

THE BROAD ROAD IN CHRISTIAN CLOTHING

*False Assurance, Counterfeit Conversion, Normalized Sin,
and the Biblical Marks of Saving Faith*

CHAPTER 4

GRACE THAT SAVES, REPENTANCE THAT TURNS, AND HOLINESS THAT FOLLOWS

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness ... and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age.”

[Titus 2:11-12, CSB](#)

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Chapter 4: Grace That Saves, Repentance That Turns, and Holiness That Follows

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RESEARCH AND THEOLOGICAL NOTE

Scripture governs the theological claims in this chapter. The chapter follows the approved architecture of *The Broad Road in Christian Clothing* and develops the author's prior work on salvation, repentance, antinomianism, sanctification, assurance, perseverance, and false gospels without mechanically reproducing earlier prose. Major Reformed and Wesleyan-Arminian interpretations of perseverance and apostasy are represented as genuine intramural disagreements. Contemporary addiction claims were rechecked against current official clinical guidance and are limited to established descriptions and evidence-based treatment principles; they are not used to erase moral agency or reduce discipleship to medicine. New Age and manifestation claims are addressed only where they directly redefine repentance, faith, human nature, or spiritual transformation. The chapter rejects both legalistic self-salvation and antinomian presumption, distinguishes struggle from settled rebellion, and treats addiction, trauma, relapse, abuse, scrupulosity, and restoration with pastoral and safeguarding care.

Abstract

This chapter examines one of the most persistent distortions of Christian assurance: the attempt to separate the grace that justifies from the repentance, holiness, obedience, and perseverance that saving grace produces. Building on the preceding chapters' distinction between the ground of salvation and the evidences of new life, it argues that the New Testament refuses both legalism and antinomianism. Legalism converts obedience, sorrow, discipline, or religious performance into a contribution to justification. Antinomian false assurance does the opposite: it appeals to grace, a past profession, or a doctrine of security while treating repentance, confession, discipleship, and the continuing war against sin as optional. Scripture allows neither distortion. The grace that saves the ungodly also trains the redeemed to renounce ungodliness, and the faith that receives Christ does not remain barren. The chapter therefore distinguishes repentance from regret, saving faith from intellectual assent or spiritual enthusiasm, obedience as evidence from obedience as payment, progressive holiness from perfectionism, and the believer's struggle with sin from settled peace with sin. Particular attention is given to habitual and deliberate sin, secrecy and rationalization, addiction and relapse, spiritual warfare, confession and restoration, and the relationship between biblical warning passages and promises of divine preservation. Contemporary addiction medicine is used cautiously to clarify why compulsive patterns may require sustained clinical and pastoral care without erasing moral agency or the call to repentance. New Age and manifestation-style counterfeits are also examined where they replace repentance with alignment, faith with mental causation, or the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work with techniques of consciousness and self-actualization. The chapter represents major Reformed and Wesleyan-Arminian approaches to perseverance fairly while refusing to let the intramural debate obscure what both warning and promise require: assurance belongs in Christ, not in a slogan detached from present faith. The controlling pastoral conclusion is that Christians are not saved by becoming holy enough, yet those whom Christ saves are claimed for holiness. The struggling believer is therefore called away from despair toward Christ's advocacy and restoring grace, while the presumptuous professor is called away from excuses toward repentance. Grace is not permission to remain under sin's peaceable rule. It is God's merciful power to pardon, teach, discipline, restore, preserve, and prepare a people who await the blessed hope of Christ's appearing.

Keywords: saving grace; repentance; sanctification; holiness; antinomianism; hyper-grace; obedience; perseverance; apostasy; assurance; addiction; spiritual warfare

Introduction: Grace Is Not God's Permission to Leave Us Unchanged

The previous chapters have placed several false refuges under the light of Scripture. A person may call Jesus "Lord" and still be self-deceived. A person may possess Christian language, rites, institutional belonging, theological knowledge, ministry experience, moral respectability, or an unforgettable conversion memory and still be resting in the wrong thing. Those warnings lead to a question that cannot be postponed: if salvation is truly by grace through faith apart from works, what place can repentance, obedience, holiness, perseverance, and the continuing battle with sin have without turning the gospel back into a system of human merit?

This question is not merely academic. It touches the conscience of the person who has fallen again after promising never to return to a sin. It confronts the church member who says, "Everyone sins," while deliberately protecting a private rebellion. It troubles the believer who has heard that any serious self-examination is legalism. It burdens the tender Christian who fears that one relapse proves there was never any grace. It also exposes a different danger among disciplined believers who begin to trust their progress, modesty, abstinence, theology, family order, or moral seriousness as though sanctification

were a second basis of acceptance with God. Both groups need the same gospel, but they need different wounds exposed.

The biblical pattern is neither "grace or holiness" nor "grace plus holiness as payment." It is grace that saves and grace that sanctifies. Paul says that believers are saved by grace through faith, not from works, so that no one can boast, and then immediately says that they are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works ([Ephesians 2:8-10](#)). Titus makes the same order explicit: the grace of God brings salvation and also trains God's people to deny godlessness and worldly desires while they await Christ's appearing ([Titus 2:11-14](#)). The cross does not negotiate a truce with sin. Christ "gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people for his own possession, eager to do good works" ([Titus 2:14](#)).

This distinction has already matured across the author's prior work. Earlier writing opposed both works-righteousness and the misuse of grace as an excuse for rebellion (Sangwa, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). Later soteriological and discipleship studies placed justification, regeneration, sanctification, assurance, and perseverance within one saving work of the triune God rather than treating them as competing gospels (Sangwa, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c). The present chapter advances that foundation by concentrating on the lived boundary between struggle and surrender, discipline and legalism, restoration and presumption, security and apostasy. It does not repeat the preceding chapter's broad definition of salvation. It asks what saving grace looks like when it enters the daily conflict of embodied, tempted, imperfect people.

Several distinctions govern the discussion. Justification is God's once-for-all declaration of righteousness for the believer on the basis of Christ, received through faith, not a verdict gradually earned by moral improvement. Sanctification is the Spirit's work of setting believers apart to God and progressively conforming them to Christ. Repentance is not self-payment but a grace-enabled turning from sin to God. Obedience is not the purchase price of sonship but one of its fruits. Perseverance is not stoic self-rescue but continuing faith sustained by the God who keeps His people. Warning passages are not proof that the gospel is uncertain, nor may promises of security be used to make apostasy harmless. Scripture speaks both promise and warning because the living God addresses living persons, not theological abstractions.

This chapter must also refuse shallow moral psychology. The human will operates within bodies, habits, histories, relationships, communities, illnesses, addictions, trauma, social pressures, and spiritual conflict. Scripture never reduces people to mechanisms, but neither does it treat every sinner as though every act arose from identical conditions. A person trapped in compulsive substance use may require medical treatment, counseling, social support, changed environments, church accountability, and long-term recovery structures. A victim's trauma response is not the same moral category as an abuser's exploitation. A believer tormented by intrusive thoughts is not necessarily consenting to those thoughts. Moral seriousness requires distinctions, not slogans.

At the same time, complexity cannot become a hiding place. Modern culture often offers explanations that are valuable as descriptions but become dangerous when turned into absolutes. A diagnosis can clarify suffering and guide treatment; it cannot by itself tell us whether a particular lie, theft, act of violence, sexual betrayal, or idolatrous choice is morally innocent. The church is cruel when it denies legitimate clinical realities, and it is equally cruel when it deprives people of moral agency, repentance, restitution, and the hope of transformation. Grace tells the truth about what happened to us and what we have done.

The same discernment is necessary in contemporary spirituality. New Age and New Thought systems frequently replace repentance with awakening, sin with misalignment, and faith with confidence in consciousness, energy, intention, or the supposed divine self (Hanegraaff, 1996; Heelas, 1996; Sangwa, 2026d). Christianized manifestation teaching can use words such as "faith," "declaration," and "spiritual law" while quietly shifting trust from the sovereign God to the alleged causal force of speech or belief.

The biblical gospel moves in the opposite direction. Faith does not enthrone the mind. It abandons self-trust and clings to Christ.

The thesis of this chapter is therefore precise: salvation is entirely of grace, but the grace that unites a sinner to Christ also creates a new relation to sin. That new relation is not sinless perfection. It is war rather than peace, confession rather than concealment, discipline rather than indifference, restoration rather than despair, and perseverance rather than the presumption that a past religious moment makes present unbelief irrelevant. The believer's confidence rests in Christ's finished work, not in the quality of the struggle. Yet the existence, direction, and fruit of that struggle matter because the Christ who justifies also sanctifies.

The purpose is not to produce chronic insecurity. A bruised believer does not need to be told that every wound proves death. A hardened professor does not need to be told that a remembered prayer makes rebellion safe. The Word must address each person truthfully. To the weary fighter it says, "We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one" ([1 John 2:1](#)). To the complacent it says, "Should we continue in sin so that grace may multiply? Absolutely not!" ([Romans 6:1-2](#)). To both it says: come to Christ, remain in Christ, walk by the Spirit, and do not turn grace into either wages or permission.

4.1 Cheap Grace, Hyper-Grace, and Antinomianism

The phrase "cheap grace" became famous through Dietrich Bonhoeffer's critique of a Christianity that wanted forgiveness without discipleship, baptism without discipline, and communion without confession (Bonhoeffer, 2001). The phrase is rhetorically strong, but it must be used carefully. Grace itself is never cheap. It cost the incarnate Son His blood, and it cannot be priced by human works. What becomes cheap is our treatment of grace when we turn the cross into permission to preserve the rebellion for which Christ died. The theological problem is not an excess of biblical grace. No sinner has ever been endangered by believing too deeply that salvation is God's undeserved gift in Christ. The problem begins when grace is redefined so that the saving reign of Christ no longer has moral consequences.

"Hyper-grace" is a modern and contested label. It is often used too broadly, sometimes against Christians who simply emphasize assurance, the completeness of justification, or the sufficiency of Christ. Those emphases are not errors. The believer really is justified apart from works. Christ's sacrifice is sufficient. The conscience should not be held hostage to endless attempts to re-earn forgiveness. Therefore, this chapter will not condemn a person merely because others have called his or her teaching "hyper-grace." The propositions must be tested. The term is appropriate only where grace is used to make ongoing repentance, confession, discipleship, holiness, obedience, or accountability unnecessary, or where a past profession is treated as an unconditional guarantee regardless of later repudiation of Christ (Sangwa, 2024b).

The strongest defense of such teaching begins with truths Christians should protect. Christ's death is once for all ([Hebrews 10:10-14](#)). The believer is justified by faith apart from works of the law ([Romans 3:28](#)). There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus ([Romans 8:1](#)). Believers are not under the Mosaic covenant as a system of justification ([Galatians 3:23-25](#); [Romans 10:4](#)). If these truths are ignored, Christian life can degenerate into anxious bookkeeping in which every failure seems to cancel justification and every act of obedience seems to restore it. Tender consciences may begin to believe that God loves them on good days and abandons them on bad days. Against that distortion, strong teaching on grace is not merely permissible. It is necessary.

The false inference appears when complete justification is made to imply moral irrelevance. Paul anticipated the objection. If justification is by grace and grace abounds where sin increases, why not continue in sin so grace may multiply? His response is not a cautious qualification but a rejection: "Absolutely not!" ([Romans 6:1-2](#)). Paul does not answer by retreating from justification by grace. He answers by appealing to union with Christ. Those united to Christ have been joined to His death and

resurrection; therefore they are to consider themselves dead to sin and alive to God and not let sin reign in their mortal bodies ([Romans 6:3-14](#)). Grace does not merely change the record in heaven while leaving sin's dominion unquestioned. It transfers the believer into a new lordship.

Titus is equally decisive. Grace is personified as a teacher. It brings salvation, then instructs the saved to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and live sensibly, righteously, and godly in the present age while waiting for the blessed hope ([Titus 2:11-14](#)). The eschatological shape matters. Holiness is not a payment offered to persuade Christ to return for us. It is the life appropriate to people who have been redeemed and are waiting for Him. The same grace that pardons also trains. A message that celebrates the first function while denying the second is not "more grace" than Paul. It is less of Paul's grace.

Antinomianism names the broader error of opposing or nullifying God's moral claim on the believer. The term has a long history and has been used differently across theological controversies, so precision is essential. Christians do not remain under the Mosaic law as a covenant of justification. Circumcision, food laws, temple sacrifices, and Israel's civil order cannot be imposed as conditions of acceptance in Christ. Paul opposed precisely such additions in Galatians. Yet freedom from the law as a condemning covenant does not mean freedom from the authority of God. The believer belongs to Christ, is led by the Spirit, fulfills the law's righteous intent through love, and lives under "the law of Christ" ([Galatians 5:13-14](#); [Galatians 6:2](#); [Romans 8:3-4](#); Sangwa, 2024a).

Jesus does not save people from His lordship. He asks why people call Him "Lord, Lord" and do not do what He says ([Luke 6:46](#)). John says that knowing God is evidenced by keeping His commands, while the person who claims to know Him and disregards His commands is living a contradiction ([1 John 2:3-6](#)). These texts do not establish salvation by moral score. They expose the incoherence of claiming union with the Holy One while making peace with lawlessness. The apostolic gospel has room for grievous failure, confession, weakness, immaturity, and restoration. It has no category for a grace that canonizes rebellion as a protected right.

A frequent rebuttal says, "All my sins were future when Jesus died, so if Christ paid for them, why should I confess sin now?" The first half is correct. Christ's atonement is not repeatedly supplemented by our confessions. The believer does not move in and out of forensic justification every time he stumbles. But the conclusion does not follow. The apostle John writes to a Christian community and says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" ([1 John 1:9](#)). In the same context he says that anyone claiming to be without sin deceives himself, and then immediately points sinning believers to Christ the Advocate ([1 John 1:8-2:2](#)). Ongoing confession does not compete with the finished cross. It is one way the justified live truthfully beneath it.

Another rebuttal says that preaching repentance creates "sin consciousness" and keeps believers focused on themselves rather than Christ. The concern can identify a real pastoral failure. Some communities cultivate obsessive introspection, public humiliation, or recurring fear that God has rejected the believer. That is not healthy repentance. Biblical repentance is not endless self-absorption. It turns from sin toward God. It names darkness so that the sinner may walk in light, not so that the sinner may worship his shame. Paul could grieve the Corinthians sharply and still rejoice because their sorrow produced repentance leading to salvation without regret ([2 Corinthians 7:8-11](#)). The endpoint of repentance is not fascination with guilt. It is restored fellowship, obedience, and joy in God.

The opposite counterfeit is legalism. Legalism may condemn antinomianism correctly and still preach another false assurance. It can turn repentance into a quota of sorrow, obedience into the basis of acceptance, spiritual disciplines into a moral currency, and visible strictness into evidence of superiority. The legalist says, "Christ will receive me because I have sufficiently corrected myself." The antinomian says, "Christ must reassure me even if I refuse correction." Both keep the self at the center. One trusts performance; the other trusts permission. The gospel calls both to Christ.

The moral classification here is clear. Where Scripture explicitly commands believers to flee sexual immorality, reject idolatry, put away lying, forgive, love, pursue holiness, and obey Christ, those commands are not optional matters of private conscience ([1 Corinthians 6:18](#); [Ephesians 4:25-32](#); [Hebrews 12:14](#)). At the same time, not every strict Christian practice carries that status. Fasting schedules, clothing conventions, abstinence from lawful foods or beverages, entertainment boundaries, and other prudential choices may involve wisdom or conscience rather than universal prohibition. Antinomianism must not be defeated by inventing new laws. The answer to lawlessness is submission to God's commands, not to every human tradition.

The self-examination is therefore sharper than asking, "Do I believe in grace?" Almost every Christian tradition says yes. The question is what grace is allowed to do. Does my doctrine of grace lead me to Christ with confidence and then into the Spirit's school of holiness? Or do I use grace as a theological restraining order against correction? When Scripture names my conduct as sin, do I confess it, resist it, and seek help, or do I accuse anyone who confronts me of legalism? Grace is not God's agreement to stop contradicting me. Grace is God's merciful action to forgive, liberate, teach, discipline, and transform those who could never save themselves.

Those who teach, preach, counsel, or shepherd carry a particular responsibility here. A pulpit that repeatedly announces forgiveness while refusing to name repentance is not more gracious than the apostles. A counselor who reassures an unrepentant person merely because that person once professed faith may soothe the conscience precisely where Scripture intends to awaken it. Christian rebuke, however, must remain cruciform: patient, specific, proportionate, and aimed at restoration rather than humiliation ([2 Timothy 4:2](#); [Galatians 6:1](#)). Love does not manufacture peace where God is calling a sinner out of darkness; love tells the truth and then points to the open arms of Christ.

4.2 Repentance Versus Regret

Repentance is one of the most frequently invoked and least carefully distinguished words in Christian speech. It can be reduced to tears, apology, embarrassment, fear, public confession, a promise to improve, or even a moment of emotional collapse. Scripture treats repentance more deeply. Jesus announced the kingdom with the command, "Repent and believe the good news" ([Mark 1:15](#)). After His resurrection, He said that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all nations ([Luke 24:46-47](#)). Paul summarized his ministry as testimony to "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus" ([Acts 20:21](#)). Repentance belongs to conversion and continues as a posture of Christian life.

Repentance is not payment. The sinner cannot repay God for guilt by producing enough sorrow. Scripture can speak of God granting repentance leading to life ([Acts 11:18](#)) and granting repentance leading to knowledge of the truth ([2 Timothy 2:25](#)). That language protects grace. The repentant person does not arrive at God's door carrying a bag of moral compensation. He comes empty-handed, agreeing with God's verdict and turning toward the mercy offered in Christ. Penance as self-atonement is therefore a category mistake. Christ bears sin; repentance abandons the defense of it.

Regret is different. Regret can be intense while remaining self-centered. A person may hate the consequences of sin without hating the sin. The adulterer may regret exposure, not betrayal. The thief may regret arrest, not theft. The abusive leader may regret the collapse of reputation, not the damage done to people. The student may regret the failed examination caused by cheating, not the dishonesty. Pharaoh repeatedly asked for relief from judgment and returned to hardness when relief came ([Exodus 8:8-15](#); [Exodus 9:27-35](#)). Emotion rose with consequences and fell when consequences receded.

Paul's distinction between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow in [2 Corinthians 7:8-11](#) is therefore central. Godly sorrow produces repentance and is associated with earnestness, a desire to clear what is wrong, indignation against sin, fear of God, longing, zeal, and concern for justice. Worldly sorrow produces death. The difference is not that godly sorrow always feels stronger. The difference is its direction and

fruit. One turns toward God and truth; the other can remain trapped in self-pity, shame, image management, or resentment over consequences.

Judas and Peter provide a sobering contrast, although they should not be turned into a simplistic psychological formula. Judas felt remorse after betraying Jesus and returned the money, yet his path ended in despair and death ([Matthew 27:3-5](#)). Peter denied Jesus with oaths, went out and wept bitterly, and was later restored by the risen Christ to love, service, and costly discipleship ([Luke 22:54-62](#); [John 21:15-19](#)). Tears were present in both stories. What finally distinguishes them is not the quantity of emotion but relation to Christ. Christian repentance is never merely movement away from wrongdoing. It is movement toward the Savior.

Confession belongs to repentance because repentance stops editing the story. David's prayer after grave sin does not call adultery and bloodguilt "a mistake" or "a complicated season." He says, "I have sinned against the LORD" ([2 Samuel 12:13](#)) and in [Psalm 51](#) refuses self-justification. Biblical confession means agreeing with God about sin. It does not require theatrical self-denigration. It requires truth. Where sin has harmed another person, confession may also need a horizontal form, as Jesus' teaching on reconciliation and James's call to confess sins to one another indicate ([Matthew 5:23-24](#); [James 5:16](#)).

Restitution can be an appropriate fruit of repentance. Zacchaeus responded to Jesus with concrete concern for the people he had defrauded, pledging repayment beyond the stolen amount ([Luke 19:1-10](#)). The law of Moses likewise treated restitution as part of justice in cases of property harm ([Exodus 22:1-15](#)). Yet restitution must not be turned into a universal ritual by which forgiveness is purchased. Some harms cannot be reversed. Some victims should not be contacted directly because contact would endanger or retraumatize them. Some cases require legal reporting, professional safeguarding, mediated communication, or acceptance that trust may not be restored. Genuine repentance asks, "What does truth and love require now?" It does not demand access to the harmed person in order to soothe the offender's conscience.

This is especially important in cases of abuse. A public apology is not proof of repentance. Tears in front of a congregation are not evidence that a leader is safe. Repentance may require surrendering power, submitting to investigation, accepting civil or criminal consequences, respecting boundaries, providing restitution where lawful and appropriate, and relinquishing any claim to immediate restoration to office. Forgiveness in Christ does not erase qualification standards for leadership ([1 Timothy 3:1-7](#); [Titus 1:5-9](#)). A church that treats visible remorse as automatic entitlement to a platform confuses mercy with access and may expose the vulnerable to further harm.

The opposite error is unforgiving perfectionism. Some communities make repentance impossible by requiring the sinner to demonstrate flawless reform before being received. The gospel does not say, "Become sanctified enough, then Christ may forgive you." The prodigal son returns with confession and is received by the father's mercy before he can build a new record ([Luke 15:17-24](#)). Repentance is real turning, but the sinner's hope is the father's compassion, not the quality of the return speech. Churches should therefore expect fruit over time without making restoration to fellowship a prize for those who can perform repentance dramatically.

Repentance also differs from self-hatred. The Holy Spirit convicts of sin, but the gospel does not teach the redeemed to despise their creaturely existence. Shame often says, "I am beyond mercy." Repentance says, "I have sinned, and I will bring that sin to the God whose mercy is greater than my defense." David asks for cleansing and a clean heart, not annihilation ([Psalm 51:7-12](#)). Paul can call himself the foremost of sinners while immediately magnifying the mercy and patience of Christ ([1 Timothy 1:15-16](#)). True repentance lowers pride without extinguishing hope.

A New Age counterfeit often replaces repentance with "alignment," "release," or awakening to a supposedly higher self. The strongest defense of such language is that people sometimes do need to recognize unhealthy patterns, release destructive habits, cultivate awareness, and pursue psychological integration. Those can be legitimate therapeutic goals. The theological problem appears when moral

rebellion against the Creator is dissolved into low vibration, blocked energy, ignorance of one's divinity, or misalignment with the universe. Scripture does not heal guilt by teaching sinners that their deepest self is divine. It announces pardon through the crucified and risen Son and regeneration by the Spirit. Repentance is not descent into lower consciousness. It is a return to reality under God.

The diagnostic question is therefore not merely, "Did I feel bad?" It is, "What am I doing with the truth God has shown me?" Am I grieving because my image broke, or because I dishonored God and harmed others? Am I willing to name the sin without euphemism? Where possible and safe, am I willing to repair what can be repaired? Am I turning toward Christ or merely trying to escape consequences? Repentance may begin in tears or in quiet clarity. Its essence is not a performance. It is the surrender of the argument by which the sinner insists that darkness should still be called light.

If your repentance disappears as soon as the consequences disappear, examine whether you have repented at all. If you apologize only because you were exposed, if you demand restored trust before there has been truthful change, or if you confess in language designed to minimize what you did, do not baptize image management as godly sorrow. John the Baptist called for fruit consistent with repentance ([Luke 3:8](#)). Such fruit does not earn forgiveness, but it does show that repentance has begun to move from the mouth into the life.

4.3 Faith Versus Intellectual Assent

Christian faith has content. One cannot savingly trust a Christ who has been emptied of His apostolic identity. The gospel announces that Jesus is the eternal Son made flesh, that He died for our sins, was buried, rose bodily, reigns as Lord, and will judge the living and the dead ([1 Corinthians 15:1-8](#); [Romans 10:9](#); [Acts 17:30-31](#)). Faith therefore includes knowledge. But knowledge is not enough. A person can understand Christian propositions, defend them accurately, and remain unreconciled to God.

James makes the distinction painfully clear: "You believe that God is one. Good! Even the demons believe, and they shudder" ([James 2:19](#)). Demonic belief is not ignorance. It includes recognition of truth and fear of divine power. What it lacks is loving trust, allegiance, and reconciliation. The point is not that doctrine is unimportant. James assumes the doctrinal confession is true. He shows that bare assent to truth cannot be equated with living faith.

The Christian tradition has often distinguished knowledge, assent, and trust as dimensions of saving faith. The categories can be useful if they are not treated as a mechanical formula. A person must know what is being promised, regard the promise as true, and rely on Christ rather than merely admire the idea. Saving faith is personal because its object is a Person. It says not merely, "Christ is a Savior," but "I entrust myself to this Christ as my only righteousness, Lord, and hope." Even that sentence must not be turned into a meritorious work. Faith saves because of the One it receives, not because faith is a spiritually impressive achievement (Schreiner, 2015).

Temporary or superficial belief complicates the picture. In the parable of the soils, some hearers receive the word with joy but have no root and fall away under pressure ([Mark 4:16-17](#)). John records people who "believed" in Jesus in a sense, while Jesus did not entrust Himself to them because He knew what was in humanity ([John 2:23-25](#)). Simon Magus believed and was baptized, yet Peter soon told him his heart was not right before God and commanded repentance ([Acts 8:13, 20-24](#)). These passages warn against treating every use of the verb "believe" as though it automatically described persevering saving faith.

Emotion can accompany genuine faith. The Philippian jailer trembled and then rejoiced after hearing the word and believing ([Acts 16:25-34](#)). The Ethiopian official went on his way rejoicing ([Acts 8:26-39](#)). Pentecost produced conviction and urgency ([Acts 2:37-41](#)). Yet Scripture never makes emotional intensity the object of faith. A quiet believer may be genuinely trusting Christ. A highly emotional hearer may be responding to fear, music, group pressure, novelty, relief, or the charisma of a speaker.

The test is not whether the moment felt transcendent. It is whether the gospel was received and whether trust remains anchored in the biblical Christ.

This is where modern manifestation culture must be separated from biblical faith. In some New Thought and New Age systems, belief is treated as a causal force. Thoughts, words, intentions, or emotional "alignment" are said to shape reality through spiritual laws, vibration, or consciousness (Hanegraaff, 1996; Heelas, 1996). Christianized versions can substitute biblical vocabulary: "decree," "declare," "activate," "sow," or "speak it into existence." The strongest defense says that expectation, disciplined attention, goal-setting, hopeful self-talk, and verbal commitment can influence behavior. That is true at an ordinary psychological level. People often act differently when they expect improvement and organize their attention toward a goal. But psychological effects do not establish a metaphysical law by which human faith obligates reality.

Biblical faith does not have faith in faith. Jesus repeatedly directs faith toward God, His kingdom, and His own person. The centurion trusts Jesus' authority ([Matthew 8:5-13](#)). Martha is called to believe in Jesus as the resurrection and the life ([John 11:25-27](#)). Paul and Silas tell the jailer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" ([Acts 16:31](#)). The power of faith lies in the faithfulness and sufficiency of its object. A weak hand can receive a strong Savior. Conversely, intense confidence in a false promise remains false confidence.

Some prosperity and manifestation teaching appeals to [Mark 11:22-24](#), where Jesus speaks of faith, mountains, prayer, and believing that one has received. The passage is not permission to treat God as an impersonal mechanism. It begins, "Have faith in God," and the canonical context of prayer includes submission to God's will ([1 John 5:14-15](#)), Christ's own "not what I will, but what you will" ([Mark 14:36](#)), and the apostolic recognition that faithful servants can suffer, remain poor, become ill, and even die without having failed spiritually ([2 Corinthians 11:23-30](#); [Philippians 2:25-30](#); [2 Timothy 4:20](#)). Faith is confidence in God, not sovereignty over God.

Intellectual Christians face a different counterfeit. The scholar, apologist, pastor, or Bible teacher may mistake conceptual mastery for communion. One can explain the hypostatic union, defend the resurrection, parse Greek verbs, lecture on justification, and still protect pride, lust, greed, bitterness, deception, or cruelty. Paul says knowledge can puff up while love builds up ([1 Corinthians 8:1](#)). Theological competence is a stewardship, not a certificate of regeneration. Satan's temptation of Jesus even shows Scripture being quoted in service of rebellion ([Matthew 4:5-7](#)). Knowing texts is not the same as submitting to the God who speaks them.

At the other extreme, anti-intellectual spirituality says, "I do not need doctrine; I just have faith." That too is unsafe. Faith without content can attach itself to another Jesus, another spirit, or another gospel ([2 Corinthians 11:3-4](#)). The Spirit of truth does not lead believers away from the apostolic Christ. Christian faith is not a leap into meaninglessness. It is trust awakened by the gospel, grounded in God's revelation, and directed to the true Lord.

The self-examination is therefore twofold. Do I merely agree that Christianity is true, or am I resting my guilt, identity, death, future, and obedience on Christ? And is the Christ I trust the One Scripture reveals, or a spiritual projection designed to affirm my plans? Saving faith is neither cold assent nor magical confidence. It is the empty-handed reliance of a sinner who hears Christ's promise and says, in effect, "I have no righteousness, no atonement, no resurrection, and no eternal life apart from You. I am Yours."

4.4 Obedience as Evidence, Not Payment

The relationship between faith and works has generated centuries of controversy partly because different questions are easily collapsed. Paul rejects works as the basis of justification. James rejects a claim to faith that produces no obedient life. If one asks, "What can make a guilty sinner righteous before God?" the answer is not moral performance but Christ's righteousness received through faith

([Romans 3:21-28](#); [Philippians 3:8-9](#)). If one asks, "What does living faith look like when it exists?" the answer includes works produced by grace ([James 2:14-26](#)). The questions are related, but they are not identical.

Ephesians states the order with exceptional clarity. Salvation is by grace through faith, "not from works, so that no one can boast." Then the text continues: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" ([Ephesians 2:8-10](#)). Good works are excluded as the source of salvation and included as its purpose. They are not the root from which justification grows. They are fruit borne by a person made alive in Christ. To reverse the order produces legalism. To cut off the fruit produces a dead profession.

This is why the phrase "obedience as evidence" must be handled carefully. Evidence is not a second Savior. A believer should not wake every morning attempting to calculate whether yesterday's conduct crossed an invisible threshold of sufficient holiness. The righteousness by which the believer stands before God is Christ's, not a composite of Christ plus an improving moral record (Schreiner, 2015). Assurance begins objectively in God's promise and Christ's finished work. Yet the New Testament also invites self-examination and points to observable fruits as confirmations that profession and life belong together ([2 Corinthians 13:5](#); [1 John 2:3-6](#); [1 John 3:14](#)).

James's argument is often caricatured. He is not teaching that faith justifies halfway and works complete the other half. His example of Abraham refers to the same patriarch whom Paul uses to demonstrate justification by faith. James emphasizes that Abraham's later obedience in offering Isaac showed faith at work and brought faith to mature expression ([James 2:21-24](#); [Genesis 22:1-18](#)). Paul emphasizes that Abraham was counted righteous before circumcision and apart from works as the basis of acceptance ([Romans 4:1-12](#); [Genesis 15:6](#)). The two apostles attack different forms of boasting. Paul denies meritorious works; James denies inert faith.

Jesus makes fruit a recurring diagnostic category. Healthy trees bear good fruit, while diseased trees bear bad fruit ([Matthew 7:15-20](#)). The point is not that a genuine tree produces a flawless piece of fruit every moment. Fruit takes time, can be damaged, and can vary in abundance. The image concerns nature expressed in outcome. Likewise, Jesus says that remaining in Him results in fruitfulness ([John 15:1-8](#)). Obedience is not a ladder climbed to reach the vine. It is life flowing from union with the vine.

The strongest legalistic rebuttal says, "If works are necessary evidence, then salvation ultimately depends on works." That conclusion does not follow. A medical sign can evidence life without causing life. Breath does not create the person, but its absence is meaningful. In the same way, love, confession, obedience, endurance, generosity, sexual integrity, truthfulness, and the fruit of the Spirit do not cause regeneration. They are among the ways regeneration becomes visible. The causal order matters. God's grace creates the new life; the new life acts.

The strongest antinomian rebuttal says, "If you look at fruit for assurance, you are looking away from Christ." There is a legitimate warning here. Scrupulous believers can become trapped in endless self-measurement. Every imperfect motive becomes proof of damnation, and every period of dryness becomes evidence that faith was false. Scripture does not teach this kind of anxious introspection. John says he writes so that believers may know they have eternal life ([1 John 5:13](#)). Yet the same letter deliberately gives moral, doctrinal, and relational tests of profession. Looking to Christ and noticing the Spirit's work are not competitors when kept in their proper order. The believer says, "My hope is Christ alone, and I thank Him that His life is producing repentance and love in me."

Obedience must also be defined biblically rather than culturally. A congregation can confuse its traditions with God's commands and then use conformity as evidence of salvation. A man may be judged spiritual because he wears a suit, avoids certain foods, uses a preferred Bible translation, belongs to a particular political camp, or follows unwritten etiquette. A woman may be judged holy by a local dress code that exceeds Scripture. Such practices may involve wisdom or conscience, but they must not be converted into universal tests of regeneration. Chapter 14 will develop those categories

more fully. Here the principle is sufficient: only God may define the obedience by which His people's fruit is assessed.

The same correction applies to progressive forms of moral respectability. Compassion, inclusion, activism, environmental care, social justice, philanthropy, and advocacy can reflect genuine love of neighbor. They can also become substitute righteousness if detached from God's truth. A person cannot compensate for sexual immorality with charitable work, nor can another compensate for greed and cruelty with doctrinal conservatism. The fruit of the Spirit is not partisan. It includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control ([Galatians 5:22-23](#)) within a life submitted to the Lord.

Final judgment according to works also belongs in this discussion. Jesus and the apostles repeatedly speak of judgment in which deeds are brought to light ([Matthew 16:27](#); [Romans 2:6-11](#); [2 Corinthians 5:10](#); [Revelation 20:11-15](#)). These texts do not overturn justification by faith. Rather, works publicly reveal the reality and orientation of a life. The believer is not acquitted because the record has become sinless. He is in Christ, and the works produced by grace testify that faith was living rather than merely verbal. The unrepentant person's deeds expose the justice of judgment. Scholarship differs on the precise relation between justification and final judgment, but the New Testament does not permit either salvation by works or a final judgment indifferent to works (Barclay, 2015; Schreiner, 2015).

A practical diagnostic is therefore useful: when obedience costs something, what happens? It is easy to affirm Christ's lordship when His commands align with preference. The evidentiary power of obedience often appears at points of conflict: telling the truth when lying would protect reputation, refusing corruption when money is available, ending an immoral relationship, forgiving an enemy, admitting misconduct, honoring marriage vows, relinquishing dishonest gain, or refusing to retaliate. None of these purchases salvation. They reveal what the heart believes is worth trusting.

The believer should never say, "I obey, therefore Christ owes me." Nor should the professor say, "Christ saved me, therefore obedience tells us nothing." The gospel says, "Christ owes me nothing, has given me everything, and now His grace is teaching me to live as one who belongs to Him." That is why obedience is humbling evidence. Even the fruit is grace.

4.5 Holiness Without Perfectionism

The word "holiness" can sound threatening to two opposite groups. To the person making peace with sin, holiness sounds restrictive because it contradicts autonomy. To the scrupulous person, holiness can sound impossible because every remaining weakness seems to threaten salvation. Scripture refuses both reactions. "This is God's will, your sanctification" ([1 Thessalonians 4:3](#)). Believers are commanded to pursue holiness, "without which no one will see the Lord" ([Hebrews 12:14](#)). Yet the same New Testament teaches that believers who claim to have no sin deceive themselves and that sinning Christians have an Advocate with the Father ([1 John 1:8-2:2](#)). Holiness is necessary, and perfectionism is false.

Sanctification has more than one dimension. The New Testament can address Christians as already sanctified, set apart in Christ ([1 Corinthians 1:2](#); [1 Corinthians 6:11](#)), and it can command those same believers to grow in holiness. David Peterson's study of New Testament sanctification rightly emphasizes this definitive aspect: God claims a people as His possession before sanctification is reduced to a graph of moral improvement (Peterson, 1995). At the same time, progressive transformation is equally real. Believers are being transformed into Christ's image from glory to glory ([2 Corinthians 3:18](#)), are called to put sin to death by the Spirit ([Romans 8:12-13](#)), and are told to grow in grace and knowledge ([2 Peter 3:18](#)).

This distinction protects assurance. If sanctification were only progressive, a believer might ask how much progress is enough before God finally accepts him. If sanctification were only positional, a

believer might imagine that actual conduct is irrelevant. Scripture does neither. In Christ, the believer has a new status and belonging. Because of that belonging, the Spirit produces an actual transformation that remains incomplete until glorification. The justified person does not become the basis of his own justification as he matures.

Perfectionism appears in several forms. Some forms are explicitly theological, teaching that Christians can reach a state in this life in which they no longer sin. Other forms are functional rather than doctrinal. A church may officially deny sinless perfection while treating any serious struggle as proof of false conversion. A family may create such a reputation for piety that members learn to hide weakness. A ministry culture may punish confession so severely that leaders appear "victorious" only because everyone has learned secrecy. Perfectionism then produces the very hypocrisy it claims to prevent.

Scripture's most obvious obstacle to sinless perfection is its direct address to believers about ongoing sin. John includes himself with his readers: "If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves" ([1 John 1:8](#)). He immediately says his aim is that they not sin, yet if anyone does sin, Christ is the Advocate ([1 John 2:1-2](#)). Paul speaks of continuing conflict between flesh and Spirit ([Galatians 5:16-17](#)). James says "we all stumble in many ways" in the context of speech and teaching ([James 3:2](#)). The Lord's Prayer teaches disciples to ask for forgiveness ([Matthew 6:12](#)). These texts do not celebrate defeat. They assume that holiness grows in people who still need grace.

Jesus' command, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" ([Matthew 5:48](#)), must not be used against that canonical witness. In context, the command climaxes Jesus' teaching on enemy-love and the Father's indiscriminate kindness in sending sun and rain. The Greek term can carry the sense of completeness or maturity. Jesus calls disciples to the whole, undivided love that reflects the Father rather than the tribal love that embraces only friends. The command is radical and searching, but it does not authorize the claim that ordinary Christians have reached impeccability.

Some Wesleyan traditions use language of "Christian perfection" or "entire sanctification" in ways that their careful theologians distinguish from absolute sinlessness. They may emphasize perfect love, full consecration, or deliverance from willful sin while still acknowledging ignorance, infirmity, growth, and dependence on grace. Other traditions reject the terminology because they fear it overstates what Scripture promises before glorification. Fair analysis should not caricature every holiness tradition as teaching that mature believers literally cannot sin. The biblical test is not the label but the claim. Any teaching that makes confession obsolete or renders the believer beyond the possibility of moral failure has exceeded Scripture.

The opposite distortion is equally serious: using "nobody is perfect" to sanctify stagnation. The fact that believers remain imperfect does not mean all patterns are equally compatible with Christian maturity. Paul expects real change. The thief is to stop stealing and work honestly so he can share ([Ephesians 4:28](#)). The liar is to put away falsehood ([Ephesians 4:25](#)). The sexually immoral are to flee sexual immorality ([1 Corinthians 6:18](#)). The bitter are to put away malice and forgive ([Ephesians 4:31-32](#)). Sanctification may be uneven, but it is not imaginary.

Growth also resists comparison. One believer may be rescued from dramatic outward vice and show rapid visible change. Another may have been outwardly disciplined before conversion but face a long exposure of pride, self-righteousness, fear, control, or lovelessness. A recovering addict's progress may include measurable periods of sobriety interrupted by relapse and renewed treatment. A person emerging from an abusive environment may need years to learn healthy trust and boundaries. Christians should not make one testimony the template for all. God produces real fruit in actual biographies, not in standardized spiritual machines.

Holiness includes the body, mind, speech, money, sexuality, work, relationships, technology, ambition, and use of power. It is not confined to a narrow set of visible taboos. A person may avoid alcohol and be addicted to praise. One may dress conservatively and slander neighbors. One may speak loudly against

sexual sin and quietly exploit employees. Another may advocate compassion while harboring contempt for anyone who resists a preferred ideology. Holiness brings the whole life under the Lordship of Christ. Discipline belongs to this process. Hebrews describes the Father's discipline as evidence of sonship, painful in the moment but designed to yield "the peaceful fruit of righteousness" ([Hebrews 12:5-11](#)). Divine discipline should not be interpreted as the opposite of grace. A father who never corrects destructive behavior is not more loving for his silence. The believer may experience conviction, consequences, church correction, relational loss, or providential exposure as severe mercy. Such experiences do not atone for sin. They may become instruments by which God turns His child from danger.

The pastoral word to the perfectionist is therefore: stop trying to become your own acceptable righteousness. Christ is enough. Confess your remaining sin without pretending it disproves every work of grace. Receive correction without converting it into condemnation. The word to the complacent is different: stop turning imperfection into permission. Christ did not redeem you so that sin could retain a permanent, uncontested throne. Holiness without perfectionism means real transformation sustained by continual dependence on a perfect Savior.

4.6 Struggling with Sin Versus Making Peace with Sin

One of the most important pastoral distinctions in this book is the difference between struggling with sin and making peace with it. Both may involve repeated failure. Both may include conduct that is objectively serious. From the outside, the patterns can sometimes look similar. Yet spiritually they are not identical. The difference concerns the person's relation to the sin: whether it is resisted or protected, confessed or renamed, grieved or celebrated, exposed to help or hidden to preserve access, brought under Christ's authority or defended against it.

Temptation is not itself sin. Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin ([Hebrews 4:15](#)). A sexual thought that intrudes unwanted, an angry impulse that is refused, a craving experienced in recovery, a blasphemous thought arising in obsessive-compulsive distress, or a flash of envy recognized and rejected cannot simply be equated with deliberate consent. James describes desire being enticed and then, when it conceives, giving birth to sin ([James 1:14-15](#)). Moral discernment must not make tender people guilty for the mere existence of temptation.

At the same time, Scripture takes the inner life seriously. Jesus does not allow the person who avoids outward adultery while cultivating lust to declare himself innocent ([Matthew 5:27-30](#)). Hatred, pride, envy, greed, malice, and deceit matter even before they become public action ([Mark 7:20-23](#)). The distinction between temptation and sin is therefore not a loophole for feeding desire privately. The issue is what the will does with the temptation. A person can resist an unwanted thought, or deliberately return to it, nourish it, plan around it, and create conditions for its fulfillment.

The Christian life includes conflict. Paul tells believers to walk by the Spirit because the flesh desires what is against the Spirit and the Spirit what is against the flesh ([Galatians 5:16-17](#)). This conflict should not be romanticized. It is painful and can involve humiliating setbacks. But the presence of battle can itself indicate that sin's peaceable rule has been disrupted. Before grace, a person may have justified what he now hates. After grace, the same temptation may remain strong, yet its moral status has changed in the conscience. What was once home has become an enemy camp.

This is why relapse is serious but not automatically apostasy. Peter denied Jesus three times under pressure, even after declaring extraordinary loyalty ([Luke 22:31-34, 54-62](#)). His failure was grievous. Jesus did not minimize it. Yet Christ had prayed for him, Peter wept, and the risen Lord restored him ([Luke 22:32; John 21:15-19](#)). David's adultery and orchestration of Uriah's death likewise required severe prophetic confrontation and produced lasting consequences (2 Samuel 11-12). Scripture does not

preserve these stories to make serious sin safe. It preserves them to show that serious failure and genuine restoration can coexist.

Making peace with sin looks different. The person stops calling the pattern an enemy. He builds theology around preserving it. She avoids anyone likely to ask hard questions. Scripture is reinterpreted only where it conflicts with desire. Correction produces rage rather than grief. The sin is planned, budgeted, scheduled, hidden, and defended. When consequences arrive, blame is directed outward. The person may still feel occasional guilt, but guilt is managed through distraction, comparison, religious activity, or repeated reassurance rather than repentance.

No single emotional state can diagnose the heart infallibly. Some hardened people feel strong emotion, and some depressed or traumatized believers feel little. A person with certain mental health conditions may experience flattened affect or impaired emotional processing. Another may be scrupulous and feel overwhelming guilt for minor or imagined wrongs. Pastors must therefore look for patterns over time rather than demanding a particular feeling. Does the person tell the truth? Seek help? Accept boundaries? Make concrete changes? Return after failure? Take responsibility? Desire freedom? These signs do not earn grace, but they matter in discerning posture.

Accountability is often where the difference becomes visible. The struggling believer may be embarrassed, but he eventually brings darkness into light and accepts that trusted people need to know. He may install safeguards, change routines, end access to a destructive environment, seek counseling, enter treatment, disclose financial records, relinquish a device, or step back from a role. The person at peace with sin usually wants forgiveness without exposure, sympathy without boundaries, restoration without evidence, and privacy precisely where secrecy protects the pattern.

The church must not confuse surveillance with discipleship. Accountability is not permission for leaders to control every private decision or demand disclosures Scripture does not authorize. Coercive groups can exploit confession to create dependence and fear. Healthy accountability is proportionate, voluntary where possible, safeguarding-conscious, and aimed at restoration under Scripture. It does not create a human mediator who replaces Christ. It helps believers walk honestly with others who can pray, correct, encourage, and intervene when necessary ([Galatians 6:1-2](#); [James 5:16](#)).

A frequent objection says, "If I keep committing the same sin, my repentance must be fake." Sometimes repeated sin does expose false repentance, especially where no concrete resistance follows. But repetition alone does not settle the question. Jesus tells Peter to forgive repeatedly ([Matthew 18:21-22](#)), implying that repeated offenses can occur within relationships where forgiveness remains relevant. Some entrenched habits involve conditioned cues, withdrawal, learned coping, trauma, social networks, and bodily dependence. Genuine repentance in such cases may need to become more intelligent, structured, and communal rather than simply more emotional.

Another objection says, "If God knows I am weak, then my repeated sin is simply part of being human." Weakness is real, but grace does not teach resignation. Paul does not say, "The flesh is strong, therefore obey it." He says, "Walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh" ([Galatians 5:16](#)). He tells believers to make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires ([Romans 13:14](#)). A person who knows a recurring vulnerability should therefore take the vulnerability more seriously, not less. Wisdom may require distance from triggers, financial limits, supervision, therapy, or changes in relationships and routines.

The decisive contrast is not between "people who fail" and "people who never fail." It is between two directions of allegiance. The Christian may be knocked down while running toward Christ. The false professor may be walking calmly away while pointing to a certificate that says he once began the race. The struggling believer should hear hope: Christ's advocacy is for sinners who come into the light. The complacent believer should hear warning: the grace of Christ is not a peace treaty with what crucified Him.

This distinction should pierce rather than merely classify. Do not call a sin an "ongoing struggle" simply because you still feel guilty after choosing it. Ask whether you are starving the sin or feeding it, exposing it or engineering privacy for it, receiving correction or rehearsing defenses. The believer may fall in battle; the danger is laying down the weapons and calling surrender peace. Christ does not despise the wounded fighter, but He will not bless the treaty by which His professed servant agrees to coexist comfortably with rebellion.

4.7 Habitual and Deliberate Sin

The language of "habitual sin" is common in Christian preaching, but it can become imprecise. Every repeated sin is habitual in some sense, yet Scripture distinguishes different kinds of patterns: weakness that is repeatedly resisted, ignorance corrected over time, entrenched habits that require sustained mortification, deliberate schemes of rebellion, and apostasy in which Christ Himself is repudiated. Pastoral care becomes dangerous when all repeated failure is treated as equivalent or when every deliberate act is interpreted as proof that regeneration is impossible.

First John creates the interpretive pressure. The same letter that tells believers not to claim sinlessness and directs sinning Christians to an Advocate also says that those who remain in Christ do not continue in sin and that God's children are distinguished from the devil's children by their relation to righteousness and love ([1 John 1:8-2:2](#); [1 John 3:4-10](#)). Some interpreters have tried to solve the tension almost entirely through the Greek present tense, arguing that John means "keep on practicing" sin habitually rather than committing any act. The grammatical observation may contribute, but it should not carry more weight than it can bear. John's argument is broader: new birth establishes an incompatibility between belonging to God and sin as an accepted way of life. The born-again person can sin, but cannot make sin the defining, unchallenged principle of life without contradicting the profession of new birth (Kruse, 2000; Yarbrough, 2008).

This is why the category "pattern" matters more than a mechanical count. Scripture does not tell us that a believer who repeats the same offense exactly three, ten, or fifty times is thereby proven unregenerate. Nor does it permit a person to preserve a repeated pattern indefinitely by saying, "There is no numerical threshold." The questions are qualitative: Is the sin being confessed or concealed? Is access being reduced or protected? Are concrete steps being taken? Is correction received? Is the conscience becoming softer or harder? Is the person moving toward light, even slowly, or building a life in which darkness can continue undisturbed?

Deliberateness also requires careful handling. Most sins include some degree of willing participation. If "deliberate sin" simply meant any sin committed knowingly, then few believers could have assurance. David knew adultery and murder were wrong. Peter knew denying Jesus was wrong. The Corinthians knowingly tolerated serious disorder. Yet Scripture still speaks of repentance, discipline, restoration, and forgiveness. The phrase in [Hebrews 10:26](#) about sinning deliberately must therefore be read in context rather than converted into a rule that one knowingly chosen act makes forgiveness impossible.

Hebrews 10 addresses people tempted to abandon the confession of Christ and return from the once-for-all sacrifice to a posture in which no sacrifice for sins remains because the only effective sacrifice has been rejected. The surrounding paragraph speaks of trampling the Son of God, profaning the blood of the covenant, and insulting the Spirit of grace ([Hebrews 10:26-31](#)). The warning is terrifying, but its center is apostate repudiation, not the claim that every conscious failure is the unpardonable sin (Cockerill, 2012). That distinction protects the warning from trivialization and protects repentant sinners from despair.

Nevertheless, deliberate planning of sin is spiritually serious. Proverbs describes people who "cannot sleep unless they have done what is evil" ([Proverbs 4:16](#)). Micah condemns those who devise wickedness on their beds and carry it out when morning comes because it is in their power ([Micah 2:1](#)). Paul warns against making provision for the flesh ([Romans 13:14](#)). The person who strategically

preserves opportunities for sin while asking God to forgive in advance is not displaying mature confidence in grace. He is rehearsing presumption.

Secrecy strengthens such patterns because concealed sin builds a private world in which correction cannot enter. David describes the wasting effect of silence before confession in [Psalm 32:3-5](#). Proverbs says that the one who conceals transgressions will not prosper, while the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy ([Proverbs 28:13](#)). Modern technology can make concealment easier. Secret accounts, encrypted messaging, private browsing, hidden payment systems, alternate identities, and endless access to sexual or gambling content can create ecosystems of temptation. Technology is not the root of sin, but design features can lower friction and increase privacy. Wisdom may require radical limits rather than pious confidence in willpower.

Rationalization is another mechanism of hardening. The person changes the label before changing the life. Greed becomes ambition. Gossip becomes concern. Pornography becomes stress relief. Manipulation becomes leadership. Bitterness becomes discernment. Adultery becomes authenticity. Envy becomes justice. Dishonest accounting becomes survival. Excess becomes self-care. Idolatry becomes culture. Some reframing may accurately correct an unjust moral label, and Christians should be willing to admit when tradition has called something sin that Scripture does not forbid. But when clear biblical commands are repeatedly renamed in order to preserve desire, language becomes a shield against repentance.

Conscience can become distorted in two directions. It can be weak and overactive, condemning lawful things as though they were sinful ([Romans 14:1-23](#); [1 Corinthians 8:7-13](#)). It can also become defiled or seared through persistent rejection of truth ([Titus 1:15](#); [1 Timothy 4:2](#)). Therefore, "my conscience does not bother me" is not a final moral argument. Conscience must be formed by Scripture. A calm conscience can be a gift, or it can be the result of repeated self-justification. A troubled conscience can be genuine conviction, or it can be misinformed. Christian maturity does not enthrone conscience; it trains conscience under God's Word.

Church discipline belongs here because private sin can become public danger. Jesus gives a process for confronting a professing believer who sins and refuses to listen, moving from private correction to wider ecclesial involvement when necessary ([Matthew 18:15-20](#)). Paul commands the Corinthian church to address notorious sexual immorality rather than boast of tolerance ([1 Corinthians 5:1-13](#)). Discipline is not vengeance. Its aims include truth, protection of the church, warning, and restoration. Paul can later urge forgiveness and comfort toward a disciplined offender who has been sufficiently grieved, lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow ([2 Corinthians 2:5-11](#)). Biblical discipline is neither indulgence nor destruction.

The pastoral significance of habitual sin is therefore real but not simplistic. A long-standing pattern may expose false assurance. It may also expose a genuine believer who has been poorly disciplined, isolated, addicted, traumatized, or unwilling to take sufficiently serious measures. The church should not pronounce final judgment on the soul where Scripture does not give omniscience. It should, however, refuse cheap reassurance. A person in ongoing adultery, fraud, violence, idolatry, exploitation, or other clear rebellion should not be told, "Do not worry, you prayed a prayer years ago." He should be called to repentance, faith, truth, and concrete change.

The test is not whether the sinner can produce a spotless week. It is whether the sinner is willing to come into the light. Habitual sin gains power through repetition, but grace can also establish new habits of truth, prayer, accountability, service, restitution, restraint, and worship. Sanctification often looks less like one dramatic moment and more like a new pattern slowly displacing an old one. The Christian does not boast in the speed of change. He boasts that Christ has not left him alone with the old master.

There is a point at which the language of "struggle" can become dishonest. If you are deliberately arranging secrecy, money, time, travel, devices, friendships, or private access so that the sin can continue, while asking others to reassure you that grace covers it, you are not merely being overtaken

by weakness; you are making provision for the flesh. Scripture says, "make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires" ([Romans 13:14](#)). The loving word at that point is not soothing reassurance but repentance: dismantle the provision, bring the pattern into the light, accept accountability, and flee to Christ.

4.8 Backsliding, Addiction, and Spiritual Warfare

"Backsliding" is a biblical-sounding word that is used more often in church vocabulary than in the New Testament itself. The Old Testament repeatedly describes Israel as turning back from covenant faithfulness, while the New Testament more often speaks of drifting, wandering, stumbling, being overtaken, hardening, falling away, or returning to former patterns. In ordinary pastoral speech, backsliding can usefully describe serious regression in a professing Christian without deciding in advance whether that regression reveals temporary disobedience, false profession, or final apostasy. The word should warn without pretending to know more than the evidence allows.

A believer can regress. The Galatians began by the Spirit and were tempted to return to a system of fleshly confidence ([Galatians 3:1-3](#)). The Corinthians could be gifted and yet deeply immature, divided, sexually disordered, and compromised ([1 Corinthians 1:4-7](#); [1 Corinthians 3:1-3](#); [1 Corinthians 5:1-2](#)). Peter, even after Pentecost, behaved hypocritically under social pressure and required Paul's public correction ([Galatians 2:11-14](#)). These texts do not make regression safe. They show why the church needs correction, discipline, patience, and restoration rather than a doctrine that mature believers move only upward.

Addiction intensifies the need for careful categories. Clinical medicine uses "substance use disorder" and related diagnoses to describe patterns in which substance use becomes impaired, compulsive, and harmful. The American Society of Addiction Medicine describes addiction as a treatable chronic medical disease involving complex interactions among brain processes, genetics, environment, and life experience, with compulsive substance use or behaviors continuing despite harmful consequences (American Society of Addiction Medicine, 2019). This clinical description is important because it rejects the cruel assumption that every addicted person can simply stop immediately through willpower. It also helps explain why relapse risk, craving, conditioned cues, withdrawal, co-occurring disorders, and social context require sustained treatment.

A Christian account should neither deny nor absolutize the medical model. Medicine can describe mechanisms, vulnerabilities, diagnoses, and evidence-based interventions. It does not by itself settle every theological question about worship, agency, responsibility, guilt, or repentance. A person may be genuinely impaired by dependence and still make morally meaningful choices within that impairment. Another person's substance exposure may have begun through coercion, prescribed treatment, trauma coping, social pressure, or experimentation. Moral responsibility can be real without being identical in every case. The church serves truth best when it refuses both "addiction is only sin" and "addiction removes all responsibility."

Contemporary treatment evidence also matters. The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration states that many substance use disorders respond to combinations of medications, behavioral therapies, counseling, and recovery supports, tailored to the individual's needs (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2025). Christians should not oppose appropriate medication or professional treatment as though seeking medical help revealed deficient faith. Luke was a physician. Bodily care belongs within providence. Prayer, Scripture, community, and repentance do not become less spiritual because a person also receives clinically indicated treatment.

This principle should be applied beyond substances with discernment. Gambling, pornography, compulsive sexual behavior, digital overuse, eating-related behaviors, and other repetitive patterns can involve strong conditioning and psychological reinforcement, but not every troublesome habit should be casually diagnosed as an addiction. Clinical terminology should be used by qualified professionals

where diagnosis is relevant. Pastors can name moral and spiritual dimensions without pretending to be clinicians, and clinicians can treat symptoms without being asked to replace the church's work of discipleship.

Relapse requires both seriousness and hope. In recovery medicine, relapse may occur without proving treatment was meaningless. In Christian discipleship, relapse is never morally neutral, but it should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that God has abandoned the struggler. The right response is immediate truthfulness and renewed intervention. What happened? Which cues, relationships, emotional states, opportunities, beliefs, or environmental conditions were present? Were treatment and accountability abandoned? What needs to change now? Repentance learns. It does not merely repeat sorrow while preserving the same architecture of failure.

The church also needs a theology of spiritual warfare that is neither superstitious nor secularized. Scripture affirms the reality of Satan and demonic powers. Believers are told to stand against the schemes of the devil, taking up the armor of God in truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, the Word, and prayer ([Ephesians 6:10-18](#)). Peter warns that the devil prowls like a roaring lion and commands believers to resist him, firm in the faith ([1 Peter 5:8-9](#)). James joins submission to God with resistance to the devil ([James 4:7](#)). Spiritual warfare is real.

Yet spiritual warfare does not erase personal responsibility. Eve was deceived, but Scripture still treats human rebellion as guilt. Judas was influenced by Satan, but Judas remained morally accountable. Ananias was asked why Satan filled his heart to lie, but Peter still held him responsible for the lie ([Acts 5:3-4](#)). "The devil made me do it" is not a biblical defense. The devil tempts, deceives, accuses, and exploits weakness. He does not become a substitute sinner who absorbs our agency.

The opposite error is to blame every addiction, illness, recurring thought, or psychological symptom on a demon. Scripture does record demonic affliction, but it does not teach that every bodily or mental disorder is demonic. Jesus distinguishes sickness and demonization in His ministry rather than collapsing them into one category ([Matthew 4:24](#)). Paul gives Timothy practical counsel concerning his stomach and frequent illnesses without proposing deliverance ([1 Timothy 5:23](#)). Epaphroditus nearly died from illness and is commended, not accused of spiritual failure ([Philippians 2:25-30](#)). A church that treats every clinical problem as demon possession can delay appropriate care and deepen shame.

Deliverance ministry becomes particularly dangerous when it promises instant freedom while bypassing repentance, treatment, restitution, or long-term discipleship. A dramatic session may produce powerful emotion, but emotion is not the same as durable transformation. Jesus' warning about an unclean spirit returning to an "empty" house demonstrates at minimum that mere removal without a reordered life is not the whole picture ([Matthew 12:43-45](#)). The New Testament pattern is not dependence on a specialist who repeatedly performs spiritual techniques. It is submission to God, resistance to the devil, renewal of the mind, putting off the old self, putting on the new, prayer, truth, community, and Spirit-enabled obedience ([Ephesians 4:20-32](#); [Romans 12:1-2](#)).

New Age approaches offer a different spiritual diagnosis. Addiction or destructive patterns may be framed as blocked energy, karmic residue, ancestral vibration, low consciousness, attachment to ego, or failure to manifest a higher self. Some practices may incidentally include helpful elements such as breathing, attention, community, or habit awareness. The theological frame, however, can displace the Creator, moral guilt, the cross, and the personal Holy Spirit. Christian recovery is not awakening the divine within. It is learning to live as a redeemed creature under Christ, using every lawful means of grace and care God provides.

For families, the distinction between compassion and enabling is critical. Love does not fund the addiction, conceal violence, repeatedly rescue someone from lawful consequences, or expose children to danger in the name of forgiveness. Boundaries may be acts of love. Separation may be necessary for safety. Reporting may be morally and legally required. A spouse or parent is not obligated to become

the sole treatment system for another adult. Churches should support affected families, not pressure them to absorb unlimited harm as proof of Christian grace.

The believer who is backsliding or addicted should therefore hear neither sentimental reassurance nor contempt. Hear the gospel clearly: your bondage is serious, but Christ is not weak. Do not hide. Seek medical and psychological help where needed. Seek mature pastoral accountability. Remove access to what destroys you. Accept consequences. Repair harm where possible. Pray, read Scripture, participate in the church, and keep returning to Christ. Recovery may be long, but length does not make grace absent. The question is whether grace is teaching you to walk toward freedom rather than teaching you to rename bondage as peace.

4.9 Confession, Restoration, and Perseverance

Confession is the language of a person who has stopped defending darkness. It is not information supplied to an uninformed God. "Before a word is on my tongue, you know all about it" ([Psalm 139:4](#)). Confession is agreement with God's truth, the relinquishing of self-justification, and the opening of what secrecy has tried to close. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" ([1 John 1:9](#)). The ground of that forgiveness is not the eloquence of confession but the faithfulness and justice of God in Christ.

Private sin should ordinarily be confessed to God, and where another person has been harmed, truth requires appropriate confession and reconciliation with that person. James also commends mutual confession and prayer among believers ([James 5:16](#)). Yet the Bible does not command the public disclosure of every private failure to an entire congregation. Public confession may be appropriate when the sin was public, when public deception must be corrected, or when leadership accountability requires it. Even then, details should be governed by truth, safeguarding, dignity, and the legitimate privacy of victims. Public confession is not spiritual theater.

Restoration is one of the gospel's beautiful words, but it too requires distinctions. Galatians instructs spiritual believers to restore someone caught in wrongdoing with gentleness while watching themselves against temptation ([Galatians 6:1](#)). James says that turning a wanderer back from error is an act of extraordinary mercy ([James 5:19-20](#)). Jesus restored Peter after denial and recommissioned him to care for the flock ([John 21:15-19](#)). The church should therefore be a community where genuine repentance can lead to real restoration rather than permanent social death.

Restoration to Christ, restoration to fellowship, restoration of trust, and restoration to office are not identical. God may fully forgive a person while earthly consequences remain. A criminal act may still require punishment. A marriage may not be immediately safe to resume. Financial authority may need to be removed. A pastor who has abused power or violated leadership qualifications may need to leave office permanently or for an extended period even if repentance is credible. The pastoral question is not, "Has God forgiven?" alone. It is also, "What does love, justice, qualification, safety, and truthful stewardship require now?" ([1 Timothy 3:1-7](#); [Titus 1:5-9](#)).

This distinction protects both grace and the vulnerable. A culture of permanent exclusion can deny the gospel's power to restore sinners. A culture of instant platform restoration can turn forgiveness into a weapon against victims. The repentant offender should not demand reinstatement as proof that others have forgiven. True repentance is willing to serve without status and to accept that trust is rebuilt slowly, if at all. The church's first obligation is not to preserve a gifted leader's career but to honor Christ and protect His people.

Perseverance expands restoration across the whole Christian life. Salvation is not a momentary spiritual transaction followed by autonomous living. Jesus says that His sheep hear His voice and follow Him, and He gives them eternal life ([John 10:27-30](#)). Paul describes the Christian life as a race requiring

endurance ([1 Corinthians 9:24-27](#); [2 Timothy 4:7-8](#)). Hebrews calls believers to run with endurance, fixing their eyes on Jesus ([Hebrews 12:1-2](#)). Perseverance is continuing trust, not heroic self-reliance.

The New Testament repeatedly grounds perseverance in God's preserving action. Jesus promises that no one will snatch His sheep from His hand or the Father's hand ([John 10:27-30](#)). Paul is confident that the One who began a good work will carry it to completion ([Philippians 1:6](#)). Peter says believers are guarded by God's power through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed ([1 Peter 1:3-5](#)). Jude ends with praise to the One able to protect believers from stumbling and present them blameless with great joy ([Jude 24-25](#)). Assurance is possible because perseverance is not sustained by the unaided will.

Yet the means of preservation include exhortation, warning, prayer, church fellowship, discipline, sacrament or ordinance, Scripture, and mutual encouragement. Hebrews tells believers to encourage one another daily so that none is hardened by sin's deception ([Hebrews 3:12-14](#)). The author does not reason, "If God preserves, exhortation is unnecessary." Divine preservation works through God-appointed means. The warning sign on a cliff does not imply that the road authority has failed to protect travelers. It is part of the protection.

This helps explain why perseverance should not be confused with mere persistence in religious identity. A person can remain on a church roll while abandoning Christ in practice. Another may continue using Christian language while no longer believing the gospel. Perseverance means remaining in the faith once delivered, continuing to come to Christ, and enduring in a life of repentance. It is not simply the passage of time since a conversion event.

Confession is therefore a practice of perseverance. The person who confesses is not restarting salvation from zero. He is walking in the light. The person who receives correction is not proving grace failed. He is being preserved through truth. The person who returns after a fall is not insulting Christ's sufficiency. He is using the road Christ opened. The devil's accusation says, "You failed, therefore hide from God." The gospel says, "You failed, therefore come to the Advocate, confess, receive cleansing, and walk again."

Perseverance also includes endurance through suffering, not merely resistance to moral temptation. Some people interpret hardship as evidence that faith has failed. Prosperity teaching can intensify this error by suggesting that sufficient faith should produce health, wealth, ease, or visible victory. The New Testament instead treats suffering as compatible with sonship and sometimes as a context for tested faith ([Romans 5:1-5](#); [James 1:2-4](#); [1 Peter 1:6-9](#)). A believer who remains faithful through grief, persecution, illness, poverty, disappointment, or unanswered prayer may be displaying perseverance more deeply than a person whose life appears spectacularly successful.

The author has elsewhere warned against making ease an idol because a Christianity organized around comfort becomes fragile when obedience costs something (Sangwa, 2026e). This belongs directly to perseverance. Jesus does not promise a discipleship free of crosses. He calls followers to deny self, take up the cross, and follow ([Mark 8:34-38](#)). The narrow road is not proven true by its difficulty, but genuine discipleship cannot make comfort the final judge of whether Christ should be obeyed.

The pastoral pattern is therefore simple but demanding. Confess quickly. Receive forgiveness gratefully. Repair harm wisely. Accept discipline humbly. Re-enter fellowship truthfully. Refuse the lie that one failure defines the whole story. Refuse the opposite lie that repeated rebellion does not matter. Keep looking to Jesus. Perseverance is not the achievement of people who never needed restoration. It is the continuing life of people whom the preserving Christ repeatedly brings back into the light.

4.10 Apostasy and the Security of the Believer

Few doctrines require more pastoral precision than the security of the believer because the New Testament gives two mutually necessary emphases within one inspired apostolic witness: magnificent promises of God's keeping power and severe warnings against falling away. Christians have differed

over how these strands should be systematized. The disagreement should not be hidden, and it should not be allowed to destroy the practical force of either set of texts. A theology that quotes only promises can create presumption. A theology that quotes only warnings can create chronic fear. Scripture gives both because assurance and watchfulness belong together.

Apostasy should first be distinguished from ordinary failure, doubt, spiritual dryness, or temporary regression. In biblical usage, apostasy involves a decisive turning away from the faith, the covenant confession, or the Lord who has been professed. Peter's denial was terrible, but he returned. Thomas doubted the resurrection testimony, but confessed Jesus as Lord and God when confronted with the risen Christ ([John 20:24-29](#)). The Galatians were in serious doctrinal danger, but Paul labored for their recovery ([Galatians 4:19-20](#)). Christians should therefore not call every season of weakness "apostasy." The term is appropriately reserved for abandonment or repudiation of the faith at a fundamental level.

The promises of preservation are formidable. Jesus says that those who come to Him will never be cast out and that He will lose none of those the Father has given Him but raise them at the last day ([John 6:37-40](#)). He describes His sheep as hearing His voice, being known by Him, following Him, receiving eternal life, never perishing, and being secure in His and the Father's hands ([John 10:27-30](#)). Paul moves from justification to glorification in a chain of divine action and then declares that nothing in all creation can separate believers from the love of God in Christ ([Romans 8:28-39](#)). Peter says believers are guarded by God's power through faith ([1 Peter 1:3-5](#)). These promises are not fragile or secondary. The Christian's security rests fundamentally in God's faithfulness, not in the perfection of human grip.

The warnings are equally serious. Jesus warns that some receive the word with joy but fall away when pressure comes ([Mark 4:16-17](#)). Paul tells the Corinthians to learn from Israel's wilderness failures and warns, "Whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall" ([1 Corinthians 10:1-12](#)). He tells Gentile believers in Romans not to become arrogant but to stand by faith and heed God's kindness and severity ([Romans 11:17-22](#)). Hebrews repeatedly warns against drifting, developing an evil unbelieving heart, falling away, and deliberately repudiating the Son after receiving profound covenant blessings ([Hebrews 2:1-4](#); [Hebrews 3:7-14](#); [Hebrews 6:4-8](#); [Hebrews 10:26-39](#)). These are not literary decorations.

[Hebrews 6:4-6](#) is especially debated. The people described have been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, tasted God's good word and the powers of the coming age, and then fallen away. Reformed interpreters have offered several readings: the language may describe profound covenant participation short of regeneration, or the warning may be a divinely effective means by which the elect persevere, or the passage may describe the impossibility of restoring a particular apostate posture without implying that the regenerate finally perish. Wesleyan-Arminian interpreters commonly argue that the description is most naturally read of genuine believers who can apostatize and forfeit saving participation. Both sides recognize the severity of the warning, even while locating it differently in their systems (Cockerill, 2012; Marshall, 1969; Schreiner & Caneday, 2001).

[Hebrews 10:26-31](#) carries similar weight. As noted earlier, the context concerns a willful repudiation of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice, described as trampling the Son of God, profaning covenant blood, and insulting the Spirit of grace. Reformed interpreters generally understand such apostasy as revealing that a person's covenant participation was not accompanied by final saving union, or as a warning through which genuine believers are preserved. Conditional-security traditions regard it as a real possibility for those who had genuinely participated in salvation. The exegetical debate is substantial. What no responsible reading should do is transform the passage into a harmless hypothetical or, at the opposite extreme, tell a repentant Christian that one knowingly committed sin has made restoration impossible.

First John adds another dimension. "They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us" ([1 John 2:19](#)). Reformed theology has often appealed to this as evidence that final apostasy reveals the absence of true saving belonging from the beginning. The verse certainly says that a specific group's departure manifested a deeper non-belonging. Yet conditional-security interpreters caution against turning one community crisis into an

exhaustive rule for every warning passage. Again, the systematic synthesis differs, but the pastoral lesson is clear: departure from apostolic Christ and truth is not spiritually neutral.

The Reformed doctrine commonly called the perseverance of the saints is often misunderstood as though it meant "a person who once made a profession can live however he wishes and is guaranteed heaven." Historic Reformed confessions say the opposite. The Westminster Confession teaches that those truly effectually called and sanctified by God's Spirit will not totally or finally fall from grace, while also acknowledging that believers can fall into grievous sins, incur God's fatherly displeasure, damage their graces and comforts, scandalize others, and experience temporal judgments (Westminster Assembly, 1647, ch. 17). Perseverance is God's preservation of the regenerate through continuing faith, not the unconditional security of every remembered religious decision.

Wesleyan and Arminian traditions place greater emphasis on the warnings as describing a genuine possibility that a believer may finally turn from saving faith. Their strongest argument is that warning language loses its natural force if the threatened outcome is impossible for every genuine addressee. They also point to texts that condition final participation on continuing in faith ([Colossians 1:21-23](#); [Hebrews 3:14](#)) and to branches connected to Christ that do not remain and are removed ([John 15:1-6](#)). Such traditions typically do not teach that salvation is lost whenever a believer commits a serious sin. The concern is persevering unbelief or apostasy, not the fragility of grace under ordinary weakness (Marshall, 1969; Oropeza, 2000).

The strongest Reformed response is that the warnings are real precisely because God uses them as means to keep His people persevering. Parents can truthfully warn children about a cliff while also successfully protecting them from falling. Scripture addresses believers covenantally and summons them to endurance without requiring the conclusion that God's saving decree fails. Moreover, promises such as [John 6:37-40](#), [John 10:27-30](#), and [Romans 8:28-39](#) appear to ground final security in divine action. Schreiner and Caneday (2001) argue that warnings and promises function together as means by which genuine faith perseveres.

The strongest conditional-security response is that a warning against an impossible event risks becoming less than its plain force, and that some texts describe persons in language difficult to reduce to merely external association. They emphasize that Scripture does not invite believers to infer security from a hidden decree but to continue trusting Christ. Marshall (1969) therefore understands preservation as genuinely powerful while insisting that New Testament warnings must remain real calls to persevering faith.

This book need not resolve every historical disagreement in order to guard the soul from two errors. First, no believer should be taught that salvation depends on maintaining a flawless performance. Christ's keeping power is real. He receives the repentant, intercedes for His people, disciplines His children, and is able to keep them. Second, no professing Christian should be taught that present unbelief, repudiation of Christ, or settled rebellion is spiritually irrelevant because of a past event. The New Testament never instructs apostates to comfort themselves with a conversion date. It calls people to believe, continue, endure, return, and hold fast.

The relationship between security and perseverance can therefore be stated without a slogan: biblical assurance belongs to those who are presently resting in Christ, and the God who saves is powerfully committed to preserving His people in persevering faith. This statement does not answer every systematic question, but it follows the New Testament's pastoral grammar. Jesus' sheep are secure, and they hear His voice and follow Him ([John 10:27-30](#)). Believers are guarded by God's power, and that guarding is "through faith" ([1 Peter 1:5](#)). Those who share in Christ are told to hold their original confidence firm to the end ([Hebrews 3:14](#)). Divine keeping and human perseverance are not rivals.

Tender consciences need this synthesis. A believer who fears apostasy precisely because he loves Christ, confesses sin, and wants to remain should not assume that anxiety proves abandonment. The promises are for him. Christ is not waiting for one weak moment to eject a child who comes for mercy. "Whoever

comes to me I will never cast out" remains true ([John 6:37](#)). At the same time, someone who deliberately renounces Christ should not be reassured by a doctrine he no longer believes. The warnings are for him. Return to the living God while the call "Today, if you hear his voice" still sounds ([Hebrews 3:7-15](#)).

The church should therefore preach security with reverence. Assurance is not arrogance because its object is Christ. Watchfulness is not legalism because the Savior Himself commands it. The believer does not stay awake because Christ is unreliable. He stays awake because Christ is Lord, sin is deceptive, the world is seductive, the devil opposes, and the promised inheritance is precious. Security that produces sleep in rebellion is not the New Testament's security. Security that produces grateful endurance is.

4.11 The Misuse of "Once Saved, Always Saved"

"Once saved, always saved" can mean different things, which is why the slogan can either summarize a serious doctrine or conceal a serious error. If it means that all whom God truly regenerates, justifies, and unites to Christ will be preserved by His power and brought safely to glory, it functions as popular shorthand for one historic account of perseverance. If it means that anyone who once prayed a prayer, walked an aisle, was baptized, felt converted, or sincerely believed for a season is guaranteed final salvation regardless of later unbelief, apostasy, or settled rebellion, it has moved beyond what Scripture promises.

The word "saved" is often doing hidden work in the slogan. How do we know that the person to whom it is applied was truly regenerate? The preceding chapter showed why no isolated rite, feeling, decision, or profession can answer infallibly. Scripture itself includes hearers who receive the word joyfully without root, people who associate with the covenant community and later depart, and workers who invoke Jesus' name but are not known by Him ([Mark 4:16-17](#); [1 John 2:19](#); [Matthew 7:21-23](#)). Therefore, the sentence "once saved, always saved" cannot be used to bypass the prior question of whether saving faith was ever present.

The misuse often appears pastorally after a person abandons Christian faith. A concerned parent may say, "He accepted Jesus at age ten, so even though he now denies Christ completely, I know he is saved." The statement may arise from love and grief, but Scripture does not authorize us to certify final safety on the basis of a childhood event while ignoring adult repudiation. The loving response is not despair, but prayer and gospel witness. We should plead for return, not convert the past memory into a guarantee God has not given.

Another misuse appears inside ongoing rebellion. A professing believer may say, "I am eternally secure, so my affair, fraud, pornography, bitterness, occult involvement, drunkenness, violence, or refusal to forgive cannot affect my salvation." The point is not that each listed sin automatically proves apostasy. The point is that security is being used to silence repentance. Paul specifically condemns reasoning that makes grace an opportunity for the flesh ([Romans 6:1-14](#); [Galatians 5:13](#)). John refuses a claimed knowledge of God that is contradicted by settled disobedience ([1 John 2:3-6](#)).

The strongest defense of the slogan is pastoral. Believers need stability. If every sin can cancel salvation, assurance collapses and fear becomes the engine of obedience. The believer may repeatedly "get saved" after every failure, never resting in Christ's finished work. This defense is correct to protect the completeness of justification and the Father's keeping love. The answer, however, is not to relocate assurance into a past human act. It is to ground assurance in Christ's objective work and present promise. "I am safe because I once did the right thing" is weaker than "I am safe because the crucified and risen Christ is faithful, I am trusting Him, and He is preserving me."

Historic perseverance theology itself rejects carnal security. The Westminster Confession's doctrine of perseverance, as noted above, explicitly allows for grievous falls and severe fatherly discipline while denying final loss for the truly regenerate (Westminster Assembly, 1647, ch. 17). Reformed theologians have therefore distinguished perseverance from "eternal security" when the latter is used to mean an

unconditional guarantee attached to a one-time profession irrespective of enduring faith. Even within traditions that affirm unconditional preservation, saving faith is expected to persevere because God preserves it.

Some modern approaches try to protect assurance by sharply separating "believer" from "disciple," suggesting that eternal life may be securely possessed even where subsequent discipleship collapses and that warnings primarily concern rewards, fellowship, or temporal consequences. This view rightly insists that discipleship costs cannot become entrance fees for justification. Yet when the separation becomes so strong that enduring unbelief and repudiation of Christ carry no eschatological significance, it struggles with passages where perseverance is connected to final salvation, where dead faith is denied saving value, and where departure exposes false belonging ([James 2:14-26](#); [Hebrews 3:12-14](#); [Colossians 1:21-23](#); [1 John 2:19](#)). The New Testament distinguishes justification from sanctification without separating the justified person from Christ's lordship.

A further problem with the slogan is that it can shift attention from the Savior to the metaphysics of one's past state. The anxious question becomes, "Was I truly saved at the exact moment I was twelve?" rather than, "Am I now trusting Christ?" The believer then performs an impossible archaeological excavation of memory. Did I understand enough? Was I sincere enough? Were my emotions correct? Scripture gives a better center. "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" ([1 John 5:13](#)). The text addresses present believers with present assurance.

This does not mean a believer is saved anew every morning. The continuity lies in Christ, His covenant faithfulness, His Spirit, and the life He sustains. The Christian can look back gratefully to conversion and baptism. But memory serves faith; it does not replace it. A wedding anniversary is meaningful because a marriage exists now. A certificate from decades ago cannot substitute for a spouse who has been abandoned. In a similar way, conversion testimony is precious when it points to a living relation with Christ.

The misuse of "once saved, always saved" should therefore be corrected without frightening genuine believers away from assurance. The corrective is not "once saved, probably lost." It is: Christ saves completely, Christ keeps powerfully, Christ disciplines lovingly, and Christ's people persevere in faith because they are kept by grace. If you have fallen, return. If you are fighting, do not despair. If you are hiding, come into light. If you have renounced Christ, do not trust a slogan. Hear His call again and come.

4.12 "Everyone Sins" as an Excuse

"Everyone sins" is true. It is also one of the most abused true sentences in Christian moral speech. Paul says all have sinned and fall short of God's glory ([Romans 3:23](#)). John says that anyone claiming to have no sin deceives himself ([1 John 1:8](#)). James says we all stumble in many ways ([James 3:2](#)). These texts demolish self-righteousness. They place the moralist, the addict, the preacher, the respectable parent, the activist, the scholar, and the notorious offender under the same need for grace. But none of them says, "Because everyone sins, no one should repent."

[Romans 3:23](#) belongs to Paul's argument that every mouth is stopped and sinners are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption in Christ ([Romans 3:19-26](#)). Its purpose is to remove boasting and drive sinners to Christ, not to normalize ongoing disobedience. Paul who writes "all have sinned" is the same Paul who asks whether believers should continue in sin and answers, "Absolutely not!" ([Romans 6:1-2](#)). To use Romans 3 as permission for Romans 6 is to make Paul contradict himself.

First John makes the same move. "If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves" is followed by confession and cleansing, then by the stated purpose "I am writing you these things so that you may not sin" ([1 John 1:8-2:1](#)). The apostle combines realism and aspiration. Christians still sin, therefore they

confess. Christians have an Advocate, therefore they do not despair. Christians belong to the Holy One, therefore they do not make continuing sin the goal. Grace provides a way out of both denial and resignation.

The excuse often functions through moral comparison. "Everyone lies." "Every marriage has problems." "Every leader bends rules." "Every man struggles with pornography." "Everyone gets angry." "Every business cuts corners." Generalization reduces conviction by making the sin appear inevitable and therefore less blameworthy. Even when the statistical claim is partly true, the moral conclusion does not follow. Widespread corruption does not turn bribery into integrity. Common lust does not turn objectification into holiness. Frequent gossip does not make slander loving.

Normalization can become communal. A workplace may treat falsified expenses as ordinary. A ministry may treat manipulation as leadership. A peer group may treat sexual immorality as adulthood. A family may treat rage as personality. A church may treat prejudice as tradition. Once the group shares the excuse, individual conscience becomes easier to silence. Isaiah's warning against calling evil good and good evil remains relevant because moral language can be collectively reversed ([Isaiah 5:20](#)). Popularity changes social pressure, not God's character.

The sentence "everyone sins" can also be used against victims. An abusive person exposed for serious harm may say, "We are all sinners; why are you judging me?" The theological truth of universal sin is then weaponized to erase moral distinctions. Scripture does not do this. Jesus can condemn hypocritical judgment while still commanding moral discernment ([Matthew 7:1-5, 15-20](#)). Paul can say all are justified only by grace and still require the church to discipline serious abuse and immorality ([1 Corinthians 5:1-13](#)). Universal guilt means no one may boast. It does not mean every act has equal gravity or every offender should retain equal access to power.

Nor does Christian forgiveness require pretending consequences are unspiritual. David was forgiven after confession, yet consequences remained in his household and kingdom ([2 Samuel 12:13-14](#)). Zacchaeus' encounter with salvation generated restitution rather than a demand that victims "just forgive" ([Luke 19:1-10](#)). A church can forgive a repentant embezzler and still remove financial access. It can forgive an abusive leader and still conclude that he is disqualified from office. Mercy does not require amnesia.

The opposite error is moral superiority: "Everyone sins, but my sins are minor compared with theirs." Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and tax collector destroys this refuge ([Luke 18:9-14](#)). The Pharisee's comparison prevented him from standing before God as a needy sinner. Christians who strongly condemn culturally visible sins must therefore examine greed, pride, contempt, deceit, family neglect, unforgiveness, exploitation, racism, gossip, envy, and love of status. The broad road is not made narrow by exchanging fashionable sins for respectable ones.

The moral classification principle remains essential. "Everyone sins" should not be used to condemn people over matters where Scripture grants liberty. A person's failure to adopt my diet, dress preference, schooling choice, political strategy, music style, or holiday practice is not evidence that "everyone sins" unless God has actually named the matter sin. Christians sometimes create unnecessary guilt and then comfort it with grace. Better to begin with truth: where Scripture commands, obey; where it gives principle, reason carefully; where it grants liberty, do not manufacture transgression.

The sentence becomes spiritually healthy when it is completed: "Everyone sins, therefore no one can boast, everyone needs Christ, and every believer must live by repentance and grace." It becomes poisonous when completed differently: "Everyone sins, therefore my sin needs no serious response." The first leads to humility. The second leads to hardening.

One of the clearest signs of grace is not that a Christian no longer needs the sentence "I sinned," but that he can say it without adding "but." No comparison. No sociology. No childhood excuse. No doctrinal camouflage. No "everyone does it." Just truth before a faithful Savior. The person who can confess that way is not being crushed by grace. He is learning what grace is for.

The sentence "everyone sins" should therefore drive the Christian to his knees, not to a shrug. If you invoke universal sin only when your own conduct is confronted, the doctrine of human fallenness has become a shield for the very pride it was meant to destroy. Do not weaponize grace against the person calling you to repentance. Do not make the universality of sin an argument for the normality of rebellion. Let it silence your boasting, open your mouth in confession, and send you again to the mercy of Christ.

Conclusion: Grace That Brings Us Home and Teaches Us to Walk

The chapter began with a tension that has troubled churches for centuries: if salvation is truly by grace apart from works, can repentance, obedience, holiness, and perseverance be necessary without becoming a second gospel of merit? Scripture's answer is not a compromise in which grace contributes part and human effort contributes the rest. The answer is a sequence of divine mercy. Grace justifies the ungodly through faith in Christ. Grace regenerates by the Spirit. Grace grants repentance. Grace unites believers to the death and resurrection of Christ. Grace teaches obedience. Grace disciplines. Grace restores. Grace preserves. Grace will finally glorify.

The distinction between ground and fruit remains nonnegotiable. The ground of acceptance is Christ's righteousness and atoning work, never our progress. Repentance does not repay God. Faith does not purchase Christ. Obedience does not complete justification. Holiness does not become a second cross. Perseverance does not mean the believer eventually graduates from dependence on grace. At the end of the Christian life, the mature saint is still a debtor to mercy.

Yet the opposite distortion is equally destructive. The Christ who justifies is not divided from the Christ who rules. The Spirit who seals is not divided from the Spirit who sanctifies. The grace that forgives is not divided from the grace that trains. A gospel that leaves a person peacefully enthroned in rebellion has promised reconciliation without lordship, forgiveness without truth, and rescue without deliverance. Paul will not permit it. John will not permit it. James will not permit it. Jesus will not permit it.

The practical tests developed through the chapter therefore matter. Repentance is more than regret because it turns toward God and truth. Faith is more than assent because it rests personally in Christ. Obedience is evidence rather than payment because new life bears fruit. Holiness is real without becoming perfectionism because the Spirit transforms people who still need an Advocate. Struggle differs from peace with sin because the struggler keeps bringing darkness into light while the presumptuous person builds a home for it. Habitual sin requires honest assessment, not automatic despair or cheap reassurance. Addiction calls for repentance and responsibility together with clinically responsible care. Spiritual warfare is real, but demons do not erase agency and deliverance techniques do not replace discipleship. Confession opens the way to restoration, while restoration must respect justice, safety, and qualification. Perseverance rests in God's keeping power and takes warning seriously.

The disagreement between Reformed and Wesleyan-Arminian accounts of apostasy should produce careful exegesis, not contempt. One side emphasizes that all truly regenerate believers will finally persevere because God preserves them. The other emphasizes that New Testament warnings describe a genuine possibility of abandoning saving faith. Both traditions, at their responsible best, reject the idea that a past profession licenses present unbelief. That shared recognition should be preached more loudly than the slogans that obscure it. The security of Christ's people is not the security of rebellion. It is the security of sheep who are known, kept, called, corrected, and led by the Shepherd.

For the believer wounded by repeated failure, the final word is not "try harder until God loves you." The final word is Jesus Christ. Bring the sin into the light. Refuse despair. Use every lawful means of help. If

addiction is involved, seek appropriate treatment. If another person has been harmed, pursue truthful restitution and accept consequences. If you have been disciplined, learn rather than flee. If you have fallen, return. The Savior's advocacy is not theoretical. "If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one" ([1 John 2:1](#)).

For the person who has used grace to defend settled rebellion, the final word is also Jesus Christ, but it comes as warning. Do not call presumption assurance. Do not use His blood as permission to protect what His blood was shed to redeem. Do not say "everyone sins" when what you mean is "I intend to continue." Do not hide behind a childhood prayer, baptism, theological system, ministry office, or doctrine of security. Hear the Lord who asked why people called Him "Lord" while refusing His words ([Luke 6:46](#)). Repent while repentance is being offered as mercy.

For the legalist, Christ speaks freedom. Your sorrow cannot pay the debt. Your disciplines cannot improve the cross. Your modesty, abstinence, conservative values, generosity, study, service, and moral seriousness cannot become righteousness before God. Even your sanctification is grace. Stop turning the fruit into a root. The same gospel that refuses to reassure lawlessness refuses to let the obedient boast.

The eschatological horizon gathers the chapter into one text. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" ([Titus 2:11-13](#)). There is the Christian life in one movement: grace appeared, grace saves, grace trains, grace teaches watchfulness, and grace fixes hope on the appearing of Christ.

Readiness for Christ's return is therefore not panic, date-setting, or a last-minute attempt to accumulate righteousness. It is the ordinary holiness of people who know they are saved by Another. They repent because mercy is real. They obey because Christ is Lord. They confess because they no longer need darkness. They persevere because the Shepherd keeps them. They long for His appearing because the One who will judge the world is the same Savior who gave Himself to redeem and purify a people for His own possession ([Titus 2:14](#)).

Grace does not say, "Stay where you are." It says, "Come to Christ and belong to Him completely." Grace receives the guilty freely, then trains, restores, and keeps them. The narrow road does not purchase salvation; it is the road on which the Savior brings His sheep home.

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