Answering the Critics — The Short Version

Paper 11 in a 12 Part Series

by Escape the Mustard Tree

A plain-language companion to Paper 11. Everything here is worked out at length there, with the Greek, the objections, and the sources.

When Someone Pushes Back

If you've started talking about the coming kingdom and the salvation of the soul, sooner or later someone will push back. It might be a pastor, a friend, or someone in your own family. The pushback usually comes as a handful of questions, and most of them are fair questions. This paper takes the six you're most likely to hear and answers each one from Scripture.

Every one of these questions was asked in real life. Paper 11 tells that story and quotes the critics in their own words. Here you'll find just the questions and short answers.

One thing first, because it settles more than you'd think. Both sides of this conversation agree on the most important thing there is: a man is saved by grace through faith, with nothing added. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Every Christian is **eternally secure**. This teaching doesn't put a condition on that. It points to another question Scripture also asks: what will a saved man **inherit**?

"Isn't This Salvation by Works?"

This is usually the first thing people say, and the answer starts with a line Scripture draws itself.

A man's **standing before God** is a gift, and it's received by believing. When a jailer asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30-31; Eph. 2:8-9). A man doesn't earn that standing, and he can't lose it. But Paul tells people who already have that standing something more:

> "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." (Phil. 2:12-13)

Paul isn't telling them how to get into the family. He's talking about what happens *after*.

Think of a child born into a family that owns a business. Being born into the family is one thing, and nobody earns that. Being trusted to run the business one day is another. A lazy child doesn't stop being family. But his father won't hand him the business, either.

Scripture calls what's at stake the **salvation of the soul**: "receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls" (1 Pet. 1:9). Jesus tied it to what a man does with his life now, and to what He'll do when He comes: "For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works" (Matt. 16:27).

And none of that work is done alone. Paul said, "I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). The Jesus who died for us now lives to help us: "He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). His work on the cross is finished (John 19:30). **What's still being finished is the work in us.**

"Isn't It 'Another Gospel'?"

People who ask this are thinking of Galatians, where Paul says that anyone who preaches "any other gospel" should be "accursed" (Gal. 1:8). That's as serious as a charge gets, so it helps to see what Paul was actually fighting.

Some teachers had told the Galatian Christians they had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be justified. Paul's answer was fierce: "You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4). This teaching agrees with every word. No one is justified by keeping the law, ever.

But keep reading the same letter. Two chapters after his warning, Paul writes this to the same people, and he calls them "brethren" (Gal. 5:13):

> "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting [age-lasting] life." (Gal. 6:7-8)

Sowing and reaping is about how a saved man lives. Just before this, Paul warned these same Christians that "those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:21).

So Paul put both things in one short letter: a standing before God that **no one may add to**, and a harvest that **depends on how you walk**. He saw no contradiction, because the two answer different questions. That is exactly what this teaching says.

"Does It Put Christians in the Lake of Fire?"

Some teachers in the past did describe it that way: unfaithful Christians thrown into a burning lake for a thousand years. People heard that and objected, and they were right to. That isn't what this series teaches.

Here's what Scripture says. Jesus told a church, "He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death" (Rev. 2:11), and John tells us the second death is the lake of fire (Rev. 21:8). The promise is made to the Christian who overcomes. So the one who doesn't overcome isn't covered by it, and this teaching won't pretend otherwise.

But fire in Scripture isn't first of all a place. **It belongs to God Himself**: "our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). It's His holiness at work, and what it does depends on what it touches. Paul describes that fire meeting every Christian's work at the Judgment Seat:

> "...the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." (1 Cor. 3:13-15)

Notice what burns. It's the man's work, and "he himself will be saved." What he loses is the reward: his part in Jesus' coming reign, and his place near the King for that age (Matt. 25:21, 30). That loss is real, and it hurts. But **no one is burned into fitness**, and no one's standing before God is ever in the fire.

"Why Have I Never Heard This Before?"

It's a fair question, and the answer has two parts.

First, **new to you isn't the same as new**. In King Josiah's day the high priest came out of the temple and said, "I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the LORD" (2 Kings 22:8). When the king heard it read, he tore his clothes. The book had been in the house the whole time. Nobody had been reading it.

Second, **the coming kingdom is the older belief**. In the second century, Justin Martyr wrote that he and other Christians expected "a resurrection of the dead, and a thousand years in Jerusalem, which will then be built, adorned, and enlarged." He admitted that other true Christians thought otherwise, so it wasn't unanimous. But it was early. More than two centuries later Augustine, whose views shaped the church for the next thousand years, wrote of that same expectation, "I myself, too, once held this opinion." The turn away from a coming kingdom came later, and it can be dated.

The idea that faithful and unfaithful Christians won't stand in the same place in that kingdom has early roots too. A letter written within a generation or two of the apostles warned "the called" against "resting at our ease" and falling "asleep in our sins," lest the enemy "thrust us away from the kingdom of the Lord." Jesus had said it before anyone: "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Luke 12:48).

"Isn't It a Cult?"

That word gets used two ways, and it helps to ask which one a person means.

Sometimes *cult* means **a group that denies the heart of the faith**. Paul spells that heart out:

> "...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." (1 Cor. 15:3-4)

This teaching believes every word of it. It holds that Jesus is God the Son, that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that a man is saved by grace through faith with nothing added. By that measure it isn't a cult.

Other times *cult* means **a group that controls its people**: cutting them off from family and friends, deciding what they may hear, making them afraid to leave. That's a question about how people are treated, and anyone can check it. A teaching that puts everything in print, verse by verse, and asks you to test it for yourself isn't working that way.

Remember, too, that Paul's own faith was called a sect. Standing before a Roman governor he said, "according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets" (Acts 24:14). A label doesn't tell you whether something is true. Scripture tells you how to find out: "Test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thess. 5:21).

"Won't It Make Me Afraid?"

It's a real concern. If a reward rides on how you live, won't you spend your life anxious?

Start with what this teaching **takes off the table**. In some churches, a Christian who is struggling is left to wonder whether he was ever saved at all. This teaching never asks him that. His standing before God is settled, and God doesn't take it back (Rom. 11:29). What's at stake in his walk is a reward. His place in God's family isn't.

Then look at where John says a Christian is headed:

> "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear..." (1 John 4:17-18)

John expects Christians to stand before Jesus with **boldness**. That boldness grows as we stay close to Him: "abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming" (1 John 2:28).

And when we fail, we aren't left alone with it. When we agree with God about our sin, He is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us, as His own children (1 John 1:9). We have a High Priest who understands weakness, and we're told to come to Him without hanging back: "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16). When God corrects His children, He does it as a Father who loves them (Heb. 12:6, 11). **The answer to failure is a Person, and He's still helping.**

Test It Yourself

None of these answers asks you to take anyone's word for it, this paper's included. When Paul preached in Berea, his hearers "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). That's all this teaching asks of you.

If one of these questions has raised more, Paper 11 takes it up at length, along with nine others, and lets the critics speak in their own words. Every other paper in the series is open to the same test.

Open the Book and see.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.