

## **Your Past, Present, and Future**

### **By David Feddes**

One of the most common ways of advertising is to give a before and after. For instance, if you are trying to advertise a new diet, you will give a before where a person is very, very heavy and an after where she can stand in the pant leg of her old pants. If you look at this before and after, you say, “Wow, what could make that kind of difference? I want that if I am trying to deal with a weight problem.” The before and after that appeals to ladies who want to lose weight may go something like this.

For men, there were the old Charles Atlas ads. Ever since then, ads to men have been similar. They take people who start out as little geeky wimps and turn them into macho he-men. “What is my job? I manufacture weaklings into men. Before they are weaklings; afterward they are men.” Still today, many kinds of advertising directed at boys take the old Charles Atlas approach of how they are going to sell you this piece of exercise equipment or that nutritional supplement or whatever, and turn you into somebody who has bigger muscles on your pinky than most people have in their arms.

Before and after is a very common method of advertising and sometimes a hokey method of advertising, but it recognizes the fact that some of us are in one condition and really want to be in quite a different condition.

The Bible has a before and after as well, and it is not a bunch of hokum or salesmanship. It is a statement of fact. “And you who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, that is by Jesus’ death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (Colossians 1:21–23). You have the past in sin. You have the present where you are reconciled to God in Jesus’ death and resurrection. You have the future where you are going to stand before Jesus, perfect. Then there is a big if, “If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (Colossians 1:23). Let us think about our past, present, and future, and that big if.

### **Past**

In the past, you were alienated. That means distant, far from God. Hostile in mind means hating God as an enemy. Your thoughts and your attitudes are opposed to God. You might not consciously say, “I hate God.” There are people who might do that. Many of us take thoughts and attitudes that are completely opposed to everything God stands for. The only reason we do not say, “I hate God,” and consider him our enemy is because we have manufactured our own little idol instead of the living God. If confronted with the righteousness and goodness and character of the living God, we are at odds with him.

Doing evil deeds is another part of the past before people are saved, defying God, doing what God hates. That is a bunch of disgusting and destructive decisions and deeds. That is the past, far from God, hostile to God, doing bad stuff.

## **Present: Reconciled**

In the present, “he has reconciled us in his body of flesh by his death” (Colossians 1:22). Romans 5 says something very similar, where it speaks of the past as well as this present of being reconciled. “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more now that we are reconciled shall we be saved by his life” (Romans 5:6, 8, 10).

Notice again the description of the before that occurs in this passage. Weak, or as some translations put it, helpless or powerless, ungodly and wicked, sinners, enemies. Remember hostile in mind, the same idea, enemies. That is the before. The present is that Christ died for us and rose again, we are reconciled to God by the death of his Son, and we are saved by his life. What a tremendous difference between the wicked, fallen past and the saved present of those who belong to Jesus Christ.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). There is a before and after for you, a new creation. The old is gone. The new has come. “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself. In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. For our sake God made him who had no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:18–19, 21).

God made Jesus Christ to be sin, even though Jesus knew no sin, so that we could become the righteousness of God. That great exchange, where all of our evil is laid on Jesus and all of his goodness is credited to us, makes it possible for us to be reconciled. When we are reconciled, we become a new creation in the present, and the old is left in the past.

What does that word reconciled mean? It is more than a ceasing of hostilities. Imagine a husband and wife who are at odds with each other, who are bickering. If they stop hating each other and stop fighting by getting a divorce, by staying separate, by agreeing to divide the goods equally, and then not bicker with each other anymore, that is not being reconciled. That is learning to keep your distance and not fight anymore. To be reconciled means to come together and to love each other. A husband and wife who are reconciled to each other belong together.

Take the example of Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son. The son finally stumbled back because he was starving to death and thought, “Maybe I can go back and get on with dad as a servant, even though I have offended him and done all sorts of terrible things” (Luke 15:17–19). When he comes back, his father races out to meet him, throws his arms around him, kisses him, has the best robe put on him, and the family ring put on his hand (Luke 15:20–22). That is reconciliation. He did not take the kid back as a slave and say, “I am not going to punish you anymore, and you can work for me.” He took him back into his embrace as a son (Luke 15:23–24).

Picture it this way with a judge. A judge does not simply declare someone not guilty and then release him and call that reconciliation. A judge could do that, and it is always great if the judge lets you off the hook, but reconciliation means more. It is not only being declared not guilty. It

means that the judge embraces you, that the judge befriends you, that you are drawn into relationship with him. It is a great thing to be declared not guilty and to be released from all the penalties of your crimes. It is an even greater thing to be reconciled and embraced by the one who is the judge and ruler of the world.

Think of it in terms of nations. Nations can end a war, or they can stop attacking each other. They can sign a treaty, sign a non-aggression pact, and not attack each other anymore. That is not quite being reconciled. Being reconciled means the nations become friends. For Christians, being reconciled means we are welcomed to live in God's nation as citizens of his kingdom. We are not left in our own kingdom, in our own nation, to do our own thing without us fighting against God and him fighting against us. We are drawn into citizenship in God's kingdom.

These are some of the things reconciled means. It means being drawn into a warm, friendly relationship, not keeping a cool distance and not hurting each other, but actually being drawn close to one another.

### **Barcode salvation?**

Salvation is more than justification.

- Regeneration: new heart and spirit
- Reconciliation: close relationship
- Sanctification: growing in goodness

Now, when we think of salvation, some have compared salvation to a barcode that you see in stores sometimes. When you go through the checkout and a machine scans the barcode, it reads that barcode in a certain way, interprets it, and then puts up the price or understands what is being sold. If you took a bag of steer manure and put on that manure a barcode from a bouquet of roses, the scanner would think the manure was actually roses. It might not smell like roses, it might not be roses, but it has the barcode of roses. The scanner will read manure as roses.

Some say, "Well, that is what God does. We are a sack of you know what, but God takes a barcode earned by Jesus and stamps it on us, and now God's scanner reads us as though we smell like roses, even though we really stink pretty bad." There is an element of truth in that barcode picture. It is true that our standing with God depends on God's decision to justify us and not on the quality of our character and behavior to earn his salvation. But it can also be misleading to view salvation strictly in barcode terms, where God takes something totally stinky and opposed to him and simply gives it a new barcode and that is all there is to salvation.

Salvation is more than justification. Justification is vital, absolutely important, but it is not the only thing in salvation, and salvation does not stop there. Salvation also includes regeneration, in which God gives us a new heart and a new spirit and we are born again (John 3:3–8; Ezekiel 36:26). It is not only that God puts a certain code on us, but he also does something inside of us to change who we are so that we are a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). It involves reconciliation, a close relationship, an ongoing relationship. We do not want to be barcoded into heaven only. We want to start living in relationship with God now. The Bible says that anyone who is saved is reconciled and does live and walk in relationship with God now (Romans 5:10; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20).

Then there is sanctification, growing in goodness and becoming more and more like Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:3; Romans 8:29). While there is a hint of truth in the idea of the barcode, that God declares us acceptable to him based on Christ's merit and receives us, God never leaves us there. He causes us to be born again. He reconciles us to himself. He transforms and sanctifies us. All of that is part of salvation. He adopts us into his family and makes us his sons and daughters (Romans 8:15–17; Galatians 4:4–7).

It is too cold to talk of salvation only in barcode terms. It may be a helpful picture for a very limited aspect of salvation, but regeneration, reconciliation, sanctification, and adoption into God's family cannot be explained strictly in terms of God looking at us in a certain way.

### **Future: holy, blameless, above reproach**

Then there is our future. God does this “in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him” (Colossians 1:22). He does not leave you as a sack of steer manure with a new barcode on you. He changes who you are, and he changes you more and more to be pleasing to him until that day when you stand before Christ holy and blameless and above reproach. Jesus died not only to forgive your sin but to put you on the path to perfect holiness (Ephesians 5:25–27).

God accepts you, justifies you, and reconciles you as soon as you trust Christ crucified, even though you still have sins to fight. He does not accept you based on how good you have already become. He accepts you as you are. But he does not leave you as you are. Our final future is to stand with Jesus before the Father with nothing to be ashamed of, with character as pure as Jesus (1 John 3:2–3). This too is part of the work of God in salvation. This is part of what we must proclaim and live, and we must not neglect it.

Our past, our present, and our future are all bound up with holiness. “Without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). We are being made holy if we are truly born again and being made more and more like our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **A big IF**

That brings us to the big if. “If indeed you continue in the faith” (Colossians 1:23). If you want that future, then you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard. You need to stick with the hope of the gospel in a steady way and continue in the faith, and then that future will be yours.

What about that kind of warning, where it says you must continue in the faith and must not fall away or you will be lost? What do those warnings mean, and how do they apply to whether we are once saved always saved and whether we are secure in the Lord? Let me mention three views of how these warnings function.

First, there is the **loss of salvation view**. Arminians would hold to this, people who have an Arminian view of salvation. The loss of salvation view says that believers can and do sometimes abandon their faith and lose their salvation. There are people who are saved but then actually

lose their salvation again. The warnings of the Bible raise doubts about receiving the prize. That is not the position I hold, and it is not the position I believe Scripture teaches, but it is one view.

Second, **the loss of rewards view**. In this view, you do not lose your salvation, but you can lose rewards. Believers can and do abandon the faith. Some believers, even genuine believers according to this view, will abandon the faith, but even then they cannot lose their salvation. The warnings refer only to the loss of rewards. There are some who say you could abandon the faith, you could stop believing in God completely, but if there was ever a time when you said, “Jesus, I believe in you. Please forgive my sins,” and you felt like you meant it, then you are saved and you cannot lose it. Any subsequent warnings in the Bible refer to losing some rewards in heaven but not to missing out on heaven itself. I believe that view is deeply mistaken.

A third view, which I think is the most biblical, is the **means of salvation view**. The warnings of the Bible are part of God’s means of helping you continue in the faith. Born-again believers who receive eternal life through genuine faith in Christ cannot lose their salvation. However, those who profess faith but then abandon it did not have real, living faith and were never saved in the first place (1 John 2:19). Real faith changes you, and real faith perseveres to the end. The warnings of Scripture are given to believers to keep true believers on the path to final salvation.

This means of salvation view is explained particularly well in a book titled *The Race Set Before Us* by Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday. The title of the book comes from Hebrews 12:1, “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1). The book goes into the biblical theology of perseverance and assurance. I heartily recommend it for those who want to explore the matter in greater depth. We need to run with endurance the race that is set before us (Hebrews 12:1).

Speaking of running the race, let us go back to the 1980 Boston Marathon. In that 1980 Boston Marathon, Rosie Ruiz was the first woman across the finish line, and she came across the line in record time. She ran twenty-five minutes faster than her time in the New York Marathon the previous year. She cut twenty-five minutes off her time and broke the Boston Marathon record.

However, after all the celebration and amazement at what she had achieved, it was noticed that she was not even coated with sweat or panting hard like all the others who had run those twenty-six grueling miles. Although she was in decent shape, her thighs looked unusually flabby for a marathon runner. Also, none of the women running in the front group, the fastest runners, could remember seeing Rosie Ruiz at all during the race, and the women who had been first and second in the later stages of the race did not remember Rosie Ruiz ever passing them. Two men who had been watching the race along the route said they had seen Rosie Ruiz burst out of a group of spectators a half mile from the finish line.

It turned out that she had started the race at the starting line, then sneaked away down a side street to the subway and took it to a spot less than a mile from the finish line. She went through some spectators and jumped back into the race. No wonder she broke the record! She did not run the whole race; she rode the subway. Rosie Ruiz was disqualified and her medal was taken away. It was later learned that she had also taken the subway for most of the New York Marathon, maybe as a trial run for breaking the world record in the Boston Marathon.

Is salvation basically a matter of pulling a Rosie Ruiz? Do we show up at the starting line, not bother running the actual course of the race marked out for us by God, and then suddenly show up at the finish line and say, “Here I am in heaven,” and claim all the prizes and win the victory? Not quite. The Bible indicates there is much more to salvation than making an initial decision for Christ and then showing up in heaven. There is a race to be run.

Some theologians, such as Zane Hodges and Charles Ryrie, say that if there was ever a time you admitted you were a sinner and had a belief in your mind that Jesus was your Savior, then you have eternal life and cannot lose it. They say that even if you go on sinning as before and never change one thing, even if you never pray or walk with God or listen to the Bible, and even if you later totally quit believing in God and never turn back to him, you will still make it to heaven, though you will lose some rewards. All that matters, they say, is that there was some point when you said a sinner’s prayer and had the thought in your mind that you were forgiven by Jesus.

However, faith that does not change you and does not keep you going to the finish line is not real faith. You will go to hell if you do not continue in the faith. Christians cannot just show up at the starting line and then hop a subway to the finish line without running the race. Between the starting line, the point where we become Christians, and the finish line, the moment when we enter heaven, there is a race to run. The only way to get from the start to the finish is to run the race, to follow the narrow road that leads to life, as Jesus told us (Matthew 7:13–14).

In John Bunyan’s classic *Pilgrim’s Progress*, there is a man named Ignorance. Ignorance thinks he can make it to the Celestial City by shortcuts. He wants to go to heaven, the Celestial City, but he does not want to enter by the wicket gate, the narrow gate. He does not want a scroll, the word of God’s promises, to go with him. He does not want to stick to the main path. He travels here and there and takes shortcuts, then shows up expecting to be received into the Celestial City. Ignorance is turned away from heaven and thrown into hell.

Scripture teaches that we must continue in the faith. Jesus himself makes it absolutely clear: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned” (John 15:5–6). Does that sound like a loss of a few rewards? Does that sound like if you do not remain in Jesus, things will turn out fine anyway? He talks about fire and burning.

Jesus said the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount: “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 7:19). You must continue in the faith or you will be lost forever.

### **Stable and steadfast**

Colossians 1:23 speaks of being stable and steadfast. “If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast.” Stable means you are well grounded. You have good foundations. You are built on something solid, or as Jesus put it, you are built on the solid rock and not on the sand (Matthew 7:24–27). Steadfast means you are not blown here and there. You are not carried along

by this wind of doctrine or that brand-new teaching, and you are not blown away by troubles. You are steady and you keep going.

Our age prizes novelty and thrills. Every new product that comes on the market says "new and improved," and even old products try to pretend they are new and improved. In church life, many want a church that stirs their adrenaline and emotions, but they are not interested in a church that provides a strong foundation and produces a community of stable and steadfast people. Beware when you live in an age that does not prize what is stable and steadfast, because stable and steadfast is part of the very essence of walking with God and living out the truth of the gospel.

“Not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (Colossians 1:23). Think about this. Jesus is the path. Jesus is the prize. How could you receive the prize if you abandon Jesus? If you leave the path, you lose the prize. Do not let go of your confidence in the gospel of Jesus. God appoints the way as well as the end result. He appoints the wonders and joys of heaven, but he also appoints the path to get there.

Jesus is the path, and walking with Christ and life in Christ is the path that leads to the prize of beholding Jesus’ face and living with him forever (John 14:6; 1 John 3:2). It is ridiculous and contradictory to say you can go through life not walking with Jesus and then end up with the prize of living with Jesus forever. What prize would that be? If you do not want to live with him in this life, how could you want to live with him in the life to come?

### **Promise and Warning**

God told Paul on one occasion that everybody on board would survive a shipwreck. You might remember the story if you have read Acts 27. There was a terrible storm going on that lasted about two weeks. Finally, the ship was getting close to land, but it was going to be pounded to pieces on the rocks before anybody could actually get to shore. It looked as though people were simply going to die. But God spoke to Paul and made it clear that everybody on board was going to survive the shipwreck.

So it might seem obvious that it did not matter what anybody did, because God said they were going to make it to shore. Not quite. At one point, some of the sailors on the ship decided they were going to get away from the rest of the people on board. These crew members were going to grab their own lifeboat and sneak away from the ship, leaving everybody else to whatever happened. Paul said, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved” (Acts 27:31). They all had to stay together, and they needed the crew to manage the ship until the last minute. On the orders of the captain, the lifeboat was cut loose, and everyone stayed with the ship. Sure enough, the ship went down, but every last person on board made it safely to shore (Acts 27:32–44).

Notice this. They had a promise that they would survive, but there was also a way given to them. They had to stay with the ship and not split up in different directions. So it is with our salvation. You cannot shift away from the hope of the gospel and then expect to receive the blessings of the gospel at the end. There is an appointed end, survival, but there is also an appointed means, walking with Christ until the end.

## Protected by Warnings

That brings us back to the big if. God protects believers from falling away, and we need to understand that. This is the doctrine that believers will persevere to the end, the doctrine of eternal security. One of the ways God protects us is through warnings. Those warnings are a means of salvation.

When God gives warnings, he is not saying to true believers that they will fall away. Rather, he uses the warnings to keep us from falling away by stating what the result would be if we did fall away. If I am walking with my children on a hike in steep territory and I say, “Be very careful. If you walk off that cliff, you will die,” I am not expecting them to walk off the cliff. I am not expecting them to die. I am giving a warning, and that warning is the means I am using to keep them on the path and protect them from perishing. If I point to a bottle and say, “That is poison. If you drink it, it will kill you,” I am not saying they are going to drink it. I am saying that if they do, it will be fatal. So they must not drink it.

Scripture is saying the same thing. If you fall away, it will be fatal, so do not fall away. If you abandon Christ, you will be lost forever, so do not abandon Christ. By these warnings, God keeps you in salvation. He keeps you by warning that if you do not continue to believe the gospel and abide in Christ, you will perish.

This does not mean that true believers can lose their salvation. It means that God uses warnings to keep them in their salvation. The warning is not that you will lose your salvation anytime you do something wrong or anytime you have an impure attitude. If that were the case, all of us would perish. We do need to be aware of our sins, confess them, and fight against them, but the biblical warning is not about every failure. The warning is against apostasy, abandoning the faith, choosing something else instead of Jesus Christ, choosing a different path than his path, choosing a different future than his future.

You need to live by faith in his future. Paul speaks of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). He also speaks of struggling “with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me” (Colossians 1:29). These are the things that enable us to continue in the faith.

This is what Scripture reveals about our past, our present, and our future. How bad is sin? You were alienated and hostile, hating God, doing evil deeds (Colossians 1:21). What a wonder the present is. Jesus has reconciled us in his body of flesh by his death (Colossians 1:22), and his resurrection guarantees our resurrection when we trust him (Romans 6:5). Our future is that he will present us holy and blameless and above reproach before him (Colossians 1:22).

Keep in mind that big if: “If indeed you continue in the faith” (Colossians 1:23). If you abide in Christ, if you walk with him, if you run the race marked out for you, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard (Colossians 1:23).

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### **Before and after**

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- **Past:** And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds
- **Present:** he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death,
- **Future:** in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him
- **A big IF:** if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.

### **PAST: And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds**

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- **doing evil deeds:** defying God and doing what God hates; disgusting and destructive decisions and deeds

### **PRESENT: he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death**

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Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5:17-21)

### **Reconciled**

- **Spouse:** Stop hatred and fighting by a peaceful divorce? *Reconciled* means coming together and loving each other.
- **Judge:** Declare “not guilty” and release? *Reconciled* means embrace and friendship.
- **Nation:** End attack and sign non-aggression pact? *Reconciled* means welcomed to live in God’s nation as citizens of His kingdom.

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- Sanctification: growing in goodness

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- **Loss of salvation view:** Believers can and do abandon their faith and lose their salvation. Warnings raise doubt of receiving the prize.
- **Loss of rewards view:** Believers can and do abandon faith but can't lose salvation. Warnings refer only to loss of rewards.
- **Means of salvation view:** Those who profess faith but then abandon it did not have real faith and were never saved. Warnings keep true believers on the path to final salvation.

## **Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. Hebrews 12:1**

### **Just show up at start and finish? Rosie Ruiz**

#### **If indeed you continue in the faith**

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are cut down, thrown into the fire, and burned. (John 15:5-6)

## **Stable and steadfast**

- **stable:** well grounded, firmly established on solid foundations
- **steadfast:** Not blown around by winds of doctrine. Not blown away by troubles.

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## **not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard**

Jesus is the path and the prize. If you leave the path, you lose the prize. Don't let go of your confidence in the gospel of Jesus. God appoints the way as well as the end result.

- God told Paul that everyone aboard would survive a shipwreck. (Acts 27:24)
- Later Paul said, "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved." (Acts 27:31)

## **A Big IF**

- God protects believers from falling away. One way he protects us is by warning us what would happen if we fell away. He is not saying we will fall away. He is keeping us from falling away by stating the result.

*"If you walk off the cliff, you will die."*

*"If you drink poison, it will kill you."*

- He is keeping you in salvation by warning that if you don't continue to believe the gospel and abide in Christ, you will perish.

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