

How does one interpret the New Testament warning passages while affirming the irrevocable nature of Salvation?

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Introduction

The perceived tension between NT warning passages and the irrevocable nature of salvation generally involves some form of perseverance or repentance, and thus performance. Advocates of conditional security (i.e., conditionalists) pose that such performance is necessary to retain regeneration and thereby attain final salvation in the soteriological sense. Advocates of unconditional security (i.e., securitists) counter by insisting that conditioning retention of salvation from hell on performance necessarily teaches an accursed gospel of works-righteousness.

A popular rejoinder by conditionalists is to claim that perseverance and repentance are nonmeritorious since God is the one who performs the work within the believer: “For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). However, despite the claims of some conditionalists, this response ends up making salvation a synergistic result. This Pauline verse could be translated as: “For God is the one who is *internally energizing* (*energeo*) you both to desire and to be *energized* (*energeo*) according to His good pleasure” (TM).¹ Paul will likewise say of himself: “And for this purpose I also diligently labor, agonizingly *striving* according to His *energizing* (*energeia*), which *energizes* (*energeo*) me with power” (Col 1:29; TM). Believers *work synergistically with* (*sunergeo*) God (Mk 16:20; 2Cor 6:1). And their works *work synergistically with* (*sunergeo*) their faith (Jam 2:22).² God *empowers* (*endunamoo*) us.³ Still, we perform the work/walk through the energizing empowering of His Spirit (Eph 3:20). Even the

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the 1977 edition of New American Standard (NAS) is the translation used in the present article. *Translation Mine* (TM) references my own translation.

² *Synergism* is derived from the Greek verb *sunergeo* and means *to work together with someone else* to accomplish a common goal. God provides energization via spiritual stimulation by which believers are encouraged to do God’s will. Through God’s enabling grace, God works synergistically in cooperation with the believer’s free will in making it possible for believers to perform good works, such as persevering in faith and goods works. While it is true that God likewise works cooperatively together with the free will of the lost in enabling them to come to saving faith, it must be remembered that saving faith is not a work. Thus, saving faith is not a synergistic response. The synergistic activities through which a person comes to saving faith are only synergistic preconditions to the non-synergistic response of saving faith. Since saving faith is the singular condition for regeneration and since saving faith is not a work, regeneration is exclusively the work of God. Regeneration is produced monergistically by God, independently of any cooperative **work** performed by man. Saving faith does not cause regeneration, is not a work, and is merely the condition for regeneration. Therefore, God’s working in cooperation with a believer’s free response of faith to save the believer at the point of regeneration is not a synergistic activity since the believer is not contributing any work at that point but is only responding with a passive punctiliar persuasion. Although synergism presupposes libertarian freedom on the part of the believer (in that God performs regeneration in cooperation with the believer’s free response of saving faith), synergism should not be confused (as is frequently done) with libertarianism because saving faith is not a work. Synergism is more than libertarian free human cooperation with God. Synergism is *free human cooperation with God in the mutual performance of work*. For further discussion, see my book, *The Outer Darkness* (TOD).

³ Marshall, for example, would condition entrance into the kingdom and thus salvation from eternal damnation on one’s perseverance: “Perseverance in this life is the way of entry into the future kingdom” (p. 61). Supposedly, works-righteousness is not involved because such works are performed by God’s enabling grace (pp. 136, 170-171). Marshall poses a paradoxical tension: “From start to finish salvation is regarded as the work of God for and in the believer....On the other hand, various exhortations are addressed to believers which imply that they also have their part to play in the attainment of their final salvation” (p. 123). Yet later he acknowledges that his paradoxical position is illogical: “Here logic breaks down” (p. 186). Scripture, however, exhorts us to worship God in a manner logically consistent with the truth. Marshall’s appeal to passive receptivity to deny synergism (p. 206) is completely non-persuasive since our part in perseverance is very active. We persevere; therefore, we are rewarded (p. 268). He turns the gift of salvation into a reward and confuses inheriting the kingdom with exclusion from the kingdom (p. 112), unnecessarily conditioning final soteriological salvation on the way believers live. His position naturally denies that believer can have absolute assurance of final salvation from damnation since believers cannot be certain that they will persevere. Thus, he appeals to “logical uncertainty” (p. 210). Even his position regarding uncertainty is illogical because Scripture offers believers absolute assurance. His making perseverance a soteriological necessity conditioned on our cooperation is irreconcilable with the Scripture’s offer of absolute assurance. Marshall illogically assumes a dichotomy between perseverance and assurance.

production of spiritual traits, otherwise called the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), requires our human *effort* (*spoude, spoudazo*, 2Pet 1:5,9). Scripture is replete with numerous warnings that God's judgment is according to our works. "He will reward every man according to his works" (Mt 16:27; TM). "My reward [*misthos*] is with Me, to pay every man according to his work [*ergon*]" (Rev 22:12; TM).⁴ These rewards—mishthological results—are conditioned, then, to some degree at least, upon our derivative merit. Yet Scripture also warns us repeatedly, in very clear terms, that salvation from eternal damnation (and thus from an eternity in the Lake of Fire) is given as a gift apart from our works. Soteriological benefits—such as regeneration, justification by faith apart from works, and salvation from hell—are gifts from start to finish and thus cannot be conditioned to any degree or in any form upon human performance. Accordingly, the conditionalistic argument fails miserably. Fundamentally, we must distinguish soteriological benefits from mishthological rewards. A gift must not be confused with a reward.

Gift versus Reward

Logic dictates, and Scripture mandates, that the NT warnings not be interpreted in such a way that would confuse a gift with a reward. A gift should not be turned into reward, nor should a reward be turned into a gift. A gift is not a reward, and a reward is not a gift. Therefore, the law of noncontradiction, as well as the truthfulness of Scripture, requires that we not treat the same object, or at least the same aspect of that object, as both a reward and a gift. Something is a contradiction if it affirms both A and non-A in the same way at the same time. Some conditionalists will claim that *retention of soteriological regeneration is both conditional and unconditional at the same time and in the same way without being contradictory because it is being viewed from two different perspectives: predestination and condition*. But this assessment is false since the same agent (God) is looking at the same object (retention of regeneration) in the same way (soteriologically). Soteriological regeneration cannot be both conditional and unconditional. The same argument applies to the soteriological aspect of other benefits, such as justification and salvation. The irrevocable nature of God's gifts (Rom 11:29) demands that we not turn soteriological benefits into revocable rewards. Such gifts, which by their very nature are irrevocable, should not be misconstrued as rewards, which by their very nature are forfeitable.

Inherit the Kingdom

The kingdom of God is the central theme of the Bible. Not surprisingly, some of the strongest warnings in the Bible pertain to the kingdom. Forfeiture of certain aspects of the kingdom are possible. Paul provides a vice-list in 1Cor 6:9-10 and warns the Corinthian believers to flee from these immoral practices (v. 18) by asking this question: "Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?" (1Cor 6:9) He provides a similar vice list and warning in Gal 5:19-21: "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (ESV). This inheritance is a birthright, but it is not right unconditionally guaranteed. The writer of Hebrews similarly warns: "See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected" (Heb 12:15-17). Just as he forfeited his inheritance, so believers can forfeit their inheritance of the kingdom. The reason is because the inheritance is a reward: "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (Col 3:23-24). Since the inheritance is a reward, we would expect the inheritance of the kingdom to be forfeitable; conversely, because it is forfeitable we would expect it to be a reward, not a gift. Rewardability and forfeitability go hand in hand.

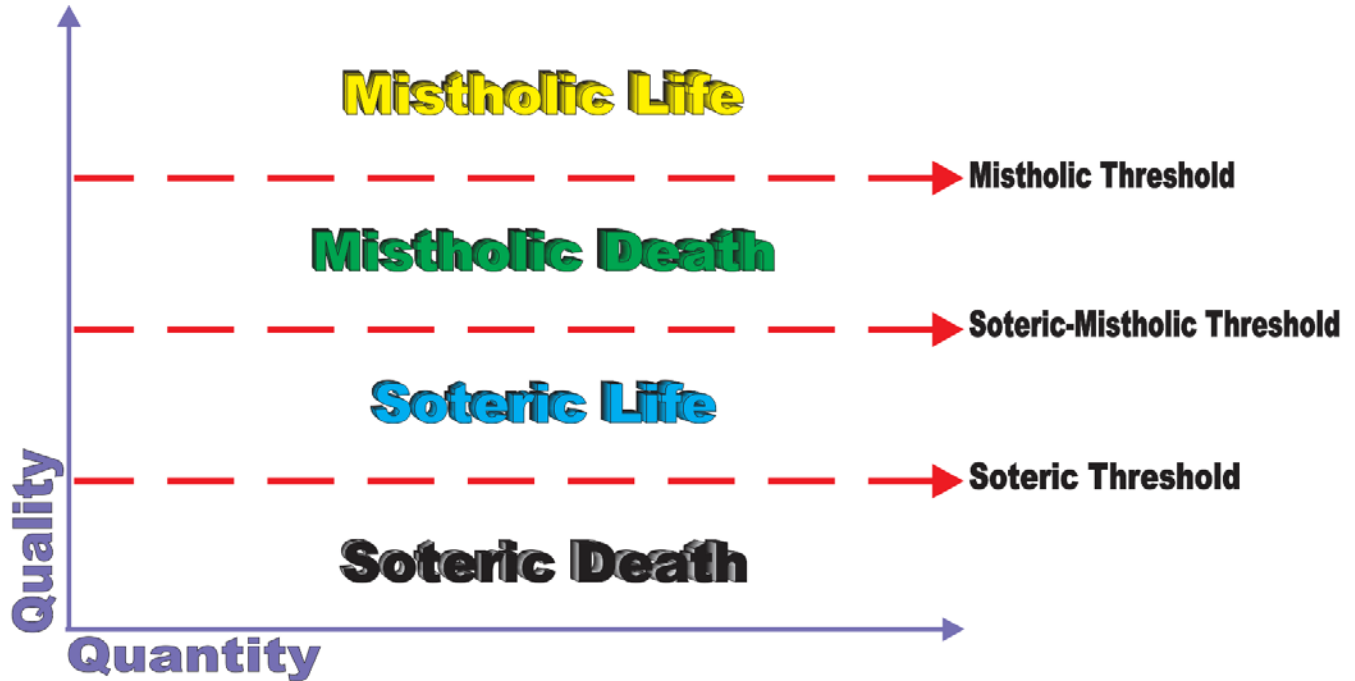
Inheritance of a kingdom necessarily implies rulership, a kingship. Those believers who inherit the kingdom will rule as kings and queens in the kingdom. This rulership is conditioned on performance. Jesus described this performance as overcoming the world: "And he who overcomes, and he who keeps My *deeds* [*works; ergon*] until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron" (Rev 2:26-27). Rewards are based on works. Rulership is a reward; hence it is based on works. Entrance into the kingdom, on the other hand, is a gift conditioned on new birth (regeneration) (Jn 3:3-5; Col 1:13). Entrance into the kingdom is thus not equatable with rulership of the kingdom: inherit ≠ enter. Securitists are not violating the rule of noncontradiction in posing that the kingdom is both a gift and a reward because two different aspects of the kingdom are in view: entrance versus rulership. Different privileges regarding the kingdom are in view.

For that matter, he is being illogical in appealing to logic to interpret Scripture on this occasion since he has thrown logic out the window by earlier claiming that Scripture is illogical. I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*, digital edition (Paternoster Digital Library, 2005). For my response to particulars of his argument, see my book, *Mere Christianity and Moral Christianity*.

⁴ *Misthology* is a coined term derived from the Greek words *misthos* (*reward*) and *logos* (*teaching*) and refers to the doctrine of temporal and eternal rewards. In the present article, it and its derivatives will be used in reference to eternal rewards, i.e., eschatological rewards.

Inherit Eternal Life

Similar observations can be made regarding eternal life. Those believers who pay the price of full-fledged discipleship can “inherit eternal life” (Mt 19:29). This dimension of eternal life is a reward according to one’s works (Rom 2:6-7), reaped by those believers who sow according to the Spirit (Gal 6:8), won by those believers who fight the good fight (1Tim 6:12). Notwithstanding, eternal life is also frequently referred to as a gift (e.g., Jn 4:10; Rom 6:23), received simply through faith (Jn 20:31; 1Tim 1:16). This gift of life, regeneration, must be unforfeitable since it is already received and is eternal. The future acquisition of eternal life as a reward, on the other hand, has not yet been realized and is very much forfeitable. As is well known, eternal life has both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. Securitists justifiably appeal to both dimensions to prove the irrevocable nature of the soteriological aspect of eternal life.



Quantitatively, eternal life cannot be forfeitable once received since it is eternal. Qualitatively, eternal can be experienced at different degrees since it is life. Naturally, the qualitative fluctuation has a minimum soteric threshold that prevents soteric life from dipping soteriologically into the range of soteric death. Logically, a higher mistholic threshold must be postulated that prevents the reward aspect from being confused with the gift aspect. Jesus said that He came that we “might have life, and might have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Simply having eternal life is a soteriological foundation, sometimes pictured as drinking the water of life freely as a gift without cost (Jn 4:10; Rev 22:17). Having eternal life abundantly is higher level, though, a misthological one, sometimes pictured as a crown of life or tree of life: “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life” (Jam 1:12). The forfeiture of the reward aspect of eternal life can be pictured as the possible forfeiture of the crown of life (Rev 3:11) or of one’s right to the tree of life (Rev 22:19), which is a reward to those believers who overcome (Rev 2:7).

Securitist rightly defend the soteric threshold. After all, Jesus clearly promises: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (Jn 5:24). Once one has passed soteriologically from the sphere of death into life, pictured in the above diagram as a soteric threshold, one cannot cross that threshold back into the realm of soteric death. One has the gift of soteric life permanently, which is the basic thesis of unconditional security. Misthologists (i.e., experts in the field of misthology/rewards) go on to acknowledge that eternal life can also be had at a mistholic level as a reward. Once the crown of life is awarded at the Bema, it will be a permanent possession. In other words, once that mistholic threshold is crossed at the Bema, overcomers will never cross it again. Unfortunately, some misthologists have failed to perceive the intermediate soteric-mistholic threshold. Some believers will reap mistholic death at the Bema. They will have eternal life at the gift level but fail to attain it at the reward level; they will not be able to cross the mistholic threshold. They will spend eternity above the soteric-mistholic threshold but below the mistholic threshold. In terms of rewards, they will reap death.⁵ Conditionalists fail to distinguish soteric death from mistholic death and therefore erroneously think that believers can lose the free gift of eternal life. Their misperception turns the gift into a reward, resulting in a false gospel.

⁵ For supporting passages and more advanced discussion and diagrams, see my book, *Rewards are Eternal*.

Inherit Salvation

The writer of Hebrews poses the possibility of believers inheriting salvation (Heb 1:14) and then proceeds to launch five warnings to these believing readers, the first of which is to ask, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (Heb 2:3) Next, he proceeds to warn believers about the possibility of not entering the promised rest, which should be understood in harmony with his warning mentioned above about the possibility of failing to inherit the blessing. The realization of our inheritance is a misthological rest. The children of Israel would have to enter the Promised Land and overcome adversity in order to enter into the realization of their inheritance and thus achieve the promised rest. This reward is also pictured as the fullness of salvation. Christ “became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation” (Heb 5:9). This salvation will be eternal for those believers who attain it because rewards are eternal. “Through faith and perseverance” believers have the hope of realizing this promised reward (Heb 6:11-12). Believers are warned that if they do not persevere, they are in danger of severe punishment in the judgment that God will bring upon His people (Heb 10:26-31). “Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a **great reward**. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (Heb 10:35-36). What is at stake, a gift? No! A *great reward!* For conditionalists to misconstrue this warning into a soteriological threat is inexcusable and nullifies the gift aspect of salvation. The text is very clear that what is at stake is the realization of a reward. The reception of the kingdom in Heb 12:28 points to the same conclusion. What do you call someone who receives/inherits a million dollars? A millionaire. What do you call someone who receives/inherits a kingdom? A king. For this reason, Paul promises, “If we endure, we shall also reign with Him” (2Tim 2:12). But he then immediately warns conversely, “If we deny Him, He also will deny us.” What will Christ deny those believers who are unfaithful? The gift. No, a gift cannot be conditioned on performance. Rather, He will deny them rulership with Him. Rulership is a reward, not a gift. Jesus promises, “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev 3:21). Experiential overcoming is necessary for misthological rulership. He likewise promises that those believers who endure to the end will be saved (Mt 10:22; 24:13). Such salvation is revocable because it is conditioned on performance. But this type of salvation is misthological, not soteriological. When securitists speak of the irrevocable nature of salvation, they are speaking of the soteriological aspect of salvation. This aspect is unconditionally secure. A believer cannot forfeit the gift dimension of eternal life. They can, however, forfeit the reward aspect, in failing to attain it, if they do not persevere.

Simple Problem Passages

Admittedly, some passages present challenges. A one-size-fits-all mentality is not the best solution. Notwithstanding, the basic premise remains intact. Because Scripture is truth, it is noncontradictory. A gift cannot be misconstrued as a reward, which would void the law of noncontradiction, and thereby contradict Jesus who said, “Thy word is truth” (Jn 17:3). Masquerading contradiction as tension is no solution. Notwithstanding, simplistic assumptions are not justified. For instance, Acts 14:22 is assumed by some to teach that entrance into the kingdom (and thus heaven) is a reward: “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom.” In harmony with the above distinction between entering and inheriting the kingdom, however, a more plausible translation would be: “Through many tribulations we must enter the *kingship*.” As is well known, *basileia* is sometimes spacial and sometimes experiential. In the case of the later, *kingship* is frequently the preferred translation in scholarly discussion. Just as the only way to inherit the kingdom is as a king (or queen), the only way to enter the kingship is as a king (or queen). Entrance into the kingdom, contrastively, remains a gift.

Salvation of the *soul* (*psuche*) is likewise a temporal or misthological construct, never a soteriological term. In other words, salvation of one’s physical life from death (Jam 5:20) or of one’s earthly life in terms of earning eternal rewards is always in view when the expression *salvation of the soul* is used (Mt 16:25; cp. 16:27). Salvation from eternal damnation in the Lake of Fire is not in preview, nor is retaining one’s eternal *life* (*zoe*). The gift of eternal *zoe* is not to be confused with the salvation of one’s earthly *psuche*.

Compound Problem Passages

Some warning passages are not so easily explained, however, at least not convincingly. Better informed conditionalists and securitists acknowledge that litotes is a valid literary device in Greek grammar.⁶ In my book, *The Outer Darkness* (TOD), I have discussed litotes at length and charted them. One such litotes is Rev 3:5: “He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels.” Being clothed in white garments, not having one’s name erased from the Book of Life, and having one’s name confessed are rewards promised to faithful believers. Similarly, Rev 2:11 provides a related litotes: “He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.” Many have assumed that the promise of not having one’s name erased from the book of life necessarily implies that one’s name can be erased, and thereby

⁶ Marshall, for instance, will mention in passing that Paul’s expression in Acts 26:19 “is probably a litotes” (p. 95).

have wrongly concluded that those whose names are erased could be cast into the Lake of Fire, which is the second death (Rev 20:15). Their reasoning is grammatically and logical false. A litotes cannot necessarily be thrown into reverse. These litotes could simply mean that overcomers will find their name's honored (rather than erased) and an abundant misthological experience of eternal life (rather than eternal death). These promises to faithful believers cannot be taken, apart from other factors, to mean that unfaithful believers will have their names erased or be hurt by the second death. Many securitists are content with this litotetic explanation, providing a simple solution to these problem passages.

Other securitists (not to mention conditionalists!) are not persuaded that this is the end of the story. Even in TOD, I made a concession that a *limited correlative application* could be intended for unfaithful believers. Although unfaithful believers might not have their names erased or literally be hurt by the second death, a correlative application is probable. Those points are still valid. However, in my soon-to-be-released series, *Misthological Models*, I advance this argument to concede that a *limited litotetic reversal* is intended within the misthological spectrum.⁷ This hypothesis concurs with those misthologists who postulate that unfaithful believers might have their names removed from a misthological copy of the Book of Life and be hurt punctiliarly at the Bema by literal fire. This model is more complex because concepts that are normally associated with the soteriological realm are allowed misthological applicability. Even so, soteriology is not confused with misthology. Believers cannot have their names removed from the soteriological Book of Life (or from the soteriological section of the Book of Life, if a singular book is posited), and they cannot be killed by the Lake of Fire, that is, be cast into the Lake of fire eternally, since soteriological benefits are irrevocable. Nonetheless, misthological benefits, which go over and above these basic considerations, are revocable.

As noted above, sometimes entrance into the kingdom is soteriological, while other times it is misthological. This simplistic explanation does not confuse a gift with a reward because it does not pose a singular soteriological-misthological entrance. Rather, some passages pose a soteriological/misthological entrance. Some passages pertain to a soteriological entrance into the *kingdom*, while others deal with a misthological entrance into the *kingship*. The same Greek word, *basileia*, can have both meanings. The meaning intended is determined by the context. A more complex model, though, would allow that in some contexts both meanings are intended: one as the primary meaning, the other as the secondary meaning. This more complex model, which allows dual vantage points, is the model being pursued in my more recent writings and has the advantage of reconciling competing models posed by fellow misthologists. Nevertheless, this appeal to dual vantage points does not confuse a gift with a reward. Consider, for example, this warning by Jesus: "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:20). Some misthologists would insist that imputed righteous and soteriological entrance are in view, while others would insist that imparted righteousness and misthological entrance are the intended meaning. In TOD, I argued for the former and allowed the possibility of the latter. In *Misthological Models*, however, I propose that both meanings are intended: one as the primary intent, the other as the secondary. In other words, the biblical speaker and writer, in this case Jesus and Matthew, intend for us to see how this singular pericope conveys both realities. Multiple layers of meaning should occasion no surprise in that Hebrew thought would anticipate four potential levels. The same argument could also be made for Mt 7:21: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven." Recognizing the multiple levels of meaning is crucial so that one does not fall into the trap of confusing a gift with a reward when one appeals to multiple vantage points. Posing dual vantage points without recognizing the dual strata results in cross-eyed conditionalism.

Proposing a compound meaning is not a case of special pleading, as this phenomenon is by no means limited to the field of soteriology. Even Protestants recognize, for instance, that the field of eschatology allows, and sometimes even requires, that some passages have a compound meaning, a near and remote fulfillment, for example. Sometimes the compound implications in the eschatological arena compound the soteriological or misthological arenas. As a case in point, the letters to churches in Rev 2-3 are regarded by many dispensationalists as having near and remote fulfillments. They were intended to have application to the local churches to which they were addressed in the first century but also application to churches, and thus believers, throughout the course of church history. One might even pose that, at least in certain cases, a triple application is intended so that the warnings also apply, at a deeper level, to (professing) believers who are faced with the seven-year tribulation (Rev 2:10;22). Even though I am a full, pretribulation rapturist who believes that no genuine believers will go through the tribulation described within the body of Revelation and that Rev 2-3 applies misthologically to believers within the church age, I would allow that some of this material is intended, at a deeper level, to have application to believers living during the tribulation. Once again, such proposals are not unique to this material. My book, *Monogamous Sex in Heaven*, points out various passages where double or even triple entendres are posed by various interpreters for complex passages that have nothing directly to do with soteriology or misthology. Multiple-level meaning is merely a phenomenon that applies across the board. Soteriological and misthological passages are not exempted.

⁷ I already have charted and provided limited discussion of this limited-litotetic-reversal model in *Rewards are Eternal*.

Conclusion

Just because some aspects of salvation are revocable does not mean that all aspects of salvation are revocable. In failing to recognize that some passages have distinct compound meanings, conditionalists are prone to fuse these meanings into one and thereby confuse a gift with a reward. Conditionalists end up teaching utter nonsense, such as insisting that soteriological entrance into the kingdom is a reward that can be forfeited and that the rapture is a gift-reward. Their contradictory assertions violate the law of noncontradiction. The superior model is to clarify that if a passage is teaching a gift-reward perspective, it is doing so at two different levels.⁸ At one level, it is teaching a soteriological truth, at another level a misthological truth. Lack of depth perception results in conditionalists looking cross-eyed at more complex passages. The gift aspect of eternal life cannot be forfeited once received. The reward aspect of eternal life can certainly be forfeited since it has not yet been awarded. The primary source of confusion lies in not discerning two separate dimensions of eternal life: soteric and mistholic. Conditionalists merge the misthological plane into the soteriological plane, resulting in a soteriological crash.

⁸ Scott Crawford and I have co-pioneered the quality-quantity-threshold charts of eternal life in varying degrees of simplicity and complexity in our material. For instance, he has a very nice chart that uses symmetrical thresholds: one above and the other below the X-axis. His website is www.wordoftruthclass.org.