

CAN A BELIEVER LOSE HIS SALVATION?

By Denver Cheddie

Let me start off by saying that, concerning the issue of eternal security, there are only 2 valid scriptural points of view. One possible view is that a genuine Christian can NEVER lose his salvation. The other possible view is that a genuine Christian MAY lose his salvation, but if he does, he can NEVER get it back. Those are the only possible views on the subject. The bible does not allow for any other view. The belief that someone can lose his salvation, come back to Christ, lose it again, then come back again; is categorically unscriptural and doctrinally false. Let's examine what the Bible has to say.

Eternal security is the belief that a genuine Christian can never be lost. They were predestined to be saved, and hence how could they eventually be lost if God predestined them to salvation? There are different versions of this. Some hold that if someone falls away, it is testament to the fact that they were never saved. Others say that if a genuine Christian falls away, it is only temporary and he/she will eventually come back. Still others say that it does not matter if they backslide, God will take them to heaven anyway, kicking and screaming and the works.

Free will on the other hand holds that believers are responsible for the decisions they make and may choose to stop being saved.

Very few people hold solely to one and discard totally the other. The truth is some combination of both free will and predestination. But what is that combination? **Calvinists** are those who hold more strongly to predestination than free will. e.g. A Calvinist may say that a believer is predestined to be saved, and in the fullness of time, God so strongly influenced his free will that he had to respond in the affirmative. Some call this **irresistible grace**. An obvious objection is that if God could do that for one person, why can't he do it for all, since he wishes all to be saved? And if he didn't do it for a particular person, why is he then angry with that person for rejecting the gospel? **Armenians** are those who have a stronger view of free will than predestination. e.g. An Armenian may say that a person chose to be saved, and predestination applies only in a general sense. But how does this account for scriptures like Acts 13:48?

Acts 13:48b ... And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

The predestination vs. free will (Calvinism vs. Armenianism) debate has waged for centuries. I do not believe that we will fully understand many things until we see Christ face to face when we will know, not in part, but fully, even as we are known. This article does not attempt to reconcile all the scriptures concerning predestination and free will, only those pertaining to eternal security. What does the Bible teach about eternal security?

Key Passages

There are a few passages that seem to teach eternal security (that a believer cannot ever be lost) – John 10:28, 29; Phil. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:5; 1 John 2:19; Jude 24. There are also those which seem to teach that believers can lose their salvation – Luke 8:6,7,13; John 15; Acts 5:1-11; Rom. 11:22; Heb. 6:4-6, 10:26-29; Rev. 3. Calvinists generally use the former passages to arrive at the doctrine of unconditional eternal security and proceed to interpret the latter passages in that light i.e. they argue that since the Bible clearly teaches eternal security, those latter passages cannot be teaching otherwise. This is circular reasoning. They assume the very conclusion they are trying to determine. Armenians do much of the same. They arrive at their interpretation of the latter (and more difficult) passages, and then question the traditional interpretation of the former (and clearer) passages. I consider myself to be somewhere in between.

Some Common Wrong Beliefs

Before we proceed, it is useful to examine some extreme beliefs which are clearly unscriptural.

1. Once saved, always saved. It is difficult to honestly interpret Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-29 and still believe in **unconditional** eternal security. Also in Rev. 3:5, why would Jesus threaten to delete names from the book of life if it could not be done? There are different forms of once saved always saved. One is "once genuinely saved, will never draw back". This has some credence given 1 John 2:19. But there are others who believe that once someone "sincerely" prays the sinner's prayer, they are forever

bound for heaven, even if they live for the devil the rest of their lives. The sinner's prayer is not even in the Bible and the condition for being saved is active, not passive faith, according to James. There will be a lifestyle change associated with genuine faith (2 Cor. 5:17). This does not mean however that a Christian is incapable of sin.

2. We must maintain our salvation. Nowhere in the Bible are we taught that it is our job to keep ourselves saved. We are to keep ourselves pure, in God's love, from idols etc. But it is God who keeps us by His grace. We are kept by his power (1 Pet. 1:5), He keeps us from the evil one (2Thess. 3:3), He keeps us from falling (Jude 24). It is by the grace of God that we stand and remain in the faith. It is never our job to keep ourselves saved by living right. Living right and confessing of sins are necessary to experience unbroken communion with God. Doing good is necessary to receive a full reward in heaven, but never to maintain our salvation.

The hypothetical question may be asked, "Suppose a genuine believer sins just before he dies, where will he go?" Some will say hell. They say that sin cannot enter heaven. In that case which of us will ever go there? More importantly why then did Jesus die? Didn't he pay the price of sin in full? ***Tetelestai*** (*it is finished*) was a commercial word meaning *the debt is paid in full*. He died for every sin ever committed and even those yet to be committed. Sin has lost its sting and cannot deter anyone from entering heaven, only unbelief can (John 3:18).

I have even heard a preacher say, once, that a believer who is already in heaven can still backslide and end up in hell. Adam fell in a perfect environment and so did Lucifer, so why can't we? But according to 1 John 3:1, we would not be like Adam or Lucifer when we are glorified but like Christ. If He cannot backslide and go to hell, then neither can we after we have already reached heaven. Rev. 20:4-6 also make it abundantly clear that someone who is a partaker of the first resurrection can never be harmed by the second death. People have allowed their traditional concept of God (which is more consistent with Allah than Jehovah) to cloud their understanding of God's amazing grace. We are kept by God's grace.

Consider also Luke 22:31,32.

And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. "But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."

Jesus knew that Peter was going to deny him ... hence the comment on when Peter would return to him. And Jesus specifically prayed for his faith to not fail. In other words, he knew Peter would sin, but falling away is something entirely different. Even though Peter was completely clueless as to what was going on, Jesus 'had his back'. Apply this now to the genuine believer who sins just before he dies. Doesn't logic dictate that Jesus, knowing in advance what would happen, would stand in the gap for that person, so that even if he sins he would not lose his salvation?

3. We must wait till judgment day to know whether we are saved. 1 John 5:13 and Rom. 8:16 cancel such a notion. God wants us to know now that we are saved. That's the difference between Christianity and most other religions. We have assurance of salvation even now.

Believers May Commit Apostasy

Scriptures like John 10:28,29 etc. emphatically teach God's sustaining power. But they do not eliminate the free moral agency of man. It is logically inconsistent to suggest that someone may willingly come to Christ but not willingly depart. Or that someone can be saved, then not able to draw back because God would not let him. God would drag him to heaven screaming and kicking. Now God would do everything in His power to keep someone, but the Bible never portrays God as overriding the free moral agency of individuals. The Bible does teach that someone can willfully depart from the faith. It does not happen by accident thus I prefer the word ***forfeit*** rather than ***lose*** one's salvation.

I have heard another preacher teach that every time we sin we temporarily backslide (lose our salvation) until we repent, when we are re-saved. Salvation then becomes a matter of beating the clock rather than depending on God's grace. Such a concept is totally foreign to the New Testament. Actually the New Testament does not even use the word *backslide*. The word which does appear is *apostasy*. When this condition is reached, there is no longer any place of repentance. No chance of restoration. Such a condition does not come about by accident but by

deliberate departure from the faith. One must decide to make a 180° turn, forsake God, brush aside his conviction, trample the blood, and walk away. One must divorce God. It is willful, deliberate and irrevocable. One would eventually reach a state where it is impossible to return.

The word *apostasia* means *a departure*. It is deliberate. In Acts 21:21 it refers to new believers forsaking the ordinances of Moses to follow Christ. In Jer. 29:32 it signifies rebellion against God. It is always deliberate and never accidental or ignorant. In both Ezek. 18:24, 20:27, it is willful transgression. Thus the translation *falling away* in 2 Thess. 2:3 is somewhat misleading in that falling seems to be accidental. But *apostasia* is a willful departure from the faith. Although that word is not used in Heb. 6:4,5 the word *parapipto* (*fall away*) means very much the same thing. It means to willfully abandon. It never refers to accidental sin.

A closer look at Heb. 4:4-6 indicates it can only be referring to true believers, not professing Christians. They were 1) once enlightened, 2) tasted of the heavenly gift, 3) made partakers of the Holy Spirit, 4) tasted the good word and 5) the powers of the life to come. Only genuine Christians fit such a description. One commentator has suggested that this is referring to professed Christians because in John 7:37, believers drink of the Spirit, not merely taste [1]. This is a desperate attempt to avoid the obvious meaning of the text. A figurative expression from John cannot interpret another figurative expression from Hebrews. Only the context can determine the meaning of a figurative expression. Such a description could hardly fit an unbeliever. No one can become a partaker of the Holy Spirit, taste of the heavenly gift and the powers of the life to come by simply attending church.

Another writer says that it is referring to genuine believers but it is not discussing the loss of salvation, instead the "falling away from their Christian confidence and worship function in the house of God" [2]. This has to be a joke. Again such an interpretation can only be arrived at by straining to find a meaning more friendly to the doctrine of eternal security.

Hebrews 10:26-29 says very much the same thing as 4:4-6. Heb 10:26 states that if we sin willfully after we receive the knowledge of the truth, there is no forgiveness. But is this talking about any sin in general or a very specific one? Some background information is in order. This epistle was written to encourage believers who were under severe persecution from the Jews and who were being tempted to draw back to Judaism and side with the very enemies of Christ. This was apostasy. I believe this was the specific sin referred to in Heb 10:26, the sin for which there was no repentance. I believe that although it is difficult for us in the 21st century to see that, it was very obvious to Paul's direct audience. It is when this sin is committed that a believer forfeits his salvation. I believe this is the only way one can cease from being saved.

Conclusion

God is more than able to keep us and we can rest assured in that knowledge. We can be confident of our salvation because we stand not by our own goodness and strength, but by God's grace. However salvation can be forfeited (as opposed to lost) if we willfully depart from the faith.

Although it is difficult for us to understand why someone would do such a thing, we do not face the same persecution and provocation as did the Hebrews . It is possible for us to willfully walk out on God and deliberately depart from the faith.

[1] William McDonald, Believer's Bible Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 2173-75.

[2] Thomas Kem Oberholtzer, The Thorn-Infested Ground in Hebrews 6:4-12 in Roy B. Zuck, gen. Ed., Vital Biblical Issues (Grand Rapids: Kregel Resources, 1994), 200-208.

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