

Peter's Epistles #21

Perseverance of Faith

(also available on-line at Ichthys.com)
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Translation of 1st Peter 1:3-5:

May the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be praised, who has in His great mercy caused us to be reborn to a hope which lives through Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, and to an inheritance which will never be destroyed, defiled, or dimmed, but which is being guarded in heaven for us, who are ourselves also being kept safe by God's power and our faith in Him to an ultimate deliverance ready to be unveiled at the end of time.

Introduction and Review: The central thesis of 1Pet.1:3-5 translated above is that, as Christians, we have been reborn, and that this dramatic rebirth has entered us into a series of new relationships which change forever the way we relate to this world. Peter enumerates three essential changes, introducing each (as we have seen) with the same Greek preposition *eis*, meaning "into" and representing our entrance into the three new blessings. These three new blessings are, in order of their occurrence in the verses above, the living hope, the imperishable inheritance, and the ultimate deliverance. All three speak of glorious realities which will obtain after the return of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The new life we possess as Christians, that is, the status of being "reborn" in God's eyes is like an anchor in our souls, linking us securely to the heavenly realities which shall one day be revealed. The *living hope*, the *imperishable inheritance* and the *ultimate deliverance*, three distinct blessings into which we have been born anew by God's grace through our faith in Jesus Christ, are all distinct features of this new life in Christ, and each corresponds to one of the cardinal virtues of the Christian life which we have been studying.

The Living Hope: First, we have been reborn "*to a hope which lives through Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead*". This "living hope" refers to the resurrection of our bodies, the transformation, as we have seen, of our flawed earthly shells into glorious, eternal residences for the eternal life we possess positionally now, and shall experience in all its wonder at the return of Christ. The virtue of hope focuses our complete confidence on the reality of this blessed final outcome, and gives us the strength to endure the decay of our mortal bodies and the disappointments of this life.

The Imperishable Inheritance: Second, we have been reborn "*to an inheritance which will never be destroyed, defiled, or dimmed, but which is being guarded in heaven for us*". This

"imperishable inheritance" refers to the reward each Christian will claim at the judgment seat of Christ, when all our earthly deeds will be evaluated by none other than our Lord and Master Himself (based on the New Covenant; cf. Heb.9:15-16). These rewards are eternal and utterly unlike any good thing we could even potentially enjoy here on earth under the devil's rulership. Just as the Israelites anticipated for several generations an end to their nomadic wanderings and a glorious entrance into the land promised to them by God, so we eagerly anticipate the day when we shall enter the kingdom of heaven in the train of Christ and reap the fruits of our labor accomplished in this present life. The virtue of love corresponds to this aspect of our rebirth, for as God's love for mankind exhibited in the person of Christ is reflected by us in our walk and in our service to Him, so we shall be rewarded. Unlike the benefits of this life, the rewards of eternity are imperishable. They cannot be "destroyed, defiled or dimmed", they cannot be harmed or diminished in any way, but remain ours to enjoy for all eternity where no thief can break in nor any moth destroy. These rewards (which reflect the love we have for our Lord and put in practice in this life) are not based on the hard peck and scabble of the world, but upon the generous bounty of a gracious God (see 1st Peter #18 "Crowns").

The Ultimate Deliverance: Third, we have an assurance of our salvation, we, who as believers in Christ *"are ourselves also being kept safe by God's power and our faith in Him to an ultimate deliverance ready to be unveiled at the end of time."* This "ultimate deliverance" refers to the historical fulfillment of all God's promises to us as individual believers, as we are literally "plucked from the fire of judgment" at the end of history. Peter assumes that his audience already understands the essential facts about the "end times" and will therefore appreciate this deliverance which depends upon continued faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The resurrection is the point at which this promise of scripture will be fulfilled, and so the actual moment and circumstances of deliverance will vary, with the Second Advent of Christ dividing the next two echelons of the resurrection as we have recently noted. But when we stand before the Lord in our new bodies, rendering an account for our lives, the purpose will be to evaluate our service, not our salvation (1Cor.3:15). As "the living hope" looks to the resurrection and "the imperishable inheritance" is intimately connected with the virtue of love, so our "ultimate deliverance" is indivisible from the cardinal virtue of faith. We are "kept safe by God's power and our faith" verse five states. The unwavering nature of God's power can be taken for granted, but given the weakness of the human being, some time must be invested at this point in the issue of the assurance of salvation, since the "ultimate deliverance" to which we aspire is faith dependent. As we saw in lesson #18, the crown of glory is the reward for Christians who back up their faith and hope with tangible and legitimate service, contributing to the salvation and growth of their fellow Christians. The crown of life is the reward for Christians who progress spiritually, backing up their faith with a life that reflects their beliefs in the face of opposition, testing, and suffering. The crown of righteousness is the reward for all who achieve spiritual maturity in this life. It is to the teachings which deal with the loss and retention of faith that we must now turn.

Keeping the Faith: Faith is an essential Christian virtue. It is through our faith in Jesus Christ that we become and remain Christians. Faith constitutes the "eyes" of our heart. When we became Christians, faith reached out and received the good news of Jesus Christ. Not by our

intellect, nor by scientific experimentation, but by belief, by faith, we accepted the gospel, we believed in Jesus Christ. We did not wait for God to "prove" the gospel to us personally, but without proof, without sight, we put our trust in God's Word, God's promise. We believed what God told us in His scriptures, that through faith in Jesus Christ we would not perish with the world, but have everlasting life. This God promised us and this we believed. We trusted Him, trusted His integrity, His character, trusted that what He had promised, He would also bring to pass, fairly and justly, for He is God. In the sacrifice of His only Son, Jesus Christ, in the voluminous testimony of the scriptures, and in our everyday experience, we see now with the eyes of faith what the Holy Spirit made clear to us then: that God is worthy of our trust, that he can be relied upon. God has never, will never let us down. All who believe in His Son are His children; they will not perish with this world. We are indeed safe and secure because of His powerful protection, no matter what our physical eyes may tell us. We are indeed being "kept safe by his power" – and "by our faith". For as Peter reminds us in verse five, the "ultimate deliverance" to which we aspire and on which we count is still dependent upon our faith. Make no mistake. Faith is at our command and is applied without merit, without physical or monetary investment, without intellectual development, but it is nonetheless absolutely essential. Without faith, we would not be Christians. The very definition of Christians in the Bible are "those who believe" (e.g. Rom.3:22).

Assurance of Salvation: When the Philippian jailer was brought by events to the realization of his need for personal salvation, he asked Paul and Silas very directly, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?". They gave him an answer which was equally direct: "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your whole house" (Acts 16:30-31). It is important at the outset of this discussion (which will detail various attacks on faith and the need to maintain faith) to remember that faith in Christ and the salvation which it brings are very simple – simple in the sense that salvation is relatively easy to attain (for us, since Christ paid the price), and that God's intent for all believers is that they maintain their faith throughout this life and attain the salvation which is theirs by their initial act of faith in Christ. So there is no need for us to become overly nervous about our salvation. We need only ask ourselves whether we believe in Jesus Christ, whether we are truly His followers. This is what Paul means when he instructs believers to "test yourselves, to see whether or not you are in the faith" (2Cor.13:5). Nor should anyone think that it is possible to live the Christian life without having our faith challenged, sometimes quite severely. It should be remembered that the author of the epistle we are presently studying once denied our Lord three times before recovering. Yet recover he did, and he went on to become one of the greatest believers who ever lived. Faith can only be strengthened if it is tested, and this Peter knew very well (1Pet.1:6-9).

Faith: Faith is trust. When we say that we "believe in Jesus Christ", we imply that we have put our trust in Him and in God the Father's witness to Him. We trust God and God's Word that Christ is the Messiah, the One who came into the world to save us from sin and condemnation, whose work was successfully completed to the Father's satisfaction, and that through His work of dying on the cross in our place, we, otherwise hopelessly lost, are saved through faith in Him. When we face the age old enemy death, and everything in our collective human experience,

everything our eyes tell us, says there is no hope, that death is the end, it is then that we believe God rather than our eyes, that we walk by the faith God gave us to exercise, and not by the sight which can only see the devil's world. Only by the vision of faith can we penetrate beyond the canopy of this life. But in faith, we believe that God has conquered death, that he actually did atone for our sin by sacrificing His only Son for us, and that He has in fact raised His Son Jesus Christ from the dead *and will do the same for us* – if only we believe Him, if only we trust Him.

Faith is not a "one-time" proposition. It is true that many believers fondly remember "the hour they first believed". But for many of us, faith was something which grew up gradually – like the sower's seed – until one day we were conscious of the fact that we did trust God, that where the world saw only hopelessness, we saw the reality of eternal life – with the eyes of faith. Whether we accepted God's promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ in a conscious moment of time which we can recall, or have no clear memory of when or how this miracle occurred, we all nonetheless who DO trust God's Word and HAVE put our faith in Jesus Christ for life beyond the grave are all likewise members of the family of God, enduring this life by faith, anticipating the next in faith.

Faith entails commitment. As any Christian should be able to testify, putting one's faith in Christ does not mark the beginning of an easy life on this earth. How could it? Christ left us in no doubt about the life of sacrifice ahead with His command to take up our cross and follow Him (Matt.16:24). Even as a builder must count the cost before he builds (Lk.14:28), so each of us had to realize from the outset that a life of following Christ would not be without its difficulties (1Pet.4:12). As Christians, we face not only the trials and temptations common to humankind, but also the active opposition of our collective adversary, the devil and his minions (1Pet.5:8). The parable of the sower makes clear that not everyone who hears the good news of Jesus Christ will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt.13:18-23). That parable (which we have studied in some detail previously in Pet.#12-13) delineates four categories of response to Christ's challenge to follow Him: 1) some never believe, though they hear the Word (the seed which falls on the hard-packed ground beside the road); 2) some joyfully accept the good news, but later fall away (the seed which falls on the rocky ground); 3) some are side-tracked by the worries and desires of this world (the seed which falls amongst the weeds); 4) only one category of individuals who hear the Word respond in a positive way, demonstrated in production for the Lord (sprouting up and producing 100, 60 or 30 fold). Category #3 is perhaps the most difficult to interpret vis-à-vis the present context. The seed which falls in among the weeds does sprout a "plant of faith", but the plant is choked and as a result does not "bring its fruit to maturity" as Matthew puts it. Category #4 individuals are definitely believers who make it safely into the Kingdom of Heaven, and we are told quite clearly that category #1 individuals are distracted by Satan before they can believe, while category #2 individuals "are tripped up" in their walk of faith, or, as Luke puts it (Lk.8:13), "turn away" from the Lord (with the verb *aphistemi* being of the same root from which the word "apostasy" is derived). Category #3 individuals, however, present a problem of interpretation. All we are told in the three accounts of this parable is that such believers are distracted by the worries and pleasures of life to the degree that they become unproductive. As we saw recently (see lesson #18), it is impossible for a true believer to live his entire life without any production

whatsoever (Jas.2:26). The description given in the parable of the sower is designed to give us pause, for it clearly depicts believers who fail to achieve maturity, and who produce little or nothing for the Lord. It is possible that such individuals may be believers who are merely ineffective for Christ in this life and whose worthless activities parallel those of the believers whose production is burned before the judgment seat of Christ (1Cor.3:12-15). However, it is also possible that the individuals here described are former believers who have become so distracted from God's plan by their own lust and concerns that the plant of faith which originally sprouted from the Word eventually shrivels. In either case, the individuals of category three whose faith is "choked" are a clear warning to all believers to preserve their faith. The most likely possibility is that both types – marginal believers and former believers – are included. One thing is sure no matter what interpretation we prefer to place upon this passage: it is not safe or spiritually healthy to be numbered with the "believers in the weeds." As we have seen before and shall doubtless see again, the only path to spiritual safety is spiritual growth. To grow in Christ we must be committed to following Christ.

Faith is believing *in* someone or something. Faith has an object, and any merit in the act of faith must necessarily lie in the object and not in the one who believes. We believe in God, for He is worthy of our trust. He has revealed Himself to us in His Son and in His Word and has therefore given us a tangible object upon which to focus our belief. He commands us to believe, provides the time, the support, the opportunity and the motivation for belief, then brings to our attention the most sublime object in which to believe, His Son, Jesus Christ who died in our place, died for our sins, died so that we might live forever with Him. Faith does not truly exist apart from the object of faith. Without God, without the Word, without Jesus Christ, the exact image of God and embodiment of His Word (Heb.1:1-4), there would be no possibility of belief. If faith is not centered on this object, then it is no faith at all.

Faith is therefore our only option. As long as we continue in the faith and continue to place our trust in God and in His Son Jesus Christ, then shall we be *kept safe by God's power and our faith in Him to an ultimate deliverance ready to be unveiled at the end of time* as verse five states. At all costs, therefore, we must "keep believing", because the implications of unbelief are too terrifying to contemplate.

Eternal Security: The scriptural truth that we as believers are being "kept safe" by God through our faith so as to be "delivered" from the judgment and destruction which is destined to befall this present unbelieving world is often referred to in evangelical circles as the doctrine of "eternal security". While there is nothing inherently wrong with this terminology, the words imply, and have often been taken to mean, that after an individual professes faith in Jesus Christ, that person's place in heaven is secure thereafter, no matter what may transpire. According to this view, gross sin, hostility to other believers and to the faith, even outright, overt denial of Christ, nothing, in short, can separate such a person from the love of God (Rom.8:39). In other words, "once saved, always saved".

The problem with this extreme view (in addition to the fact that it ignores dozens of very clear scriptures as we shall soon see) is that it fails to take into account God's character and God's justice. God is love (1Jn.4:8), and it was because He loved the entire world that He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to die for everyone (Jn.3:16). Not everyone, however, is going to be saved, as even proponents of eternal security are very well aware. Just as God has done everything necessary for every human being to be saved, except to violate their free will, such it is with believers after salvation. God gives us everything we need to maintain our faith, up to and including the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit, but continuing in the faith takes persistence, perseverance and daily decisions for God and against the devil's world. The parable of the sower makes all this clear. Many hear the Word; some never take it in; some fall away quickly at the first sign of pressure; some are gradually neutralized by the cares and concerns of this world; only believers whose faith rises above the weeds and thorns of our daily existence ultimately become productive for God and, in Peter's words, "make [their] calling more secure" (2Pet.1:10). Therefore we do indeed have a secure hold upon our eternal status as believers in Christ, but only as long as we continue to persevere as genuine believers in Jesus Christ.

Perseverance: Perseverance means sticking it out until the end; in the Christian context, it means to hold onto your faith through thick and thin, in every trial, to the end of this earthly life. It is true that perseverance is not an easy assignment. In fact, throughout the Bible we see believers subjected to tests of their faith, some of which seem extraordinarily difficult. Abraham told to sacrifice his son, Daniel in the lions' den, Joseph in prison and Jeremiah in the miry pit are all examples of extreme situations that called for no little faith in God on the part of these believers. In such dire straits, the Christian must rely completely upon God's justice and His fairness for the strength necessary to endure, just as these great believers of the past did. But whether we are called upon to suffer through an exceptionally long or miraculous process of deliverance (like the children of Israel were when God led them out of Egypt), or whether the testings of our faith are destined to be less obvious to the human eye, we can rest assured of two things: 1) as long as we are on this earth and in this life, our faith will be tested; 2) God has provided for us the means of coping with whatever we shall face (1Cor.10:13).

The generation of Israelites who went out with Moses at the time of the Exodus provides us with an important lesson in the need for perseverance. As Paul observes, "they all were identified with Moses, ate the same spiritual food and drank from a spiritual rock ... nevertheless God was not pleased with most of them and they were laid low in the desert" (1Cor.10:2-5). This generation did believe God at first. They put the sign of the cross in blood on their doors and so avoided the angel of death (Ex.12:13), and they crossed the parted Red Sea "by faith" (Heb.11:29). But despite their initial belief, and despite the miracles they witnessed and participated in, this faith of theirs did not last. They put God (and Moses) to the test continually in their wanderings through the wilderness with the result that God ultimately destroyed the majority of them (Jude 5).

The experience of the Exodus generation is also important from another point of view. The generation of believers who will have to pass through the Great Tribulation of the end times will

have many similar experiences and will need to be on guard not to "faint in faith" as their predecessors did. Christ's words at Matthew 24:13 refer to that future time, but are also applicable to the "here and now" tribulation that each of us as believers are experiencing to a lesser or greater degree. In that passage, Jesus tells us that it is "the one who perseveres to the end" who will be saved. The basic meaning here is as we have discussed it above. The one who maintains faith until the end of life is the one who exits life as a believer, the plant that grows in the good soil and continues to bear fruit to the end.

Faith is hard work. In 1st Thessalonians 1:3, Paul speaks of the Thessalonian believers' "work of faith", referring to the effort involved in maintaining their belief in the face of the testing and apparent unfairness of life they were experiencing. Like these Thessalonian believers who "suffered at the hands of their kinsman" for their faith (1Thes.2:14), perseverance is often not without its costs. Nevertheless, it is by such perseverance, that is, the patience and endurance of faith, that believers in the future tribulational period will be saved from that most difficult time of testing (Matt.24:13; Lk.21:19). Perseverance comes in many forms, but as the writer of Hebrews makes clear, we all have the opportunity "to return" to the country of "unbelief" from which we set out when we placed our faith in Christ (Heb.11:15). By maintaining our faith, by "persevering", we stay true to the commitment we made when we first took Christ as our Savior – we stay true to Him.

On the other hand, "returning" to the "land of unbelief" is often a deceptive process. Only infrequently are believers presented with clear cut roads which lead back in the wrong direction. Our adversary the devil is much more clever than that. More often than not, the slippery slope of unbelief is a subtle one. Very often, that slope is "greased" with personal sin. As it will be remembered from our earlier studies, personal sin is something from which, unfortunately, no believer will ever be completely free as long as we inhabit this body with its inherently sinful nature. Nevertheless, occasional lapses (and even these are not without God's discipline) followed by repentance and confession are a far cry from gross sin, repetitive, unrepentant, unconfessed and even self-justified sin. Such behavior inevitably alienates the believer from God – it not only brings about God's displeasure and discipline, but also sours the believer on his or her relationship with God, thus accelerating the decline of faith. This is exactly the scenario we see in the case of the Exodus generation, who believed in the first instance, but later made a practice of doubting God, blaming God and betraying God (cf. Psalm 78). Their behavior destroyed their relationship with God by first eliminating their faith in God. That is what apostasy is.

Sin and faith are mutually exclusive. When we sin, we are saying, in effect, that we do not trust God to handle whatever problem or fulfill whatever need our sin is aiming to satisfy. For a believer who is on the right track of spiritual growth, such lapses should be immediately dealt with by a process of repentance (recognizing and rejecting our mistake) and confession (admitting our mistake to God in prayer). Behavior which consists of willful sinning without remorse in defiance of God will eat faith away like acid. This is essentially what Paul means when he tells us that "the wages of sin are death" (Rom.6:23): not that one personal sin will

condemn us, but rather that the death of our faith is a sure result of giving ourselves over entirely to a life of sin, and that without faith in Christ, we no longer have a substitute to stand in for us on judgment day. If we "fall away" from our faith, therefore, we cannot expect God to "have pleasure" in us any longer (Heb.10:37-39). As James puts it, sin, once brought to completion (i.e., having become a patterned way of life), produces death – a spiritual type of death, that is, the death of our faith. For this same reason Paul warns us not to be arrogant about our faith vis-à-vis unbelievers, noting that just as unbelieving Israel was "cut off" because of their lack of faith, similar disbelief will produce the same result for us (Rom.11:20-26). The ultimate question is whether we are going to stick with the truth we know to be true. Only as long as we do stay faithful to the truth of the gospel, as "long as the truth we have heard remains in us" as the apostle John says, are we assured of our salvation (1Jn.2:24).

Hardening: God has constructed the human mind, or heart, to be receptive to truth. It is our birth-right as human beings to be able to recognize God's Word when first we hear it. Whether we accept it as true, however, may be a different matter. In fact, rejecting the reality and truthfulness of God's communications is a long-standing tradition for the majority of the human race. Even though God has made the truth about Himself, about His divinity and character, patently obvious to all mankind, most nevertheless choose to disregard and disbelieve this truth (Rom.1:19-20). Rejection of what we know to be true is, from the biblical standpoint, a devastating mistake. The reason for this is that it is impossible to divorce rejection of truth and acceptance of what is false (or, conversely, acceptance of the truth and rejection of what is false) – the two propositions are mutually exclusive for human beings in the midst of the cosmic struggle in which we find ourselves between God and the forces of evil. None of us is a free agent to the degree of being immune from the pressures or the choice of true versus false. That is why Paul can say of unbelievers that when they fail to glorify God as God (though they understand very well His divinity) their thinking is immediately rendered "foolish" and their hearts, the biblical organ of the inner life, are "darkened" (Rom.1:21). In Ephesians 4:18, Paul provides more details of this process of the clouding of mind occasioned by rejecting truth. In that context, he entreats the Ephesians not to walk as unbelievers walk "in the vain foolishness of their minds, darkened in their understanding and alienated from the life of God". The origin of this sad state is then explained to be "the hardening of their hearts", for, once "desensitized", they then "gave themselves over to lasciviousness to do all manner of impure things in a greedy way".

The Pharaoh of the Exodus is a perfect case in point for the process of hardening, the mental insensitivity to God that results from rejecting His truth and accepting in its place the devil's lies. As God had predicted to Moses, in response to miracles performed by God through Moses and Aaron, and to the many plagues rained down upon Egypt as a result of his stubbornness, Pharaoh continued to "harden his heart" and reject the obvious, namely that he was going to be compelled to release the Israelites (Ex.4:21; 7:13; 8:15). Doing so was equivalent to rejecting the power of God, even though confronted by awesome and undeniable manifestations of that power. In effect, God allowed Pharaoh to harden his heart to an unprecedented degree. Pharaoh was allowed by God to continue to exercise his negativity past the point of all rationality. As horrifying as it is to contemplate Pharaoh's temerity, should we not be even more horrified at the

soul who takes it upon itself to reject God's power and plan for salvation in this life through Jesus Christ? It is no wonder that the opportunity for salvation exists in this life alone. Should the unsaved see God in His glory face to face and still be allowed to repent, it would be no fair test of free will. Only in this life can the heart be hardened to the point of rejecting God.

Apostasy: Rather than the reasons for and consequences of the unbeliever's rejection of God, however, our lesson concerns instead the preservation (and potential loss) of the salvation acquired by believers through faith in Jesus Christ. As we have described it above, the last phrase of the previous sentence is really the critical one: as long as a person *is in fact a believer* in Christ, that person is saved, and may look forward with assurance to the "ultimate deliverance" vouchsafed by God's power and *our faith*. The mechanism for undermining, eroding and eventually killing off faith is uncontrolled, unacknowledged and unrepented sin. Un-Christian behavior carried on without qualms or remorse eventually takes its toll on the life of faith. But it is *faith* that is the real issue, more so than sin. The more we, by our own efforts, estrange ourselves from God, the more difficult it becomes for us to come to Him. Eventually we stop coming to Him altogether. Eventually we reject, disavow and disown Him. No matter that we tell ourselves before the fact that such a thing could never happen – it is biblically documented and predicted. And have we not all known people who once professed Christ, but who for one reason or another (perhaps an unexpected tragedy in the life for which God was blamed) turned completely away from Him, as far as could be ascertained? It is as if the backsliding believer becomes so alienated from God in his thinking that he reaches a point where he just cannot stand to "look God in the face" anymore (Jn.3:19-20). Eventually, the conscience is destroyed and the apostasy complete.

"Apostasy" is the word commonly used for the phenomenon of falling away from God. It is a Greek word, transliterated into English. Literally, it means "a standing away" and had been used throughout Greek literature to signify rebellion and treason. The choice of the word by biblical writers is thus quite apropos. For just as one must first abandon and reject one's loyalty to the ruling power in the secular realm to qualify as a rebel or a traitor, so in the spiritual realm apostasy signifies a complete rejection of God and His authority. It does not mean that the person in question no longer believes in the existence of God (remember, the fallen angels "believe" this – and shudder; James 2:19), but such a person has abandoned his faith in God, his allegiance to God.

These two ideas – loss of faith and apostasy – are also combined by the writer of Hebrews, who warns his listeners "lest there should be anyone among you whose heart is evil with unbelief in his rebellion from the living God". Paul describes some former Christians in most unflattering terms vis-à-vis his own, correct manner of life; while he and some others like him are indeed "models" for the Philippians to emulate, there are some who have gone astray, even to the point of "making themselves enemies of the cross of Christ: their end is destruction" (Phil.3:18-19). This is not surprising, for, as has often been the case in the history of the Church, the trend toward apostasy often comes from above from those in positions of authority (i.e., "false teachers"). In "the last days" many believers will be drawn to such false teaching, and the result

of this will be that those falling under its influence will become like their teachers, "seared in conscience" (1Tim.4:1-5; see also 2Pet.2:1-3). The connection of damage to the conscience and apostasy should also not be overlooked; for as Paul says, "for the foul and faithless, nothing is clean, but their very minds and consciences are befouled" (Titus 1:15). As long as we are pressing toward what we know is right and attempting to implement it in our lives, we are spiritually safe, but we cannot actively embrace the ways of evil without damaging that watch-dog of our hearts, the conscience. For that is a road by which we eventually will arrive at a point where a faithless life and faithless acts no longer concern us (cf. Eph.4:17-19).

Loss of Salvation: Not all who initially embrace our Lord are destined to stay true to Him. Especially at the end of the age, many who initially claimed belief will, like the seed which falls in the rocky soil, abandon the faith they once accepted with joy (Lk.8:13). Considering the magnitude of the disaster that a complete falling away from the Lord entails, we are compelled to say with the writer of Hebrews that "for this reason, we ought to pay considerably close attention to the words we have heard, lest we drift away from God" (Heb.2:1). The materialistic world in which we live offers ample opportunity for the covetousness which produces "temptation, snare, and many senseless and harmful lusts which swamp men's souls unto destruction and damnation" (1Tim.6:9). But as we have seen, such repeated patterns of sinful behavior desensitize the conscience and alienate the believer from God. Recognition and acknowledgment of sin bring cleansing and renewal, but the arrogant refusal to leave off wrong-doing makes restoration impossible. As the writer of Hebrews points out, "it is impossible ... to restore again to repentance those who have fallen away *as long as they continue to crucify the Son of God and make a public display of Him* (i.e. continue in arrogant rebellion toward God: Heb.6:4-6). It is not merely sin, therefore, but repeated, persistent disobedience to God to the point that the person in question freely and willfully abandons his faith that produces apostasy, and the judgment reserved for such apostates is clear (1Cor.6:9-10; Gal.5:19-21; Eph.5:3-7): it would be better for them if they had never embraced God in the first place (2Pet.2:21).

The crucial dividing line between heaven and hell, between salvation and damnation, then is the attitude of belief (or unbelief) in the heart of the individual. Unbelieving Jews of Paul's day were, as he tells us, separated from Him by their unbelief; they were in fact broken off of the tree of life because of their lack of faith; but Paul counsels the gentiles in his audience to beware, for it is by their faith that they stand and they will continue to stand only as long as their faith stands firm (Rom.11:20-21). For this reason, we who believe need to exercise appropriate caution; we must be wary about being too sure of our status – not because we may have already lost our salvation (if we believe, then we are saved), but because a lackadaisical attitude may lead us into danger just as it did the children of the Exodus (1Cor.10:1-12). In the end, they did not enter the land of promise precisely because unbelief had replaced belief in their hearts in spite of the many wonders and miracles they had witnessed (Heb.3:18-19). Therefore we cannot rely on past positive experiences; we must continue to pursue righteousness and sanctification "without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb.12:14). For as long as we continue to believe, as long as God's Word remains in our heart, then we shall remain in Him (1Jn.2:24).

God's Conditions: It is important to remember that salvation is not conditional upon God. God, who so loved the world that He sent His only Son to die for it (Jn.3:16) and who wishes all mankind to be saved (1Tim.2:4), is not the problem: in sacrificing His Son and in designing a plan of universal applicability, He has already done everything necessary for all to be saved. Nevertheless, some conditions do apply to our eternal state, conditions that govern our behavior here on earth, that period of time before we are securely "locked in" to our status in eternity. The apostle Paul tells us that we are destined to be presented blameless before Him "if, that is, you stay founded and grounded in your faith, unmoved from your hope in the gospel" (Col.1:23); and that it is through faith in this good news that we are saved "if you hold fast to it, unless you believed to no purpose" (1Cor.15:2). To remain Christ's we must continue to "hold fast" to our original convictions firmly to the end (Heb.3:6, 14). But "if we deny Him, He will also deny us" (2Tim.2:11-13; cf. Matt.10:33; Lk.12:9).

Corrective Discipline: It is precisely to avoid the loss of our salvation that the Lord afflicts with corrective discipline those who begin to fall away. The writer of Hebrews states the principle behind this type of this discipline (Heb.12:9). In connection with our response to God's corrective discipline, he points out that we had no trouble accommodating ourselves to the discipline of our earthly fathers, then asks "should we not subordinate ourselves to the Father of our spirits *and live?*" Eternal life is thus the end of adjusting to God's just reproof of our actions. But the end of stiff-necked refusal is death.

This is the reason, for example, for the apostle Paul's seemingly harsh pronouncement upon the member of the Corinthian church who had involved himself in gross sin. Paul states that, using his special apostolic powers, he had decided to "turn over such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh *so that his spirit might be saved on the day of the Lord*" (1Cor.5:5). In other words, Paul removed this person from divine protection, so that the ensuing punishment might bring about a change of heart that would ultimately preserve his faith. In a similar vein, Paul says in the same epistle in connection with communion abuses that we believers are "being judged [*krino*-ed] and disciplined by the Lord, so that we might not be condemned [*kata-krino*-ed] along with the world" (1Cor.11:32). For there is a "sin unto death" (1Jn.5:16-17).

The Call to the Wise: Our study has confirmed Paul's words that "the wages of sin are death" (Rom.6:23; cf. 6:16; 6:21), but along with the writer of Hebrews we may say "actually, I am convinced that better things, things leading to salvation, will prove true in your case, brothers, though I have had to speak to you in this way" (Heb.6:9). As long as we continue to build our faith, our hope, our love for God, we will, as Peter instructs us to do, "be zealous to make your calling and selection secure, for, if we do so, we will not stumble" (2Pet.1:10). In this way, the "ultimate deliverance" will certainly be ours, and the crown of righteousness on the day of the Lord in company with all those who grow up in Jesus Christ.