Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

When Believers Stop Believing: Portrait of an Apostate
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
Code: GTY119

Hello, I'm Phil Johnson, Executive Director of Grace To You, and I'm in the studio today with Pastor and Bible Teacher John MacArthur. Hi, John.

John MacArthur: Hi, Phil. Good to be with you.

Phil Johnson: John, we've invited you into the studio this hour because we would like to talk with you about apostasy, falling away from the faith. What does it mean when someone who professes to be a believer and even seems to be a believer turns his back on Christ and falls away completely? This is a theme we see in Scripture and sometimes Scripture even refers to people like that as believers when they start out. At the end of John chapter 2, the Apostle John says, “Many believed on Him when they saw His miracles.” But the very next verse says, “But Jesus didn't commit Himself to them because He knew what was really in their hearts,” implying that that faith wasn't real. And then that becomes a theme in the gospel of John because in chapter 6, “Many of His disciples turned away and walked with Him no more.” They abandoned the faith completely.” It's a big topic, why do we choose it for this?

We've been thinking about this for a while. We received a letter last year from one of our supporters, a former Grace partner, in fact, and it was one of the saddest, most troubling, most provocative letters we've seen in 40 years of ministry and we wrote back right away and didn't receive a reply. We've tried two or three more times to contact this man, and still again with no response. But his letter raises some important questions.

So we wanted to get you in the studio and just discuss these for a while. We need to warn our listeners. And this isn't really going to be a highly academic discussion. We're not going to talk about theological fine points. But this is a difficult issue that every Christian has questions about and the questions that come to us from this listener are personal, practical questions that frankly all of wish we could have helped him with before he ultimately turned against Christ. But I think these are going to resonate and hit home in many ways with lots of our listeners and some of them in ways they may not expect.

So, let me ask you to start by reading this letter we got from Steve as kind of a starting point.

JOHN: Yeah, Phil, I want to do that. Before I do that, I want to say this. The people who believe you can lose your salvation, and that's a pretty wide range of people across the world, usually are brought to that belief because of people like Steve. It isn't because they find it in the Scripture, it's because they're trying to explain how this person could be a Christian and now they're not a Christian. So that's what leads to that view that you can lose your salvation. And so it is an important issue because there, as I said, is a massive professing Christians around the world who think you can lose your salvation and they've got people to prove you can. As I said, it's not a biblical issue but we'll look at it biblically, try to help the folks who might be drawn to that conclusion because of people they know who denied the faith.

PHIL: Great.

JOHN: Here's the letter from Steve.

“Dear Grace To You:

“Over many years, I have been blessed to receive free tapes, CDs and books from your ministry. Thank you. At those times I really appreciated them. Now, I no longer believe in the God of the Bible or in Jesus Christ. Ten years of full-time ministry proved to me that there is no God and that the God of the Bible does not care. I now reject Christianity and have come to peace. What was at first a great loss has now turned to joy, peace and freedom. I did not leave the faith because of some extreme sin. I left because the God of the Bible, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are all a fantasy. I'm happy I now live in the real world. I only feel guilt about the many people whom I led to Christ and exposed them to the lies of Christianity. I'm not mad at Christians, I'm not mad at you. However, I am mad at myself for not being a more critical thinker. I won't make this mistake again.

“Again, thank you for the many years of help and teaching you all shared with me. I do appreciate what you all are trying to do with the knowledge you have. Please remove me from your mailing list. Save the money. Don't waste it on an apostate like me. I was just giving your CDs away. But now my conscience can no longer can tolerate the further spread of a false hope and disappointment.

Sincerely,

Steve... Agnostic”

PHIL: That's sad, isn't it?

JOHN: Yeah, it's the letter you never want to get. It's the story you never want to hear. You want to believe that anybody exposed to the truth of the gospel over a prolonged period of time, deeply exposed to it by listening to CDs and reading books and being ten years in the ministry, is going to

continually discover the ever-increasingly glorious truth. You don't want to believe that somebody who is listening to teaching and reading books and ministering and studying and sharing the gospel is finding it has diminishing returns and ultimately ends up an apostate. That seems completely counter to what we believed to be true about the essence of divine truth that it becomes richer and richer and more fulfilling and more wonderful all the time. So this is the kind of reverse of that, that's very hard to understand.

PHIL: And it's interesting because he knows all the language and he even diagnoses himself correctly. He says it plainly. “I am an apostate.”

JOHN: Right.

PHIL: What is the biblical definition of an apostate? What does apostasy mean?

JOHN: Well, we want to be careful about how we define that. The simple definition of an apostate is this, an apostate is someone who knowing fully the gospel turns against it in complete rejection. And you could add the components such as in the case of Steve that there was at one point in time a professed belief in the gospel.

But I think apostasy can be defined as someone who with full knowledge of the gospel, full knowledge of the message of Scripture turns against it in a final act of rejection.

PHIL: And there are examples of this even in the New Testament. You've got Judas and Demas.

JOHN: Sure, and you have those people who heard the gospel and had nothing but scorn for it. But you also have the people who simply walked away with a degree of disinterest. I think in either case, whether you're talking about scorn and hostility against the gospel, or utter indifference to the gospel, in either case you have apostasy. It's a full rejection, a final rejection of the truth known.

PHIL: How do you explain this though with someone like Judas or Demas or even Steve who says he was ten years in the ministry? The same with Judas who was with Christ for all those years, none of the other disciples even suspected him when Jesus said someone is going to betray Me? Demas worked alongside Paul until he forsook him. How does someone invest that much of their lives in the gospel and seem so positive about it and then turn away?

JOHN: Well, in every case the personal dynamics may be different, but Judas is the perfect illustration because Judas was three years in the ministry. He was a ministry partner with the eleven Apostles. He was a ministry partner with the Lord Jesus Himself. He was exposed to the perfections of Christ on a 24/7 basis. He actually was a preacher and from all that we can tell, he was there participating in the miracles that the Apostles were part of and that they actually did. So he was fully

engaged in the ministry, fully engaged in fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. But of him, Jesus said this, “One of you is a devil.” Jesus diagnosis of Judas was not that he was a believer who lost his way, or he was once saved and then became unsaved, or he once had saving faith and then forfeited that saving faith. It was that from the beginning one of you is a devil. And the other thing He said is this, He said, “I have lost none of you except that son of perdition that the Scripture might be fulfilled.”

In other words, it was never a shock to Jesus that there was a traitor among the Twelve because that was predicted in the Old Testament. There are a number of prophecies that are fulfilled directly by Judas.

So, Jesus never speaks of him as a believer. He is a son of perdition which is to say he is by nature headed for damnation. He is a devil. So whatever was going on on the outside, nothing was going on on the inside. And I think that's what we have to understand about apostates. It isn't that they once were saved and turned against that. It is that they never were. And if you ask the question...well how could a guy minister for ten years? Then ask the question, how could Judas walk with Jesus, as you put it, for three years, 24/7, and with eleven men living in very intimate conditions day after day after day and they don't even know that he's a devil, that he is by nature a son of perdition?

So I don't think you can draw conclusions because somebody functions in ministry. Again, this goes back to the parable that Jesus gave in Matthew 13 where He said, “The devil would sow the tares among the wheat..

PHIL: Uh-huh.

JOHN: “And you won't be able to tell them apart.” You and I can't, even at our best, know who is really a Christian. I think we can say that person has given evidence of being a Christian, but we may not be able to say that person is not a Christian, even though they look like one. That we can't say. So I think that's part of...part of understanding apostasy is that it hides very well among the saints. Until it comes to fruition, until it shows itself, discloses itself, we may not really know.

PHIL: And Scripture is clear, 1 John 2, that anyone who turns away and abandons the faith like that, none of them were ever true believers from the beginning.

JOHN: Yeah, see that...there are two passages that I think are foundational to this. And one of them is in John 8 where Jesus says, “If you continue in My word, then you are My *alethos mathetes*, my genuine disciple.” In other words, Jesus said it is continuity. It is continuing in obedience to the truth that gives evidence that you are a real Christian. If you don't continue, you weren't a real Christian.

Now Paul picks that up in Colossians 1. You remember he talks about true believers and then he adds, “If you continue in the faith...if you continue in the gospel.” Continuity is the evidence of true

salvation. That's a vital passage.

Now the other one that always comes to my mind that you mentioned is 1 John 2:19 which says this, and this is THE definitive passage. Speaking of an apostate, they...or apostates, “They went out from us that it might be made manifest they never were of us. If they had been of us, they would have continued with us, but they went out from us that it might be made manifest they were not of us.” That verse is the definitive verse. When somebody abandons the faith having once made a profession, understood the faith, it is not a loss of salvation, it is merely the revelation that they never ever had it to begin with.

PHIL: And the apostasy is proof regardless of what that person may have done for ten years supposedly in the service of the Lord.

JOHN: Yeah, the profession is meaningless. “There are many who say, ‘Lord, Lord,'” right? Didn't we do this and didn't we do that? And they're not going to be accepted by the Lord. That's Matthew 7. So the profession is meaningless.

Secondly, the function is meaningless. You know, one of the classic situations along this line is a guy named Church Templeton.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: Chuck Templeton ministered with Youth For Christ, I think he ministered with Billy Graham.

PHIL: Yeah, they were friends.

JOHN: They were close friends. He had a high profile. He was the better preacher. He was the more dynamic personality. He was preaching in big meetings and big rallies. And completely turned on the faith and became an advocate, an anti-Christian advocate of all things agnostic. And I speak of Chuck Templeton because my dad was in that generation and spoke of him. So you had a man who ministered for years and years as a non-Christian and became a Christian and you had a man who ministered for years and years as a non-Christian and finally became an apostate. So the ministry part of it is immaterial.

Now, take it in the more contemporary situation. A pastor in Cambridge, England, right?

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: Just a few years ago, pastor of Eden Baptist Church, wrote commentaries, wrote a number of books, very popular...

PHIL: Gifted expositor.

JOHN: Gifted expositor, Don Carson, Mark Deavor were in his church. He was their pastor. All of a sudden announces that he's a homosexual and he's abandoning the church, he's abandoning everything he ever taught, he's abandoning his wife, his children and he's going to go off and live with some guy that he would only identify with an initial, I think it was C. This is not the first time this has happened, is what I'm saying. And if it happens at those high levels of involvement in ministry, it's a Judas syndrome is what it is, and it's gone in through history. But it also happens all down through the ranks, people who go to church for a while, here's this guy Steve, he would have been a lesser light in terms of popularity and prominence, but it trickles all the way down. And I think this is...this is part of maybe you could say the satanic strategy of sowing tares in the church. I think where Satan wants to do his most deadly work, where he wants to do his most corruption is not outside the church but inside the church. If you can confuse the people in the church about what is Christianity, who is a real Christian, etc., etc., that's the greatest damage you can do.

So we're not surprised that the church is full of people who turn out to be non-Christians. We hope that they finally get saved, but they may well become apostate and turn on the church.

PHIL: We keep coming back to Judas as sort of the prototype of this, and I know when you were in seminary you did a major study on Judas and a lot of that has sort of been woven through your ministry over the years. I have a question about Judas. Do you think, and we know that the human heart is deceitful above all things, desperately wicked, do you think it's possible that he was self-deceived? Or did he know all along that he wasn't a true believer?

JOHN: No, I think he knew all along that he wasn't a true believer. I think he was motivated by greed. You remember the incident that really brought that to light was when he saw a lady wasting a very, very valuable amount of perfume on Jesus and he said, “Oh, why are you doing that? We could take that and give it to the poor.” And the commentary of the New Testament is he didn't want to give it to the poor, he said that because he held the bag. He was the treasurer. He wanted his hands on that money.

PHIL: So he was just very good at being a phony.

JOHN: He was very good at being a fake. He was trying to ride Jesus into power, prominence and money. He was motivated by avarice. He was motivated by greed. I don't think he was ever self-deceived in the sense that he thought he was a true disciple of Jesus and he thought he was...he was a part of the Kingdom...no way, the very opposite. He knew from the get-go that this was a way to power and prominence and money if this Jesus who could do miracles and he knew that. And that's kind of...that's the amazing part of it because all the evidences of Jesus' messiahship were there for

him, too. But instead of concluding that Jesus was, in fact, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior, and embracing the salvation He provided, all he could see in Jesus was the path to his own power and his own riches.

PHIL: Is it possible though for someone to be self-deceived about that? I got a letter just last week from a guy half way around the world who is asking this question: how do I know...is it possible for me to be absolutely sure that I'm not going to end up like Demas? How do I know I'm not self-deceived?

JOHN: Oh, there is no doubt that people can be self-deceived. Matthew 7, “Lord, Lord, we did this...we did that,” there are going to be self-deceived people. Take for example somebody in the Greek Orthodox Church, somebody in the liberal church, somebody in the Roman Catholic Church, look, they're not doing all that stuff...they're not playing games, they're not...they're not pulling off something on the church. They believe that all that religious activity and all that moral effort is going to get them to heaven. Evangelical churches are full of people like that.

And look, Phil, you're right. This all goes back to my seminary dissertation on a Character Analysis of Judas Iscariot. My interest in Judas was what led to all the books I've written on the gospel.

PHIL: Humph.

JOHN: My interest in Judas was how do you distinguish a true believer from a false believer? What was going on in that guy's life? And that's what launched me into that study. And you will remember that it was prompted by a young man that I met when I was in high school, college and seminary who defected from the faith.

PHIL: Yeah, talk about that. I wanted to ask you about that, but since you brought it up, go ahead.

JOHN: When I was in high school I had a very close friend, his name is Ralph and we were good buddies. We played football together in high school and played baseball and he was the leader of his youth group in his church, and I was the leader of the youth group in my church. We used to go down into L.A. and pass out tracts and witness and evangelize and I worked for his dad in the summer. And, you know, I just assumed he was a Christian and I went away to school and, you know, studied for the ministry.

I'll never forget, in his case he went away to Redlands University here in Southern California and just totally abandoned the faith, just totally denied the faith. And that was my first sort of need to understand this. What was going on here? What was the dynamic here?

And then I went away to college and had another buddy, we played football in my days in college and we were kind of a tandem in the backfield, we were close friends. We were on student council

together. His dad was a pastor and a friend of my dad who was a pastor, so I knew their family, I was in their home. He said he was going to be in the ministry, that's what he wanted to do. He ended up totally denying the faith. He ended up becoming a philosopher, taught philosophy at California State University at Long Beach, was arrested for immoral improprieties in his classroom. He became some kind of entrepreneur of rock concerts, had to serve some kind of a jail sentence, totally denied the faith.

Got to seminary, the dean's son denied the faith, put a Buddhist altar in his house when he got married and walked away from Christ.

So, you know, by the time I got to the end of seminary in my last year, I had to do a dissertation, I was very interested in how people can hide in a spiritual environment and all of a sudden shock you. And Judas is the model of that because they didn't get it. They were all saying at the Last Supper, “Is it I? Is it I? Is it I?” They had no clue who it was. And I think even when Jesus said it's the one who dips the sop with Me, that didn't help a whole lot because they were all doing that. I don't know if they even got that.

So, yes, it's been an interest of mine and I think it's foundational to make sure that we don't contribute to self-deception. I don't think you can do anything about an apostate. If people...for whatever reasons they move in to Christianity, and then deny it, I don't know what the dynamics...everyone may be doing it for different reasons.

PHIL: It does often seem to be a moral dimension though, right?

JOHN: There is a moral...there is often a moral dimension and a religious dimension.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: You know, a desire to serve God or know God, or whatever. But there's no change in heart. We're looking at the negative side of this. The positive side, just flipping it over for a second, is that true believers do have increasing joy, increasing peace, increasing satisfaction, increasing assurance and do not apostatize...they do not.

So what's going on in the non-believer during this process is hard to identify. But it was a concern to me that while there's really no way to sort of prevent the apostate, that is the willful person who comes in for all the wrong motives, the Judas-type person. There is a way to minimize the self-deceived and that is to get the gospel right. And that's what prompted *The Gospel According to Jesus; The Gospel According to the Apostles; Ashamed of the Gospel; Hard to Believe*. Now the newest book, or *The Truth War*, *The Jesus You Can't Ignore*. We just keep hitting at it, hitting at it and hitting at it every way we can because I just don't want people to be self-deceived. I want them to be

operating with the right biblical criteria to evaluate what true repentance and what true saving faith is.

PHIL: And a common theme that runs through all of those books is the necessity of examining ourselves to see whether we're in the faith.

JOHN: Exactly.

PHIL: That's pretty much...I mean, it's interesting on the night of the Last Supper all the Apostles except Judas are saying, “Is it I?” They're examining themselves, they're asking, “Am I self-deceived?”

JOHN: Right.

PHIL: That's right to do, right?

JOHN: It is and I think in their case...we've got to understand, they didn't have a Bible, they didn't have a New Testament. The Holy Spirit, of course, was operative in their lives but not in the Pentecostal, post-Pentecostal fullness. So...you know, they were very, very infantile in their understanding. They didn't have a long track record of proof about the strength of their faith. In fact, for three years they lived in the constant shelter of Jesus who resolved every issue instantaneously on the spot. So there was reason to question.

They also in honesty, you know, had the same attitude that Paul did in Romans 7. Look, I know I'm still a sinner. Whatever my relationship to Jesus is, I do things I don't want to do, I think things I don't want to think, I say things I don't want to say, I don't do what I want to do, I don't say what I want to say...I don't think what I want to think. So they knew they were trapped in still their unredeemed flesh. And so, I think that was a very, very honest, and a very spiritual, in a sense, a very spiritual response. “Lord, look, I know I'm a sinner, even though I believe in You and even though I have received the grace of forgiveness and salvation which, of course, will be ratified when He went to the cross. But I think they had received it already. They were believers in Him, they were forgiven. I think they were in touch with the reality that sin was still present. And Romans 7 hadn't been written yet. So they didn't necessarily have the source to sort that out.

PHIL: John, is there a danger even in self-examination because we know that there are remnants of sin that hide themselves in our unglorified flesh and is there a danger that people might focus too much on that and their failures and their weaknesses and take their eyes off Christ?

JOHN: Yeah. And that's a very, very insightful thing to ask because some times people would look at Romans 7 and say...why would Paul say that? You know, Paul's this great, strong, resolute champion of the truth and faith and he's the purest minded guy...he says my conscience is clear, that I've, you

know, lived in holiness and godly sincerity, 2 Corinthians 1:12. Why would he say what he says in Romans 7?

The answer is, because that section of Romans 7:14 to the end of the chapter, may be the most helpful portion in all of Paul's writings to a Christian. Because otherwise, if that wasn't there, we would be more melancholy, more frightened by our sinful tendencies. I just am so grateful for Romans 7:14 to 25. You take it out and all you're left with is 1 John, you know, if you sin, you know, you're not born again. You know, if you don't obey, you don't belong to Christ. If you say you walk with Christ, then you ought to behave the way He behaves.

Well, that is so black and white. You know, there's got to be some relief. And Romans 7 is a haven for the doubting Christian, where you can go and find comfort in the fact that the Apostle Paul struggled mightily against his own sin. That is why it is such a tragic thing to misinterpret that section, to try to make that some pre-Christian experience which commentators through the centuries have done.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: And that robs us, you know, we're not looking at perfection here. So I often will say to someone who struggles with assurance, you need to know two things. One, you need to go back and read Romans 8:31 to 39 that nothing will ever separate you from God, from Christ. And no one will ever successfully condemn you because Christ does not. He died to eliminate that condemnation. And then you need to read Romans 7 to understand that though you are secured, you're sinful. And the combination of those two, I think, is a haven. At the same time, you say to a person, and I said to somebody, this was last Sunday morning, a guy came up to me, nice young man struggling with this very issue. And I said to him, the answer to your assurance is this, when you go through the severest trials possible, when you go through the most disappointing behaviors and thoughts and attitudes, when you repeat the same sins, when you succumb to the same temptations, do you come out of that denying Christ? Do you come out of that denying the gospel? Do you come out of that denying salvation by grace and faith?

He said no. I said, “That's the evidence that your faith is real.” That's the proof. Peter calls it the proof of your faith. James says the same thing, count it joy. Why? Because this trial gives evidence that you have a faith that is supernatural. You know, this guy here, this Steve, he had a human faith...whatever it was. And when God didn't save him from trials...he says essentially in the letter that He didn't care about me. You know, which is to say I went through this, I went through that. And hey, let's face it, ten years in the ministry, you can pick any ten years of my ministry and there would be incidents in those ten years that if I was just hanging on by human faith, I would abandon it.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: Right? Because it's just too much bad stuff going on.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: I mean, I've asked the question and you and I are asking it these days right now, why in the world, Lord, are You allowing the stuff that's going on in the church in the name of Christ? It's polluting Your church. We...we try to write books about it, we try to address these kinds of things. We do everything we can.

So, look, if you're just hanging on by your fingernails, if this is your faith, believe me, there's going to be enough trials for your faith to die. And that's what happened to Steve. He had nothing more than a some kind of human interest in belonging to the church and following the Lord to some degree superficially, and being in a ministry, etc., etc. When the trials came that human faith could not stand, it didn't turn out the way he wanted it to turn out, hey, this is Judas also. Right? It wasn't going the way you wanted it to go, so he's going to grab the cash if he can, betray Jesus and get out.

Sadly, he couldn't deal with the remorse and he hanged himself. And I wonder what happened to Steve, you know, in all honesty. Because while he says he has peace and freedom, I think there's a hollow ring to that. But anyway, I do believe that when you have a false faith, a human faith, it can't hang on. When you have a saving faith, bring the trial and your faith will be proven to be the real thing. And so that's what I encourage people who are struggling with their assurance to look at. Look at Romans 7, look at Romans 8 and then consider the fact that the testing of your faith proves its reality.

PHIL: Yeah, as a pastor, you have a really fine line to walk here because you want to encourage the faith of those who have weak faith and you want to destroy the confidence of those who are presumptuous. And does it seem to you, like it does to me, that the natural human tendency is for people to latch on to the wrong side of that equation, those who need to be comforted generally hear all the warnings as if they're aimed at them and those who are already presumptuous listen to all the encouragements as if they deserve to hear that.

JOHN: Well sure...sure.

PHIL: How do you get around that?

JOHN: I think there are several things that come to mind, and again I'm going back to this, we have to get the terms of the gospel right. I mean, it has to start with the terms of the gospel. Do you believe the true gospel?

You know, I think there are probably Roman Catholics who have assurance that, you know, they're right with God, even though in Roman Catholic theology you're not supposed to know that, I think there are Roman Catholics who think they're going to heaven. I think there are Mormons who think for sure they're going to heaven. So you undo that by saying, “Wait a minute, what do you believe?” And you go back to the foundations of what is necessary.

You remember the seven-hour conversation I had with those leaders some years ago. At the end of the day I said, “I want to ask you a question. What is the irreducible minimum that you have to believe to be saved and if you don't believe that, you're not saved?” It's got to be somewhere, you know. Do you believe in Christ? Do you believe what about Him? There has to be some essential element in the objective truth that is believed. So we have to start with the gospel. And then we have to talk about repentance and we have to talk about the honest commitment to that truth, the honest abandonment. And that's why in our ministry, we go back to much to the statement of our Lord, “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, follow Me.” It's all about a total life commitment.

So I think that's where you have to start. And then you have to cease doing something that has been traditionally done through the years, and that is telling people that if they prayed this prayer, they're saved. I grew up in a generation, you know, when you've led this person to Christ, then say to that person, “Did you mean what you said? Now you're saved. This is wonderful and erase all doubt.”

You can't do that. You don't know that when they prayed that prayer that really was salvation. You can't see justification take place. It's an invisible transaction. You can't even see regeneration. The best you can say is, “If your repentance and faith was real and if God in His power and His grace has given you new life and justified you, and converted you and saved you, here's what you can expect...here's what you can expect.” And then you lay out, “You're going to love Christ, you're going to love His people, you're going to desire to worship, you're going to desire the Word, you're going to find hope in the midst of difficulty, you're going to look forward to seeing the hand of God manifest in the trials and issues of life.

So, we have to get over this kind of...pray this prayer, and then remove all doubt from people.

PHIL: Yeah, easy decisionism.

JOHN: Easy believism. So I do think there's another element to it. I think some people are just more melancholy and more fearful by nature. And sometimes only time will take care of that. If they go through enough trials and go through enough issues and go through enough struggles and their faith holds, and it's anchored and it's growing, and they know their love for the Lord is growing and they're flourishing spiritually, they come to a comfort level that this is the real thing.

PHIL: So the testing of their faith actually produces maturity.

JOHN: Yeah. But I would add something to that, Phil. I think it is a massive tragedy for new believers to be in churches that are utterly incapable of arming them for trials, of taking them deep into the Word of God where they find their soul flourishing.

You know, if go to a church where the worship exalts the Lord, where the Word of God is taught in depth, your soul resonates with that. Your heart embraces that. I see that week after week after week, people pouring into our church, opening their Bibles, writing down things, rejoicing in what they hear. You know, I don't get a lot of people coming by and saying, “I'm not sure I'm saved...I'm not sure I'm saved...I'm not sure I'm saved.” Why? Because their soul resonates with the spiritual dynamics that are going on in Bible exposition, sound theology, God-honoring worship.

Now you sit in a church where some guy is giving a superficial, shallow talk on who knows what...you may be a true Christian, I wouldn't be surprised that you do doubt or wonder whether you're saved because there's nothing going on there that you really resonate with. In fact, in many cases people grow even indifferent and sometimes even bitter toward churches like that, that don't give them anything. Well you know as well as I do, you drag any bag of mail into this place and it's going to be full of letters, every bag that comes to this ministry, some of them are going to say, “We're struggling with our church. We can't find a church.” And what they're saying is, there's nothing that excites my heart when I go there about the Lord. But when you do have that opportunity, it causes the reality of who you are to become obvious to you.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: And I think...I think Grace To You steps into this vacuum, you know, largely and we get people who are fanatical. They can't get enough. Well what is that? You don't find somebody who is downloading, you know, five sermons every week and listening to them and digging in to the Bible and reading the Bible, they're not saying to themselves, “Am I saved? Am I saved? Am I a Christian? I don't know if I'm a Christian. I have all kinds of doubts.” Why? Because their soul is so...flourishing, I guess is the word that keeps coming to mind...their soul is excited, it's energized by the truth and that's evidence.

PHIL: Yeah, assurance is really a byproduct of the sanctifying process.

JOHN: It is.

PHIL: And if you go to a church that has no stress on sanctification, you're not going to find assurance very easily.

JOHN: No and I would think the people who sit in churches where, you know, the so-called pastors are cool dudes that talk about the culture and tell funny jokes and all of that, those poor people if they're Christians at all must struggle mightily.

PHIL: Yeah, in fact, if you got into a situation in a church situation like that and you're not genuinely saved, it would seem to me that churches like that would just multiply apostates.

JOHN: Yeah, no question.

PHIL: Because they inoculate people against the truth with the appearance that they're getting some kind of Christian teaching.

JOHN: Well they multiply...they multiply the self-deceived. It's the many, many that are there, Lord, Lord. And He says, “I don't know you.” They multiply the self-deceived for sure. But I do think they multiply apostates because they give every reason to be a part of it but the right one.

I think apostates are less likely the more faithful the church is. The more the church is truly devoted to the Lord, the more the church is truly pure in its love for Christ, the more biblical the church is, the fewer apostates are there because there's a certain reality that they have to face. But where there's a superficial kind of church, they can be a part of that and fit in to that. So I...and I think that's obviously true.

I would wonder, for example, what the post-church life of people who leave the emergent church is. It would be the same as those who leave the liberal church.

PHIL: Yeah, in fact, you see a lot of people coming out of that kind of environment who become apostates, they turn away.

JOHN: Sure.

PHIL: In fact, a lot of this is keenly interesting to me because I've just over the past two years corresponded with a guy who started out seeming to be the most devoted Christian, a father home-schooler who taught others, seemed to have his doctrine down pretty good and everything. And then he first started writing to me because he was questioning some things. And this was the stage. He first questioned things...he wasn't satisfied with any answers whether they were biblical or rational or what...no answer ever answered his questions, it just produced more and more questions. And the questions then gave way to skepticism. He became very argumentative and then suddenly he announced he had become an atheist, turned against the faith completely. It took him two years to do that, it was a long process.

Are there warning signs that most apostates give before they abandon the faith?

JOHN: Yeah, I think...I think maybe the dead giveaway is that they put themselves in a position to sit in judgment on the Bible. It's one thing to have somebody come up and ask you a question, and then when you give them an answer, they're interested, satisfied, they want to think about it. But I think...if you're going to reject the Bible, if you're going to reject the gospel,...if you're going to be an apostate, you have to reject the Bible, right?

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: So you have to put yourself in a position to be the judge of Scripture's validity. That is a very proud position to take, given the fact that for thousands of years the most godly and brilliant minds in Christianity have found the Bible to be consistent, inerrant, divine, you know, it verifies itself again and again and again every which way possible, but you are a higher judge, you are a more clear minded authority than all the Christian scholars of all the ages. So I think the danger sign in somebody that's headed toward apostasy is they want to render judgment on the Scripture that is independent of history that is independent of Christian theology, Christian tradition. And so they turn from, as you said, and you wouldn't know it at first, your friend asking questions, and it becomes sitting in judgment. You never have an answer that satisfies. It's never enough. I don't think that comes because the Bible can't defend itself. I don't think that comes because the Bible is unclear or hard to interpret which would be the emerging, you know, answer. I think it comes because the heart is so proud and so rebellious that it will deny what is patently obvious.

So when you start to see that pride that rises up and wants to sit in judgment on the Scripture, sometimes it starts, Phil, I can think back to some guys who I've known in ministry, gone to the Master's Seminary, and I worry about them in the future because when they got out of seminary, they began a trend of rendering judgment on what they were taught of wanting to undo what they were told, of rejecting and coming up with some novel interpretation. That is the path. And when you begin to see that happen, that a person rather than submitting to the consistent interpretation of the Word of God, rather than submitting to that, they have to come up with their own critique of what has traditionally been believed.

I actually would go so far as to say that you have apostates who are in the ministry still. They have not denied Christianity, they have denied true Christianity.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: Right?

PHIL: That's exactly right. You see a lot of that.

JOHN: There are pastoring emerging churches, they're pastoring liberal churches. They defect into Catholicism.

PHIL: Some of them are writing best selling books.

JOHN: They're writing best selling books that you find in a Christian bookstore and a Barnes and Noble. And these guys are apostate, that is to say they have rejected the true gospel. And they are affirming a false gospel while staying in the church, or in a church, or in some form of false Christianity.

PHIL: That's true even of people who apostatize by going in to unrepentant sin but still profess to love Christ. You mentioned that British pastor, we'll keep him nameless, who announced that he was a homosexual, left the ministry, left his family, but he still professes to believe in Christ.

JOHN: Yeah, but he has changed his view of Scripture.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: And he has sort of invented a way to believe in Christ that is different than the real way savingly to believe.

PHIL: In order to justify unrepentant sin, of course.

JOHN: And I don't think he wants to minister.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: So, you know, they can take all different courses but I think it needs to be said that apostates who are still in the church will simply create more apostates. And what I think is happening...if you look at the Emerging Church Movement, most of these guys that lead the Emerging Church Movement from Brian McClaren on down are disaffected former fundamentalists. Is that not true?

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: They once were in a evangelical fundamental church where they were taught the gospel, they threw that over, they kicked that over. That's a form of apostasy. They reject that. They're still in the church. And who is going to their church but more of those disaffected former fundamentalists. They prey on them. You know, if you're sitting in a church and they telling you this and that and you've

been exposed to legalism all your life...they write all this in their books. Those people are coming out. So it's almost like a collection of apostates under an apostate pastor in some cases.

PHIL: Take the case of an apostate who has utterly abandoned the faith, says he doesn't believe in Christ any more, like Steve, who wrote us that letter, is there hope for an apostate like that, or is this the unpardonable sin? I mean, the difficult passage is Hebrews 6 which says if somebody falls away, it's impossible to renew him to repentance.

JOHN: You know, I think in the truest sense, apostasy is a final rejection. And I think Hebrews 6 is saying that if someone has full light, that's the point there, tasted the heavenly gift, etc., etc. By the way, there are no terms in Hebrews 6 that are used of salvation. It never says a person is regenerate, saved, born again, converted. But it uses terms that indicate full knowledge, they've been illuminated, they've tasted the heavenly gift, they've tasted the powers of the age to come. And in the case of the writer of Hebrews, what he's looking at is those people who were exposed to Christ. They saw His miracle power, they heard His message about the Kingdom, they saw that He had power over demons, power over death, power over disease, all of this. And he says if at that point when you have that full disclosure, you fall away, it's impossible to be renewed again to repentance.

Reason...not so much because of some divine judgment, but because there's nothing more to say to you. When you had the full disclosure, you rejected it. And there can be no more revelation. So I think the writer of Hebrews is simply saying that those people who have full exposure to all the revelation of God in Christ and they fall away. In other words, they completely go the other direction, it's impossible to renew them to repentance. Because if they didn't repent with a full understanding, there's nowhere else to go. I think the key to the passage is in the next verse where the writer says, “But, beloved,” and now he turns from the apostate, “But, beloved,” and he talks to believers, “we are convinced of better things concerning you, things that accompany salvation.”

PHIL: Humph.

JOHN: So the first part of the passage is about those people who with full knowledge fall away and can't be saved because there's no more information to give them and if they conclude that Christ like the Pharisees did, does what He does by Beelzebub...they made the opposite conclusion, that's the end, but then he turns to believers. “But that's not true of you. What's true of you are the things that accompany salvation.”

PHIL: Yeah, I used to really struggle with Hebrews 6, it's one of the most difficult passages in the New Testament to understand. And it was your teaching years ago that really helped me to see it and because you made that connection with Judas. All of these phrases, somebody who has tasted of the heavenly gift and become a partaker of the Holy Spirit, and it does sound like someone who is identified with Christ so closely, maybe he is a believer. But every phrase in there would be

descriptive of Judas, right? And he turned away.

JOHN: Right. Tasting, partaking, it's all about the experience of being around the power and the teaching of Jesus.

PHIL: Is there a relationship do you think between this and the unpardonable sin that Jesus spoke of which seemed to involve the Pharisees?

JOHN: Yeah.

PHIL: Rejecting the truth with their eyes wide open.

JOHN: Right. That's Matthew 12. Yes. Because they saw everything Jesus did. They never deny His miracles, never in the New Testament do they deny His miracles. They heard everything He said and He continually talked to them. And they concluded that He's from hell. That He's operating under the power of Satan. He said you can't be forgiven. You can't be forgiven.

You've attributed the works of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, that's done through Me, to the devil. That is 180 degrees away. You can't be saved.

So I think the parallel is...to Hebrews 6...if with full revelation you turn away from Jesus and go in the opposite direction, then you've apostatized, there's nowhere else for you to go. So I think those two are connected.

PHIL: Yeah that really shows the irrationality of apostasy as well, doesn't it? If you can look at and see the truth with your eyes wide open in the bright light of day and conclude something as irrational as Jesus was doing that in the power of Satan...

JOHN: And how about the fact that they all knew, all the Pharisees knew that Jesus rose from the dead. They knew that. They knew He rose from the dead because they bribed the Roman soldiers to lie and say somebody stole His body. So talk about...don't confuse me with the facts. That's the resolute hard-heartedness of an apostate who with all the right evidence makes the absolute wrong conclusion.

PHIL: It's frightening to think that there is a kind of apostasy so bad for which there is no remedy. How would you counsel a parent, say, whose child has apostatized?

JOHN: First of all, I'd be very careful to make the conclusion that that child apostatized. I had a very, very prominent pastor, I was having dinner with him one night, he said to me, “I have a son that's not elect.”

I said, “What? What do you mean you have a son that's not elect?”

He said, “ He's not elect.”

I said, “How do you know who's elect?”

He said, “I'm just convinced he's not elect. I prayed for him and he's just gone totally the wrong way and after being raised around the gospel.”

Three years later, maybe, he said to me, “By the way, my son is now serving the Lord in ministry.”

PHIL: He was elect after all.

JOHN: First of all, I counseled him, I said, “Wait a minute, you don't know the secret decree. Don't give up, don't come to that conclusion.” That's a conclusion that we don't want to presume. You know, if you're a parent, you just want to keep praying for that child, praying for that child, praying for that child. You don't know when in the heart that final step has been taken.

PHIL: So the idea that apostasy can be irremediable is a good warning to people who may be in danger of apostasy, but it's not something that we should sit in judgment on other people and declare them having committed the unpardonable sin.

JOHN: Yeah, I don't think we can render that judgment. I think we continually pray. I think in most cases you just continue to pray whatever rejection of the gospel is not final.

And I know this is a heart thing for parents. I know very close to me parents who have children who are just in this situation and they're trying to decide...do I have an apostate child here, or do I just have a prodigal, a rebellious child who is following the pursuits of sin. Do I continue to pray? And I would say, “Unless there is a prolific outspoken animosity toward the gospel, I'd just keep praying for them.

PHIL: Well suppose Steve is listening to us right now. He could be for all we know. Would you have a message directly for him?

JOHN: I don't know what I would say to him if he walked into the room here. I would say maybe...maybe there's still a possibility of grace. I would say to him what I would say to anybody. “Cry out to God. Pound your breast, if you're repentant.” But I wouldn't say anything to him until I heard him speak. And if he said to me, “I'm even more the way I've been,” so it would depend. If he came and said, “You know, I'm sorry I ever said those things. I was wrong, I repent,” well then that's not a final apostasy. But I think in the end you would just say, “Get on your face before God and cry out to

Him," because...you know, we have this idea of salvation that says, "If you pray this little prayer, God will save you." Right? If I say these words, God has to save me.

That is the most skewed view of salvation. God only does what He wills to do and what He purposes to do. And all the sinner can do is the model of Luke 18, "God be merciful to me a sinner." You can only ask, you can't demand. And it's not a formula that if prayed, "Repeat these words after me," oh isn't this wonderful, we're all saved.

Wait a minute. Did you ask? Did you ask to be forgiven? Did you ask to be saved from sin and hell? Did you ask because this is something God dispenses at His own will. Now He's not going to turn away the one who comes in all honesty, but I think we have...we've taken it out of the hands of God and put it into a formula.

PHIL: Yeah, and in the absence of genuine repentance, that formula is a recipe for apostasy.

JOHN: It is, yeah.

PHIL: Well I have one more question for you, John, and I know this one is going to hit home for lots of our listeners who may be wondering...if I'm secretly entertaining doubts about the Christian faith, am I an apostate? How are we to know the difference between doubts that assault our minds, and that total rejection of the gospel that may be lurking waiting to bubble up in the midst of those doubts.

JOHN: Well that's what Paul said to Timothy. He said if you doubt, He remains faithful. If you doubt, He remains faithful. If you deny Him, He'll deny you. Denial is apostasy. Doubt is just struggling, and we all do that.

I'm sure that there are even occasions when a fleeting thought of doubt passes through your mind. Sometimes out of nowhere a fleeting thought about doubting some...

PHIL: It does happen.

JOHN: Biblical truth just goes by.

PHIL: Spurgeon talked a lot about that. He struggled with doubts, especially as a younger man.

JOHN: Yeah. And I used to wonder, you know, is this really true? Those things are very, very rare and fleeting at this point in my life. But if you doubt, Paul said He remains faithful. Doubt is just part of being human. Doubt is just part of the weakness of the flesh. You don't beat yourself up on matters of doubt.

And I've often said to people, doubt what you might have reason to doubt. Don't doubt what you know to be true. Don't doubt the veracity of Scripture, the deity of Christ, the gospel of grace and salvation by faith and the hope of heaven. That's temptation and you need to overcome temptation the way you overcome all temptation, by turning to the Lord, by turning to His Word, and anchoring yourself in the truth. Don't get melancholy and feed those doubts. Go to the Word of God and find what the Scripture reveals to be true about those things and don't doubt what you already know to be true.

Now doubting things like is the Lord going to work this problem out? Is the Lord going to give me what I think I need? You know, there are questions in life that may hang unanswered for a while. And you can have doubts in those areas. That's normal because you have hopes and desires and aspirations and wishes and things like that. But I think it's a sin when you let the doubt debilitate you about things that are revealed in Scripture to be true. And so you go back to the Word of God like every temptation. When Jesus was tempted, He went to the Scripture. He went right back three times to Deuteronomy and answered every temptation with Scripture. That's the pattern. So...I don't know if I'm saved...I don't know if I'm saved...Go back to Romans 10:9 and 10, “If you believe in your heart God raised Christ from the dead and you confess Him as Lord, you'll be saved.” Go to the Word of God and anchor yourself in the Word and those doubts will disappear.

Doubt, you know, what's still in doubt. You know, is God going to heal my husband of cancer? Is the Lord going to bring me a wife? Or whatever is on your mind. Those things you can wrestle with those things. That's just normal. But don't let temptation turn into sin by making you doubt the things that are clearly promised and revealed in Scripture.

PHIL: Yeah, one of my favorite confessions of faith in all the Bible is that demon-possessed boy's father who said, “Lord, I believe, cure my unbelief.”

JOHN: Yeah.

PHIL: That's the perspective to have.

JOHN: Right. And we all are short of 100 percent faith. We all operate where that man operates. Some people might be, you know, I half believe and half don't believe. And some people it might be 90 percent believe and ten percent, you know, doubt. And maybe some of us are 98 percent and two percent...but we all have that because just like we aren't perfect morally, we also aren't perfect in our faith. So doubt is part of being still in a fallen condition. It's part of remaining flesh.

PHIL: John, for our listeners who may still have some questions about this subject, are there any resources you would recommend to them?

JOHN: Well, I'm having a rush of resources in my mind. There is a CD series on the Doctrines of Grace that can be ordered. It can also be downloaded from our website, GTY.org on an MP3 file free of charge. I would think the *Saved Without A Doubt* book, that book has been around for years and years and years and it deals directly with the issue of assurance.

PHIL: Great book.

JOHN: And then *Saved Without A Doubt*, again is the title. And then I would say probably two books that are sort of the staples of this ministry, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, of all the things that I've ever written this deals most directly with what the Bible says about true repentance and true faith, *The Gospel According to Jesus*and the companion to that, *The Gospel According To The Apostles*.

PHIL: Yeah.

JOHN: Those are both available through our ministry, as is *Saved Without A Doubt.*

PHIL: As a matter of fact, *The Gospel According to the Apostles*has one chapter devoted to the subject of assurance that happens to be my favorite single resource on that subject.

JOHN: Wow, and also in the *Doctrines of Grace*series, there are specific messages on the perseverance of the saints, the security of salvation, and on the subject of assurance.

PHIL: Thanks, John. I know I join thousands of our listeners in saying thank you for this time that you give us and thanks for your faithfulness in your teaching. And thanks for teaching us.

JOHN: Well, I thoroughly enjoyed it, Phil, and your choice of questions was really helpful. I want to be an encouragement and I think this particular discussion may go a long way to encourage people.

PHIL: Great.

JOHN: Thank you.

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