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The Security of the Believer as the Son’s Fulfillment of the Father’s Will (John 6:38-40)

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Chapter 3 – *Perspectives on Eternal Security*

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Introduction

Understanding God’s will, on both a practical and theological level, is one of the most important biblical issues believers face. On the practical level, Christian men and women desire to know God’s will for their lives (*i.e.*, which job God wants them to have, which person God wants them to marry, etc.). Yet, many struggle to find that specific will. Part of the difficulty in being able to discern God’s will is that the Bible does not call each of us by name and say specifically

¹ See www.mabts.edu.

² See <http://wipfandstock.com>.

what we should or should not do. However, guidelines exist to help believers understand God's will for their lives.³

On the theological level, theologians wrestle with the various components of God's will, too. For example, they desire to know the will of God as it relates to salvation (*i.e.*, what is God's role—since he is sovereign, what is man's role—since he possesses free will, can salvation be lost, etc.). Here, as on the practical level, difficulty exists. Part of the problem seems to be that there are so few passages that explicitly state "this is the will of God."⁴ Even where there are texts that make this assertion, their interpretation has given rise to various opinions.

One example of a text that speaks about God's will appears in John 6:39-40. In the midst of this "bread of life" discourse, Jesus claimed:

This is the will of Him who sent Me: that I should lose none of those He has given Me but should raise them up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father: that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.⁵

On this occasion, as Jesus spoke, he described the nature of the will of his Father. According to Jesus, God's will meant two things. First, that he (Jesus) would "lose none of those" God had given him; and second, that he would "raise them up" on the last day.

This passage makes several assertions. First, God does have a role in salvation. He is the one who "gives" some⁶ to his son Jesus (6:37, 39). Second, those whom the Father gives, Jesus will never cast out (6:37). Third, not only will Jesus not cast them out, he will also not lose any of them (6:39). Last, not only will Jesus not lose any of them, but he will raise them up "on the last day" (6:40).

³ Two resources which have become quite popular are Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) and Henry Blackaby's *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Lifeway, 1993). Warren's book has sold more than a million copies in 20 languages. Blackaby's book is 15 years old and has sold more than 4 million copies.

⁴ A sampling of such texts is 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 5:18; and 2 Peter 3:9.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references come from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

⁶ The use of the neuter relative pronoun at this point is interesting. If anything, we would expect the masculine pronoun to be employed, but it is not. More will be said about this later.

Based on this text and others like it, many have derived the concept of the security of the believer. What does this concept mean? Is this the correct understanding of the words of Jesus? What truly is God's will as it is presented here? These are some of the questions that we will seek to answer as we examine this portion of John's Gospel.

Analysis of the Text

Context

John 6:39–40 comes in a section of John's Gospel that has become known as the "Bread of Life" discourse. This particular discourse falls within the first half of John's Gospel which describes the public ministry of Jesus.⁷ The discourse itself extends from John 6:22–71 and includes the first of many "I am" sayings of Jesus as recorded by John.⁸

As the narrative begins in verse 22, one notes that Jesus and his disciples have gone to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (6:22). They had been in Galilee, where the 5000 had been fed (6:1–15). A crowd gathered and asked Jesus a simple question, "Rabbi, when did You get here?" (6:25). Jesus responded, "I assure you: You are looking for Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate the loaves and were filled" (6:26). Interestingly enough, Jesus did not answer their question directly, but moved to address the real issue at hand—"food that lasts for eternal life" (6:27).

This reply leads to further discussion (6:28–29) in which the crowd asked Jesus what sign he was going to perform for them because their fathers had eaten manna in the wilderness (6:30–31). Jesus responded by speaking of the "real bread from heaven" (6:33). The mention of this type of bread caused the crowd to exclaim, "Sir,

⁷ Many commentators have well noted the basic structure of John's Gospel, where Raymond Brown's analysis has influenced many. See Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)*, vol. 29 in *The Anchor Bible*, gen. eds. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), cxxxviii. In brief, Brown described the divisions of John's Gospel in this manner:

- A. Prologue (1:1–18)
- B. The Book of Signs (1:19–12:50)
- C. The Book of Glory (13:1–20:31)
- D. Epilogue (21:1–25)

⁸ The other "I am" sayings found in John are: "I am the light of the world" (8:12); "I am the door" (10:7); "I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 14); "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25); "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6); and "I am the true vine" (15:1, 5).

give us this bread always!” (6:34) It was this statement that prompted Jesus to begin the discourse on the fact that he himself was this bread.

The theme of Jesus as the bread of life continues until verse 58 (6:47–58). In fact, as the discussion progresses, Jesus speaks of eating his flesh and drinking his blood! Because of the nature of this concept, many of Jesus’ disciples “turned back and no longer walked with Him” (6:66). The chapter closes with two final statements. First, Peter affirms the commitment of the twelve to follow Jesus because only he had “the words of eternal life” (6:68) and they had come to know and believe that he was “the Holy One of God” (6:69). Second, Jesus noted the fact that one of them was “going to betray Him” (6:71).

Analysis

When we focus on John 6:35–40, the focus of this article, we note a highlighted emphasis on the will of the Father. In fact, three times in these verses Jesus referred to God’s will. In verse 38, Jesus claimed that he came “not to do (His) will, but the will of Him who sent (Him).” In verses 39 and 40, Jesus clarified what this will was by stating twice that “this is the will” of my Father. The Greek word used at this point is the noun *qēl hma*. Generally, *qēl hma* is used with one of two ideas in the New Testament. It can be used in a subjective manner indicating “the act of willing or desiring.”⁹ One example of this is found earlier in John’s Gospel. In John 1, the Apostle John wrote, “But to all who did receive Him, He gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, or of the *will* of the flesh, or of the *will* of man, but of God” (vv. 12-13; italics mine). The subjective connotation at this point indicates that the action, becoming children of God, finds its basis not with humanity but God.

Qēl hma may also have a more objective sense meaning “what one wishes to happen.”¹⁰ This is the meaning in John 5:30 where Jesus said: “I can do nothing on My own. Only as I hear do I judge, and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own *will*, but the *will* of Him who sent me” (italics mine). The objective sense of

⁹ A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), s.v. “*qēl hma*.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

qeł hma in this passage is highlighted by Jesus' commitment to carry out what God wanted to happen. It is this second sense that should be understood as the connotation in John 6.

This particular word is found about 62 times in the New Testament. Of those uses, 35 are found in John (11 times) and Paul (24 times) combined. D. Müller explained that since “qeł hma is the more theologically significant word (generally used for the will of God), the theological emphasis lies primarily in Paul and John who focus on this theme.”¹¹ Certainly, Muller’s observation applies to John’s Gospel. Whether one sees explicit statements to this affect or the idea is implied, one of the notable emphases in John is Jesus’ desire to carry out the Father’s will.¹²

This theme is introduced in John 4 and is interspersed throughout John’s narrative until its climax in John 17. For instance, in John 4:34 Jesus stated: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work.” Jesus’ desire to finish the work his Father had given him is described in John 17:4 where Jesus prayed: “I have glorified You on the earth by completing the work You gave Me to do.” Perhaps the most intense illustration of Jesus finishing the work he was given to do is his climatic cry from the cross—“It is finished” (John 19:30). Commenting on this aspect of John’s theology, D. A. Carson noted that “The Fourth Gospel does not record the agony of Gethsemane (*cf.* Mt. 26:36-46), including the resolute ‘Yet not as I will, but as you will,’ but its entire Christology is an expression of that same resolution.”¹³ It is the will of God, then, that Jesus explains he came to do.

The will of God that Jesus came to do is explained in John 6:39–40 with two very similarly structured statements. Understanding these verses is vitally important to grasping what it is that Jesus came to do. Therefore, one must ask a few questions at this point: Do verses 39 and 40 describe two different components of God’s will? And, if they are different, how are they to be reconciled? Or, could it be that some

¹¹ D. Müller, “Will, Purpose,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 1015–18.

¹² See also John 5:30, 6:38–40, and 7:16.

¹³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, in *The Pillar Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 291.

type of grammatical construction is employed here by John to show that both verses work together?

At first glance, it might appear that verses 39 and 40 are making a distinction between two different aspects of God's will. Further analysis, however, reveals that both verses are carefully linked. For instance, both verses begin with similar predicate nominative structures placing the demonstrative pronoun *touto* (this) with the third declension noun *qel hma* (will). Both verses use purpose clauses to express the purpose of God's will. The sense of purpose is expressed by the use of the conjunction *iha* followed by a verb in the subjunctive mood. Finally, both verses also end in the same manner stressing the fact that Jesus will raise up on the last day those whom the Father gave him.

These similarities are such that many have noted the connection between the two and the way they clarify exactly what is the will of the Father. Barclay Newman and Eugene Nida recognized a connection explaining that “both verses 39 and 40 stipulate the will of God; verse 40 simply amplifies what is already in verse 39.”¹⁴ Gerald Borchert arrived at a similar conclusion saying that verse 40 “serves as a kind of summation to vv. 35-39.”¹⁵

While noting the connection between the two verses, William Hendriksen explained that verse 39 employed a figure of speech called “litotes” to highlight its emphasis. According to Hendriksen, a litotes is an “affirmation produced by the denial of the opposite.”¹⁶ The understanding of verse 39, then, would be that since Jesus would lose none of those who had been given by the Father, he would “guard them to the very end.”¹⁷ Hendriksen explained that verse 40 was “a further definition of the will of the Father.”¹⁸ Based on these observations, a more detailed analysis of this text reveals that verses 39 and 40 are inextricably linked to describe the will of God that

¹⁴ Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *The Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of John* in the United Bible Societies Helps for Translators (New York: United Bible Societies), 201.

¹⁵ Gerald Borchert, *John 1–11*, vol. 25A, in the *New American Commentary*, gen. ed. E. Ray Clendenon (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 266.

¹⁶ William Hendriksen, *John*, in the *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 234. Carson also noted the used of the litotes in this passage at verse 37. See Carson, *John*, 290.

¹⁷ Hendriksen, 235.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Jesus came to fulfill. This will can be understood, then, as containing two parts. Furthermore, both components should be understood as working together and in no way contradicting each other. The first part is that Jesus should lose none of those that God has given him (further clarified in verse 40 as those who see the Son and believe in him). The second part is that he will raise them up on the last day.

Another question arises at this point—since Jesus will not lose any that the Father gives him, who are these that will not be lost and raised up on the last day? Twice in these verses, Jesus refers to a specific group with the use of the neuter singular relative pronoun where one would expect a masculine plural form to be used (vv. 37, 39). Newman and Nida noted that this “is a strange expression in Greek,” although it “is a stylistic feature of the Gospel of John.”¹⁹ Even though the expression may be strange and somewhat difficult to translate,²⁰ most commentators are agreed to its meaning. F. F. Bruce commented on this construction explaining that “the pronoun ‘all’ is neuter singular, denoting the sum-total of believers.”²¹ The tendency by some is to look at this passage as support for the idea of an elect group. Hendriksen boldly stated his belief that “the expression ‘all that’ views the elect as a unity; they are all *one* people” (emphasis his).²² Carson agreed with Hendriksen’s conclusion affirming that the relative pronoun here “is used to refer to the elect collectively.”²³

While one must agree that a specific group of people is being referred to in this passage, this admission does not necessitate that s/he need attempt to limit the number of individuals to an “elect” group. For the specific group about which Jesus speaks is further described in verse 40 as “everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him.” R. C. H. Lenski stated that “The neuter singular is used as an

¹⁹ Newman and Nida, *Handbook*, 199. Other examples of John’s use of this construction can be found in 17:2 and 17:24.

²⁰ The New King James Version, the New American Standard Updated, and the New International Version translate the neuter pronoun as “all” in both verses 37 and 39. The NET Bible translates verse 37 with “everyone” and uses the phrase “one person of every one” in verse 39.

²¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 154. See also Borchert, *John 1–11*, 265; Hendriksen, *John*, 234; Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*, in the *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, eds. Robert Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 211, fn. 61; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1942); and Newman and Nida, *Handbook*, 199.

²² Hendriksen, *John*, 234.

²³ Carson, *John*, 290.

abstract expression and as such sums up the whole mass of believers of all ages and speaks of them as a unit.”²⁴ According to Lenski, one can look at these words of Jesus without developing an idea of an elect or limited group. Certainly, then, there are some given to Jesus by the Father (6:37). These he will never cast out (6:37) nor lose (6:39). Moreover, he will raise them up on the last day (6:40).

Summary

The words of Jesus at this point must be understood as affirming the security of the believer. It is God’s will, in other words, that those whom he has given to the Son be raised up on the last day. Jesus will keep them and not lose any of them. The believer’s assurance, then, lies not in his or her own work or power, but in the work of Jesus.

Such security is emphasized in this passage in a variety of ways. First, the act of God’s giving must not be minimized. Grant Osborne recognized that here in this passage, “the sovereign control of salvation by God is given greater stress than anywhere else in John.”²⁵ Second, the commitment of Jesus to complete the will of his Father and his promise to raise up on the last day those who have believed in him must be given its due weight. Last, the emphasis on the individual responding by seeing and believing should not be overlooked either. Raymond Brown commented on this topic, stating:

The stress in vs. 37 that God destines men to come to Jesus does not in the least attenuate the guilt in vs. 36 of those who do not believe. One might conjecture that the reason that they do not believe is because God has not “given” them to Jesus. Yet, it would be unfair to NT thought-patterns to elaborate this as a psychological explanation of the refusal to believe.²⁶

Based on Brown’s conclusion, one sees the need to properly evaluate all components of this text and attempt to keep from elevating one aspect over another. All three of the previously mentioned concepts, then, must be understood as working together.

²⁴ Lenski, *Interpretation*, 463. Later, Lenski further clarified his thinking, noting there “is not a fixed number, in some mysterious way chosen by an absolute decree of God to be such a gift to Jesus” (464).

²⁵ Grant R. Osborne, “Soteriology in the Gospel of John,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, gen. ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989), 247.

²⁶ Brown, *John*, 276.

Now, based on these summary statements, one must ask, “What are the implications of these words for our theology?”

Implications of the Text

Having analyzed John 6:39–40, now one must consider the claims of these verses and how they apply to our understanding of the will of God. As was stated at the end of the previous section, this writer believes that this portion of John’s Gospel affirms the security of the believer. It still remains, however, for us to explain what this means.

Definitions

When we examine a theme like the security of the believer, we must be careful to define our terms clearly. For example, some refer to this concept as the “security of the believer;”²⁷ others prefer the designation the “perseverance of the saints;”²⁸ and yet others opt for a different descriptive phrase such as the “preservation of the saints.”²⁹ While some might think these three phrases are synonymous and describe the same thing, certain differences exist.³⁰ Consider, for instance, what the Southern Baptist understands the security of the believer to be.³¹ *The Baptist Faith and Message* says “All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end.”³² In other words, Southern Baptists believe that if a person is truly saved, they cannot lose their salvation. They are secure in their relationship with Jesus and this security depends solely on God.

²⁷ This is the description adopted by Southern Baptists. See *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: LifeWay Christian Resources, 1998).

²⁸ This is the designation adopted by Calvinists and represents the “P” in the acrostic “TULIP.”

²⁹ One recent proponent of this terminology is C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002). Olson explained “that the truth of eternal security in Christ is not identical to the traditional Calvinistic doctrine of the *perseverance of the saints*” (295; emphasis his).

³⁰ For a detailed and very pointed analysis of the distinction between the ideas “the security of the believer” and “the perseverance of the saints” see Laurence M. Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, rev. ed. (Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications, 1991), 562–63.

³¹ This writer understands that all Southern Baptists are not completely united on this issue. In fact, there are many Southern Baptists who do agree with the five points of Calvinism. He is speaking in general terms, however, to highlight a fundamental difference between these two concepts.

³² *The Baptist Faith and Message*, 12.

The emphasis on the work of God is also understood by those who prefer the designation “preservation of the saints.” C. Gordon Olson confessed that he preferred the term preservation “because the emphasis is upon the work of the triune God, not upon the works of man.”³³ Olson argued that the difference between the ideas of “perseverance” and “preservation” was not simply one of semantics. He continued, “The nub of the difference is that Calvinists have generally put the onus upon the saints to persevere, while a biblical concept of eternal security puts the responsibility upon God to preserve the saved.”³⁴ Olson’s observations fit nicely with the analysis of John 6 offered already in this article. The security of the believer rests in the fact that Jesus, in accordance to the will of God, will raise them up on the last day.

As was just mentioned, the perseverance of the saints, as commonly understood by Calvinists, contains two components. One component emphasizes God’s part and the other places responsibility on the believer himself. Taking note of both aspects, Wayne Grudem defined perseverance as the idea that “those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again.”³⁵ In Grudem’s definition, one sees both emphases highlighted. First, true believers will be kept by God’s power. Second, the evidence that one is a true believer is revealed in the fact that they remain or persevere to the end.

It is this second emphasis that distinguishes the phrase “perseverance of the saints” from the phrases “security of the believer” or “preservation of the saints.” The latter two recognize the sole responsibility of security as resting with the fulfillment of God’s will, not the contribution of humanity or the fact that the believer perseveres. Again, in accordance with the words of Jesus in John 6, the security of the believer lies in the Son’s fulfillment of the Father’s will.

³³ Olson, *Beyond*, 295.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 788.

Implications

Having sought to properly define the various terms used to describe a specific theological understanding of the security of the believer, we turn now to draw out the implications of John 6 for our theology. To put it another way, what does it mean that a believer has security in his salvation?

To reiterate, a believer can find great comfort in John 6 knowing that they are secure and that their security lies not in what s/he does, but in the fulfillment of God's will as carried out by the Son. Jesus affirmed this idea himself in this text, noting that he would never cast out those the Father gives him (6:37); that he would lose none of those the Father had given him (6:39); that those who see him and believe in him would have eternal life (6:40); and that he would "raise them (him) up on the last day" (6:39–40).³⁶

To state that the believer's security rests in the work of Christ is not to deny that the believer should live a life in accordance with God's will for him or her. In fact, at this point, some have misunderstood what "security of the believer" actually means. For instance, John MacArthur appeared to lump those who defend the designation "security of the believer" in with those whom he would describe as having an easy believism. This understanding follows from his observation that some advocate a "once saved, always saved" message that places no emphasis on personal holiness or the need for the believer to conduct his life in a manner worthy of the Lord (Col 1:10). MacArthur claimed that "Any doctrine of eternal security that leaves out perseverance distorts the doctrine of salvation itself."³⁷

MacArthur's comments need to be addressed. First, proponents of the term "eternal security" do not deny the need for righteous living on earth. While they recognize that some believers may fall into sin and even "bring reproach on the cause of Christ,"³⁸ they are

³⁶ The scope of this article does not permit in-depth analysis of other Johannine texts that speak to the issue of the security of the believer. See other essays in this book for further discussion. The point that needs to be expressed here briefly, however, is that this is a theme given some emphasis in John's Gospel (see also John 10:25–30).

³⁷ John F. MacArthur, "Perseverance of the Saints," in *The Master's Seminary Journal* (Spring 1993): 13.

³⁸ The Baptist Faith and Message, 13.

firmly committed to the biblical idea of a faith that is vibrant, alive, and shows itself in good works. Or to state it another way, they affirm what Paul said in Ephesians 2:10 when he wrote “we are His creation—created in Christ Jesus for *good works*, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them” (italics added for emphasis). Second, in contrast to what MacArthur stated, one can forthrightly affirm a proper biblical understanding of the security of the believer without holding to the idea of perseverance of the saints. In fact, Laurence Vance openly confessed that eternal security and perseverance of the saints “have no connection whatsoever.”³⁹ A proper understanding of security notes the necessity of the believer living a godly life without placing an overemphasis on his “persevering” as a necessary component of security.

Conclusion

One of the central truths related to the soteriology of the New Testament is called the security of the believer. One of the key passages from which this concept is derived is the “bread of life” discourse as recorded in John 6. The assurance possessed by the believer is affirmed in this passage in a number of ways. First, God the Father gives some people to his son Jesus. Second, the ones whom the Father gives will not be cast out by Jesus. Third, Jesus will *not* lose any. Last, Jesus will raise them up on the last day. Because the work of the Son constitutes a response to the Father’s will, the security of the believer is certain.⁴⁰

³⁹ Vance, *Other Side*, 562.

⁴⁰ This author wishes to express his gratitude to two colleagues, Tim Christian and Michael McDill, for their helpful suggestions with editing this article.