

SOTERIOLOGY (157)

There were many who had not truly responded to the Spirit of God and their hearts were hard, in total unbelief (3:7, 8, 12, 15, 18, 19). If a person continually hardens his heart to Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God, he will never enter into God's rest and may reach a point where he is not able to respond to the Gospel (4:1-3).

The context is very clear that those who have believed on Christ have entered into the rest of God (4:3). The specific point in this context is to cease from relying upon one's own works and start trusting in the finished work of Jesus Christ (4:9-11).

This passage is a serious warning to those who profess to be right with God, but have never truly responded to the saving grace of God, which is found in Jesus Christ. A critical key to this is the fact that such a person relies upon his own works to make him and keep him right with God. Such a person fails to totally rely upon the finished work of Jesus Christ, even though the Holy Spirit is prompting him to do so and, as a result, this person fails to enter into the rest (rest from works) which God has provided.

This text warns that it is possible to reach a point in which it is no longer possible to come to faith in Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews is warning people not to harden their hearts to the Spirit of God, for one never knows when God has spoken for the last time (3:7-8). The truth of the Bible is this—a "come to Christ at any time gospel," is not a biblical Gospel. One may harden one's heart one time too many and it can be too late.

As we have observed, from a contextual analysis of each of these passages, the subject is not one of a person losing his salvation. The subject matter is one of a person professing to be saved and not truly being saved. Profession of salvation and possession of salvation are two very different and distinct issues.

(Sub-heading #3) - Passages that contextually refer to true salvation being proved by fruit.

There are two lines of truth that threat N.T. teaching regarding the fruit of one who is truly saved:

- 1) There may be times when a truly saved person bears no fruit.
- 2) There cannot be a total time when a truly saved person bears no fruit.

Bearing fruit is a valid test for humanly establishing true salvation. We are to look for fruit-bearers because fruit-bearers are, in fact, truly right with God.

When one is being used by God to influence people into being saved or to develop and mature in their lives and in their understanding of the Word of God, that one truly demonstrates he is right with God.

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When fruit inspections are being made, it needs to be remembered that it is impossible for a true believer to be out of fellowship with God to the extent that he or she is not bearing any fruit. It must also be remembered that it is not possible for a believer to forever bear no fruit. Both theological realities are clearly established in the New Testament.

1) John 8:31 - Here is a text that is often appealed to as a proof that one may lose his salvation. It will be observed that those who appeal to this verse neglect true doctrine and the true context.

The context helps us unlock the true interpretation. Jesus Christ was in the temple of Jerusalem, teaching the Jewish people. At this meeting the Scribes and Pharisees came (8:2-3). They were trying to discredit Christ and they neither believed Him nor did they want others to believe Him or His teachings (8:13). Christ specifically said to “them” (Pharisees) (8:13-14, 21) that they would die in their sins and never have a proper relationship with God (8:21). Christ knew many Jewish people were listening to Him so He warned every one of them that if they refused to believe on Him, they, too, would die in their sins (8:24). The Jews put great stock in the fact that they were Jewish (8:33). They assumed that this automatically meant they were right with God. Christ informs them that the issue of not dying in sins is the issue of believing on Him and the issue of discipleship for those who have believed on Him (8:31) is the issue of abiding in the Word of God. The thing that makes a believing Jew a disciple is a commitment to the Word of God and the more one is given over to learning and applying the Scriptures, the more truth will be known (8:31-32).

One who is a true disciple will have a high level of commitment to God’s Word. It is one’s relationship to the Word of God that establishes whether or not there has been a real Jewish conversion (8:37). When a person believes on Christ and obeys Christ, it is proof one is a true disciple.

This text is not about being saved and losing it. It is about establishing that there has been a true relationship with Jesus Christ by a commitment to the Word of God.

The specific issue Christ is concerned about here is the issue of truly believing on Him, not losing one’s salvation. The context makes that point very, very clear (8:24). Christ points out that once He delivers a person from sin, that person is freed forever (8:34-36).

2) John 15:6 - Dr. Chafer said of this verse: “Arminian writers generally look upon John 15:6 as the most formidable biblical testimony in behalf of their claims in the field of insecurity” (Vol. 3, p. 298).

The problem for those who appeal to this verse in support of their position is the problem of context. The real question of verse 6 is whether or not Christ’s illustration of the vine and the branches refers to a union with Christ, which is salvation, or a communion with Christ, which produces fruit. In other words, does the “abiding” or “not abiding” refer to eternal salvation or to practical sanctification? As Dr. Chafer says, “Unless this doctrinal distinction is apprehended, there can be no basis for a right understanding of the text in question” (*Ibid.*, p. 298).

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As we look closely at the context, it will be observed that the issue at stake is not a union with Christ that produces salvation, but a communion with Christ that produces fruit.

It is quite evident that the main point Christ is trying to make to His disciples is that He wanted them to be fruit-bearing individuals (15:2, 4, 5, 8). The context makes it very clear that the determining factor as to whether one will be a fruit-bearing believer or not is obedience to God's Word (15:10). This will prompt God to work through the individual to bear fruit.

Not only is the issue of "bearing fruit" proof that this context is not talking about losing salvation (an unsaved person cannot bear fruit), but the person who does not bear fruit (metaphorically termed "branch") is still said to be "in" Christ (15:2). If a non fruit-bearing person is still "in Christ," he is not lost! This context, then, is not discussing the matter of union with Christ, but of communion with Him which bears fruit.

The word "take away" (15:2) is one that means to take or raise-up or to remove (Smith, pg. 13). The opening promise to the disciple is that one who is "in Christ," who does not bear fruit will be one who will be taken or raised up or removed. The issue of removal is not one of removal from salvation; it is a removal from service. Furthermore, the participle "bear" is present tense, indicating a continual, habitual, persistent lifestyle that does not produce fruit. What Christ is telling His disciples is that if a believer continually lives life in a way that does not produce fruit he will be removed by God. God will take the believer home to be with Him. He will remove and take up to heaven the disciple who does not bear fruit (I Cor. 11:30; I John 5:16).

Discipleship was a very serious proposition, especially for those alive at the time of Jesus Christ. These disciples had the responsibility of communicating and writing the Word of God. To not bear any fruit was a very serious matter for them. The issue of everlasting life is NEVER an issue of bearing fruit; it is ALWAYS an issue of believing on Christ (John 1:12; 3:15-16; 6:35, 47).

These disciples were already clean from their sin; they were already saved (15:3). Never is a challenge given to an unsaved person to bear fruit or abide in Christ. The challenge to the unbeliever is to believe on Christ. Christ challenges these disciples to "abide" in Him (15:4). The idea of abiding in Christ is the idea of allowing Him to work through us by obeying the Word of God. This becomes the key to bearing fruit. The one who continually lives life in conformity to the Word of God and the will of God will bear much fruit, for Christ will powerfully work (15:5). Without a close communion with Jesus Christ, fruit-bearing is an impossibility. In other words, the child of God will never bear much fruit for the glory of God until he is truly cultivating a close relationship with Jesus Christ by obeying the Word of God. This is THE key to fruit-bearing.

The general assumption of the context is that disciples have been saved to bear much fruit for the glory of God (15:8). This bearing of fruit, which glorifies God, will be determined by a disciple's relationship with Jesus Christ. If the relationship to Christ is close and one is obeying the Word of God, much fruit will be produced through the disciple.