

Satan Can't Touch You, but Watch Out!

Victory by Faith: Part 6
1 John 5:18-19 2-8-2009

Why does the Bible promise protection for us and also warn us of danger? This message will help you understand how to take delight in God's promises, even when they are conditional or only partially fulfilled in this life.

Excerpt 1:

1 John 5:18 We know that anyone born of God does not sin

John made it clear in chapter 1 that when he makes those kinds of blanket statements he was not talking about sinless perfection. Anyone who claims to be without sin is a liar. When John says that true Christians do not sin, he is talking about unrepentant sin.

Imagine that the ground represents sin and the sky is righteousness. A Christian is like a bird and an unbeliever is like a frog. Birds are in the sky and frogs are on the ground. Are there exceptions? Of course. Sometimes birds land on the ground, and sometimes frogs jump up into the air. But when a bird comes down to the ground he stays there a short time and then soon "repents" and returns to the sky – either flying, or in his nest in a tree. When a Christian drops down into sin, he does not stay down there. He soon repents and returns to righteousness. He does not stay on the ground indefinitely.

On the other hand, the unbeliever might make some attempts at righteous behavior, like a frog jumping into the air. But no matter how high he jumps, he always comes right back down to the ground. He is never truly in the sky. So even though there might be some moments when a bird is on the ground and a frog is jumping, so that at that moment the frog is actually up higher than the bird, still it is correct to say that generally speaking birds live up there and frogs live down here and the exceptions are just that – exceptions to the rule. Christians are righteous and unbelievers are unrighteous and exceptions are temporary and are soon reversed.

Excerpt 2:

When you find out God's promises are conditional, does that ruin the promise? No, because the conditions are always good. Most, if not all, of the conditions God places on His promises boil down to this one condition: Give up what is worthless in order to receive what is priceless. The conditions are just as much a gift of grace as the promises.

Excerpt 3:

Knowing that you always have the ability to receive God's promises is vital in this war. There are so many times people give up because they think they cannot win. Just think of how hard Satan works in your life trying to convince you that some particular battle is hopeless.

Last summer I had my Jeep up in Lefthand Canyon, and I came to a spot that was especially difficult. I tried two or three times to get past it, and couldn't, so I decided my Jeep just couldn't make that move and I gave up and just turned around. A week later I tried it again and finally got past that spot. Once I did that I knew it was possible. And from then on I never had any trouble getting past that spot. You see, when you think something might be impossible, then as soon as it gets really hard, you are prone to quit because for all you know it is impossible. But when you know for sure that it is possible, then you are much less prone to give up. That means as long as you are willing, you can have anything God has promised!

When you have these thoughts, "It's just too hard to do the right thing here. I can't do it. I just don't have the strength to do what the Bible says in this situation," if it is possible that those words are true, then Satan will defeat you every time just by making it hard. But when you believe God's great and precious promises, and you know for an absolute fact that it is possible for you to do what is right, and you are motivated on the other hand by God's terrifying warnings about the danger of not obeying, you will have victory over the evil one.

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1 John 5:14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked from him. 16 If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not end in death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not end in death. There is a sin that ends in death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not end in death.

18 We know that anyone born of God does not sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot touch him.

19 We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world lies in the evil one.

20 But we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true--even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

21 Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

Introduction

Last Sunday afternoon I was talking to Andrew & Danelle about the sermon and Danelle said, “You have a lot of explaining to do next Sunday.” And she is right – we left off last time with a lot of questions still unanswered. The flow of thought through chapter 5 has gone this way: Victory over the world comes by faith and to strengthen our faith so that we can have that victory, God has given us bombproof testimony about His Son. Your response to that testimony shows whether you are a child of God or not. If the testimony convinces you, put that confidence to work by praying for your brother when he sins. (If you do, then God will grant him life.) But that only applies to sins that do not end in death. And that is where we left off. The question we are faced with now is, “What is the sin ending in death?”, and how do you know for sure whether someone has committed it?

We also left ourselves with some other questions. I pointed out last time that if we are to pray for God to grant life to our brother who commits a regular sin, that implies that sinning any sin puts a person on a track that requires deliverance from death. And the reason we need to pray is because the danger is real.

But as soon as I preached about the danger being a real danger that brought up questions in the Q&A time about eternal security. When Danelle said I have a lot of explaining to do she was talking about verse 18. If the danger is as real as I made it out to be last week – if there really is a genuine need to pray for a sinning brother to be granted life, how do we explain verse 18?

18 We know that anyone born of God does not sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot touch him.

How can we take John seriously when he says we need to pray for God to grant life to a brother if that brother is guaranteed to be safe? If Satan cannot touch him and the Son of God is protecting him, why is it so urgent for me to pray for him when he commits a sin? And for that matter, if Satan cannot touch him and the Son of God is protecting him, and it is really true that anyone born of God does not sin, why is John instructing us at all on what to do when we see him sin? What kind of protection would leave us in real danger?

Don't Pray for the Dead

What is the sin ending in death?

We will start with the first question - "What is the sin the ends in death?" That phrase is *pros thanaton*.¹ *Thanaton* means death; *pros* can mean "leading to" or it can mean "resulting in."² I think "resulting in" is the way John is using it here because this very passage makes it clear that *every* sin leads toward death. That is why verse 16 tells us to pray that God will grant the person life even when that person has not committed the sin that is *pros* death. Every sin leads toward death, but not every sin ultimately results in death.

John uses that exact same phrase in his Gospel.

John 11:4 When Jesus heard [that Lazarus was sick], he said, "This sickness is not *pros thanaton*."

It is not going to result in death. Lazarus did die from the sickness, but that was only temporary. Jesus raised him from the dead so that death was not the final outcome of the illness. So the meaning of *pros thanaton* there seems to be that the sickness will not *ultimately, finally, permanently* end in death.

In John 11 the context was physical death and here the context is spiritual death. So what John is saying is, if you see a brother commit a sin, pray that God would grant that brother life, *unless* it is a sin that ends finally, ultimately, and permanently in spiritual death.

So what kind of sin does that? Some people have said, "The sin ending in death must be unbelief." So then John would be telling us we do not need to pray for unbelievers. But we know from 1 Timothy 2 that that is not right.

1 Timothy 2:1 I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession ... be made for everyone--
...

3 This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

So we are to pray for the lost to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

Others might say, "Well maybe it is talking about the Jews who rejected Jesus." But that would not fit with Romans 10:1.

Romans 10:1 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.

So we are to pray for the lost – both Jew and Gentile. So who is it that we are not supposed to pray for? Someone else might say, "Well, maybe it means not to pray for those who are especially hostile toward Christianity." But Jesus said...

Matthew 5:44 pray for those who persecute you

¹ πρὸς θάνατον

² Other uses of *pros* include *toward, against, among, until, for the purpose of, and with reference to*.

Luke 6:28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

The people crucifying Jesus were pretty hostile, but Jesus prayed...

Luke 23:34 "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

The people stoning Steven were hostile but Steven...

Acts 7:60 fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Could it refer to those who abandon the faith?

2 Timothy 4:16 At my first defense ... everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.

Paul's prayer was that their desertion of him, which was tantamount to deserting the gospel, not be held against them. So Paul interceded even for deserters.

Maybe the sin ending in death refers to the sin of publicly denying Christ. No – Peter did that, and Jesus prayed for him.

Luke 22:32 But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

We are starting to run out of options. What's left? Is there any other place in the Bible where God instructs someone not to intercede for someone? Yes. God said that to Jeremiah three times. In chapters 7, 11, and 14 God told Jeremiah, "Don't pray for this people – I won't listen to you."³

Jeremiah 15:1 Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go!

For centuries God had been patient. He kept giving them more and more time to repent, and kept calling them back, and rescuing them out of trouble, and sending them prophets. But they rejected the prophets, rejected God's Word, and rejected God. And finally the time came when their fate was sealed. Finally God made up His mind and revealed to Jeremiah that they were not going to repent, so intercession would be a waste of breath. They had sinned a sin that was going to end finally, ultimately, and irrevocably in their destruction.

Once God makes His final determination, there is no place for intercession. Remember verse 14?

14 if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

For God to hear our prayer it must be according to His plan. If He has already revealed that a person's fate is sealed, then praying for a different outcome is not according to His will. So then how do you know if a person has come to that point? How do you know if a person's final, ultimate fate is sealed for good? The only way I know of is if the person dies in unbelief. I do not know of any other way you could know for sure that someone's sin has resulted in ultimate, final, irrevocable spiritual death except if they die in unbelief (unless you were a prophet). There is one other place where Jesus spoke of a sin resulting in spiritual death.

³ Jeremiah 7:16 Do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you.

Jeremiah 11:14 Do not pray for this people nor offer any plea or petition for them, because I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their distress.

Jeremiah 14:11 Then the LORD said to me, "Do not pray for the well-being of this people. 12 Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; though they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague."

John 8:24 if you do not believe that I AM, you will indeed die in your sins.

That is the sin ending in death.

When a person dies in unbelief there is no use in praying for that person anymore. Our Roman Catholic friends teach that when a person dies he goes to Purgatory, and while he is there he can benefit from your prayers on his behalf. That is a false doctrine. There is no Purgatory, and once a person dies his ultimate, eternal fate is sealed forever and absolutely nothing can be done to change it.

What if the person is still alive?

But what if the person is still alive, and you do not know for sure whether their final fate is sealed or not? What if you accidentally pray for someone whose fate is sealed? Is that a sin? Notice that John does not actually explicitly prohibit praying for the person who has sinned a sin resulting in death. He just says, “When I tell you to pray and God will answer I am not talking about cases like that.” If someone has sinned a sin ending in death and that person’s fate is sealed, but you are not aware of that so you go ahead and pray for the person, you are not sinning by doing that, but God will still not answer that prayer.

Use Wisdom in Prayer

So how do you know who to pray for? Just use wisdom. You do not have time to pray for everyone, so you have to pick and chose, right? You only have a certain amount of time you can spend in prayer, which means every moment you spend praying for one person is a decision not to pray for anyone else during that moment.

So you have to use wisdom. Are there times when wisdom would call you not to pray for someone because your prayer time would likely be better spent praying for someone else? Of course – otherwise you would have to pray for every person at every moment. So if there is someone whose fate is sealed and for whom God no longer wants you to pray, surely we can trust God to work through that decision-making process to prevent us from praying for someone like that.

But is there ever a time when we should look at a person who is still alive and say, “That person is beyond hope – I know for sure that he has committed the sin ending in death”? Not that I know of.

Don’t miss the main point

So that is my understanding of the meaning of the sin ending in death. And if you are not convinced, study it on your own. But when you do that, remember – as you wade through all the endless arguments and all the various theories, in all the buzz and hubbub over what the sin ending in death is, the main point of the passage tends to get lost. Do not lose sight of the fact that the comment about not praying for someone who has committed the sin ending death is a side comment. But John’s main point is really very clear: God will answer your prayer when you pray for Him to give life to the brother who has committed a regular sin.

PROMISED PROTECTION FROM THE ENEMY

And that point raised a few eyebrows last week, because the implication is that the brother who commits a regular sin is in some danger. And saying that we are in some kind of danger brings up a real problem, because we have been *saved* – delivered, rescued, which means we are safe and secure in Christ. (What else could “rescued” mean if not “brought to a place of safety” or “delivered from danger”?) John has spoken throughout the book about how we are delivered from sin and have overcome the evil one. But on the other hand he also said that he was writing to warn us lest we go astray. So it is fitting that John would address the tension between security and danger in the closing section of the book.

All John’s talk in this book about victory and overcoming is the language of warfare. John is very concerned that we never forget that we are in a war that has two distinct sides. It is very much an “us against them” situation. Look down at verse 19.

19 We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the evil one.

The devil controls this world and all the people in it. 2 Corinthians 4:4 calls Satan the god of this age. Ephesians 2:2 calls him the ruler of the power of the air. He is in charge of the system of evil that John refers to as “the world.” He has control over all unbelievers.

That is why the world is as bad as it is. Pretty much everyone in the world agrees that love and kindness and honesty and integrity are good things, and lying and stealing and murder and rape, etc. are bad things. And they have been trying to bring about more of the good and less of the bad for thousands of years, without any success. They come up with new laws and new legal systems, they try more and more education, different parenting techniques, better schools, psychology, medications, political programs, they try financial incentives and every kind of social experiment imaginable, and they keep trying and trying and trying and it has been thousands of years now and still the world is not one bit more upright morally than it ever has been since the flood. In fact, if anything, it is worse. The amount of evil in this world is absolutely staggering. Why? It is because there is a powerful, evil being who has a stranglehold on the affections and understanding and beliefs and actions of every unbeliever in the world. The whole world lies in the evil one – they are under his power and control, and there is absolutely nothing they can do to break free. He can get them to do whatever he wants.

But when you were saved, God snatched you out of Satan’s clutches. And now you are in a condition where there is both an element of safety and an element of danger.

The benefits of the promise

So let’s take a look at the extent of that safety.

Delivered from sin

18 We know that anyone born of God does not sin

We have been delivered from sin. Anyone born of God does not sin. That does not mean we are perfect. John made it clear in chapter 1 that when he makes those kinds of blanket statements he was not talking about sinless perfection. Anyone who claims to be without sin is a liar. But to be a person who walks in the light you must confess your sins and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Advocate. So we found in chapter 1 that when John says that true Christians do not sin, he is talking about unrepentant sin.

I think you could illustrate it this way: Imagine that the ground represents sin and the sky is righteousness. A Christian is like a bird and an unbeliever is like a frog. And John is very categorical about where the frog lives and where the bird lives. Birds are in the sky and frogs are on the ground.

Are there exceptions? Of course. Sometimes birds land on the ground, and sometimes frogs jump up into the air. But when a bird comes down to the ground he stays there a short time and soon returns to the sky – either flying, or in his nest in a tree. When a Christian drops down and sins, he does not stay down there. He soon repents and returns to righteousness. He does not stay on the ground indefinitely.

On the other hand, the unbeliever might make some attempts at righteous behavior, like a frog jumping into the air. But no matter how high he jumps, he always comes right back down to the ground. He is never truly in the sky.

So even though there might be some moments when a bird is on the ground and a frog is jumping, so that at that moment the frog is actually up higher than the bird, still it is correct to say that generally speaking birds live up there and frogs live down here and the exceptions are just that – exceptions to the rule. Christians are righteous and unbelievers are unrighteous and exceptions are temporary and are soon reversed.

So the first way that we have been rescued is we were rescued from a life of unrepentant sin. Do we have absolute, total victory over sin in this life? No, but we do have real victory.

Protected from harm

Secondly, not only are we delivered from sin, we are also protected from Satan’s attacks.

18 We know that anyone born of God does not sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot touch him.

The word “touch” in this context refers to harm, and it implies control over the person. So the idea is that Satan does not have the power to harm us at will because we are protected by the one who was born of God. (I believe that is referring to Jesus. We are called those who are born of God in the first part of the verse, and then Jesus is called the One who was born of God to show the union between us and Christ.) So our Elder Brother, the Lord Jesus Christ, guards us. 1 Peter 1:5 says we are **shielded by God’s power**. The devil is not free to just unload on us whatever attack he wants to. If he were allowed to do that we would not last one second. But the only way Satan can do anything to a believer is by first getting God’s permission. Satan unloaded on Job, but only after God granted him permission and even then God set limits on what Satan was allowed to do. When Satan wanted to sift Peter as wheat he first had to ask God.

2 Thessalonians 3:3 The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

Guards our hearts

God is our refuge and shelter and fortress and protector. That is one of His most celebrated attributes in Scripture. So far I have counted almost 100 times God is spoken of that way just in the Psalms alone. And the promises of protection are both physical and spiritual. God not only guards our bodies, but also our hearts. That is part of the promise of the New Covenant.

Ezekiel 11:19-21 "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. 20 Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

In the New Covenant God works on us from the inside to guard us from breaking the terms of the covenant.

If you think that God just gave us all free will and then left us on our own to sink or swim, you need to take the promises of preservation more seriously.

2 Corinthians 1:21 It is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ.

When you stand firm in Christ, that is God’s doing.

2 Tim 1:12 I ... am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.

God is not hogtied by our freewill. He is able to preserve our faith – even while leaving our will intact. And not only is He able, He is also willing.

1 Corinthians 1:8 He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

Over and over God promises to guard us from Satan and to protect us from sin and to cause us to be faithful.

The Means of the Promise

The benefits of the promise are we get delivered from sin and protected from Satan’s attacks, but what are the means of protection? How does God do it? - Two ways. One is that He puts limits on what Satan is allowed to do – like we saw with Job. And the other is God protects you from sin by working inside your heart.

God works in you to will and act

Philippians 2:12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

He works inside your heart. He does not just throw you a life raft. He works in you to cause you to want to get in the life raft and stay in it.

You are not passive

You need to realize that because it is crucial that we understand that we are not passive in our own preservation. God preserves your faith by working in you to will and to act. That means if you are not willing and acting you are not being preserved. That is why it is no contradiction when Scripture speaks of God preserving you in some places and in other places speaks of you preserving yourself.

18 We know that anyone born of God does not sin; the one who was born of God guards him, and the evil one cannot harm him.

21 Dear children, guard yourselves from idols.

In verse 18 He is guarding us and in verse 21 we are guarding ourselves.
Is it God who sanctifies us? Yes. Is it God who makes us godly? Yes. And yet...

1 Timothy 4:7 Train yourself to be godly.

1 Timothy 5:22 Keep yourself pure.

Colossians 3:8 Rid yourselves of [sin]

Romans 13:14 Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ

Jude 1:20 Build yourselves up in your most holy faith.

Is it Christ who presents you to God as one who is approved? Yes. However...

2 Timothy 2:15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God.

Who rescues you from the world?

Galatians 1:4 [He] gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age

It was Christ – however...

James 1:27 Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: ... to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Romans 12:2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world

Who is it that purifies your heart? Is it not God? Yes – but...

1 Peter 1:22 you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth

Isn't it God who gives you a new heart and new spirit and who rids you of your sins? Yes, but...

Ezekiel 18:31 Rid yourself of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit.

What about salvation? Is it not God who saves us? Yes, but...

Acts 2:40 [Peter] pleaded with them, "Save yourself from this corrupt generation."

1 Timothy 4:16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

And what about perseverance? Doesn't God promise to keep you in His love? Yes, but...

Jude 1:21 Keep yourself in God's love

Does God guard us and keep us secure? Yes, but...

2 Peter 3:17 [Your] be on your guard so that you may not be carried away ... and fall from your secure position.

So what are we to make of that? Does it mean that it is a collaboration where God does His half and we do our half? No. God does it, but the way He does it is by working in us and enabling us to do it. And your flesh resists, and God even promises to work in you to overcome that resistance.

The question, however, is this – are those promises unconditional and absolute in this life? I think that question is fairly easy to answer. Just ask yourself these two questions: Does God promise to work in you to will and to act according to His good purpose? Yes. Do you always will and act according to God's good purpose? No. How do you explain that? If God is working in me to will and act according to His good purpose and yet much of my willing and many of my actions go against His good purpose – how do we explain that?

The Limitation of the Promise

It is because there are limitations to the promise. The reason you and I still fail to will and act according to His good purpose in so many instances is because His promise to work in us to will and to act according to His good purpose is, in this life, neither absolute nor unconditional. He promises to work in me to will and to act according to His good purpose, and yet He at the same time also allows me to fail to will or act according to His good purpose. The promise was never intended to apply in an absolute sense in this life, and there are conditions attached to it.

Partial

When I say it is not absolute, that should not be a big shock to any of us, because so many of the benefits of our salvation are partial in this life. The fullness of salvation comes in heaven, and we only have partial foretastes of it now. We are living in an age when the benefits of the New Covenant are realized in part, but not in full. For example, in the Kingdom of the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, the Messiah would reign over all. Is that happening? Yes – but in a limited way. There is also such a thing, in this age, as disobedience to Christ.

Theologians call this the "already but not yet" aspect of the Kingdom in this age. Is Christ reigning? Yes, He is already reigning in one sense, but not yet in the fullest, greatest way that He will after the Second Coming.

Are we delivered from sin? Already but not yet. We are already delivered from the penalty of sin, but not yet totally from the presence of sin. Are we transformed? Yes, we are already transformed to one degree, but not yet like we will be after the Resurrection when we receive our glorified bodies. Has Christ defeated Satan? Yes, He already defeated Him at the cross, but has not yet totally done away with him.

Jesus' first coming was the inauguration of His Kingdom, but the fullness of it will not be in place until the Second Coming. So many of the benefits of the Kingdom we enjoy in a partial way now, but not in an absolute, total way like we will in heaven.

God's promises to keep us from sin and to preserve our faith are real promises. But they are not absolute in this life. If they were, then we would never sin at all.

When God promises something as a general principle, and we turn it into an absolute with no possible exceptions – we are guilty of twisting God's Word. Isn't that the mistake Job's friends' made? They were assuming that God blesses the righteous and protects them from calamity. And He curses the wicked by subjecting them to calamity – that is known as the Retribution Principle. Is that true? Absolutely – the Bible says that 100 times. Their error was not in believing that. Their error was in turning it into an absolute rule that had no exceptions. And the book of Job teaches us that there are exceptions to the Retribution Principle. Some of God's promises are absolute – even in this life. But many of them are not.

Conditional

Secondly, many of the promises in Scripture are conditional – even though all the conditions are not mentioned every time the promise is mentioned. Let me give you an example.

1 John 3:21-22 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God²² and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.

It says as long as our hearts do not condemn us God will give us what we pray for. Does that mean that is the only condition for answered prayer? No.

1 John 5:14 If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

To have your prayers answered you need to meet both conditions, even though each passage only mentions one and not the other.

When you read about the benefits of the New Covenant they very often sound unconditional.

Jeremiah 31:34 I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sin.

God will forgive sins in the time of the New Covenant, and it does not mention any conditions. Does that mean it is unconditional? Acts 13:38 says faith is a condition for receiving forgiveness.

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins

So there are conditions, even though they are not mentioned in every place where the promise is mentioned. If God has placed a condition on one of His promises anywhere in the Bible then that condition does not suddenly disappear just because you happen to be reading a passage that does not mention it.

The Comfort of the Promise

Now, if you have always been taught that all God's promises are unconditional – that they will happen no matter what you do, so that your actions or lack of actions do not really determine anything of any real significance- if you have been taught that way then when you hear this it may sound to you like it destroys the promises. You might think – “If there are conditions attached, then the promise is worthless.”

Is that true? Can we really take any comfort in conditional promises (or in promises that are not fulfilled in an absolute way in this life)? Absolutely! According to Psalm 119:50 those promises preserve our very life.

The conditions are good

The conditions do not destroy the promises for two reasons. First, because the conditions are always good. Most, if not all, of the conditions God places on His promises boil down to this one condition: Give up what is worthless in order to receive what is priceless.

You see, the reason we do not experience God's conditions as oppressive or burdensome is because God only places good conditions on His promises. If you give up the sludge off the bottom of the garbage dumpster I will give you a feast. If you give up darkness and destruction and death I will give you glory

and light and life. If you let go of your love affair with the devil you can be the Bride of the King. So not only are the promises delightful to us, but the conditions are delightful to us, because they are for our good. The conditions are just as much a gift of grace as the promises.

The conditions are possible

A second reason why the conditions do not spoil the promises is because the conditions are always within our reach. God is not like a mortgage lender who says, “The condition for getting this loan is you have to make \$100,000/year.” But if you do not make that much then it is just out of your reach. None of God’s promises are like that.

The very fact that God makes the promises to all of us implies that it is possible for all of us to meet the conditions. He will give you the grace to meet His conditions.

“But doesn’t God sometimes place conditions on His promises that He knows we will never be able to meet?”

Does He command the impossible? Is God like a parent who tells his three year old, “If you get in shape so you can run a two-minute mile, then I’ll take you to Disneyland”? Does God do that sort of thing with us? No. When God gave the law to Moses He said,

Deuteronomy 30:11 Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.

Isaiah 45:19 I have not said to Jacob's descendants, 'Seek me in vain.' I, the LORD, speak the truth; I declare what is right.

The implication of that verse is that if God were to tell us to do something knowing that our efforts to obey would be in vain, then He would not be speaking the truth or declaring what is right. It would be a lie because the command implies the ability to obey it.

Do you realize what that means? It means as long as you are willing, *you can have anything God has promised!* Nothing is beyond your reach. God does not make any promises that apply only to certain super-Christians. There are no promises in Scripture that have such high conditions attached that we should think, “Oh, that’s for those upper-echelon Christians. It doesn’t have any realistic application to me.” That is never the case. All of God’s promises are for all of God’s children.

It is hard to appreciate this principle unless you have been in a position where people you trust were telling you that pleasing God or meeting His conditions was out of your reach. If every single leader in this church came to you one day and said, “You are in sin, but you can’t see it because you’re self-deceived,” you would be wise to search your heart with the utmost honesty and humility to see if what we were saying is true. And you should search the Scriptures to the best of your ability. And you should cry out to God day and night and beg Him to show you. But – if you did all that and still you were unable to find any unrepentant sin in your heart, it would be wrong for you to take our word for it. Because if you did, you would be saying, “I trust those men more than I trust the Holy Spirit.” God will never put His requirements out of your reach. As a father has compassion on his children so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him, and He remembers that we are dust (Ps.103:13, 14). You would not make it impossible for your kids to know what you want and then spank them for not knowing it. And God is a more understanding and more compassionate parent than you are. He will never place His requirements out of your reach.

Conclusion

So, is the danger real danger? Yes, it is. That is why we need to pray hard for our brothers in sin, and that is why we need to be on guard to keep ourselves from idols.

Are the promises real promises? Yes, they are. God will protect us and guard us from the evil one. We are safe in His arms.

Is that a contradiction? No. The promises are not absolute, and they are conditional. So if you do not meet the conditions, the danger is very real. If someone says, “Come inside my house and you will be totally safe” – if you don’t meet the condition (if you don’t run inside the house), then you are still in danger.

So the danger remains, because there is always a risk of failing to meet the conditions. However, at the same time, the promises of protection are sweet and immensely comforting to us, because the conditions are always possible for us to meet, which means as long as we are willing we can have victory over the evil one. As long as you are willing to persevere you will be able to persevere. Satan will never be able to overpower you without your consent. He will never just prove to be too much for you. God will always provide a way out – a way that is possible for you.

Knowing that is vital in this war. There are so many times people give up because they think they cannot win. Just think of how hard Satan works in your life trying to convince you that some particular battle is hopeless.

“You will never overcome this. You have been battling it for years and you are no better off now than you were ten years ago. Who are you kidding? You will never win. Just give up.”

Last summer I had my Jeep up in Lefthand Canyon, and I came to a spot that was especially difficult. I tried two or three times to get past it, and couldn't, so I decided my Jeep just couldn't make that move and I gave up and just turned around. A week later I tried it again and finally got past that spot. Once I did that I knew it was possible. And from then on I never had any trouble getting past that spot. You see, when you think something might be impossible, then as soon as it gets really hard, you are prone to quit because for all you know it is impossible. But when you know for sure that it is possible, then you are much less prone to give up. That means as long as you are willing, you can have anything God has promised!

When you have these thoughts, “It's just too hard to do the right thing here. I can't do it. I just don't have the strength to do what the Bible says in this situation,” if it is possible that those words are true, then Satan will defeat you every time just by making it hard. But when you believe God's great and precious promises, and you know for an absolute fact that it is possible for you to do what is right, and you are motivated on the other hand by God's terrifying warnings about the danger of not obeying, you will have victory over the evil one.

Benediction: 1 Co.1:4-9 I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. 5 for in him you have been enriched in every way--in all your speaking and in all your knowledge--6 because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. 7 therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. 8 he will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

Devotionals

Day 1

The implication is that the brother who commits a regular sin is in some danger. And saying that we are in some kind of danger brings up a real problem, because we have been *saved* – delivered, rescued, which means we are safe and secure in Christ. (What else could “rescued” mean if not “brought to a place of safety” or “delivered from danger”?) John has spoken throughout the book about how we are delivered from sin and have overcome the evil one. But on the other hand he also said that he was writing to warn us lest we go astray. So it is fitting that John would address the tension between security and danger in the closing section of the book.

All John’s talk in this book about victory and overcoming is the language of warfare. John is very concerned that we never forget that we are in a war that has two distinct sides. It is very much an “us against them” situation.

19 We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the evil one.

The devil controls this world and all the people in it. 2 Corinthians 4:4 calls Satan the god of this age. Ephesians 2:2 calls him the ruler of the power of the air. He is in charge of the system of evil that John refers to as “the world.” He has control over all unbelievers.

That is why the world is as bad as it is. Pretty much everyone in the world agrees that love and kindness and honesty and integrity are good things, and lying and stealing and murder and rape, etc. are bad things. And they have been trying to bring about more of the good and less of the bad for thousands of years, without any success. They come up with new laws and new legal systems, they try more and more education, different parenting techniques, better schools, psychology, medications, political programs, they try financial incentives and every kind of social experiment imaginable, and they keep trying and trying and trying and it is been thousands of years now and still the world is not one bit more upright morally than it ever has been since the flood. In fact, if anything, it is worse. The amount of evil in this world is absolutely staggering. Why? It is because there is a powerful, evil being who has a strangle-hold on the affections and understanding and beliefs and actions of every unbeliever in the world. The whole world lies in the evil one – they are under his power and control, and there is absolutely nothing they can do to break free. He can get them to do whatever he wants.

But when you were saved, God snatched you out of Satan’s clutches.

How desperate was my plight when I was in his clutches, dear Lord! And I didn’t even know it. I was in the grip of the most wicked, vicious, ruthless, merciless created being in existence; and had absolutely no escape. What unimaginable horror You saved me from when You plucked me out of his hand! Oh, thank You, dear Lord!

Teach me to have compassion, rather than disdain, for those still in his grip. Make me the instrument You use to wrest others out of that dreadful bondage. Open my eyes to see how desperate is the condition of every unbeliever I ever meet.

And dear Father, please work in Your servant gratitude that would be fitting for one so rescued. Teach my heart to respond to You with the king of love that should flow from one who has been saved from the clutches of the evil one.

Day 2

You have been rescued from the clutches of Satan, and now you are in a condition where there is both an element of safety and an element of danger. In this passage John emphasizes the safety. But to understand why it is not a contradiction for John to also warn us of real danger we need to understand the extent of that safety.

18 We know that anyone born of God does not sin

We have been delivered from sin. Anyone born of God does not sin. That does not mean we are perfect. John made it clear in chapter 1 that when he makes those kinds of blanket statements he is not talking about sinless perfection. Anyone who claims to be without sin is a liar. But to be a person who walks in the light you must confess your sins and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Advocate. So we found in chapter 1 that when John says that true Christians do not sin, he is talking about unrepentant sin.

I think you could illustrate it this way: Imagine that the ground represents sin and the sky is righteousness. A Christian is like a bird and an unbeliever is like a frog. And John is very categorical about where the frog lives and where the bird lives. Birds are in the sky and frogs are on the ground.

Are there exceptions? Of course. Sometimes birds land on the ground, and sometimes frogs jump up into the air. But when a bird comes down to the ground he stays there a short time and soon returns to the sky – either flying, or in his nest in a tree. When a Christian drops down and sins, he does not stay down there. He soon repents and returns to righteousness. He does not stay on the ground indefinitely.

On the other hand, the unbeliever might make some attempts at righteous behavior, like a frog jumping into the air. But no matter how high he jumps, he always comes right back down to the ground. He is never truly in the sky.

So even though there might be some moments when a bird is on the ground and a frog is jumping, so that at that moment the frog is actually up higher than the bird, still it is correct to say that generally speaking birds live up there and frogs live down here and the exceptions are just that – exceptions to the rule. Christians are righteous and unbelievers are unrighteous and exceptions are temporary and are soon reversed.

So the first way that we have been rescued is we were rescued from a life of unrepentant sin. Do we have absolute, total victory over sin in this life? No, but we do have real victory.

Secondly, not only are we delivered from sin, we are also protected from Satan's attacks.

18 We know that anyone born of God does not sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot touch him.

The word "touch" in this context refers to harm, and it implies control over the person. So the idea is that Satan does not have the power to harm us at will because we are protected by the one who was born of God. (I believe that is referring to Jesus. We are called those who are born of God in the first part of the verse, and then Jesus is called the One who was born of God to show the union between us and Christ.) So our Elder Brother, the Lord Jesus Christ, guards us. 1 Peter 1:5 says we are **shielded by God's power**. The devil is not free to just unload on us whatever attack he wants to. If he were allowed to do that we would not last one second. But the only way Satan can do anything to a believer is by first getting God's permission. Satan unloaded on Job, but only after God granted him permission. And even then God set limits on what Satan was allowed to do. When Satan wanted to sift Peter as wheat he first had to ask God.

2 Thessalonians 3:3 The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.

Guards our hearts

God is our refuge and shelter and fortress and protector. That is one of His most celebrated attributes in Scripture. So far I have counted almost 100 times God is spoken of that way just in the Psalms alone. And the promises of protection are both physical and spiritual. God not only guards our bodies, but also our hearts. That is part of the promise of the New Covenant.

Ezekiel 11:19-21 "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. 20 Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

In the New Covenant God works on us from the inside to guard us from breaking the terms of the covenant.

If you think that God just gave us all free will and then left us on our own to sink or swim, you need to take the promises of preservation more seriously.

2 Corinthians 1:21 It is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ.

When you stand firm in Christ, that is God's doing.

2 Timothy 1:12 I ... am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.

God is not hogtied by our freewill. He is able to preserve our faith – even while leaving our will intact. And not only is He able, He's also willing.

1 Corinthians 1:8 He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

Over and over God promises to guard us from Satan and to protect us from sin and to cause us to be faithful.

What a marvelous truth, dear God, that Your protection is not merely external. If all You did were offer some bomb shelter, my sinful, foolish heart would refuse to go in. If You only provided the means for protection without working on my heart it would be useless, because my heart would reject those means. Oh, what blessedness to be the child of a God who provides both the armor I need as well as working in my heart to be willing and eager to put the armor on and fight. Thank You, Father!

Day 3

The benefits of the promise are we get delivered from sin and protected from Satan's attacks, but what are the means of protection? How does God do it? - Two ways. One is that He puts limits on what Satan is allowed to do – like we saw with Job. And the other is God protects you from sin by working inside your heart.

Philippians 2:12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

He works inside your heart. He does not just throw you a life raft. He works in you to cause you to want to get in the life raft and stay in it.

You need to realize that because it is crucial that we understand that we are not passive in our own preservation. God preserves your faith by working in you to will and to act. That means if you are not willing and acting you are not being preserved. That is why it is no contradiction when Scripture speaks of God preserving you in some places and in other places speaks of you preserving yourself.

18 We know that anyone born of God does not sin; the one who was born of God guards him, and the evil one cannot harm him.

21 Dear children, guard yourselves from idols.

In verse 18 He is guarding us and in verse 21 we are guarding ourselves.

Is it God who sanctifies us? Yes. Is it God who makes us godly? Yes. And yet...

1 Timothy 4:7 Train yourself to be godly.

1 Timothy 5:22 Keep yourself pure.

Colossians 3:8 Rid yourselves of [sin]

Romans 13:14 Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ

Jude 1:20 Build yourselves up in your most holy faith.

Is it Christ who presents you to God as one who is approved? Yes. However...

2 Timothy 2:15 Be diligent to present yourself approved to God.

Who rescues you from the world?

Galatians 1:4 [He] gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age

It was Christ – however...

James 1:27 Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: ... to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Romans 12:2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world

Who is it that purifies your heart? Is it not God? Yes – but...

1 Peter 1:22 you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth

Is it not God who gives you a new heart and new spirit and who rids you of your sins? Yes, but...

Ezekiel 18:31 Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit.

What about salvation? Is it not God who saves us? Yes, but...

Acts 2:40 [Peter] pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

1 Timothy 4:16 Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

And what about perseverance? Doesn't God promise to keep you in His love? Yes, but...

Jude 1:21 Keep yourselves in God's love

Does God guard us and keep us secure? Yes, but...

2 Peter 3:17 [Your] be on your guard so that you may not be carried away ... and fall from your secure position.

So what are we to make of that? Does it mean that it is a collaboration where God does His half and we do our half? No. God does it, but the way He does it is by working in us and enabling us to do it. And your flesh resists, and God even promises to work in you to overcome that resistance.

What is this marriage between Your work in me and my own will? Where does the one end and the other begin? Oh what a mystery. It is beyond my understanding, dear Lord. But even though I cannot comprehend it, what I can understand I love. I love being worked on by You from the inside. I love it that I am not on my own with regard to willing and acting. Teach me to be responsive to what You are doing. Today, dear Lord, may I not resist Your holy work in me.

Day 4

Does God promise to work in you to will and to act according to His good purpose? Yes. Do you always will and act according to God's good purpose? No. How do you explain that? If God is working in me to will and act according to His good purpose and yet much of my willing and many of my actions go against His good purpose – how do we explain that?

It is because there are limitations to the promise. The reason you and I still fail to will and act according to His good purpose in so many instances is because His promise to work in us to will and to act according to His good purpose is, in this life, neither absolute nor unconditional. He promises to work in me to will and to act according to His good purpose, and yet He at the same time also allows me to fail to will or act according to His good purpose. The promise was never intended to apply in an absolute sense in this life, and there are conditions attached to it.

When I say it is not absolute, that should not be a big shock to any of us, because so many of the benefits of our salvation are partial in this life. The fullness of salvation comes in heaven, and we only have partial foretastes of it now. We are living in an age when the benefits of the New Covenant are realized in part, but not in full. For example, in the Kingdom of the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, the Messiah would reign over all. Is that happening? Yes – but in a limited way. There is also such a thing, in this age, as disobedience to Christ.

Theologians call this the “already but not yet” aspect of the Kingdom in this age. Is Christ reigning? Yes, He is already reigning in one sense, but not yet in the fullest, greatest way that He will after the Second Coming.

Are we delivered from sin? Already but not yet. We are already delivered from the penalty of sin, but not yet totally from the presence of sin. Are we transformed? Yes, we are already transformed to one degree, but not yet like we will be after the Resurrection when we receive our glorified bodies. Has Christ defeated Satan? Yes, He already defeated Him at the cross, but has not yet totally done away with him.

Jesus' first coming was the inauguration of His Kingdom, but the fullness of it will not be in place until the Second Coming. So many of the benefits of the Kingdom we enjoy in a partial way now, but not in an absolute, total way like we will in heaven.

God's promises to keep us from sin and to preserve our faith are real promises. But they are not absolute in this life. If they were then we would never sin at all.

When God promises something as a general principle, and we turn it into an absolute with no possible exceptions – we are guilty of twisting God's Word. Isn't that the mistake Job's friends' made? They were assuming that God blesses the righteous and protects them from calamity. And He curses the wicked by subjecting them to calamity – that is known as the Retribution Principle. Is that true? Absolutely – the Bible says that 100 times. Their error was not in believing that. Their error was in turning it into an absolute rule that had no exceptions. And the book of Job teaches us that there are exceptions to the Retribution Principle. Some of God's promises are absolute – even in this life. But many of them are not.

Secondly, many of the promises in Scripture are conditional – even though all the conditions are not mentioned every time the promise is mentioned. Let me give you an example.

1 John 3:21-22 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God ²² and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.

It says as long as our hearts do not condemn us God will give us what we pray for. Does that mean that is the only condition for answered prayer? No.

1 John 5:14 If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

To have your prayers answered you need to meet both conditions, even though each passage only mentions one and not the other.

When you read about the benefits of the New Covenant they very often sound unconditional.

Jeremiah 31:34 I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sin.

God will forgive sins in the time of the New Covenant, and it does not mention any conditions. Does that mean it is unconditional? Acts 13:38 says faith is a condition for receiving forgiveness.

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins

So there are conditions, even though they are not mentioned in every place where the promise is mentioned. If God has placed a condition on one of His promises anywhere in the Bible then that condition does not suddenly disappear just because you happen to be reading a passage that does not mention it.

Heavenly Father, teach me how to take delight in Your great and precious promises, and to never wish that they were something other than what they are. If You place a condition on a promise, then that condition is good, and it is better than if there were no condition. Forgive me, Father, for thinking that I have better ideas than You about what would be the best things for You to promise – or for taking Your amazing promises for granted. Teach me to delight in them and draw life from them like the psalmist. May trust in them be the very strength of my life from hour to hour today.

Day 5

Now, if you have always been taught that all God's promises are unconditional – that they will happen no matter what you do, so that your actions or lack of actions do not really determine anything of any real significance- if you have been taught that way then when you hear this it may sound to you like it destroys the promises. You might think – “If there are conditions attached, then the promise is worthless.”

Is that true? Can we really take any comfort in conditional promises (or in promises that are not fulfilled in an absolute way in this life)? Absolutely! According to Psalm.119:50 those promises preserve our very life.

The conditions do not destroy the promises for two reasons - First, because the conditions are always good. Most, if not all, of the conditions God places on His promises boil down to this one condition: Give up what is worthless in order to receive what is priceless.

You see, the reason we do not experience God's conditions as oppressive or burdensome is because God only places good conditions on His promises. If you give up the sludge off the bottom of the garbage dumpster I will give you a feast. If you give up darkness and destruction and death I will give you glory and light and life. If you let go of your love affair with the devil you can be the Bride of the King. And so not only are the promises delightful to us, but the conditions are delightful to us, because they are for our good.

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It is hard to appreciate this principle unless you have been in a position where people you trust were telling you that pleasing God or meeting His conditions was out of your reach. If every single leader in this church came to you one day and said, “You are in sin, but you can't see it because you are self-deceived,” you would be wise to search your heart with the utmost honesty and humility to see if what we were saying is true. And you should search the Scriptures to the best of your ability. And you should cry out to God day and night and beg Him to show you. But if you did all that and still you were unable to find any unrepentant sin in your heart, it would be wrong for you to take our word for it. Because if you did, you would be saying, “I trust those men more than I trust the Holy Spirit.” God will never put His requirements out of your reach. As a father has compassion on his children so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him, and He remembers that we are dust (Ps.103:13, 14). You would not make it impossible for your

kids to know what you want and then spank them for not knowing it. And God is a more understanding and more compassionate parent than you are. He will never place His requirements out of your reach.

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So the danger remains, because there is always a risk of failing to meet the conditions. However, at the same time, the promises of protection are sweet and immensely comforting to us, because the conditions are always possible for us to meet, which means as long as we are willing we can have victory over the evil one. As long as you are willing to persevere you will be able to persevere. Satan will never be able to overpower you without your consent. He will never just prove to be too much for you. God will always provide a way out – a way that is possible for you.

Knowing that is vital in this war. There are so many times people give up because they think they cannot win. Just think of how hard Satan works in your life trying to convince you that some particular battle is hopeless.

“You’ll never overcome this. You’ve been battling it for years and you’re no better off now than you were ten years ago. Who are you kidding? You’ll never win. Just give up.”

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I bless Your holy name, dear Lord, for Your great and precious promises, and for putting them within my reach! Thank You, Father! Teach me not to despise them by failing to reach for them in times when they seem out of reach. Teach my heart to trust in You, that You would never require more than what You enable.

Summary

The sin ending in death is when a person’s fate is sealed. The only way we can know if that is the case is if they die in unbelief (and if we pray with wisdom God will no doubt keep us from wasting our prayers on people whose fate is sealed even though they are still alive).

Satan controls the world, but we have been delivered from his clutches, meaning we are delivered from unrepentant sin and from satanic attack. God protects us by limiting Satan and by working in us to will and to act. The promise of protection is neither absolute nor unconditional, but it is still a comfort because the conditions are good for us and are always possible.