude*, reprint ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 52). *BDAG* (225) submits two passages where διὰ plus genitive “seems” to be causal (Rom 8:3; 2 Cor 9:13). But Grudem notes that these are ambiguous (*Systematic Theology*, 792, n. 9).

<sup>63</sup>H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 101.

<sup>64</sup>Osborne, “Exegetical Notes,” 183.

<sup>65</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 792.

## 5. 1 John 3:9

The predominant theme of 1 John is Christian certainty.<sup>66</sup> More specifically, John addresses believers disturbed by certain false teachers who had withdrawn from their assembly. John writes “in order to reassure them that they really were true Christians since they accepted Jesus as the Son of God.”<sup>67</sup> John’s theme is clearly presented in 1 John 5:13: “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life.”

John’s argument, however, is two-edged. While affirming true security for genuine believers, John wants also to destroy the false security of counterfeit believers. Three tests accomplish this two-fold task: (1) theological—do they believe Jesus is the Son of God? (2) moral—are they practicing righteousness? And (3) social—do they love one another?<sup>68</sup> 1 John 3:9 falls under the second test.<sup>69</sup>

According to this verse, “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” Three things are important. First, John’s *subject* are those who are born again.<sup>70</sup> Second, John states what is *true* regarding those born again: they *do not* practice sin (ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ), and they *cannot* continue sinning (οὐ δύναται ἁμαρτάνειν).<sup>71</sup> Third, John gives the reason *why* this is

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<sup>66</sup>John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, reprint ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 50.

<sup>67</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 5.

<sup>68</sup>Stott, *Epistles of John*, 52–53.

<sup>69</sup>Cf. also the parallel passage 1 John 5:18.

<sup>70</sup>1 John does not address the *process* of being born again; John takes up that matter in his gospel. 1 John is concerned rather with the *behavior* of those born of God (Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Leicester: Apollos, 2000], 124).

<sup>71</sup>John’s use of the present tense here may be understood in the sense of the habitual practice of sin (Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, English ed. adapted from 4<sup>th</sup> Latin ed. by Joseph Smith [Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1963], 82). According to 1 John 1:8–9, believers still have sin and must confess their sins (cf. 2:1, 5:16); thus, 3:9 does not teach sinless perfection but rather “the absence of persistent sinning” (Osborne, “Exegetical Notes,” 174). Kruse rejects this conclusion, noting that 1:8 and 3:9 both use the present tense; thus, both are “depicting the sinning as something in progress” (*Letters of John*, 129). In response, however, saying one continually *has* sin (1:8) is not the same as saying one continually *sins* (3:9). The former speaks of *presence*, the latter of *practice*. Marshall likewise points to the present tense of 5:16: “If anyone sees his brother committing a sin” (*Epistles of John*, 180). But again, while John uses the present tense he obviously has in mind a particular act of sin. Also, the clause is conditional (ἐάν plus subjunctive), denoting what is probable in the future rather than continuous in the present (Eugene Van Ness Goetchius, *The Language of the New Testament* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965], 274). Thus, the clause may be rendered, “If anyone ever sees his brother committing an act of sin.” Furthermore, the sin of this brother is “not unto death” (KJV). In the context of the letter, the sin unto death is the denial of Christ by the false believers who apostatized (2:19). The significance, then, of the present tense in 3:9 is that the true believer cannot persist in sin so as to deny Christ and commit apostasy. For a good discussion of the sin unto death, see David M. Scholer, “Sins Within and Sins Without: An Interpretation of 1 John 5:16–17,” in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975): 230–46.

true: God's seed abides in them. The power of this statement is born out in the chiasmic structure:

- a No one who is born of God
- b will continue to sin,
- c *because God's seed remains in him;*
- b' he cannot sin,
- a' because he has been born of God.<sup>72</sup>

The most plausible options for the identity of God's seed are the word of the gospel, the Holy Spirit, or the divine nature.<sup>73</sup> But regardless of one's choice, "John's meaning is the same, namely that it is the Christian's supernatural birth from God which keeps him from sinning."<sup>74</sup>

1 John 3:9 teaches eternal security in a powerful way. There is a cause (new birth of God, God's abiding seed) that leads to an invariable effect (believers cannot continue in sin). The clear implication is that those who have been truly born again "cannot so sin as to apostatize or fall totally from God."<sup>75</sup>

Arminians have responded to this passage in three ways. First, Osborne agrees that "the absence of persistent sinning" is in view; however, he states that this absence is *commanded*.<sup>76</sup> But there is no imperative here; John states in *absolute terms* that the one born of God does not and cannot continually sin.<sup>77</sup> Second, Marshall acknowledges that John's statements regarding the believer's freedom from sin are absolute, but prefers to interpret them idealistically: "John is describing the ideal character of the Christian, ideal in the sense that this is the reality intended by God for him, even if he falls short of it while he still lives in this sinful world."<sup>78</sup>

The problem with Marshall's interpretation is that it turns what *is* the case into what *ought* to be the case. However, John is not stating here what believers *ought* not do, but what they *cannot* do.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>72</sup>Kruse, *Letters of John*, 125.

<sup>73</sup>See discussions in Kruse, *Letters of John*, 124–25; Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 186–87; and Stott, *Epistles of John*, 129–30.

<sup>74</sup>Stott, *Epistles of John*, 130.

<sup>75</sup>William H. Goold, ed., *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 11, reprint ed. (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 573.

<sup>76</sup>Osborne, "Exegetical Notes," 174.

<sup>77</sup>Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 185–86. It is possible that Osborne is taking the verse as an implicit imperative—a statement of what ought to be, and thus an injunction to approach the ideal (cf. Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 181).

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>79</sup>"John did not write as an idealist that, ideally speaking, the Christian 'should not' sin. His language was that of the realist. He stated categorically that the Christian 'does not', and indeed 'cannot', sin" (Stott, *Epistles of John*, 133).

Elsewhere, John does express obligation, using either the verb ὀφείλω, *ought* (2:6, 3:16, 4:11), or the subjunctive mood (3:11, 4:21). In all of these instances, by stating what true believers ought to do, John assures true believers and exposes false professors. John 3:11 is a good example, coming as it does on the heels of the indicative statement of v. 10: “Any one who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.” Why is this true? “*For* (ὅτι) this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we *should love* (ἀγαπᾶμεν) one another” (v. 11).

So we see that the absolute statement of fact (the one who does not love his brother is not of God) is complemented and supported by the statement of obligation (believers ought to love one another). Both work together to accomplish John’s two-fold goal of affirming security for those who were expressing love, thereby demonstrating that they truly had been born of God, and removing false security from those who were not expressing love, thereby giving evidence that they were false professors and not true believers at all.

The same is true with regards to 3:9: It is an absolute statement and should not be made an expression of the ideal or obligatory behavior of believers. Rather, its truth is *upheld* by the statements of obligation in 1 John. John says true believers cannot continually sin (3:9). John also says the one who claims to be a true believer ought to walk as Christ walked (2:6). What is the implication? The self-professed believer who is sinning continually, and not walking as he or she ought, may very well be a false professor who has not been born again. In other words John’s message is, “If you claim to be a Christian, but do not what you ought, perhaps you are not.”

The third Arminian response to 1 John 3:9 is Shank’s three-fold argument. First, he thinks that the perfect participle γεγεννημένος shows that “John’s emphasis is on the new birth as a present relationship, rather than as a past event.”<sup>80</sup> Second, Shank does not think that John’s statement that the one truly born of God cannot practice sinning indicates an *absolute* impossibility, because “there are many warnings directed to believers against so doing, and the New Testament records numerous instances of apostasy.” Thus, in Shank’s mind John speaks of a *relative* impossibility.<sup>81</sup> Third, Shank concludes, “It is evident therefore, that the circumstance ‘cannot practice sinning’ is not presented as an inevitable *consequence* of the new birth, but as an essential *condition* governing the continued realization of the new birth in the individual.”<sup>82</sup>

I will respond point-by-point. First, Shank is simply wrong to state that the perfect participle γεγεννημένος describes the new birth “as a present relationship, *rather than* as a past event.”<sup>83</sup> It is not either-or but both-and, for the Greek perfect tense “emphasizes

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<sup>80</sup>Shank, *Life in the Son*, 94.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 94–95.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 95, emphasis original.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 94, emphasis added.

the *continuing result* of the action which was *completed in past time*.”<sup>84</sup> This is John’s whole point in the letter: the one who has truly been born again in the *past* proves it by behaving properly in the *present*. Conversely, the one who is not behaving properly in the *present* has not truly been born again in the *past*. This truth rings most loudly in 2:19: “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us.”

Second, how can Shank speak of absolute *versus* relative impossibility in this verse? John’s statement is clearly absolute and is qualified by nothing within the verse or context. Shank’s qualifications are the two he imports: (1) warnings to believers against continually sinning; and (2) actual instances of apostasy. The latter remains to be seen; I am presently taking this issue up in my dissertation still in progress, “New Testament Warning Passages in the Light of the Doctrine of Eternal Security.” As for the former, the NT warnings against continually sinning are directed to *professing* believers. As such, they have a two-fold function. First, they work to promote the perseverance of true believers.<sup>85</sup> They cry out as Paul does in Romans six: “live in line with who you are!” Second, they work to warn mere professors: “You are giving evidence of never having been born again.” However, such warnings cannot be made to relativize the absolute statement of 1 John 3:9. In fact, they *support* it, as seen in the following argument:

1. Those who have been born again cannot continually sin.
2. One who claims to have been born again is continually sinning in spite of the clear warnings of Scripture.
3. This one has not truly been born again.

Shank’s concluding point also does not hold up; there is no condition to be found in 1 John 3:9. Shank tries to import the condition from v. 6, which states that no one who abides in Christ sins. The implication is that one’s ability to keep from sinning is conditioned upon one’s abiding in Christ.<sup>86</sup> According to Stott, while this

may be a legitimate exposition of verse 6; it is not of verse 9. There are two differences between the verses. In verse 6 it is stated that the Christian “sinneth not”; in verse 9 it is said that “he cannot sin”. Secondly, the Christian’s conquest of sin is attributed in verse 6 to his present abiding in Christ, but in verse 9 to his past birth of God, as a result of which, God’s seed “abides” in him. And the “abiding” of God’s seed in us is as constant and invariable as our abiding in Christ may be inconstant and variable. In a word, the statement he “does not” sin (verse 6) may be conditional, depending on “he who abides in Christ”; the statement he “cannot sin” (9) is absolute, since it depends on “because he is born of God”.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>Goetchius, *Language of the New Testament*, 293, emphasis original.

<sup>85</sup>Carson, “Reflections on Assurance,” 409.

<sup>86</sup>Shank, *Life in the Son*, 99.

<sup>87</sup>Stott, *Epistles of John*, 134; cf. Marshall’s agreement with Stott (*Epistles of John*, 181).

The last phrase of Stott's quote makes a fitting conclusion to the study of this passage. Because true believers have been born of God, and because God's seed continually abides in them, they *cannot* continually sin so as to apostatize or fall utterly and finally away from God.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I argued for eternal security on the basis of five key NT passages. I demonstrated how each affirms eternal security in an absolute way, despite Arminian arguments to the contrary. In John 10:27–30, Jesus declares unequivocally that His sheep shall never perish. According to Rom 8:28–30, those whom God has justified are as good as glorified. Furthermore, vv. 31–39 argue that there is absolutely nothing or no one capable of separating the justified believer from God's love. Eph 1:13–14 teaches that God has sealed each believer with the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption. Peter asserts in 1 Pet 1:5 that those who have been born again are kept by the power of God for salvation. Finally, 1 John 3:9 states that because they have been born of God, and because God's seed abides in them, believers cannot fall utterly and finally away from God. *Contra* Moody, I assert that eternal security is firmly rooted in Scripture.