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THE RACE SET BEFORE US

What Is There to Win or Lose?

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. (Heb 12:1-2 NRSV)



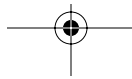
The New Testament frequently uses the imagery of the foot-race to portray the Christian life. This imagery aptly represents various aspects of our salvation. God calls us to this race (Phil 3:14). We train for this race (1 Tim 4:7-8). Our training entails strict self-control (1 Cor 9:25). Anyone who runs this race must compete according to the rules (2 Tim 2:5). There is a prize to be won (1 Cor 9:24), and anyone who seeks to win the prize must run with singular devotion, with one's eyes set on the prize who is Jesus Christ (Heb 12:1-2).¹

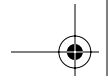


Throughout this book we will discuss these and many other analogies between the athlete and the Christian. Presently, however, our concern is to consider the nature of the race set before us. One question comes to the foreground as we begin to ponder the Christian race, namely, the urgency of the race. What is there to win or lose? Not all Christians agree on the answer, though all appeal to Scripture.

It may seem quite simple to answer this question from Scripture. However, we all come to the Bible with biases. All of us read the Bible

¹For a development of the athletic imagery in the Bible, see Erich Sauer, *In the Arena of Faith: A Call to the Consecrated Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955).

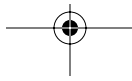


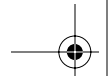


with a point of view already in place, a point of view that needs to adjust to Scripture. Therefore, we tend to read biblical passages through our point of view so that, without intending to do so, we adjust words and phrases and clauses to fit our perceptions and biases. None of us ever completely escapes this. Nevertheless, every time we come to Scripture, we must strive to rid ourselves of prejudices that impede our reading of the biblical text and to read it for what it actually says. This is what we seek to do for our readers, just as we seek this for ourselves.

Therefore, we begin this book by focusing on a variety of interpretations of biblical passages that portray the Christian life as a footrace in pursuit of a prize. What is the prize to be won or lost? Christians offer varied responses. These varied responses principally derive from how they view biblical warnings and admonitions that urge us to persevere to the end in order that we may lay hold of the prize. For example, consider the exhortation that appears below the title to this chapter: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:1-2 NRSV).

One will find varied explanations of this admonition in the commentaries. Some, believing that the goal of the race set before us is salvation itself, are convinced that it is necessary to persevere to the end in order to be saved. Others contend that perseverance is the evidence that one is already saved. Still others argue that the outcome of this race cannot be salvation, for, they believe, the salvation issue has been settled already. Therefore, they argue that perseverance has nothing to do with salvation but only with rewards that even real Christians may lose without losing their salvation. Yet others believe that admonitions such as Hebrews 12:1-2 indicate that it is possible for authentic Christians to fall away and perish forever. Some contend that admonitions indicate that all who are saved will persevere to the end and not fall away and that warnings address those who have fallen away, proving that they never truly did believe. Finally, some believe that admonitions say nothing concerning our salvation. These and many other differences exist among well-meaning believers who read the Bible to find encouragement and hope in living the Christian life.





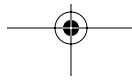
While our book offers an exposition of Scripture's teaching regarding Christian perseverance and assurance, our central concern is to show how the Bible places side by side both God's promises of complete and final salvation for all his people and God's admonitions or warnings that call on his people to persevere to the end in order to be saved. Long before we began to think about the biblical teaching on perseverance and assurance, many Christians had already wrestled to explain the biblical relationship between warnings and promises. The juxtaposition of promise and warning continues to be the source of the disputes we sketched above and has given birth to at least four different popular views. Therefore, it is only right that we consider briefly how others have tried to explain the relationship of promise and warning before we offer our proposed explanation.

Our objective for this chapter is twofold. First, we will explain four major interpretations of the relationship between God's promises and his admonitions or warnings and how both relate to assurance. We will do so excluding our own view. Our objective is not to offer a critique of these four popular views but to explain them accurately and fairly.² We do this because we believe each of these views has legitimate concerns that Christians need to hear as we strive to settle on a biblically conceived understanding of the tension. To clarify distinctions among the various views, we include pictorial representations of each view. Second, we will offer a succinct introduction to our own explanation of the relationship between biblical promises and admonitions or warnings. The remainder of the book lays out the biblical evidence that grounds our understanding of how Scripture integrates God's promises and warnings without contradiction. Each subsequent chapter examines vital biblical evidence that must be factored into a cohesive and comprehensive biblical theology concerning perseverance and assurance.

Four Popular Views on Warnings and Assurance

Loss-of-salvation view. Though many Christians believe that the Bible addresses warnings and admonitions to believers, some insist that these warnings and admonitions indicate that believers can and

²See also a summary of views by Thomas R. Schreiner, "Perseverance and Assurance: A Survey and a Proposal," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2 (1998): 32-62.





sometimes do abandon their faith and consequently lose their salvation. According to the loss-of-salvation view, the Bible's warnings and admonitions make it clear that heirs of God's promise can, by forsaking Christ, fail to persevere in faithfulness and longsuffering, and thus lose the inheritance of salvation. I. Howard Marshall engages a careful study of the New Testament in his attempt to resolve this question, "whether it is possible for a man who has truly become a Christian and an heir of the life of heaven to fall away from his faith and be finally lost."³ He concludes that though the possibility of losing one's salvation is "slight on the whole, nevertheless it is a real possibility."⁴ Marshall attempts to position his view between the Arminian and Calvinist views by adopting what he calls a Wesleyan view.⁵

John Wesley, with whom Marshall identifies, held that biblical warnings are the starting point for explaining biblical words of promise and hope. Wesley insisted that every biblical promise of God's preservation of his chosen ones needs to be qualified with warnings. For example, Wesley argued that we properly understand Romans 8:28-39 only by recognizing that the certainty of God's preservation of his chosen people is contingent on their perseverance. Thus he contended that the warning of Romans 11:22 must be imported into a reading of Romans 8:28-39. He claimed this because he believed that Paul's unbroken chain—election, predestination, calling, justification and glorification—must be understood conditionally. Wesley commented, "And whom he justified—provided they 'continue in his goodness,' Romans 11:22, he in the end glorified—St. Paul does not affirm, either here or in any other part of his writings, that precisely the same number of men are called, justified and glorified."⁶ So both Wesley and Marshall conclude that Paul "does not deny that a believer may fall away and be cut off between his special calling and his glorification."⁷ Thus, even though Marshall wants to distance himself from

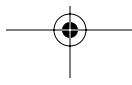
³I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (1969; reprint, Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), p. 24.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁶John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1952), p. 551. G. C. Berkouwer wisely observes, "The opponents of the doctrine of perseverance knew these passages, of course; but they always stress that the 'if,' the conditional, must always be understood in the text, even though it is not found there in so many words" (*Faith and Perseverance*, trans. Robert D. Knudsen [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1958], p. 90).

⁷Wesley, quoted by Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, p. 103.





Arminianism, he and Wesley are both Arminians, for they affirm that believers may fall away from Christ and perish.⁸

Recently other scholars have argued the case for the loss-of-salvation view to explain the function of the biblical warnings (see figure 1.1).⁹ Of these the best argument is that made by Scot McKnight, who focuses on the epistle to the Hebrews.¹⁰ McKnight carefully examines

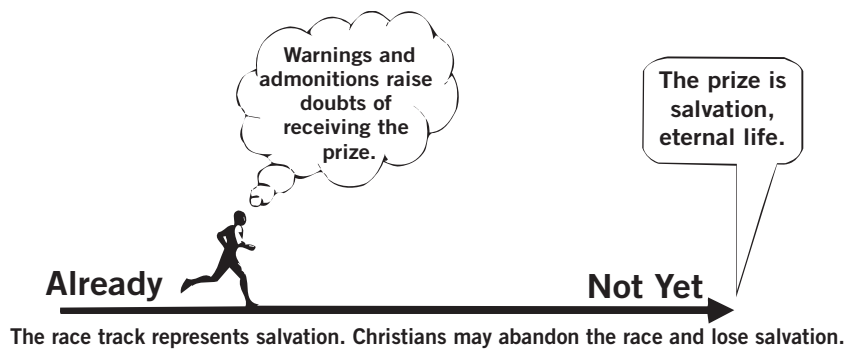


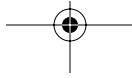
Figure 1.1. Loss-of-salvation view of warnings and admonitions

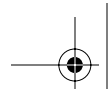
all five warning passages (Heb 2:1-4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19-39; 12:1-29) together as he makes a strong case that all the warnings do at least three things: (1) they interpret one another, (2) they address believers, and (3) they warn believers that they will perish if they for-

⁸This has become a cardinal teaching of Arminianism. However, the original followers of Arminius, the Remonstrants, did not at first fully affirm that true believers can apostatize and lose salvation.

⁹See, e.g., Grant R. Osborne, "Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975), pp. 144-66; Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance*, 2nd ed. (Springfield, Mo.: Westcott, 1976); Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1981), esp. pp. 337-65; and Dale Moody's polemical work *Apostasy: A Study in the Epistle to the Hebrews and in Baptist History* (Greenville, S.C.: Smyth & Helwys, 1991).

¹⁰Scot McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions," *Trinity Journal* n.s. 13 (1992): 21-59.





sake the salvation announced by the Lord in these last days. McKnight also contends that apostasy in Hebrews is deliberate and willful. Two features of McKnight's case deserve emphasis. He argues that the author of Hebrews threatens authentic believers with eschatological judgment if they apostatize from Jesus Christ. He also maintains that the author of Hebrews principally conceives of salvation in future terms. Therefore, believers who now partake of the present aspects of salvation, which is already inaugurated, may wander from the pathway and perish before they experience the eschatological salvation.

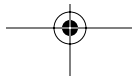
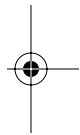
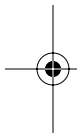
Do the warnings indicate that it is possible for authentic believers to perish in the end? One of the questions we intend to address is whether or not the biblical evidence, including Hebrews, warrants the conclusion that true believers can apostatize and thus perish eternally. However, we will demonstrate that there is a primary question that we need to answer first. It concerns the function of warning passages.

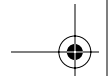
Loss-of-rewards view. Christians who embrace the loss-of-rewards view as the explanation of biblical warnings hold two beliefs in common with the loss-of-salvation view. Both agree that biblical warnings address true believers. Both also believe that one of the functions of biblical warnings is to indicate a possible loss for true believers. The two views radically disagree, however, concerning what the believer who fails to persevere will lose.

The designation loss of rewards accurately describes this view and distinguishes it from the previous interpretation because its advocates contend that the biblical admonitions and warnings threaten believers with a possible loss. However, the loss that a Christian may encounter concerns "rewards" only, not salvation or eternal life, which comes to us only by faith in Jesus Christ.¹¹ The strongest advocates of this view have made this their theological mission. Indeed, in 1986 Robert Wilkin established the Grace Evangelical Society, which now has its own journal and website.¹² According to the society's mission statement, "The goal of Grace Evangelical Society is to focus worldwide attention on the distinction between the freeness of eter-

¹¹This may be confusing in light of the paragraph above. We will clarify this double use of terms such as *salvation* and *eternal life* by advocates of this view.

¹²*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*. See <www.faithalone.org>.





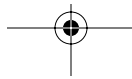
nal life and the costliness of eternal rewards." Their view concerning biblical warnings maintains popular support among American evangelicals. The popularity of this interpretation is partly owing to the earlier influence of the notes in *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, particularly the note concerning 1 Corinthians 3:14:

God in the N.T. Scriptures offers to the lost, salvation; and for the faithful service of the saved, He offers rewards. The passages are easily distinguished by remembering that salvation is invariably spoken of as a free gift (e.g., Jn. 4:10; Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8-9), whereas rewards are earned by works (Mt. 10:42; Lk. 19:17; 1 Cor. 9:24-25; 2 Tim. 4:7-8; Rev. 2:10; 22:12). A further distinction is that salvation is a present possession (Lk. 7:50; Jn. 3:36; 5:24; 6:47), whereas rewards are a future attainment, to be given at the rapture (2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 22:12).¹³

Two important concerns motivate advocates to adopt this explanation of biblical passages that warn believers against eternal loss. First, advocates of the loss-of-rewards view endorse a radical version of "eternal security." Like many, they appeal to texts such as John 6:37-44, 10:28-30 and Romans 8:28-39 to affirm that no one who believes in Jesus Christ will fail to have eternal life and that no one who has eternal life will ever perish. However, they radicalize eternal security by insisting that security in Jesus Christ guarantees that even those who fail to persevere in faithfulness to Christ and his gospel will never perish but are saved and will remain saved forever. The second motivation that prompts people to adopt the loss-of-rewards view is a defense of the gospel against any intrusion of works-righteousness. Advocates of this view see themselves as guardians of the gospel, the only consistent preachers of the free grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the champions against others who introduce the idea of meriting or earning salvation.¹⁴ Their concern is to keep the biblical warnings separate from salvation, for otherwise salvation and eternal life would be earned

¹³*The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 1235. Charles C. Ryrie similarly states, "Salvation is a free gift, but rewards, for those who are saved, are earned" (*The Ryrie Study Bible*, NASB [Chicago: Moody Press, 1978], p. 1730). It is curious that commentators, theologians and preachers who adopt this view argue vigorously against a doctrine of human merit with regard to salvation yet speak of meriting rewards from God.

¹⁴Both expressions, "consistent" and "free grace," are their own. For this, see various publications of the Grace Evangelical Society, including comments made at <www.faithalone.org>.





by works.¹⁵ They insist that anyone teaching that believers must persevere in doing good works in order to be saved is proclaiming a different gospel that falls under Paul's anathema in Galatians 1:8-9.¹⁶ They take such a strong stand because they say that the gospel requires only faith for salvation; there is no role at all for obedience or good works in salvation. If obedience or good works are necessary in any sense, then the gospel's offer of eternal life is no longer free and salvation is no longer a free gift. Furthermore, no one could have assurance of salvation, because a Christian's assurance would be conditioned on works. Christians would always be in a state of uncertainty.

Loss-of-rewards advocates agree that biblical warnings address true Christians, but because believers cannot lose their salvation, the threat of loss concerns rewards that would otherwise be received in the age to come. For example, R. T. Kendall contends that anyone who believes the gospel "*will go to heaven when he dies no matter what work (or lack of work) may accompany such faith.*"¹⁷ Kendall asks, " 'What if a person who is saved falls into sin, stays in sin, and is found in that very condition when he dies? Will he still go to heaven?' The answer is yes."¹⁸ He then concludes, "I therefore state categorically that the person who is saved—who confesses that Jesus is Lord and believes in his heart that God raised Him from the dead—will go to heaven when he dies no matter what work (or lack of work) may accompany such faith."¹⁹ Likewise, Charles Stanley affirms, "The Bible clearly teaches that God's love for His people is

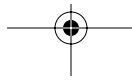
¹⁵Recent works that argue for the loss-of-rewards view include Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: Rendición Viva, 1991); *Grace in Eclipse: A Study on Eternal Rewards* (Dallas: Rendición Viva, 1985); *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1989); Robert Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, Tex.: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999); Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990); and Erwin W. Lutzer, *Your Eternal Reward: Triumph and Tears at the Judgment Seat of Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998). Two British authors defending this perspective include R. T. Kendall (*Once Saved, Always Saved* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1983]) and Michael Eaton (*No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995]).

¹⁶Robert Wilkin, "What Is the Anathema of Galatians 1:8-9: Are All Who Preach a False Gospel Eternally Condemned?" *Grace in Focus*, March-April 1994. Wilkin argues that Paul's anathema does not entail eternal punishment.

¹⁷Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved*, p. 49, emphasis in the original.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.



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of such magnitude that even those who walk away from the faith have not the slightest chance of slipping from His hand.”²⁰ He explains further, “Even if a believer for all practical purposes becomes an unbeliever, his salvation is not in jeopardy.”²¹ There is no danger of eternal condemnation because “believers who lose or abandon their faith will retain their salvation, for God remains faithful.”²²

Consider how this view interprets one biblical warning. Paul sharply warns the Corinthians, “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9-10 NRSV). Zane Hodges explains this warning as follows:

In speaking of heirship in 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10, the Apostle did not threaten his readers with the loss of eternal salvation. He did not even raise a question about their salvation. But he warned them plainly that, if they did not correct their unrighteous behavior, they confronted a serious consequence. They would not inherit the Kingdom of God.²³

This may sound like double talk. However, Hodges and fellow advocates of this view distinguish between inheriting the kingdom of God and entering the kingdom of God. Hodges explains: “Many have assumed, without much thought, that to ‘inherit’ the Kingdom must be the same as entering it.”²⁴ But for Hodges there is a great difference. He contends that entrance into the kingdom is of grace, and therefore free, because it is based on Christ’s work for us. However, inheritance of the kingdom is based on the merits of our deeds for Christ and thus is costly.²⁵

Advocates of the loss-of-rewards view have a doctrine of perseverance, but for them perseverance has nothing to do with salvation in the sense of deliverance from eternal punishment. If it did, salvation

²⁰Stanley, *Eternal Security*, p. 74.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 93.

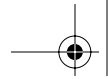
²²*Ibid.*, p. 94.

²³Hodges, *Gospel Under Siege*, p. 134.

²⁴*Ibid.* See also Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse*, pp. 67-81. He devotes the entire chapter to drawing his distinction between “inheriting” and “entering.” Compare Eaton, *No Condemnation*, pp. 214-17.

²⁵See Hodges, *Grace in Eclipse*, pp. 66-81, esp. pp. 72-75.





would be earned by works. Furthermore, they contend, if perseverance were necessary for salvation, then the loss-of-salvation view would be correct, since, they insist, many believers do not persist in faithfulness. So they agree with the loss-of-salvation view that biblical warnings indicate that a real loss for the believer is possible. The point at which the two views disagree, however, is with regard to what is lost. Advocates of the loss-of-salvation view take phrases such as “eternal life,” “salvation” and “inherit the kingdom” at face value. Advocates of the loss-of-rewards view, on the other hand, adopt a novel reading of the text. They reject the Arminian and Wesleyan understanding of biblical warnings because they are convinced that the Bible warrants belief in eternal security. However, because they find no biblical support for the assurance that believers will persevere in faithfulness to Jesus Christ, they reject the classical Calvinist or Reformed view of biblical warnings (yet to be discussed).²⁶

Robert Wilkin, for example, argues that biblical warnings and commands “to persevere would be pointless if all believers persevere.”²⁷ Rather, advocates of this view insist, the Bible makes it clear that many believers will not persevere in loyalty to Christ. Some will become apostates yet continue to be Christians.²⁸ For advocates of the loss-of-rewards view, perseverance is the attainment and earning of the right to inherit the kingdom and to rule with Christ Jesus.²⁹ Perseverance has nothing to do with salvation for two reasons: (1) salvation would be based on works, and (2) God does not assure believers that we will persevere. Wilkin notes, “The Scriptures repeatedly command perseverance, but they never promise it.”³⁰ Even the apostle Paul was uncertain if he would persevere in faithfulness to the gospel (1 Cor 9:26-27). That is, “Paul knew he was eternally secure” (2 Tim 1:12), but he did not know if “he would reign with Christ” (2 Tim 2:12).³¹

²⁶Eaton identifies his loss-of-rewards view as Calvinist, but he draws a clear distinction between his version of Calvinism and what he calls “developed Calvinism” (*No Condemnation*, pp. 15-25).

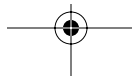
²⁷Wilkin, *Confident in Christ*, p. 175.

²⁸Hodges, *Gospel Under Siege*, p. 78.

²⁹Wilkin, *Confident in Christ*, pp. 133-34.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 133.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 134.



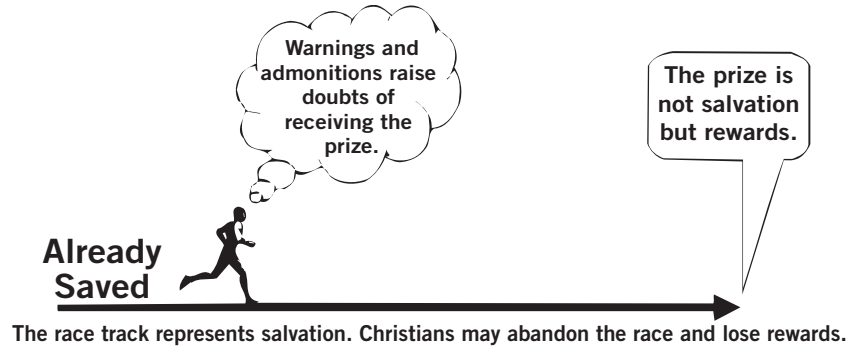
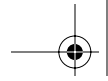


Figure 1.2. Loss-of-rewards view of warnings and admonitions

For Hodges and his fellow advocates of the loss-of-rewards view, “perseverance in holiness is an indispensable condition” for attaining one’s reward, but it has no function whatsoever concerning salvation and eternal life (see figure 1.2).³² According to this view, texts to which Christians often appeal for confidence and assurance that God will preserve them in faithfulness to him unto the end turn out to have nothing to do with salvation.³³ Because of this, adherents of this view carefully separate salvation from perseverance in holiness.

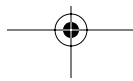
Tests-of-genuineness view. One of the most common views in evangelicalism today may be called the tests-of-genuineness view. Those who hold this view contend that the Bible poses many warnings and admonitions because of hypocrisy. People may profess faith in Christ but have nothing more than a false salvation.³⁴ Michael Eaton refers to this view as “developed Calvinism,”³⁵ while Zane Hodges and other

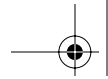
³²Ibid., p. 116.

³³See, e.g., John F. Hart, “Does Philippians 1:6 Guarantee Progressive Sanctification?” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 9, no. 16 (1996): 37-58.

³⁴Eaton calls this “unreal salvation” (*No Condemnation*, p. 21).

³⁵Ibid., pp. 15-25. Though we do not agree fully with Eaton’s assessment of “developed Calvinism” (popular Calvinism, our term), we concur that its general treatment of biblical warnings and admonitions tends to evoke introspection. We believe Eaton’s criticism of Puritanism’s introspective bent is correct, though he seems to have overreacted against English Puritanism.



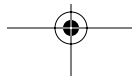


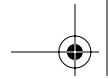
American evangelicals who adopt the loss-of-rewards view use the designation “lordship salvation.” We will call this perspective the tests-of-genuineness view.³⁶

How does this view differ from the two we have already considered? We have shown that Christians who adopt either the loss-of-rewards or the loss-of-salvation view to explain biblical warnings agree that the warnings address true believers and that one of the functions of biblical warnings is to indicate a possible loss for true believers, though they disagree over what the believer might lose. By way of contrast, those who advocate the tests-of-genuineness view believe that the biblical warnings are addressed to people who profess faith in Jesus Christ but who prove to be false or disingenuous in their confession. Second, this view does not regard the threatened loss to be a possible loss of something already possessed. Rather, the warnings function as tests to prove that the “disingenuous believer” never possessed true salvation. Thus, biblical admonitions and warnings distinguish pseudobelievers from true believers.

Here it is important to recognize points of agreement between this view and the first two we described. In terms of defining *salvation*, advocates of the tests-of-genuineness view concur with those who hold to the loss-of-rewards view. Both fundamentally conceive of salvation as already possessed and as something that, once possessed, cannot be lost. However, when the two views apply this conviction to biblical warnings, they come to radically different conclusions. On the other hand, adherents to the tests-of-genuineness view agree with proponents of the loss-of-salvation view that good works are necessary for salvation. However, in the context of warnings and admonitions, their agreement diverges because those who view biblical warnings as tests of faith regard good works retrospectively only as evidence that one is saved. Advocates of this view carefully explain that though perseverance is

³⁶Note the subtitle of Hodges's book *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation*. Review the theological firestorm swirling about John MacArthur and Zane Hodges. See particularly John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1988), juxtaposed with Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation*. For a Reformed critique of this conflict, see Michael Horton, ed., *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1992).



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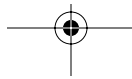
necessary as evidence of authentic faith, perseverance has no role in the means of salvation, for then salvation would be of works and not of grace.³⁷

It is characteristic of those who hold the tests-of-genuineness view to insist that authentic faith in Christ inevitably perseveres as it produces good works (Eph 2:10). Yet, while good works are both the inevitable fruit and necessary evidence of faith, advocates of this view vigorously oppose any notion of works-righteousness. They do not separate good works from faith as if one were justified by faith and good works. Instead, faith is the root that yields its fruit of good works.³⁸ Those defending this view of biblical warnings argue that perseverance in loyalty to Christ and in holiness is essential for salvation, because perseverance is the necessary evidence that belief is genuine. Therefore, preachers who hold this view of biblical admonitions and warnings are understandably concerned to call on their congregations: "Test yourselves, whether you are in the faith. Examine yourselves!" (2 Cor 13:5). They use biblical admonitions and warnings as tests of genuine faith, citing 1 John 2:19 to support their case. There the apostle John says, "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. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us" (NRSV). Because there are many who make a false profession of faith in Christ, a significant aspect of faithful preaching, for advocates of this view, is to call on people to test the genuineness of their faith, for saving faith produces the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).

For the time being we offer two examples to show how the tests-of-genuineness view handles biblical admonitions and warnings. We will interact with other examples during our interpretive work in the biblical text. John MacArthur writes:

³⁷This is the viewpoint expressed by John F. MacArthur Jr. in various books, including *Gospel According to Jesus*; *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1993); *Saved Without a Doubt* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1992).

³⁸See Kim Riddlebarger, "What Is Faith?" in *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation*, ed. Michael Horton (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1992), pp. 81-105, for a discussion of how both Zane Hodges and John MacArthur articulate the relationship between faith and good works.





Certainly Scripture seems to be filled with warnings to people in the church lest they should fall away (cf. Heb. 6:4-8; 1 Tim. 1:18-19; 2 Tim. 2:16-19). . . . But God does not contradict Himself. The warning passages do not negate the many promises that believers will persevere. . . . And, it might be added, the warning passages like Jude 21 reveal that the writers of Scripture were very keen to alert those whose hope of salvation might be grounded in a spurious faith. Obviously the apostolic authors were not laboring under the illusion that every person in the churches they were writing to was genuinely converted.³⁹

It seems evident that MacArthur believes that biblical admonitions and warnings address the “mixed church” as a way of sifting the “tares” from the “wheat” (cf. Mt 13:24-30).⁴⁰

S. Lewis Johnson Jr. agrees with this approach to biblical admonitions and warnings. Consider his explanation of Colossians 1:21-23, which indicates that Christ Jesus will present us holy and blameless before God in the day of judgment, “if [we] remain in the faith.”

But what about the “if”? we hear someone say. Is not the whole program in jeopardy? Does it not all depend upon us ultimately? Suppose our faith fails? Now, we must not dodge the “ifs” of the Word. They are tests for professors. If faith fails, that is the evidence that the faith was not valid saving faith (cf. 1 Jn. 2:19). On the other hand, the genuine believer will persevere in faith, not by human strength, but by divine strengthening. . . . The *ei* (AV, “if”), it may be noted, introduces a first-class condition, determined as fulfilled. The apostle assumes the Colossians will abide in their faith.⁴¹

Unlike adherents to either the loss-of-salvation or the loss-of-rewards views, Johnson regards the admonitions and warnings to be retrospective tests of faith. They prompt believers to review their progress in faith to assess whether or not there is evidence that faith is genuine. Johnson does not explain Colossians 1:21-23 as having a

³⁹MacArthur, *Faith Works*, pp. 179-80.

⁴⁰In chapter four we will return to evaluate MacArthur’s appeal to the idea of the “mixed church” to explain biblical warnings and admonitions. Here it is sufficient to note I. Howard Marshall’s objection that this idea that the church “contains men whose belief is superficial and unreal” is not “adequate to explain the whole of the evidence” (*Kept by the Power of God*, pp. 200, 201).

⁴¹S. Lewis Johnson Jr., “Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: IV. From Enmity to Amity,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119 (1962): 147. See also Willard M. Aldrich, “Perseverance,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 115 (1958): 16.





prospective orientation, as the other two views do.⁴² By *prospective* we mean forward-looking, particularly to the consummation of salvation. This view of admonitions and warnings turns us both retrospectively and introspectively to assess the beginning and continuation of our faith, whether or not growth, good works and fruit have been and continue to be present. Others support Johnson's explanation of these verses in Colossians. F. F. Bruce comments, "If the Bible teaches the final perseverance of the saints, it also teaches that the saints are those who finally persevere—in Christ. Continuance is the test of reality."⁴³

Earlier we took note of how John Wesley introduces the language of a biblical warning ("if") from Romans 11:22 into Romans 8:29-30 to explain the language of promise.⁴⁴ Those who hold the tests-of-genuineness view do the same thing, only in an inverted way. Whether overtly or implicitly in their explanations of the text, they import language of promise to explain biblical warnings and admonitions.

When advocates of the tests-of-genuineness read biblical warnings and admonitions, they reject the idea that the loss to be avoided is merely loss of a reward. Though they believe that the warnings are concerned with eternal loss, they disagree with the loss-of-salvation view by arguing that the warnings in a text like Hebrews 6 are addressed to those people who have externally joined themselves to the church and have experienced many blessings attached to the gospel but who are not actually Christians. The warnings address people "who experienced many blessings and then fell away," and by their falling away prove that they "had never truly been saved in the first place."⁴⁵

⁴²Contrast, for example, Robert Shank's concern: "Let us, then, heed the many warnings against the peril of turning aside from Him who is our hope, our peace, and our life. We dare not ignore the fateful contingency with which Paul confronts us: God, who has reconciled us to Himself through the death of His Son, will ultimately present us . . . 'Holy and unblameable and unproveable before him' in His own holy presence—if we continue in the faith, grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the Gospel which we have heard" (*Life in the Son*, p. 71). Also see Hodges's explanation of the text as a prospective warning against loss of rewards (*Gospel Under Siege*, pp. 89-90).

⁴³F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 79. Compare the approval of this view by Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1990), p. 197 n. 231.

⁴⁴See note 6 above and the corresponding discussion it supports.

⁴⁵Wayne Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study of Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Other Warning Passages in Hebrews," in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), p. 173.



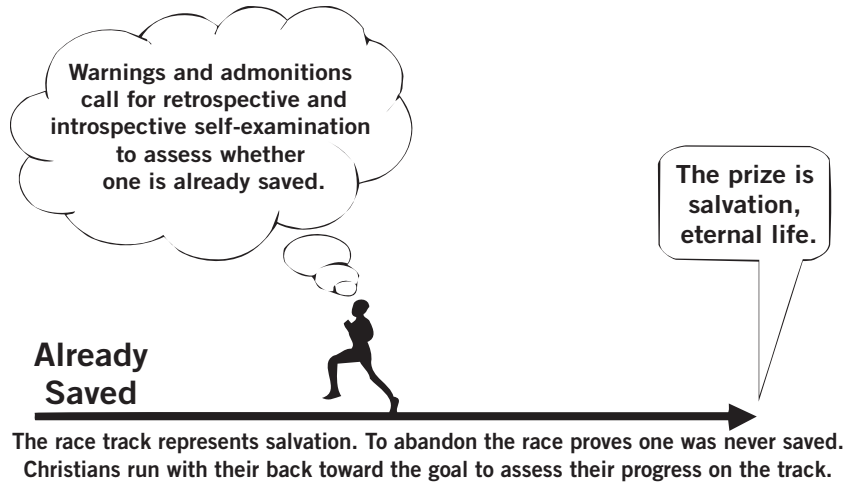
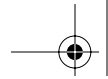
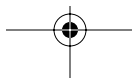
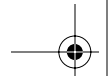


Figure 1.3. Tests-of-genuineness view of warnings and admonitions

It is apparent that those who hold the tests-of-genuineness approach to biblical warnings adopt this view as a way to preserve the promise of security in Jesus Christ for everyone who truly embraces him for salvation. Advocates of this view want to take the warnings seriously because they administer caution against the sin of apostasy. However, this viewpoint often interprets the biblical warnings from the retrospective vantage point of apostasy completed rather than from the prospective threat lest someone fall away. In other words, this view often interprets biblical warnings as though the loss warned against is already a reality for the persons being warned (see figure 1.3). If professing Christians forsake Christ and the gospel, such apostasy proves that they were never truly part of Christ's household. The warnings against apostasy in Hebrews 6 do not address authentic believers, for that would entail their loss of salvation. Clearly for this view the warnings do not have that function, because there is no possible loss of salvation for anyone who is truly a believer.

If the Bible warns spurious believers against apostasy, do these warnings have any function for true believers? Wayne Grudem, who adopts this view, claims at the close of his essay on the warnings in



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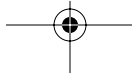
Hebrews that “these warnings will often be the very means God uses to keep his own from turning away.”⁴⁶ However, it is at least curious that Grudem makes this statement, because he consistently argues that Hebrews addresses the warnings to people who have already fallen or who are about to fall, and in every case those people prove not to be Christians. Evidently Grudem means that one’s response to the warnings is the test of faith. Just as failure to persevere is evidence that one does not belong to God’s people, so all who respond to the warnings by persevering in loyalty to Christ prove that they are genuine believers and members of Christ’s household.

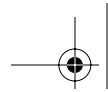
Hypothetical-loss-of-salvation view. It is not necessary to devote much space to the hypothetical view because this interpretive viewpoint emerges principally in discussions of warnings in Hebrews. Some who comment especially on the threats in Hebrews adopt this fourth viewpoint as they attempt to avoid problems they see in each of the other three views. For advocates of this fourth interpretive viewpoint, the problem with the loss-of-salvation view is that it contradicts biblical promises of security in Jesus Christ for everyone who believes. The problem with the loss-of-rewards view is that it minimizes the awfulness of apostasy, for, they insist against Hodges, an apostate is not a Christian. This fourth view also seeks to avoid two problems with the tests-of-genuineness view: its insistence that the warnings do not address authentic Christians and its retrospective reading of the warning passages in Hebrews. Contrary to Grudem’s claims, the sin of apostasy that the author of Hebrews warns against has not yet happened; it is a projected supposition. Otherwise, why administer the warning?⁴⁷

The fourth view contends that the warnings, particularly in Hebrews, focus on correcting “wrong ideas” by making it clear that if a Christian could apostatize, it would be impossible for that person to become a Christian again. The warnings address genuine believers to correct the wrong idea that apostasy is not serious, as though one could continue to oscillate between Christianity and Judaism without

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 182. Grudem adds, “This does not imply that a true believer could lose salvation, but it does imply that the impossibility of losing salvation does not rest ultimately in any inherent ability in the believer himself or herself, but in the power of God at work, usually in many different internal and external ways, in the believer’s life.”

⁴⁷See Homer A. Kent Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1972), pp. 111-113.





eternal loss.⁴⁸ The warnings threaten Christians with eternal and irremediable loss lest they flirt with such apostasy from Christ. Succinctly expressed, this interpretive viewpoint claims that any believer who fails to persevere in faithfulness to the gospel (and this is impossible) will not be saved (see figure 1.4).

Various scholars who adopt the hypothetical-loss view express it

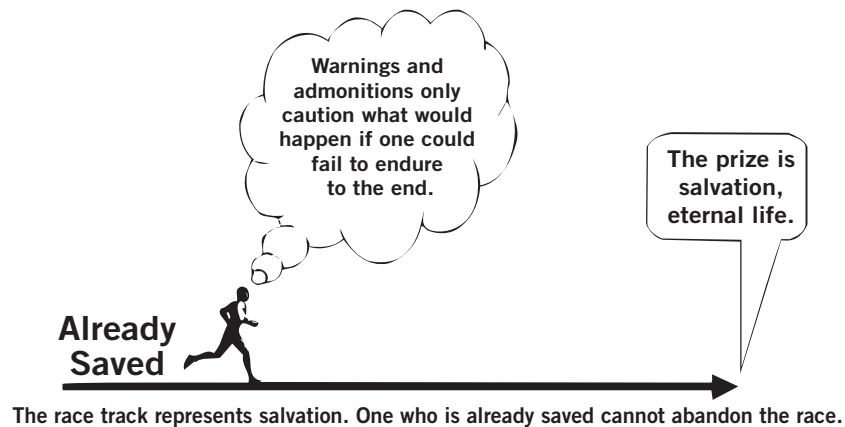


Figure 1.4. Hypothetical loss-of-salvation view of warnings and admonitions

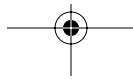
differently. However, all point to B. F. Westcott as the modern source of the view.⁴⁹ Commenting on Hebrews 6:4-6, Westcott says, "The case is hypothetical. There is nothing to show that the conditions of fatal apostasy had been fulfilled, still less that they had been fulfilled in the case of any of those addressed. Indeed the contrary is assumed."⁵⁰ However, careful attention to Westcott's phrasing indicates that he does not hold the view that Thomas Hewitt ascribes to him concerning Hebrews 6:4-6.⁵¹ Hewitt explains the warning as follows: "If such a

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 113.

⁴⁹See Kent, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 114. Also see Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 111.

⁵⁰B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 165.

⁵¹Marshall correctly demonstrates that Hewitt wrongly uses Westcott to support his own view (*Kept by the Power of God*, p. 146).





falling away could happen, he is saying, it would be impossible to renew them again unto repentance unless Christ died a second time, which is unthinkable.”⁵² While Westcott says that “the case is hypothetical” (“if one apostatizes . . .”), Hewitt goes beyond the simple conditional by using a different type of hypothetical construction, namely, a contrary-to-fact supposition, for he says, “if such a falling away could happen.” Notice the difference. Westcott is saying, “Suppose someone falls away.” Hewitt is saying, “Suppose someone could fall away.” Hewitt, and those who follow his lead, fail to realize that Westcott’s commentary does not support their view.⁵³

The concern that motivates the hypothetical view is the desire to avoid the apparent contradiction between biblical warnings and God’s promises to secure his own people. Kent’s comments on the warning of Hebrews 10 make this clear.

Are true Christians ever guilty of complete apostasy? The Arminian says yes, and interprets this passage as denoting true believers who lose their salvation. Calvinists, however, recognize that salvation is eternally secure for true believers, and interpret this passage in other ways. Some regard the apostates as mere professors who finally depart. It might be tempting to weaken the punishment so as to make it less than loss of salvation, but this expedient has not satisfied many in the light of the nature of the offense. A more reasonable explanation would seem to be that the passage warns true believers what the outcome would be if apostasy would occur.⁵⁴

We have surveyed four major interpretive approaches concerning the relationship between biblical warnings and promises. We have offered little critique of these viewpoints as we have attempted to represent each one fairly and accurately. We do not intend to suggest that these are rigid categories so that someone who advocates one view never crosses over to another view when interpreting another biblical warning. Rather, we have identified categories by prominent

⁵²Hewitt, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 111.

⁵³For example, Homer Kent does not properly distinguish between Hewitt’s and Westcott’s views (*Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 114). His misfortune is that he confuses his own view by appealing both to Hewitt and to W. H. Griffith-Thomas. He quotes Griffith-Thomas: “The passage is apparently a supposed case to correct their wrong ideas, and the argument seems to be that if it were possible for those who have had the experiences of verses 4-6 to fall away, it would be impossible to renew them unless Christ died a second time” (p. 114).

⁵⁴Kent, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 206-7.





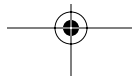
interpretive tendencies that will help our readers understand the issues at stake with regard to how the biblical text holds warnings and promises together. Of course, there is a fifth view that we have not yet discussed: our own. We will briefly introduce it in the following section, then use the remainder of the book to develop it and demonstrate its biblical basis.⁵⁵

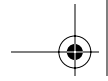
Promises and Warnings: God's Means of Saving His People

In our earlier days of Christian understanding, we both sat under preaching and teaching that led us to certain conclusions about the relationship between biblical promise and warning. We first believed that those who hold the loss-of-reward view explained the relationship best, but later we came to agree with those who teach that warnings are tests of the genuineness of one's faith. In truth, our spiritual pilgrimages took us through various understandings until the Scriptures convinced both of us that we were continually asking the wrong question concerning the biblical warnings. Thus, we now believe that biblical warnings are a crucial means God uses to protect his people for "the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet 1:5 NIV).

What is the function of biblical admonitions and warnings? Advocates of all four popular views surveyed above are consumed with addressing one principal question, which they believe the biblical warnings and admonitions raise in view of God's promises: Is it possible for authentic believers to apostatize and perish forever? Advocates of each view offer contrary answers, depending on other theological commitments. Many Christians believe that the admonitions and warnings are proof that Christians are free to forsake Jesus Christ and perish eternally, and that some do. Therefore, they hold the loss-of-salvation view. Yet other Christians believe that, if God's promises are true, no genuine believer can fall away and perish forever. It is not surprising, then, that their explanations of biblical warnings sound very different. However, the explanations of this second group are quite diverse, as our overview above shows, which leads to three

⁵⁵We should mention another interpretive view. Gerald L. Borchert believes that we must maintain a certain tension between passages that offer assurance to the believer and warning passages. He believes the proper approach is to let both kinds of texts stand as they do by preaching both but not making an effort to explain how they fit together (*Assurance and Warning* [Nashville: Broadman, 1987]). For interaction with this view see Schreiner, "Perseverance and Assurance," pp. 40, 51-52.





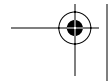
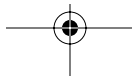
divergent interpretations within this one group.

None of the advocates of the four popular views arrive at their interpretations of biblical warnings on the basis of the warning passages themselves. Rather, they read the warning passages in view of their prior assumptions concerning the possibility of falling away and perishing under God's wrath. Because they all seek to protect their prior conclusions concerning falling away, whether consciously or not, all four views fail to ask the right question concerning biblical warnings. We believe the right question concerns the function of biblical warnings in relation to biblical promises. This question does not seem to occur to those who adopt one of the four popular interpretations of biblical warnings.

Advocates of both the loss-of-salvation view and the loss-of-rewards view appeal to admonitions and warnings to prove that believers have the freedom to forsake Christ Jesus. The basic function of warnings seems to be to indicate that it is possible to fall away and suffer loss. While it is true that the apostasy and consequential loss differ substantially between these two views, they hold in common the notion that admonitions and warnings, framed as suppositions, necessarily imply a doubtful outcome.

Those who endorse either the tests-of-genuineness view or the hypothetical-loss-of-salvation view seem concerned to avoid the implications the other two views find in suppositional warnings and admonitions. They also seem to assume that suppositional warnings imply some kind of uncertainty. Convinced, however, that all who are in Christ Jesus are secure forever, these Bible interpreters unwittingly modify the suppositional warnings to avoid conflict with God's sure promises. Earlier we showed how S. Lewis Johnson's interpretation of Colossians 1:21-23 turns the prospective admonition into a retrospective test of faith's sincerity. Consequently, the function of admonitions and warnings is to call on believers to assess whether or not their belief is authentic. Similarly, Thomas Hewitt recasts suppositional warnings to mean that if a believer could fall away, then it would result in eternal perishing. Thus, the function of admonitions and warnings is to correct incorrect reasoning that apostasy is not serious. However, the call for perseverance is only indirect.

What distinguishes our proposal from the other four views? While the other four interpretations of biblical warnings do not allow the suppositional language of biblical warnings its ordinary function, we





seek to do just that. Whereas the other four explanations of biblical admonitions and warnings smuggle theological conclusions into their explanations of the warning passages, unwitting though it may be, we believe we avoid both implicitly and explicitly imposing a theological grid on the warnings. Instead, we concentrate our interpretive efforts on the grammar and context of biblical texts that admonish and warn, and we do the same for biblical promises of God's assuring grace to preserve his own. We refuse to impose suppositional warnings on God's promises, as advocates of the loss-of-salvation view do. We equally resist superimposing God's promises on admonitions and warnings, as those who endorse the other three views do. We believe that God's promises have their own function, namely, to establish belief in the God who keeps his promises and to assure us that he is faithful to his people. We also believe that God's warnings and admonitions have their distinctive function. They serve to elicit belief that perseveres in faithfulness to God's heavenly call on us. Thus, God's promises and God's warnings do not conflict. Rather, the warnings serve the promises, for the warnings urge belief and confidence in God's promises. Biblical warnings and admonitions are the means God uses to save and preserve his people to the end (see figure 1.5).

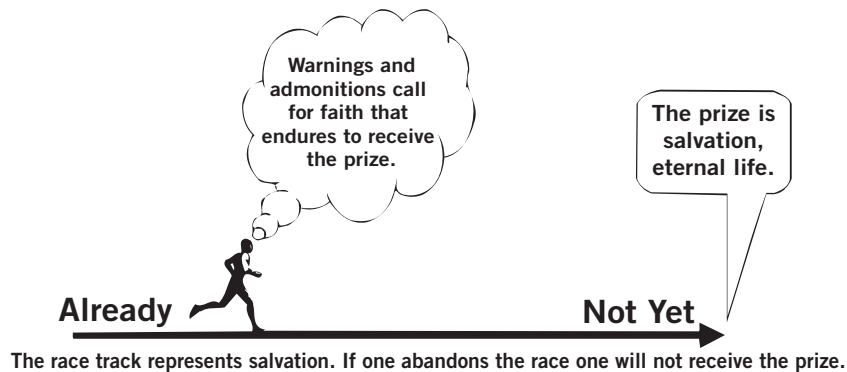
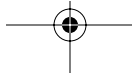
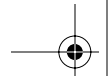


Figure 1.5. God's means-of-salvation view of warnings and admonitions

Conditional promises and conditional warnings. What do biblical warnings look like? Most biblical warnings use suppositional or condi-





tional language to express a threat or a promise. It may be helpful to identify what conditional language entails. A condition expresses a contingent relationship. Ordinarily we express this contingency with a conditional sentence that consists of two clauses: (1) a dependent clause (“if”), also called the protasis, and (2) an independent clause (“then”), also called the apodosis. Another word to describe a condition is *supposition*. English readers usually think of the word *if* as the indicator of a condition. Though perhaps most conditional expressions in English do use the word *if*, there are other ways to express a conditional idea. We often use the imperative, a command, to express a contingency, such as, “Swallow arsenic, and you will die.” Sometimes we simply express a condition by saying, “Suppose you swallow arsenic—you will die.” But we also use other grammatical structures to express a contingency. For example, we regularly use a relative clause for this purpose: “Whoever swallows this bottle of arsenic will die.” We also use a gerund: “Swallowing arsenic will kill you.” Or we may rephrase it, “The one who swallows arsenic will die.” What is true in English is also true in the biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek.⁵⁶

As we read the New Testament, we find many warnings and admonitions that seem to have immediate and direct application to Christians. We will look briefly at two main kinds of New Testament passages in this segment. We will call these two categories of passages (1) conditional promises and (2) conditional warnings and admonitions. At this point we will simply introduce the kind of biblical language that will become the primary focus of chapter four. Here we will illustrate what we mean by conditional promises and conditional warnings. We have carefully selected two passages with the hope that readers will agree that these fit our two categories. In addition, we expect that all will agree that the alternative the text presents in both passages is eternal life or eternal perishing. We are also reasonably confident that not all will fully agree with our discussion of these texts.

The following passage represents a conditional promise: “To the one who is thirsty, I will give freely from the spring of the water of

⁵⁶For a helpful discussion of conditional sentences in the Greek New Testament, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 679-712.





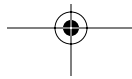
life. The one who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be God to that one and that one will be a son to me” (Rev 21:6-7). The passage expresses the promise conditionally, for receiving the thirst-quenching drink of eternal life is conditioned on thirsting, and inheriting all that God has promised is contingent on overcoming. This promise seems to be nothing more nor less than an elaboration of the gospel’s initial conditional call to believe the good news of Jesus Christ. Who could doubt that this passage announces the gospel’s command to both believer and unbeliever? It is clear that the two metaphors—thirsting and inheriting—depict our profound need and God’s abundant provision. Furthermore, the passage uses the common biblical imagery of water to depict eternal life (cf. Jn 4:7-15; Rev 7:17; 22:1, 17). But how does this conditional promise elaborate the call of the gospel? It does so by inviting believer and unbeliever alike to consider the outcome of extended belief, here designated by two Greek participles: “the one who is thirsty” and “the one who overcomes.” Thus, eternal life, according to this conditional promise, belongs to anyone who exercises belief that endures against trials, belief that is characterized as thirst that is determined to be quenched.⁵⁷

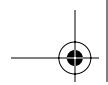
An example of a passage that administers a conditional warning is Revelation 22:18-19:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (NRSV)

As before, this passage uses conditional language, but here it expresses the warning. If one adds to the book of Revelation, God will add to that person the horrible plagues described in this book. If one subtracts from the book, God will snatch away from that person his or her share “in the tree of life and in the holy city.” As with the promise, the warning uses metaphors for eternal punishment (“plagues”) and for eternal life (“share in the tree of life and in the holy city”). To

⁵⁷Though we nuance our discussion of gospel conditions and of the relationship between faith and obedience, we essentially concur with John Piper’s discussion of “conditional promises.” For his discussion see *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 1995), pp. 231-59.





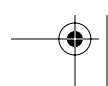
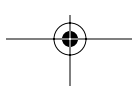
THE RACE SET BEFORE US

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“add to” or to “take away from” the book is imagery that depicts the consequences of unbelief or unfaithfulness. It should be apparent, now, that the two passages are similar, for both promise and warning employ conditional language.

However, there is an important difference between the two classes of passages. The first passage assures a promise of eternal life with a condition attached. The second trumpets a warning lest anyone who has a share in eternal life forfeit it. Though there is a distinction between the two passages, it is important to study both classes of passages together because the warning is a corollary of the promise. By corollary, we mean that the warning accompanies the promise by complementing it. One may readily see this complementary relationship by reading Revelation 22:17, the verse that immediately precedes the warning we have cited: “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift” (NRSV). Clearly, this verse reiterates the conditional promise of Revelation 21:6-7. Thus it confirms our earlier observation that the conditional promise of those verses is the gospel’s sustained call for protracted belief, belief that endures. It also confirms our observation that the warning of verses 18-19 complements the conditional promise by reinforcing the fact that the promise is conditioned on persistent belief. The conditional promise (Rev 21:6-7; 22:17) sustains and elaborates the gospel’s initial command to believe by reiterating the call for belief that persists to the end. The conditional warning (Rev 22:18-19), as a corollary to the promise, also elaborates or sustains the call of the gospel for faithfulness and loyalty to Christ that endures to the end.

Biblical warnings and admonitions point us toward the last day. Another significant difference between our proposal and the general orientation of the other four interpretations of warnings is what we call an eschatological orientation. A passage such as 1 Peter 1:5—“who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (NRSV)—makes the point, if we will hear it, that salvation has an eschatological or last-day orientation. *Salvation*, in other words, is not only a term to describe what God has already done by justifying and converting us but also a word that portrays what God has not yet done when he will bring us to “the





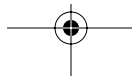
goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls" (1 Pet 1:9).

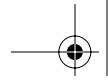
Much of the theological wrangling that has taken place between Calvinists and Arminians, between defenders of so-called lordship salvation and the self-designated advocates of free grace, has been due to a failure to take seriously and consistently the biblical evidence for the already-but-not-yet elements that fill the pages of the New Testament.⁵⁸ Each of the four theological groups we have identified earlier in this chapter talks past the others because each has ignored one strand of evidence or another while also exaggerating out of biblical proportion one or another strand. The way forward and through the impasse of this theological dispute is to acknowledge that the biblical lines of evidence indicate that our salvation in Christ Jesus is properly portrayed with evenhanded accent on both the already and the not-yet aspects.

In the next chapter we will demonstrate that the Bible portrays salvation with many and varied metaphors, as a reality that is already ours by rights as heirs but that we have not yet inherited. This is so because the heavenly Son of God offered himself as a sacrifice once to do away with sin, but he has not yet returned to bring salvation to us who are waiting for him (Heb 9:26-28). We recognize how tempting it is to draw simplistic conclusions concerning this tension between the already and the not yet. Some evangelicals tend to exaggerate the not-yet-attained consummation of salvation as they insist that the biblical warnings and admonitions prove that Christians can lose their salvation. Many other evangelicals exaggerate what we already possess in Christ Jesus so that they collapse the not-yet-attained aspects into the already-received aspects. The result is that either the warnings have nothing to do with salvation (as per the loss-of-rewards view) or the warnings lose their prospective orientation and take on a retrospective function as tests to uncover hypocrites and spurious believers in the church.

We believe that holding a proper tension between the already and not-yet aspects of God's gracious gift of salvation leads us to recognize that biblical warnings are prospective, designed to elicit faith that perseveres to the end in order to lay hold of the eternal prize of life. We

⁵⁸See the critique of the so-called lordship salvation debate between Hodges and MacArthur, in *Christ the Lord*, ed. Michael Horton (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1992).





believe that not only must we accept the intended functions of both promise (assurance) and warning (admonition), but we must also accurately represent their functions in our writing, our teaching and our preaching if we want to do justice to the biblical evidence. This is especially true because how we explain the relationship of promise and warning has profound implications for us personally, interrelationally in the home and in the church, and pastorally.

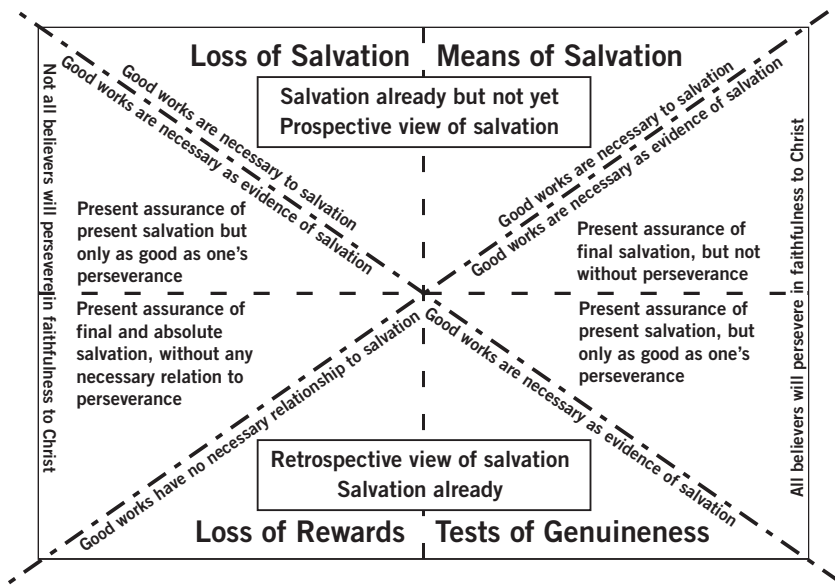


Figure 1.6. Comparative chart of four views of perseverance and assurance, with a focus on warnings and admonitions (excluding the hypothetical-loss-of-salvation view)

