

# **The Perseverance of the Saints and The Sin unto Death in 1 John 5:16: Harmonizing Text and Theology**

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## INTRODUCTION

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not *leading* to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not *leading* to death. There is a sin *leading* to death; I do not say that he should make request for this (NASB, 1995).

John's directives in 1 John 5:16 represent a well-known crux in New Testament interpretation. The tensions with this passage are found on two levels. The first level involves the actual interpretation of the passage. What is this sin not leading to death, and how is it different from the sin that leads to death? How is the expression "brother" being used, as a description of a true believer or of one who has made a profession of faith but who is not truly saved? What is the meaning of "life" and "death?" And, why is the one whose sin is not leading to death promised life?

The second level concerns the theological implications of the passage. What is the relationship between the sin mentioned in 5:16 and John's declaration in 5:18 that one born of God does not sin (cf. 3:6, 9)? How can a "brother" be committing sin, as 5:16 states, and still be described in 5:18 as not sinning? Ultimately, the theological tension involves harmonizing what John says about the individual here with what John and other New Testament writers teach about the perseverance of the saints. How can a "brother" be engaged in sin and still be described as persevering in the faith and in faithfulness to God's word?

The procedure followed in addressing the interpretive and theological questions raised by these verses is, first, to place the passage in its literary context. In view here is the identification of the purpose and structure of the letter in order to understand how the passage fits within the immediate and larger contexts. Next, the major interpretive options are presented and critiqued to arrive at the interpretation best supported by the evidence. Following this, the theological implications of the passage are addressed in an effort to resolve the tension between what John states here about a "brother" engaged in sin and what John and others state elsewhere about the perseverance of the saints.

## PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE OF 1 JOHN

### Purpose

John actually records four purpose statements in his first epistle, 1:4; 2:1; 2:26; 5:13. Combining these statements, John's purpose appears two-fold. On the one hand, John's purpose is to counteract the influence of false teachers. This purpose is brought out most clearly in his statement in 2:26, "These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you," a clear reference to the false teachers (cf. 2:18; 4:1).

On the other hand, John's purpose is also to establish his readers in the truth. This purpose is expressly stated toward the end of the letter in 5:13, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life." Here the emphasis is on linking doctrinal orthodoxy ("believe in the name of the Son of God") with assurance of salvation ("know that you have eternal life").

John accomplishes both purposes by giving his readers a series of *tests of eternal life* by which the readers might identify the false teachers and, at the same time, gain assurance of their salvation (Law, *The Tests of Life*, pp. 1–24). In other words, the tests John uses to expose false teachers are the same tests he uses to identify genuine believers. John's intentions in providing these tests are: (1) to ground the readers in the truth; (2) to provide them with assurance of salvation; (3) to equip them to combat the false teachers; (4) to exhort them to godly living (cf. 2:1).

### Structure

Identifying the structure of 1 John has been particularly challenging. John repeats key topics throughout his epistle and his transitions from one topic to the next are subtle at best. As well, 1 John does not follow a standard epistolary format. There is no conventional epistolary introduction or conclusion nor is there an overall division between instruction and exhortation. Nevertheless, based on the content of what John wrote, the letter can be separated into three major divisions: the introduction or prologue, 1:1–4; the body of the letter, 1:5–5:12; and the conclusion or epilogue, 5:13–21. In addition, the body of the letter may be further divided into three sections, with each section composed of ethical demands followed by doctrinal demands (Burdick, *The Letters of John*, pp. 85–92).

Using "the tests of eternal life" as the controlling theme, the first section, 1:5–2:27, introduces the initial test: eternal life is defined as having fellowship with the Father and the Son. Fellowship, according to John, refers to sharing in the life of God, sharing in eternal life. The second section, 2:28–4:6, presents the second test: eternal life is defined as evidencing divine sonship, that is, as manifesting the characteristics of those who have been born of God. The third section, 4:7–5:12, gives the third test: eternal life is defined as a combination of love and faith. Specifically, eternal life is demonstrated by loving God and other believers and by believing God's word.

The verse under consideration is located in John's epilogue. Following the various tests by which eternal life can be discerned and false teachers exposed, John concludes his letter by addressing the issue of assurance. The conclusion is divided into four sections. John starts off by giving a more formal statement as to the purpose of his writing in providing assurance of salvation (v. 13). Following this, he addresses the confidence that believers have in God's hearing and answering prayer (vv. 14–17). He then briefly restates certain truths that he has established in his letter as the basis for assurance (vv. 18–20). And, he finishes with a final exhortation for his readers (v. 21).

A corollary to the believer having assurance of salvation and eternal life (v. 13) is the confidence or assurance a believer can have in God's hearing and answering prayer (vv. 14–17). John divides his discussion on the believer's confidence in prayer into two sections. He first identifies the conditions for answered prayer (asking according to God's will, vv. 14–15) and then he gives an illustration of how God does answer prayer (God answering prayer for a sinning brother, vv. 16–17).

## THE MAJOR VIEWS

### The Presentation of the Major Views

Taking into consideration John's teaching on eternal security, that eternal life once received cannot be lost (e.g., John 10:28–29), there are roughly three views on the interpretation of 1 John 5:16 (contra, for example, Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 245–51 and Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, pp. 297–301, both of whom argue that a true believer can commit sin that leads to apostasy and eternal death; for various approaches to the interpretation of the passage, see Brown, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 610–19 and Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, pp. 207–10).

The **first view** takes the one described in 5:16 as committing a sin not leading to death to refer to an unbeliever and the giving of life to eternal life. The expression "brother" is interpreted in this context to depict a nominal Christian. It is someone who has made a profession of faith but who is not saved. Assuming this is the case, John would be saying that, if a believer observes a professing believer persisting in sin, he shall pray for that individual and God will bring that individual to repentant faith and eternal life.

The sin that leads to death and for which the readers are not directed to pray, according to this view, refers to those who have heard the gospel, have made an initial response, but who have come to reject the gospel. It is the sin which the false teachers have committed, those whom John is combating in this epistle (cf. 2:22; 4:3). As such, these commit an unpardonable sin which inevitably brings divine judicial hardening, resulting in eternal death and punishment.

See, for example, Stott, *The Letters of John*, pp. 188–93; Busenitz, "The Sin unto Death," pp. 17–31.

In support of this interpretation, John has used the expressions life and death elsewhere in this letter to refer to eternal life and eternal death (cf. 1:2; 3:14–15; 5:11–12). Furthermore,

John describes a true believer as one who does not practice sin (1:6; 3:9; 5:18). And, this view nuances the sin unto death in light of the surrounding context to refer to the sin of the false teachers, those whom John was combating in the letter.

The **second view** takes the one sinning as a believer and the giving of life as a reference to physical life. The sin not leading to death is any sin that a believer is caught up in that has not persisted to the point where God intervenes to take the believer's life. In this case, the phrase "not leading to death" means that the sin has not reached the point where God acts to chasten the believer with physical death.

Correspondingly, with the second view the sin leading to death refers to a believer persisting in some sin to the point where God acts to take the believer's life. God intervenes to prevent the sinning believer from bringing further reproach on the name of Christ. Death, in this case, is the result of God's disciplining a believer for failure to repent of a sin in which the believer is engaged and which harms the cause of Christ.

Assuming this is the intent, John would be saying that, if a believer observes another believer caught up in some sin, the observer shall pray for the one sinning. In response to this prayer, God will bring the sinning believer to repentance, cleansing, and restoration to faithfulness. Thus, the individual would be delivered from physical death as the consequence of divine chastisement in response to protracted disobedience.

See, for example, Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 124–25; idem, *Answers to Questions*, p. 134; MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, p. 1974.

In support of this interpretation, the term "brother" is used elsewhere in the epistle to describe a believer (cf. 2:9–11; 3:10, 14–15; 4:20; 5:1). As well, there are other New Testament parallels where a believer is disciplined with physical death because of a failure to repent over some continuing sin (e.g., 1 Cor 11:30).

The **third view** represents a combination of the first two. The sin not leading to death is the sin of a believer. The life given to the sinning believer refers to God's confirming the believer in eternal life by restoring the sinning believer to faithful service with its present and future rewards. In other words, God will answer this prayer by bringing the sinning believer to repentance and restoration to spiritual service and blessing, confirming the believer in eternal life.

The sin leading to death, according to the third view, is the sin of an unbeliever and, in particular, the sin of apostasy. It is the sin the false teachers had committed, those whom John was combating in the letter. Such sin is irrevocable in that it inevitably brings judicial hardening and, thus, the certainty of eternal condemnation and punishment.

See, for example, Burdick, *The Letters of John*, pp. 401–4; Hiebert, *The Epistles of John*, pp. 257–63; Kruse, *The Letters of John*, pp. 190–94; Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, pp. 207–11.

The strengths of this view include its interpreting the expression “brother” to refer to a believer, as John has previously used the term. It takes the terms “life” and “death” as references to eternal life and eternal death respectively, consistent with John’s use of these terms elsewhere in the epistle. And, it nuances the sin unto death in light of the larger context as the sin of apostasy, that which the false teachers had committed.

### An Evaluation of the Major Views

The **first view** interprets the expression “brother” to refer to one who has made a profession of faith, but who is not saved. The phrase “a sin not leading to death” describes any sin short of a final rejection of the gospel. And, “life” and “death” refer to eternal life and eternal death. There are several difficulties with this interpretation. The first is its explanation that, other than a final rejection of the gospel, any sin an unbeliever commits does not lead to eternal death. There is a real sense in which any sin an unbeliever commits leads to eternal death (*NIDNTT*, s.v. “Appendix,” by M. J. Harris, 3:1206). As Paul declares in Romans 6:23, “the wages of sin is death” (cf. Ezek 18:20).

John could have meant that, while the unbeliever is still alive and has not finally rejected the gospel, any sin this individual commits does not lead to eternal death, *if* God intervenes to save that individual. Assuming that is the case, John would be directing his readers to pray for this individual with the promise that God will save the lost sinner (Busenitz, “The Sin Unto Death,” pp. 29–31). While such an understanding of the expression resolves the theological tension of an unbeliever’s sin not leading to death, the expression as it is written seems like an oblique way to make this point.

The real difficulty with the first view, however, is its defining the expression “brother” as referring to an unbeliever. The problem with this interpretation is that John uses “brother” consistently throughout the epistle to refer to a believer (2:9–11; 3:10, 13–17; 4:20–21). The one exception to this is in 3:12 where Abel is referred to as Cain’s brother, a common use of brother to refer to males having the same biological parents.

Proponents of the first view counter by pointing to those verses which describe the unbeliever as hating “his brother,” where “brother” refers to a believer. For example, in 3:15, John states, “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (cf. 2:9, 11; 3:14). The argument is that the unbeliever in these verses is described as hating “his brother.” The implication with the expression “his brother” is that the unbeliever who hates is nevertheless understood in a nominal sense as a brother (Stott, *The Letters of John*, pp. 192–93; Busenitz, “The Sin unto Death,” pp. 25–26).

It must be granted that these verses do imply that the one hating has at least a nominal relationship to believers, to those who are called his brothers. Yet, the text does not explicitly use “brother” to describe those who hate, those who are unbelievers. John uses the expression specifically of the one hated. Thus, the point still stands. John consistently uses “brother” in 1 John to describe believers and never directly to describe unbelievers.

The **second view** interprets the one sinning not unto death as a believer whose sin has not come to the point where God disciplines him with physical death. In this case, “life” and “death” refer to physical life and physical death. This view too faces several problems. One problem is the expression “God will give him life.” Advocates understand the promise of life to mean that God will intervene in response to prayer and bring the sinning believer to repentance and forgiveness. In effect, God gives life by delivering the sinning believer from continuing in sin and experiencing physical death.

While such a reading is possible, it gives a meaning to the expression “God will give him life” that requires some level of clarification or expansion. God is giving the sinning believer life in the sense that God is preventing the sinning believer from experiencing physical death. In other words, giving life means delivering the sinning believer from physical death as the outcome of continued sin. Again, such an interpretation is possible, but requires a measure of explanation or clarification.

The chief difficulty with the second view is that it must interpret the expressions “life” and “death” in terms of physical life and physical death. The problem comes in that John uses the same two expressions elsewhere in the epistle to contrast eternal life and eternal death. For example, John writes in 3:14, “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren” (cf. 1:1–2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11–13, 20). If a different kind of life and death were in view in 5:16, it would be expected that John would use different words or add modifiers to make that meaning clear.

The **third view** takes the one sinning not unto death as a believer and the sin unto death as the sin of an unbeliever involving apostasy. As with the first view, “life” and “death” refer to eternal life and eternal death. The third view faces a number of difficulties as well. The first difficulty is its interpretation of the expression “he will give him life.” In what sense does God give the sinning believer life, if life means eternal life? In other words, how is it that a believer is promised eternal life? John consistently depicts the believer throughout 1 John as already having eternal life (5:13).

Proponents argue that what is given the sinning brother is the confirmation of eternal life by bringing the brother to repentance and restoring faithfulness with all of its accompanying blessings (e.g., Scholer, “Sins Within and Sins Without,” p. 240). While such a meaning is possible, like the second view and its interpretation of the phrase, such a meaning requires a level of expanding or clarifying the text as it is written.

The chief difficulty with the third view is its interpretation of the sin unto death as the sin of an unbeliever. It is not clear from the context that the sin unto death refers to the sin of an unbeliever. John directs the reader to pray for a brother who is sinning not unto death. John adds that there is a sin unto death and he states that he is not directing prayer for that kind of sin. At face value, John has the sinning brother in view with both sins. There is no reference to a second individual in the verse.

Some proponents of the third view agree, arguing that John intended “brother to be taken with both sins. In the case of the sin not unto death, the “brother” committing such refers to a

true believer. In case of the sin unto death, the “brother” committing this sin is one who has made a profession of faith, but who is not a true believer (Tan, “Should We Pray for Straying Brethren?” pp.602–3, 606–9).

This attempt at resolving the tension actually creates a more serious hermeneutical problem. In effect, this interpretation gives two different meanings to the expression “brother” in the same context. With the sin not unto death, the brother committing such is a true believer. But, with the sin unto death, the brother committing this sin is an unbeliever. Giving “brother” two different meanings in this passage violates the univocal nature of language and the single meaning of Scripture. In order to maintain a coherent hermeneutic, words can have one and only one meaning in a given context.

Beyond this, John is not prohibiting prayer for the one sinning unto death (contra Kruse, *The Letters of John*, pp. 192–93). He simply says that he is not directing the readers to pray for the one sinning unto death (Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, pp. 207–8). Yet, if the sin in view is apostasy and irrevocable, as the third view argues, how is it that John is leaving the door open for the readers to pray for such? We would expect John to direct the readers *not* to pray for such, if indeed the sin is apostasy and irreversible.

#### THE MEANING OF THE TEXT

Choosing among the three views on the interpretation of the passage is challenging. The first view appears the easiest to harmonize with perseverance. Previously in the letter, John has declared that a believer does not practice sin (3:6, 9). In 5:16 the one engaged in sin is an unbeliever, not a believer. Thus, there is no conflict between what John says elsewhere about believers not practicing sin and what he says about the individual in 5:16 who is engaged in sin.

Having said that, John employs the illustration in this verse as an example of the kind of prayer the readers can pray with confidence that God will hear and answer (5:14–15). That being true, are the readers to have confidence when they pray that God will save the lost, as in the first view? Or, are the readers to have confidence when they pray that God will restore wayward believers, the second and third views (although not stated, the subject of the assertion “he will give life” is God, see Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, p. 249; contra Stott, *The Letters of John*, pp. 188–89, who identifies the subject as the one praying)?

John’s teaching about believers persevering points in the direction of the second and third views, i.e., that the readers can have confidence in God’s promise to restore wayward believers so that they persevere. There is little evidence in John or elsewhere that supports the first view that God promises to save every lost person who becomes the object of a believer’s prayer (Rom 10:1).

Even more troubling with the first view is that John refers to the one in need of prayer in 5:16 as a “brother,” a term John consistently uses throughout the epistle of a brother in Christ, a fellow believer. It is difficult to imagine that John would use the term here to describe someone who is lost and in need of salvation, as the first view argues. Thus, the function of

the passage within its context and John's use of brother elsewhere in the epistle makes the first view problematic, if not unlikely.

Choosing between the remaining two views is even more challenging. The major hurdle for the second view is defending its interpretation that the substantives "life" and "death" refer to physical life and physical death. As was shown above, John uses the expressions elsewhere in 1 John to refer to eternal life and eternal death. Supporters of the second view offer the following in defense. The expression "unto death" is found only one other time in John's writings, in John 11:4. There, when told that Lazarus was seriously ill, Jesus responds by saying that this sickness was not "unto death." Clearly, "death" in John 11:4 refers to physical death, the same meaning proposed by the second view for 1 John 5:16.

Those opposing the second view argue that the contexts of the two passages are distinct and the meaning of the expression in John 11:4 cannot be used to determine the meaning in 1 John 5:16. It must be granted that the contexts are not parallel. In John 11:4, the expression "unto death" refers to sickness, it is a sickness not unto death. In 1 John 5:16 the expression refers to sin. In 5:16, it is a sin not unto death.

Furthermore, the expression in John 11:4 means that Lazarus' sickness will not end in death. Lazarus does die, but the Lord resuscitates him. Thus, to say that the sickness is not "unto death" in John 11:4 means that the sickness will bring physical death, but death will be reversed and physical life will be restored. The meaning of the expression in 1 John 5:6, on the other hand, means that the sin has not reached the point of no return, the point where God intervenes to take the believer's life.

These differences notwithstanding, the point argued with the second view is that in both passages, the term "death" in the collocation "unto death" carries the connotation of physical death. In other words, "unto death" in John 11:4, the only other time this collocation is found in John's writings, refers to physical death, the same meaning argued with the second view for the expression in 1 John 5:16.

Stating the argument linguistically, the term John uses for death in 1 John 5:16 has a semantic range that includes the concepts of both physical death and eternal death (BDAG, s.v. "θάνατος," pp. 442–43). Whether or not the term has this range of meanings in 1 John is contested. The expression is used only six times in 1 John and four of these are in 5:16–17, the debated text. However, this semantic range is attested in John's Gospel and in Revelation and is therefore viable in 1 John. Furthermore, as was mentioned above, the only other use of the collocation "unto death" in 1 John 5:16 is in John 11:4 where the construction refers to physical death.

Perhaps the key challenge with the second view is its interpretation of "life" in 5:16 to mean physical life. John uses the substantive "life" a total of twelve times in 1 John. In its eleven other uses, "life" refers to eternal life (1:1, 2 [twice]; 2:25; 3:14, 15; 5:11, 12 [twice], 13, 20). As well, when John refers to physical life in 1 John, he employs other vocabulary to communicate that thought (2:16; 3:16).

Again, the argument can be stated linguistically. Since John consistently uses the term “life” in 1 John of eternal life, and since John employs other words in 1 John for physical life, the expression in 5:16 should be interpreted as eternal life. In addition, the only other time John uses the collocation of “life” and “death” in 1 John, the expressions refer to eternal life and death, not physical life and death (3:14).

In response, the substantive “life” has a semantic range that includes the concept of both physical life and spiritual or eternal life (BDAG, s.v. “ζωή,” pp. 430–31). Although the substantive is not found in the sense of physical life in the Gospel, both meanings are attested in Revelation. The fact that John uses “life” in both senses elsewhere in his writings allows for the interpretation of “life” in 5:16 as a reference to physical life. Furthermore, John technically is not contrasting life and death in 5:16, as he does in 3:14. In 5:16, the contrast is between the sin that leads to death and the sin that does not lead to death.

What the issue comes down to is the matter of probability. When all of the arguments for the second and third views are weighed, which interpretation appears the more probable? In the majority of its uses in John’s writings, the expression “life” carries the meaning of eternal life, a meaning that favors the third view. On the other hand, in the majority of its uses elsewhere in John’s writings, the expression “death” carries the meaning of physical death, a meaning that favors the second view. Taking into considerations the strengths and weaknesses of both views, the second view is preferred, though either is viable.

### THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Regardless of whether the second or third view is accepted, the theological tensions in 5:16 remain. In 5:16, John describes a brother, a believer, who is engaged in sin. Yet, two verses later, John declares that one born of God, a believer, does not sin (5:18). How is it that John, on the one hand, describes a believer engaged in sin and, on the other hand, declares that a believer does not sin? Putting the question in its theological context, in what sense can a believer be engaged in sin and still be persevering in the faith and in faithfulness to God’s word?

In resolving the theological tensions, two pitfalls must be avoided. The first is that those passages which speak of believers not sinning must *not* be interpreted as teaching sinless perfection. For example, when John states that the one born of God does not sin (5:18) or is not able to sin (3:9), John’s statements cannot to be taken as absolutes. John is not describing believers in these statements as attaining a state of sinlessness. Elsewhere John clearly denies that believers are free from sin. In fact, John specifically declares in 1:8, 10 that anyone who claims not to sin is self-deceived and devoid of the truth (cf. 2:1).

The second pitfall that must be avoided is interpreting these passages as though they are depicting the believer’s glorified state or as stating the ideal or hypothetical rather than what is real or actual (contra, among others, Kubo, “1 John 3:9: Absolute or Habitual?” pp. 47–56). John’s purpose in writing is to identify certain tests of eternal life by which the readers might gain assurance of their salvation (5:13). But if these tests describe something other

than what believers can presently experience, then believers will necessarily fail these tests and be deprived of the very assurance John was intending to provide.

The best approach to solving the theological tension is to recognize the force of the tenses John uses in these passages. In the passages where John describes believers as not sinning, he consistently employs the present tense. As such, the present tense should be viewed in its normal or customary force as indicating linear action, that which is ongoing. Linear action is the default force of the present tense, unless contextual factors override and point in a different direction (Wallace, *Exegetical Syntax*, 514–16). No such contextual factors are evident that would counter the linear interpretation of the present tense in these texts.

At the same time, there is contextual evidence that points to a more specific use of the present tense. In 3:9, John states that the one born of God does not “do” sin.” The verb used here in the present has within its semantic range the idea of “to practice” (BDAG, s.v. “ποιέω,” p. 840). The thought is that the one born of God does not “practice” sin and, with the present tense, “does not continue to practice sin.” The specific category reflected in this context is that of a *customary* or *habitual* present (Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, pp. 880, 890, 1081).

What John is saying is that believers do not continually engage in sin as a habit or pattern of life. John is not denying in these passages that believers sin. He is denying that believers can have lives that are characterized by the habit and practice of sin. Thus, John is reinforcing the fundamental distinction between a believer and an unbeliever in their relationship to sin. According to John, the unbeliever is unregenerate and enslaved to sin and, thus, “practices sin” as a habit and pattern of life (3:8; cf. John 8:34). Conversely, the believer is regenerate, no longer enslaved to sin, and thus does not and cannot practice sin as the habit and pattern of life (3:9; 5:18; cf. Rom 6:1–11; Akin, *1, 2, 3, John*, pp. 143–44; 148–50).

The tension comes in harmonizing what John says about believers not practicing sin with his statement in 5:16 about a believer “committing” sin. The expression “committing” in 5:16 is also a present tense. In the absence of contextual factors indicating otherwise, the present tense should be given its normal linear force of an ongoing activity (Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 408–13). Furthermore, there is nothing in the context to indicate whether or not the sin is of limited duration. So how can John assert, on the one hand, that believers do not and cannot practice sin and, on the other hand, describe a believer in 5:16 as committing ongoing sin, both statements involving the present tense?

The solution is to recognize that in 5:16 the construction John uses, “committing a sin,” identifies the believer as engaged in some specific sin. The construction involves an anarthrous noun that is singular and, in this case, indefinite (Wallace, *Exegetical Syntax*, pp. 243–54). John is not saying in 5:16 that the believer in view has a life characterized by the habit and pattern of sin. That would directly contradict what John says about believers both before and after this verse. What John is saying, and what the rest of Scripture teaches, is that a believer can get caught up in some specific sin (Gal 6:1; cf. 2 Sam 11:1–12:25 and David’s protracted sin).

Furthermore, Scripture also teaches that the believer can persist in a given sin to the point where the Lord intervenes to take the believer's life. This statement is consistent with the second interpretation of 5:16 argued above. But even if the preferred interpretation is rejected, other Scriptures teach the same point. Paul, for example, affirms this in 1 Corinthians 11:30. Addressing the Corinthian believers, Paul says that some of them were sick and others were asleep, that is, had died, all of this because of their ongoing abuse of the Lord's Supper. Even in this instance, however, the believer still cannot have a life that is characterized by the habit and pattern of sin.

The one passage that appears to contradict the above is 1 Corinthians 3:15. There Paul describes a believer standing before the Lord whose works are burned up and whom Paul describes as still saved, "yet so as through fire." The impression from this verse is that a believer can have a life devoid of good works and still be saved. Yet, to describe a believer's life as devoid of good works is tantamount to describing the believers' life as characterized by the habit and pattern of sin. Stating it theologically, how is such a believer persevering in the faith and in faithfulness to God's word, that is, in good works?

Here the analogy of faith is particularly helpful. Among others, James teaches that saving faith produces good works, not as a condition for salvation but as the necessary evidence of salvation. For example, James declares in 2:14 that faith without works cannot save; it is not true, saving faith. The converse, then, is that saving faith must produce good works or it is not saving faith.

That being true, what Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 3:15 must be understood as hyperbole. In effect, Paul overstates his case to make his point. The Lord's evaluation of the believer's works does not jeopardize the believer's standing before God. Were it possible for a true believer to be devoid of good works, such a believer would still be saved. Taking the use of hyperbole into consideration, Paul does not envisage a believer who is devoid of good works. Elsewhere Paul argues for the importance and necessity of good works in the life of every true believer (e.g., Eph 2:10).

## CONCLUSION

In 1 John 5:16, John directs his readers to prayer for a brother who is caught up in sin that does not lead to death. The readers can have confidence when they pray that God will hear and answer that prayer. John says that God will give life to the believer not sinning unto death. God will bring that brother to repentance and restore that brother to faith and faithfulness. All true believers persevere in faith and in faithfulness, though not all do so to the same degree. It is possible for a believer to be caught up in some sin, even to the point where God takes that believer's life. Yet, even here, the believer's overall life will not be characterized by the habit and pattern of sin.

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