

Messianic Jew David Stern and the Security of the Believer

David Stern is a Messianic Jew who believes that Yeshua (Jesus) is the Messiah. He has written *The Complete Jewish Bible* (CJB) and *The Jewish New Testament Commentary* (JNTC). He provides a number of insightful translations in the CJB and comments in the JNTC. One of the things I found interesting was his comments on passages that Arminians typically use in support of conditional security and the possibility of apostasy (i.e., believers becoming unbelievers through unbelief manifested in sin and disobedience toward God and His Word). He clearly falls on the side of Arminianism. I have put his CJB translations in **bold** to offset his comments in the JNTC.

“The parable is this: the seed is God’s message. 12 The ones along the path are those who hear, but then the Adversary comes and takes the message out of their hearts, in order to keep them from being saved by trusting it. 13 The ones on rock are those who, when they hear the word, accept it with joy; but these have no root — they go on trusting for awhile; but when a time of testing comes, they apostatize.” (Luke 8:11-13, CJB)

13 Apostatize, Greek *aphistēmi* (“go away, desert, fall away”). The word used in the parallel passages (Mt 13:18, Mk 4:17) is “*skandalizo*” (“fall into a trap, be caught in a snare”). Yeshua’s point is that poorly rooted believers, whose commitment is inadequate to carry them through times of temptation, harassment and persecution, “fall away” from faith. (JNTC, 119)

For I am not ashamed of the Good News, since it is God’s powerful means of bringing salvation to everyone who keeps on trusting, to the Jew especially, but equally to the Gentile. (Romans 1:16, CJB)

To everyone who keeps on trusting. This renders the Greek more accurately than the usual translation, “to everyone who believes,” not only because “trust” is closer to the biblical concept than “believe” . . . but also because the present tense of a Greek verb implies ongoing activity, not a once-and-for-all event. (JNTC, 329)

So then, brothers, we don't owe a thing to our old nature that would require us to live according to our old nature. 13 For if you live according to your old nature, you will certainly die; but if, by the Spirit, you keep putting to death the practices of the body, you will live. (Romans 8:12-13, CJB)

13 If by the Spirit you keep putting to death the practices of the body, you will live. . . . The phrase, "practices of the body," refers to the body's bad habits which the sinful old nature has produced; previously Sha'ul [Paul] wrote similarly of the body's "various parts" which a believer should not "offer... to sin as an instrument for wickedness" (6:12-13, 19; 7:5, 23). Unless you, the believer, continually and actively, by the power of the Holy Spirit, "put to death" your body's bad habits to which it has become accustomed and conditioned by your old nature, these bad habits will certainly find expression, so that **you will certainly die**, spiritually and eternally as well as physically. By actively and continually setting the mind on the Spirit (v. 6), **you will live**, as explained in vv. 10-11. (JNTC, 382-383)

So you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20 True, but so what? They were broken off because of their lack of trust. However, you keep your place only because of your trust. So don't be arrogant; on the contrary, be terrified! 21 For if God did not spare the natural branches, he certainly won't spare you! 22 So take a good look at God's kindness and his severity: on the one hand, severity toward those who fell off; but, on the other hand, God's kindness toward you — provided you maintain yourself in that kindness! Otherwise, you too will be cut off! (Romans 11:19-22, CJB)

19-21 So, seeking an excuse for pride, **you**, a new imaginary opponent (see 10:14-15N), a prideful boastful Gentile Christian, **will say**, "**Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in**," the implication being that God prefers Gentiles to Jews. Sha'ul's [Paul's] answer is, literally, "[It is] well"; my rendering, **True, but so what?** brings out the implicit irony, the point being that the opponent's statement, though true, cannot be made into a ground for boasting against the branches. For even though **They were broken off because of their lack of trust**, nevertheless, the only reason **you stay in place is because of your trust** in the God of the Jews and in the Jewish Messiah. **So don't be arrogant; on the contrary, be terrified** of letting pride in having been included with God's people replace trust in God. This was the very sin Sha'ul found unbelieving Jews prone to at 2:17-29, and compare Mt 3:9. "Stand in awe" or even "fear," as some translations have, are not strong enough; you are to **be terrified**, once you face the fact that **if God did not spare the natural branches** when they apostatized through lack of trust in him, **he certainly won't spare you**, a grafted-in branch, when you, through antisemitic pride, demonstrate that same lack of trust.

22 Some people think that if they have given mental assent to the proposition that Yeshua is the Messiah, they have “eternal security” with God, no matter how they live their lives. This parody of genuine trust is rightly called “cheap grace.” The truth of the matter is that “faith” without actions to match is dead (Ya [James] 2:14-26); in other words, salvation is conditional: **provided you maintain yourself in that kindness! Otherwise you too will be cut off!** This involves taking care that faith “works itself out in love” (Ga 5:6, Ep 2:20). (JNTC, 414)

7 Actually, if you are bringing lawsuits against each other, it is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? **8** Instead, you yourselves wrong and cheat; and you do it to your own brothers! **9** Don't you know that unrighteous people will have no share in the Kingdom of God? Don't delude yourselves — people who engage in sex before marriage, who worship idols, who engage in sex after marriage with someone other than their spouse, who engage in active or passive homosexuality, **10** who steal, who are greedy, who get drunk, who assail people with contemptuous language, who rob — none of them will share in the Kingdom of God. **11** Some of you used to do these things. But you have cleansed yourselves, you have been set apart for God, you have come to be counted righteous through the power of the Lord Yeshua the Messiah and the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:7-11, CJB)

9-11 Unrighteous people will have no share in (literally, “will not inherit”) **the Kingdom of God, . . .** In 4:20 the Kingdom of God is thought of as present, but in this verse and at 15:50 it is future; actually it is both (see Mt 3:2N).

Sha'ul [Paul] is not saying that a single infraction will cause a person to lose his salvation; but that people who continue to lead a life of sin, who are habitual thieves, who intentionally go on committing one or more of the four enumerated varieties of sexual immorality, who refuse to give up the other egregious sins named, show by their behavior that they are not part of God's people (compare 1 Yn [John] 3:9). Mere mental assent to doctrines or to the fact of Yeshua's Messiahship is not sufficient for salvation, for “faith without actions is dead” (Ya [James] 2:26).

The idea that a person can profess belief in God or in Yeshua and still highhandedly go on sinning is repugnant to the writers of Scripture. Overly easygoing congregations bring shame on the Messianic Community by soft-pedaling the need for believers to change their lifestyles. Such congregations produce complacent pseudo-believers. Some take advantage of the notion that God is gradually changing them, thereby justifying continued indulgence in their sins. God, who has made his will clear, has provided **through the power of the Lord Yeshua the Messiah and the Spirit of our God** everything needed to overcome known grievous sins like the ones named in these verses. We are not to presume on God's patience (Ro 2:3-6). (JNTC, 450-451)

1 Now, brothers, I must remind you of the Good News which I proclaimed to you, and which you received, and on which you have taken your stand, 2 and by which you are being saved — provided you keep holding fast to the message I proclaimed to you. For if you don't, your trust will have been in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:1-2, CJB)

1-2 Now, brothers, I must remind you of the Good News. Sha'ul [Paul] immediately places the question of resurrection in the context of the Gospel (last mentioned at 14:36) because belief in the resurrection is an indispensable component of it, not a side issue (vv. 3-34). Only after reminding the Corinthians how important resurrection is can he address the difficulty which prevented some from believing in it, namely, their inability to imagine how it could happen (vv. 35-38).

How does the Gospel save? Here is Sha'ul's brief anatomy of the process. First it is **proclaimed**, then **received** and through further teaching internalized, so that one can take a **stand** on it, making it the foundation of one's life. Thus, by continuing to trust in it one goes on **being saved** (as at Ro 10:9-10&N), given one condition, to **keep holding fast to the message proclaimed** and not be diverted to "some other so-called 'good news,' which in fact is not good news at all" (Ga 1:6-7), in which case one's **trust will have been in vain** (compare Lk 8:13). (JNTC, 485)

I am astounded that you are so quick to remove yourselves from me, the one who called you by the Messiah's grace, and turn to some other supposedly "Good News," 7 which is not good news at all! What is really happening is that certain people are pestering you and trying to pervert the genuine Good News of the Messiah. 8 But even if we — or, for that matter, an angel from heaven!—were to announce to you some so-called "Good News" contrary to the Good News we did announce to you, let him be under a curse forever! 9 We said it before, and I say it again: if anyone announces "Good News" contrary to what you received, let him be under a curse forever! (Galatians 1:6-9, CJB)

6-9 Is Sha'ul [Paul] a martinet with an uncontrollable temper, or is he filled with venom against anyone whose opinions differ from his own? The answer depends on whether one believes there is such a thing as a true Gospel, God's **genuine Good News**, summed up in vv. 1 and 3b-5, answering the deepest questions of human existence. If in fact Yeshua **called** Sha'ul **by** his **grace** to proclaim God's Good News, then this is the true Good News that saves. Any other "gospel" is **not good news at all** but misleading bad news, capable of drawing off to perdition people who began on the road to salvation. (JNTC, 520-521)

And it is perfectly evident what the old nature does. It expresses itself in sexual immorality, impurity and indecency; 20 involvement with the occult and with drugs; in feuding, fighting, becoming jealous and getting angry; in selfish ambition, factionalism, intrigue 21 and envy; in drunkenness, orgies and things like these. I warn you now as I have warned you before: those who do such things will have no share in the Kingdom of God! (Galatians 5:19-21, CJB)

19-21 There are believers who do not take these verses seriously, who think they can continue in adultery, fornication, *pharmakeia* (a Greek word which gives us our word “pharmacy” but combines the ideas of sorcery and drug use, as in the *JNT* rendering; see Rv 9:21N), and the other sins enumerated here without having to pay the price. They suppose that a loving God will accept them regardless of their sins, or that having once long ago professed their faith guarantees them entry to heaven. Sha’ul’s [Paul’s] response is brief and severe: **I warn you now as I have warned you before: those who do such things will have no share in** (literally, “will not inherit”; compare 3:29–4;7) **the Kingdom of God!** The phrase, “those who do such things,” is the Greek word “*prassontes*” (“practicing”). It is not those who fall short of perfection who are excluded from the Kingdom, for that would exclude everyone, but those who willfully continue to practice their sins instead of turning from them sincerely to seek God’s forgiveness (1 Yn [John] 1:9). While some of the listed sins can be performed alone, note how many involve abuse of other people and breakdown in human relationships (see v. 26&N). (JNTC, 565)

In other words, you, who at one time were separated from God and had a hostile attitude towards him because of your wicked deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in the Son’s physical body through his death; in order to present you holy and without defect or reproach before himself — 23 provided, of course, that you continue in your trusting, grounded and steady, and don’t let yourselves be moved away from the hope offered in the Good News you heard. (Colossians 1:21-23, CJB)

For when people have once been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become sharers in the *Ruach HaKodesh*, 5 and tasted the goodness of God’s Word and the powers of the *‘olam haba* — 6 and then have fallen away — it is impossible to renew them so that they turn from their sin, as long as for themselves they keep executing the Son of God on the stake all over again and keep holding him up to public contempt. 7 For the land that soaks up frequent rains and then brings forth a crop useful to its owners receives a blessing from God; 8 but if it keeps producing thorns and thistles, it fails the test and is close to being cursed; in the end, it will be burned. 9 Now even though we speak this way, dear friends, we are confident that you have the better things that come with being delivered. (Hebrews 6:4-9, CJB)

4-6 These verses have been commandeered into service of the most amazing variety of theological positions. Arminians (named after their supposed founder, Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609)) take them as proof that it is possible for someone who has once been a believer to fall away from faith irretrievably. Calvinists (after John Calvin (1509-1564)) interpret them in such a way as to make that a practical impossibility. The dispute between them has fueled many fires, but often forgotten is the author's purpose, which is not to deal abstractly with the "eternal security of the believer," but specifically with his readers' concern that unless the Levitical sacrifices required by the Five Books of Moses are offered their sins remain unforgiven. Whether they had in fact reintroduced sacrifices on their own cannot be determined from the evidence of this book. But it is obvious that they were fixated on the sacrificial system; and it becomes the author's task to show them that Yeshua's atoning death and his elevation to the office of *cohen gadol* has brought about "a transformation of *Torah*" (7:12) which alters the sacrificial system and priesthood.

Here is a review of the author's argument in these verses. He speaks of **people who have**

1. **once been enlightened**, so that they know who Yeshua is and what he has done;
2. **tasted the heavenly gift** of God's forgiveness;
3. **become sharers in the *Ruach HaKodesh***, the Holy Spirit whom God gives only through his Son Yeshua (this terminology makes it impossible that the author is referring to pseudo-believers, because only true believers become sharers in the *Ruach HaKodesh*);
4. **tasted the goodness** (compare Psalm 34:8) **of God's Word and**
5. **tasted the powers of the *'olam haba***, which is interesting terminology for the gifts of the Holy Spirit as enumerated in 1C12:8-10.

When people who have experienced salvation in such a deep way **and then have fallen away** from faith by trusting not in Yeshua's own sacrificial death and high-priestly office but in animal sacrifices and the system of *cohanim* which the *Torah* set up to administer them—then **it is impossible to renew them so that they turn from their sin, as long as for themselves they keep on executing the Son of God on the stake all over again.** The reason is that they ignore what his death on the stake means, as proved by their trusting in animal sacrifices instead of his sacrifice. Thus they **keep holding him up to public contempt** by not glorifying his death as an atoning death but seeing it as having no special significance, so that his execution as a criminal becomes the dominant fact about it.

I am indebted to Jerome Fleischer, a Messianic Jew with a ministry in the San Francisco area, for pointing out to me that the author's purpose in these verses was not to provide fuel for the Calvinist-Arminian controversy of 1500 years later, but to turn his readers' concern away from animal sacrifices and toward the significance of Yeshua's final

sacrifice. This is clear from the context of the following four chapters, which deal with precisely this question and which constitute the heart of the book.

However, it is possible to make a *midrash* on these verses which does deal with the Calvinist-Arminian controversy. Calvinism teaches the eternal security of the believer. It is possible to define “believer” tautologically, in such a way that no one so defined ever falls away; but then no one could be certain he is a “believer” until his life had ended. For it is manifestly possible for a person to trust the Messiah as fully as he knows how, by any imaginable subjective or objective measure of his ability to trust, and to experience subjectively all the benefits of faith, and still at some point later to fall away. If that happens, it is impossible, so long as he remains in such a state, to renew him again so that he turns from his sin. Why? Because God has given him everything he can give, yet he now refuses to accept his status as righteous with God, along with the implied responsibility of living a holy life. In vv. 7-8 these good gifts of God are compared to rain, intended to make a good crop grow; but if an evil crop comes, it is in due course burned—a reminder of the fate of the wicked on the Day of Judgment. But the New Testament’s way of dealing with the security of the believer is different. Yochanan articulates it well: “The way we can be sure we know him is if we are obeying his commands” (1 Yn [John] 2:3-6&N). (JNTC, 677-678)

My brothers, if one of you wanders from the truth, and someone causes him to return, 20 you should know that whoever turns a sinner from his wandering path will save him from death and cover many sins. (James 5:19-20, CJB)

19-20 Causing a brother to turn from sin is the greatest form of healing, since it **saves him from spiritual death**. Compare Ezekiel 33:14-16, 1 Yn [John] 5:16-17 and 1 Ke [Peter] 4:8&N. (JNTC, 742)

The way we can be sure we know him is if we are obeying his commands. 4 Anyone who says, “I know him,” but isn’t obeying his commands is a liar — the truth is not in him. 5 But if someone keeps doing what he says, then truly love for God has been brought to its goal in him. This is how we are sure that we are united with him. 6 A person who claims to be continuing in union with him ought to conduct his life the way he did. (1 Yn [John] 2:3-6, CJB)

3-6 Two ways not to have the truth: (1) to claim not to have sin (1:8), and (2) to say “**I know him**” but not **obey his commands** (as Ya 2:14-26 teaches). In the *Tanakh* [Old Testament] the word “know” can mean “have intimate experience”; here “knowing Yeshua” means having intimate spiritual experience with him, to the degree that one obeys his commands from the heart. Anything less is not true knowledge; there is a difference between giving mental assent to Yeshua’s Messiahship and knowing him. Elsewhere Yochanan reports that Yeshua said, “If you love me, you will keep my commands,” and “If you keep my commands, you will stay in my love” (Yn 14:15,

15:10; compare Yn 14:21, 15:14). **This is how we are sure that we are united with him,** and this answers the question raised by the “eternal security of the believer” in MJ [Messianic Jews (Hebrews)] 6:4-6N. (JNTC, 770)

Those who keep trusting in the Son of God have this witness in them. Those who do not keep trusting God have made him out to be a liar, because they have not trusted in the witness which God has given about his Son. 11 And this is the witness: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Those who have the Son have the life; those who do not have the Son of God do not have the life. 13 I have written you these things so that you may know that you have eternal life — you who keep trusting in the person and power of the Son of God. (1 John 5:10-13, CJB)