

TO HIM WHO IS ABLE

**“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,
and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy,
to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord,
be glory, majesty, dominion and authority,
before all time and now and forever. Amen”**

(Jude 24-25, NASB)

According to Jude 24, God is able to do two things: (1) to keep every believer from stumbling (from experiencing major moral or doctrinal failure); and (2) to make us stand “blameless with great joy” in the presence of His glory. An important interpretive question is whether Jude was teaching an *unconditional guarantee* God will keep believers from stumbling and stand blameless in the presence of His glory, or was referring to a *conditional guarantee* requiring a certain response by individual believers. In other words, if God is able to do something, does this necessarily mean that He will do it?

[NB to Greek students: Jude 24 is an instance in which an adjectival participle is functioning as the controlling verb. Gal. 3:21 is similar: “for if a law had been given that **could** make alive” (eij gar eplouh nomo" ol dunameno" zwbpoih'sai; see Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, p. 599].

Most evangelical biblical interpreters consulted understand Jude 24 as an unconditional promise of perseverance and eternal security. For example:

“Jude’s message of warning and doom might have depressed and discouraged his readers. Beset by so much false teaching and immorality, how can Christians ever reach heaven? The answer lies only in the power of God. So this doxology, surely one of the greatest in the NT, reminds us of God’s ability to bring every one of his own safely to himself. God ‘is able to keep [us] from falling’ (or ‘stumbling’)”. *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (vol. 12), s.v. “Jude”, p. 396.

“In this final paragraph Jude exploded with a most elevated doxology, answering the unexpressed question, ‘But who will deliver us from the apostates and the apostasy into which they lead the unsuspecting?’ His proclamation was, praise be **to Him who is able to keep you from falling**. Victory over apostasy is found in Jesus Christ! He is the One who will ‘keep’ believers”. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Vol. 2), s.v. “Jude”, p. 924.

“The praise of God blends with the comfortable assurance that God can and will keep them even to His throne”. *Lange’s Commentary on Jude*, p. 33.

These biblical commentators (and many others) thus understand Jude 24 as an unconditional promise of God to believers concerning perseverance and eternal security.

But how can anyone propose such an unconditional guarantee when one thinks of saints like David, Solomon, Peter, John Mark, and Demas? All of these believers stumbled badly. In these instances, was God unable to keep these believers from stumbling, or is the unconditional guarantee proposed by biblical interpreters found at fault? If the latter, then Jude 24 calls for, but does not guarantee perseverance, and thus we should not confuse this passage with eternal security which is promised elsewhere in Scripture (Jn. 3:16; 5:24; 6:29, 40; Acts 16:31; 1 Jn. 5:12-13).

I. DOES GOD'S ABILITY NECESSITATE A GUARANTEE?

God is able to perform anything He wishes to do, as long as it aligns with His absolute holiness. For example, God is unable to lie, because this contradicts His personal character. But there are numerous events which have happened which God could have stopped from occurring. One only needs to think of the fall of man and the woman in the Garden of Eden. God could have created them without an ability to sin; yet He chose not to do so. He could have kept the serpent from tempting them, but He did not.

There are many places in the New Testament where the same expression "God is able" is employed and where the possible result either never occurred, or where it only occurred when a condition was met. Consider the following examples:

1. "And do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you, that **God is able** from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Matt. 3:9, NASB).
2. "For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, **He is able** to come to the aid of those who are tempted" (Heb. 2:18, NASB). Yet, this aid is conditioned upon the one being tested looking to Him in prayer with faith (Heb. 3:12—15; 4:11-16).
3. "And after He had come into the house, the blind men came up to Him, and Jesus said to them, 'Do you believe that **I am able** to do this?' They said to Him, 'Yes, Lord'" (Matt. 9:28, NASB). Jesus conditioned His healing of these two blind men based on their answer.

The fact that God is **able** to do something does not unconditionally guarantee that He **will** do it. It may be something He never intends to do, or which He will only do for those who respond as He commands, as in the case of Jude 24.

II. WHAT DOES THE WORD “STUMBLING” MEAN?

The word used in Jude 24, “not to/without stumbling” (*ἄπταisto*"/*aptaistos*), only occurs here in the New Testament (one may want to cross reference the metaphorical use of *πταίειν*/*ptaiein* in Rom. 11:11; James 2:10; 3:2; 2 Pet. 1:10). The term is used literally by Xenophon of a horse which is sure-footed and does not stumble; by Plutarch of the steady falling of the snow. Thus, here in Jude, it is being used figuratively meaning “not losing one’s footing” or “falling”. While some Bible interpreters suggest that only doctrinal slippage is meant, Jude was warning his readers about false teachers who were promoting both false doctrine and the licentious living which ensues (Jude 15-18).

The context of Jude 24 makes it clear that Jude is encouraging believers to look to the One who can keep them from being deceived by false teachers:

“But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith; praying in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life [*lit.*, ‘life to the age’]. And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh” (Jude 20-23, NASB).

To suggest that Jude in verse 24 unconditionally guarantees his readers would not be deceived by false teachers, misinterprets the entire purpose of the letter. It was Jude’s concern his readers would be deceived by the false teachers which prompted him to write this brief letter in the first place (cf. vv. 3-4). In fact, Jude gives seven commands to believers as guidance so that they would not be deceived:

- Earnestly contend (*lit.* “agonize”) for the faith (v. 3)
- Remember the teaching and warning of the apostles (v. 17)
- Build yourselves up in the most holy faith (v. 20)
- Pray in the Holy Spirit (v. 21)
- Keep yourselves in the love of God (v. 21)
- Wait anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus (v. 21)
- Show mercy to those doubting (vv. 22-23)

Now to say that one can disobey these directives and yet, at the same time be kept from stumbling into doctrinal and moral error, is to believe God will act contrary to His Word. There is no doubt that a believer may experience victory over doctrinal and moral corruption, because God is ready, willing, and able to sustain us through the tests we face (1 Cor. 10:13). The question is not whether **He is able** to keep us from stumbling, rather, will we continue to look to Him in faith and be obedient to His Word?

III. WHEN WILL WE BE PRESENTED BLAMELESS?

The second complementary infinitive of “he is able” is “**to make** you stand in the presence of His glory **blameless** with great joy”. This clause is probably the reason why so many commentators suggest God guarantees prevention from stumbling. They see the word “blameless” and jump to the conclusion eternal salvation must be in view.

The word “blameless” (αἰνῶμος/*amothos*) means “without spot” or “without blemish”. The LORD’s demand that sacrifices be without physical blemish in the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in the perfect moral blamelessness of the Redeemer who sacrifices Himself (Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:19).

However, the term may also refer to an experience which is not sinless, but which is yet exemplary and pleasing to God, since it reflects faithfulness to Him. For example, Revelation 14:5 refers to the 144,000 Jewish evangelists during the Tribulation: “And no lie was found in their mouth; they are **blameless**” (NASB). Also, Paul speaking to the Colossian believers said:

“And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and **blameless** and beyond reproach if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister” (Col. 1:21-23; NASB).

[The same concept, although a different Greek word (ἀνεγκλήτος/*anegklethos*) is used among the requirements for elders in the church. Elders are men who must be **blameless** in their experience (1 Tim. 3:10; Titus 1:6-7; also see 1 Cor. 1:8 and Col. 1:22 for other occurrences of this word)].

There are several clear indications that these people were believers:

- Paul says to the Colossians he was addressing were once alienated from God, but were now reconciled to Him by the death of Christ. People who are no longer alienated from God are clearly believers.
- Paul exhorts his readers to “continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard”. This is in addition to Paul’s earlier reference to the faith which the readers had in Jesus Christ (Col. 1:4). Unbelievers by definition do not believe. They have no faith to continue in, nor hope of the gospel to grasp.

[The terms “hope of the gospel”, “inheritance” and “salvation” are inseparably linked in Scripture. Only because we are saved (passive, salvation of the spirit) can we possess “hope”. And hope looks ahead to the reception of an inheritance within a salvation (future, salvation of the soul; cf. 1 Pet. 1:9; Heb. 10:39; James 21; 5:19-20) to be revealed. “The blessed hope” in Titus 2:13 is one of the more familiar passages written to Christians concerning this truth. “Hope” is often said to be the return of Christ, but that is not what this or any other passage in the NT dealing with the Christians’ hope teaches. “Hope”, as in Titus 2:13, is associated with the “appearing of the glory of the great God, even our Savior Jesus Christ”. The construction of the Greek text actually makes “the blessed hope” synonymous with “the appearing of this glory”. Christians are the ones who possess this hope, as they are the ones who will be companions of Christ’s glory when it is revealed (Heb. 1:8-9; 2:10). In this respect, participation in the coming glory of Christ will be the realization of one’s present hope. This is the “so great a salvation” taught in the Epistle of Hebrews, which we are not to neglect (Heb. 1:14; 2:3)].

Some biblical interpreters teach that Colossians 1:21-23 indicates eternal life can be lost by failing to continue in the faith; many others teach those who fail to continue in the faith were never saved in the first place. In both instances, it is a grave mistake to view Paul’s purpose statement, “to present you before Him holy and **blameless** and beyond reproach”, as dealing with issues revolving around the possession of eternal life.

In the New Testament, reconciliation has two goals:

- (1) Eternal life. The recipient is passive and it’s goal is both guaranteed and fulfilled immediately at the very moment of faith (Jn. 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 1 Jn. 5:12-13; Eph. 2:8-9; Tit. 3:5), never being predicated on works.
- (2) To be presented holy, **blameless**, and beyond reproach before God in order to co-reign with Christ (Matt. 10:32-33; 16:27; Mk. 8:38; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; Heb. 1:8-9; Rev. 2:26-27; 3:21; Matt. 22:1-14//Rev. 19:7-9). The believer actively participates in good works, and its goal is neither guaranteed nor fulfilled immediately at the point of faith.

The second goal **always** concerns a future (eschatological) presentation. The question is, what is in view? Is there a future time when believers will be presented before God?

Yes, and the Judgment Seat of Christ is such a time. This is when “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10; NASB; cf. Rom. 14:10-12). Some will be found to have been good and faithful servants (Lk. 19:16-19). These are those who will be presented as having lived lives which were “holy, blameless, and beyond reproach”. Others will be found to have been worthless

servants (Lk. 19:20-26) and they will not be presented as having lived exemplary lives. At the Judgment Seat of Christ, according to Paul, not all believers will receive rewards because of unfaithfulness, but will suffer “loss” (1 Cor. 3:15; cf. Matt. 16:27; Mk. 8:38; 1 Cor. 9:27; 1 Jn. 2:28).

Furthermore, the term “holy” used in Colossians 1:22 also refers to a believer’s experience. Quoting an Old Testament verse from Leviticus, Peter commands his readers, “**You shall be holy**, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16; NASB). Similarly, Paul refers to unmarried women believers in Corinth who are “concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be **holy** both in body and spirit” (1 Cor. 7:34; NASB).

Trusting Christ as substitution for our sins and His resurrection alone is the sole basis for eternal salvation (1 Cor. 15:1-3). However, continuing in the faith is required in order to be presented at the Judgment Seat of Christ as “holy, blameless, and beyond reproach”. Continuing in the faith is a believer’s obedience to the LORD, extending over a lifetime. As Paul remarked elsewhere, “Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary” (Gal. 6:9; NASB).

Just as in Jude, Paul had a particular need for stressing in continuing in the faith at Colossae. The Colossian church was besieged with heretical teaching. These teachings were a mixture of Greek philosophy, mysticism, and Jewish legalism. For example, Paul had to warn the body of believers not to worship angels (Col. 2:18) or adopt ascetic lifestyles in the hope that neglecting the body could somehow aid in keeping the flesh under control (Col. 2:20-23).

Just as in Colossians 1:22, Jude 24 has in view the future judgment of believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Not all believers will be presented **blameless**; nor will all believers experience **great joy**. However, exceeding joy awaits believers who do not lose their footing due to false teaching and immorality. There will be a special measure of joy for such believers at the Judgment Seat of Christ, and forever thereafter.

At the Judgment Seat of Christ, no excuses will be valid. We will not be able to legitimately blame the devil, our parents, our spouses, our children, our genes, society, circumstances, or even God Himself. Nothing can “make us” stumble from the path of righteousness. God is able to keep us from stumbling as we obey Him. If any of us walks away from God, we do so because we have failed to look to Him who is able to keep us from stumbling (cf. Rom. 16:25; 2 Pet. 3:14-18).

**To the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord,
be glory, majesty, dominion and authority,
before all time and now and forever.
Amen.**

Bibliography

- Arndt, William F.; Gingrich, F. Wilbur. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. S.v. ἀἠνωμο", pp. 47-48; ἀἠταῖστο", p. 102. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Blum, Edwin A. "Jude". In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981.
- Fronmuller, G. F. C. "Jude". In *Lange's Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 12. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976.
- Pentecost, Edward C. "Jude". *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty*. New Testament edition. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983.
- Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996.