

Does John's Gospel Demand Belief in Eternal Security for Salvation?

There are some who claim the saving message of the gospel is “Believe in Jesus as the guarantor of eternal life, which can never be lost.” In other words, a person must know, understand, and express agreement with the doctrine of eternal security, the teaching that those who are saved through faith in Jesus Christ will never lose that salvation by anything they do or do not do. The Scriptures clearly teach this security (See *GraceNotes* no. 24), but does a person have to affirm this in order to be saved, or is this an unwarranted addition to salvation by faith alone in Christ alone?

They make their argument from the Gospel of John, which indeed has a lot to say about eternal life in relation to salvation (e.g., 3:15-16; 3:36; 4:14; 5:24; 6:27; 6:40, 47, 54, 58; 68; 10:28). The assumption is made that John is the only Bible book written to tell us how to be saved, and eternal life is the exclusive focus of that message.

A look at John's purpose

In John 20:30-31, the author declares his purpose for writing about selective miracles: “*but these [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.*” While some claim this is the sole purpose statement for the whole book, John is only explaining why he chose to write about the eight signs seen in the book. If John writes only to unbelievers about how to be saved, then chapters 13-17 would not fit that purpose. In these chapters, after Judas departs, Jesus has discussions with His disciples alone about loving, serving, abiding, learning from the Holy Spirit, persecution, and unity.

We would expect John to express his purpose in the introduction to the book, as he does in 1 John 1:3-4. If so, then John 1:4-5 tell us that he is writing to present Jesus Christ as the light and life of men. Even John 20:31 supports this theme, because the promised result of believing is “life,” not explicitly “eternal life.” John's Gospel presents life not only in its linear quantitative sense, but also in its present quality-of-life sense, which is why the disciples believe repeatedly in the book (e.g., 1:50; 2:11, 22; 13:19; 14:10-11; 20:27). Not “eternal life,” but simply “life” is the issue in 1:4; 3:36; 5:21; 6:33, 35, 48, 51, 53, 63; 8:12; 10:10; 14:6; and 20:31.

A look at John's other statements about salvation

Many other salvation contexts in John focus not on eternal life, but other aspects and results of salvation.

- Salvation from sin: 1:29; 8:21, 24; 9:24; 13:8-10 (“washed”), 15:3 (“clean;”); 16:8-19.
- Coming into the light: 1:4-5, 9; 3:20-21; 8:12; 11:9-10; 12:35-36, 46.
- Life as quality: 1:4; 4:36; 5:21, 40; 6:53, 63; 8:12; 10:10; 12:25; 17:2-3 (see Matt. 16:25; Rom. 6:23; Gal. 6:8; 1 Tim. 6:12, 17-19 where “eternal life” is qualitative).
- Never hungering or thirsting, which includes temporal satisfaction in one's present life: 4:10; 6:33, 35; 7:37-38.
- The new birth or indwelling by the Holy Spirit: 1:13; 3:3-7; 5:21; 7:39.
- Becoming a child of God or coming to the Father: 1:12; 14:6-7.
- Deliverance from final death: 5:24; 8:51-52; 11:25-26.
- Jesus' death for sins and resurrection: 1:29; 2:19; 3:14-15; 11:25-26; 12:32-33; 18:32; 19:30; 20:27-29.
- Saved or delivered from condemnation: 3:17-18; 5:29; 10:9; 12:47.
- Belief in who Jesus is: “in His name:” 1:12; 2:23; 3:18; “in Him:” 2:11; 3:15-16, 18; 4:39; 6:29; 7:31, 39; 7:48; 8:30; 9:36; 10:42; 11:45, 48; 12:37, 42; the Christ: 1:41; 4:25-26, 29, 42; 6:69; 7:26-27, 31, 41-42; 9:22-33; 10:24-25; 11:27; 20:31; the Son of God: 1:49; 3:18; 6:69; 9:35-38; 11:27; 20:31; from God the Father: 6:46; 8:42; 9:16, 33; 11:42; 16:27-30; 17:21.

The claim that John's text and Jesus' words demand belief in eternal security is a myopic view of salvation in this Gospel where salvation is addressed in its many aspects. From the overwhelming frequency of passages where Jesus' identity must be accepted or believed, one could argue that *who Jesus is* is the focus of the saving message in John—He is the One sent from God. His identity is certainly the emphasis of the prologue (John 1:1-18). Neither can we ignore the centrality of the death and resurrection of Christ, especially its emphasis after chapter 12.

A look at John's other statements about salvation

If eternal security must be the object of one's belief, why is it spoken of as a result in passages designed to assure those who believe? In John 5:24 the object of belief is "Him who sent Me" and the result is "eternal life." But after saying that, Jesus adds, "he [the one who believes in Him for eternal life] shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life." This is an assurance about the result of eternal life, not the requirement for eternal life. Likewise, in John 6:35, Jesus says belief in Him as the Bread of Life results in never hungering or thirsting (which could be taken as satisfaction in this life and into eternity), but then states in verse 37 the assurance that He will never cast out those who come to Him, and again in verse 39 that He will lose none the Father gives Him. Yet again, in John 10:27-30, Jesus gives assurance that those who hear Him (believe in Him) have eternal life, shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of His hand or His Father's hand.

These statements of eternal security are given to assure those who have believed in Jesus Christ. They are not the object, but the result of believing the saving message. If those who believed in Jesus already believed in eternal security, then these assurances are unnecessary. Rather, Jesus uses them as a comfort to those who have already believed.

Beyond John's Gospel

While John's Gospel certainly has a purpose of bringing people to salvation, it is an unprovable assumption that he wrote the only book that contains an evangelistic purpose. Why would Matthew write to the Jews unless one purpose was to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah? Why do Luke and Acts speak of the results of the gospel as peace, forgiveness from sins, and justification (e.g. Luke 18:14; 24:46-47; Acts 10:40, 43; 13:38-39)? Both Romans and Galatians explain the gospel, yet their description of salvation is mainly in terms of justification before God. If justification (Romans 3-4) comes by believing the doctrine of eternal security, why does the apostle Paul expend himself eloquently explaining that security only later in Romans 8:28-39?

Beyond the Judeo-Christian Mindset

Demanding belief in the Christian concept of eternal security assumes a Judeo-Christian pre-understanding of eternal life as living with God forever. But how does that concept translate to the Hindu who likely sees eternal life as endless cycles of reincarnation, or a Buddhist who understands eternal life as absorption into nothingness, or an atheist who has no concept of an afterlife? Does a gospel presentation to them have to explain the Christian concept of eternal life and eternal security, or can they come to believe in Christ for forgiveness of sins, righteousness before God, a new life, or deliverance from judgment?

Conclusion

While we might argue that someone who believes in Jesus Christ for *eternal life* should understand that *eternal* demands or implies irrevocability, this may not be initially or explicitly understood; it may not even be on their radar. Neither is it the exclusive way that John and Jesus present the gospel message (or Luke or Paul, for that matter). Besides, John clearly sees eternal life not only in its linear or quantitative sense, but as a quality of relationship with God: "And this is eternal life, *that they may know You*, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3, emphasis added). John's gospel does not demand belief in eternal life "which can never be lost." Of course, it is good to share eternal security when sharing the gospel. When grasped, it makes the promise of salvation all the more wonderful. But we must distinguish what is the object of belief and the condition for salvation from the result of salvation. There are many results of salvation, which may take a person some time to understand fully. The doctrine of eternal security is a wonderful and comforting assurance that those who have eternal life can never lose it, but to demand that an unsaved person grasp this in order to be saved is an unnecessary addition to the saving gospel. A person who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior who died for their sins and rose again is adequate for salvation.