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**‘What My Father Has Given Me’:
Believers as God’s Gift in the Gospel of John**

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Chapter 2 – Perspectives on Eternal Security

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Foreword by Michael G. Maness (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock,³ c2008)

The text most commonly introduced in support of the so-called “security of the believer,” or “perseverance of the saints,” is John 10:28–30. There Jesus speaks about those whom he calls his “sheep,” defined as those who, he says, “hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me” (v. 27). He then adds, “And I give to them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one” (vv. 28–30, NRSV; see also the NIV margin, the Good News Bible, and Richmond Lattimore’s translation).

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² See www.missouristate.edu.

³ See <http://wipfandstock.com>.

The more familiar reading of John 10:29 begins differently. Instead of “What my Father has given me is greater than all else,” the text is usually remembered as “My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all” (NIV, and most English versions). The notion that God the Father is “greater than all” is surely true in any Jewish or Christian context, and the Greek text acknowledges this by placing “my Father” first in the sentence. But in a number of the earliest and most reliable Greek manuscripts, Latin versions, and patristic quotations, the word for “greater” (*meizon*) and the pronoun that goes with it (*o*) are neuter, and therefore cannot refer to “Father,” which is masculine. Thus, a literal translation of the Greek text would be, “My Father, that which he has given to me is greater than all, and no one can snatch [it] out of the Father’s hand.”⁴ The more common reading “My Father who has given them to me, is greater than all” is by far the “easier” reading, so “easy” in fact that it would seem to go without saying. Because it was the reading of the majority of later Greek manuscripts from the Byzantine and medieval periods, it became part of the King James Version and most subsequent English versions.⁵ But a basic rule of textual criticism is that the more “difficult” reading (unless it makes no sense at all) is more likely to be original than a smooth or “easy” reading. That is, would early scribes have changed “My Father . . . is greater than all” (which makes perfect sense) to “What my Father has given me is greater than all” (which raises as many questions as it answers)? It is easier to imagine a change in the opposite direction, clarifying a pronouncement that on the face of it seems hard to understand.⁶

The point of the pronouncement, then, is not simply that God the Father is “greater than all,” but that because the Giver is “greater than

⁴ This reading (that of the NRSV) is the reading of B (Vaticanus, from the fourth century, our best single witness to the Greek text of the New Testament), plus a number of old Latin versions and the Latin Vulgate, the Bohairic Coptic version, and a number of the church fathers, including Tertullian, Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine. Certain other very early manuscripts (including the fourth century Codex Sinaiticus, or a, as well as the slightly later manuscripts L, W, and Y have the neuter pronoun (*o*), yet with a masculine adjective for “greater” (*meizwn*), which Bruce Metzger calls “impossible Greek” that “cannot be construed” (*A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. [London: UBS, 1971], 232). This reading, confused though it may be, confirms the reference not only to the Father as Giver but to a neuter singular “gift” that the Father has given to the Son.

⁵ In addition to the majority of later manuscripts, however, this reading has very early support in one ancient papyrus (P⁶⁶, from the third century), and a few other somewhat later manuscripts (including A, Q, and a later scribal corrector of B).

⁶ Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 232.

all,” the “gift” (that is, “what he has given”) is “greater than all” as well. The context makes it clear that the Father’s “gift” consists of Jesus’ “sheep,” who “hear his voice,” whom he knows and who follow him (see v. 27)—in short, all who believe. They are secure in Jesus’ hand because they were first of all secure in the Father’s hand, and, as he concludes, “I and the Father are one” (v. 30). The neuter singular signals that they are being viewed corporately, as “that which” the Father has given. The text as a whole views them both individually (“no one will snatch *them* out of my hand,” v. 28), and corporately (“no one can snatch [*it*]⁷ out of my Father’s hand” – “it” referring to the Christian community as a single entity, v. 29).

This classic promise of “eternal security” must be set in a wider context within John’s Gospel. The principle on which it is based comes first from the lips of John the Baptist, who, when his disciples reminded him that Jesus was baptizing and that “everyone is coming to him” (John 3:26), replied: “A person can receive nothing unless it is given him from heaven” (3:27). The broad principle he expressed has a variety of applications. First of all, he meant that *he, John*, could receive only what God gave him, for he added, “You yourselves can testify that for me that I said I am not the Christ, but that I am sent on ahead of him” (3:28). But more than that, it implied that *even Jesus* could receive only what God the Father gave him “from heaven.” If Jesus was baptizing, and people were flocking to him in great numbers, it was because God wanted it so, and it was not John’s place to question God. Moreover, the principle applies to *everyone*, for no one can receive salvation or eternal life unless God gives it. As Paul would later ask the Corinthians, “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor 4:7)

Three chapters later, Jesus himself endorses exactly the same principle: “*All that the Father gives me* will come to me, and the person who comes to me I will never cast out” (6:37, italics added). The same interplay evident in John 10:29 between the corporate and individual nature of Christian salvation is in play here as well. “All” in Greek (παν) is neuter and singular (literally “everything”), referring to all believers *corporately*, while the participle, “the person

⁷ As the brackets indicate, the pronoun “it” is not in the Greek text, but must be supplied (more literally, “no one can snatch out of my Father’s hand”). But “it” has to be supplied and not “them” because of the neuter singular “what” (ὅ) or “that which” the Father is said to have given.

who comes” (ol ejrcomeno~) is masculine singular, focusing on *individuals* who “come to Jesus” in the sense of believing in him, or giving him their allegiance. God decides who they are, for they are God the Father’s gift to Jesus, and they prove it precisely by “coming to him.” Jesus will make the same point negatively a few verses later (“*No one* can come to me *unless* the Father who sent me draws him,” v. 44), and yet again further on in the chapter (“This is why I have told you that *no one* can come to me *unless* it is given him from the Father,” v. 65, italics added). Thus when Jesus goes on to promise that “the person who comes to me I will never cast out” (v. 37b), he is not issuing a generalized “Whosoever Will” invitation. Even as staunch a Calvinist as John Bunyan, at the very end of his classic *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, thought that he was,⁸ but in fact the title of the old gospel song is based rather on Revelation 22:17, “And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely” (KJV). Here in John’s Gospel, Jesus is referring not to those who come on their own whim or initiative, but quite specifically to those whom the Father has “given” or “drawn” to him.⁹ Earlier he said that the person who “practices wicked things hates the Light and does not come to the Light, for fear his works will be exposed” (3:20), while the person who “does the truth comes to the Light, so that his works will be revealed as works wrought in God” (3:21). In this Gospel, coming to Jesus in faith is clear evidence that a person has been “drawn” to him by the Father’s love.

The basis of the so-called doctrine of “eternal security” is that those who are so “drawn” are the Father’s gift to the Son, and this gift, Jesus insists, is an irrevocable gift. It cannot be “lost” or wasted. “And this is the will of the One who sent me,” he continues, “that of all he has given me I might not lose any of it, but raise it up at the last

⁸ Bunyan wrote: “The scripture also did now most sweetly visit my soul, *And him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out* (John 6:37). O the comfort that I have had from this word, *in no wise!* . . . But Satan would greatly labour to pull this promise from me, telling of me, that Christ did not mean me. . . . But I should answer him again, Satan, there is in this word no such exception, but *him that comes, him, any him, him that cometh to me, I will in no wise cast out*” (*Grace Abounding* [London: Penguin, 1987], p. 55, par. 215).

⁹ Perhaps a different gospel song is more appropriate here: “I’ve found a friend, O such a friend. He loved me ere I knew him. He drew me with the cords of love, and thus he bound me to him.”

day” (6:39).¹⁰ These verses in John 6 form the essential background to the startling notion in 10:29 that “What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand.” The “security” of the believer is clear in both passages, but what is surprising in the second is the phrase “greater than all,” with its strong accent on the immense *value*, or *worth* of the Father’s gift to the Son, that is, on the value or worth of Christian believers. The doctrines of grace have taught us that in ourselves we are worthless sinners—and “in ourselves” this is true. But value, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, and in this case the Beholder is Christ, who sees believers as a treasured gift, “greater than all” because it comes from the Father and must therefore have had great value in the Father’s eyes.

Jesus picks up the thread of the Father’s gift and its immense value not only in chapter 10 of John’s Gospel, but again in his long prayer to the Father in John 17, where he enumerates several things the Father has “given” him, including “authority over all flesh” (17:3), “words” to pass along to his disciples (v. 8), God’s own “name” (vv. 11–12), and God’s own “glory” (vv. 22, 24). Pre-eminent among these gifts from God, not surprisingly, are the disciples themselves, and ultimately all Christian believers. “I have revealed your name,” he recalls, “to the men¹¹ you gave me out of the world. *They were yours*, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word” (17:6). And again, “I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom you gave me, because *they are yours* (and all mine are yours and yours mine), and I am glorified in them” (17:9–10). The words in italics remind us that Christian believers belonged to the Father *before* they belonged to the Son (“They were yours,” v. 6), and that in being given to the Son they nevertheless still belong to the Father (“they are yours,” v. 9). This is true both corporately and individually, for Jesus finally prays, “Father, *that which* you have

¹⁰ Again, notice the neuter “all” (παν) and “it” (αυτο), but here again it is balanced by the generic masculine in the following verse: “For this is the will of my Father, that *every person* (πα-) who sees the Son and believes in him might have eternal life, and I will raise *him* (αυτον) up at the last day” (v. 40, italics added).

¹¹ “Men” is appropriate here for ανθρωπου- here because Jesus is referring in all likelihood to the all male “Twelve” (see 6:70).

given to me, I want *them* to be with me where I am,¹² that they may see my glory which you have given me, because you have loved me before the creation of the world” (v. 24, italics added).

Jesus affirms in this last great prayer that his stated intention “that of all he has given me I might not lose (mh; apol esw) any of it” (see 6:39) has in fact been realized, for “none of them is lost (apwl eto) except the son of destruction” (that is, Judas Iscariot), and the only reason for that single exception was “so that the scripture might be fulfilled” (17:12).¹³ Jesus’ prayer confirms that both the principle itself (that “none of them is lost”) and the one exception to it (Judas) are grounded in the eternal plan of God. When Jesus is arrested in the following chapter, he tells the arresting officers, “I told you that it is I, so if you are seeking me, let these [that is, his disciples other than Judas] go” (18:8). He did this, we are told, “so that the word he had spoken, that ‘I have not lost any of those you have given me’ might be fulfilled” (18:9). In John’s Gospel, the temporal safety of the disciples God had given Jesus becomes a sign of their eternal safety in the Father’s hand.¹⁴

What conclusions can be drawn from this brief survey of the evidence? First, the so-called “security of the believer” does not emerge in a vacuum in the Gospel of John. Rather, it is a corollary of the often-repeated claim that believers are God the Father’s gift to Jesus the Son. They belonged to God before they belonged to Jesus. Without using the verb “to choose,” or the noun “election,”¹⁵ John’s Gospel makes the point that God has taken the initiative in human salvation. Those who “come to the Light” do so not because they are sinners. Sinners in fact habitually avoid the light (John 3:19–20). They come rather *despite* being sinners, because at some point in their lives they “do the truth” (3:21). They do so because God the Father is *already* at work in them, drawing them to his Son (see 6:44). Coming

¹² Yet again, notice the interplay between the neuter singular (“*that which* you have given me”) and the masculine plural (“I want *them* to be with me”), reflecting both the individual and corporate aspects of election and salvation (see above, n. 7).

¹³ The “scripture” is evidently Psalm 41:10 (see John 13:18).

¹⁴ This is the case in spite of the shame associated with their desertion of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (see, for example, Mark 14:27), and even in John’s Gospel itself (see 16:32).

¹⁵ The language of choice or election is used in John’s Gospel, but in relation to Jesus’ *selection* of the Twelve to accompany him during his ministry and continue his work thereafter (see 6:70, 13:18, 15:16), not in relation to God the Father’s *election* of individuals or of a people to salvation.

to Jesus merely *reveals* “the works of God” in a person’s life (again, see 3:21). A prime example in the Gospel is the man who was born blind in order that “the works of God might be *revealed* in him” (9:3)—not by the restoration of his sight so much as by coming to believe in Jesus and worshipping him (9:38). Turning Reformation theology on its head, one could say that they prove their good works (not *their* good works exactly, but God’s work in them), by their faith.¹⁶ A second conclusion is that those so drawn and so given to Jesus are of immeasurable worth and value (“greater than all,” 10:29), not in themselves or on their own merits, but in the eyes of the Father who loved them and made them his own, and in the eyes of the Son who received them as his greatest treasure. And this value is their intrinsic value, for what could be more “intrinsic” than the value assigned to a person by God the Creator and Redeemer?

Having looked closely at the relevant passages in John 3, 6, 10, and 17, it is legitimate at the end of this essay to allow ourselves a bit more range, and our imaginations a bit more room. Take, for example, Jesus’ parables (in Matthew, not in John) about the “treasure hidden in the field” which a man discovered, and sold all that he had in order to buy the field and the treasure in it (Matt 13:44), or the “one precious pearl” which a merchant admired so much that he sold everything in order to make it his own (Matt 13:45–46). These are commonly understood as incentives to Jesus’ hearers to seek the “highest good,” the Kingdom of Heaven. But what if the pearl or the treasure, or both, represent instead those whom God the Father loves, redeems, and entrusts to his Son? If that were the case, it would not be so different from the way in which Jesus in John’s Gospel views believers as “greater than all,” a gift of matchless worth from the Father who sent him. Ironically, such an idea comes to expression even in a document judged heretical by the later church, the apocryphal *Gospel of Philip*, probably Gnostic in origin, from the second or third century:

When the pearl is cast down in the mud it does not become dishonoured the more, nor if it is anointed with balsam oil will

¹⁶ See my article, “Baptism and Conversion in John: A Particular Baptist Reading,” in *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church. Historical and Contemporary Studies in Honour of R. E. O. White*, JSNTSup 171, ed. S. E. Porter and A. R. Cross (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 136–56.

it become more precious. But it has its worth in the eyes of its owner at all times. So with the sons of God wherever they may be. For they have the value in the eyes of the Father (*Gospel of Philip* 48).¹⁷

It should be noted, however, that this is by no means a characteristically “Gnostic” interpretation. The *Gospel of Thomas*, for example, moves in exactly the opposite direction, interpreting not only the parables of the treasure and the pearl (*Thomas*, 76, 109), but also the lost sheep (*Thomas*, 107) and the net (*Thomas*, 8) as referring to humans seeking and valuing the “highest good,” rather than God seeking and valuing a people for himself.

Finally, it may not be accidental that one of the first of Jesus’ disciples, the first who was said to “believe” in him (John 1:50) was named “Nathanael,” a name that means “gift of God.” Jesus recognized Nathanael’s worth as a gift from the Father when he addressed him as “a true Israelite in whom is no deceit” (1:47), and told him, “Before Philip called you when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (1:48). With this, he echoed the prophet’s words about God’s joyful discovery of his people Israel long ago: “Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruits on the fig tree, in its first season, I saw your ancestors” (Hosea 9:10, NRSV).

Such random thoughts “outside the box” are admittedly speculative and by no means capable of proof, yet they are consistent with the main point that in John’s Gospel the “security” of Christian believers rests on their profound value in God’s sight, and on the Father’s work in their lives long before they ever came consciously and willingly to the Son in faith.

¹⁷ For the translation, see R. McL. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip* (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1962), 109.