

Once Saved Always Saved? A Closer Look at the Doctrine of Eternal Security

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Introduction

- One of the most important questions concerning the Christian doctrine of salvation is whether a person who is saved can lose his salvation.
- This issue is related to the question of assurance. How can I be sure that I am saved?
- How we answer this question will determine our attitude to Christian discipleship.
- To hold that our salvation is permanent and secure may lead to indifference to the moral demands of the Gospel.
- To hold that our salvation can be lost may lead to anxiety and insecurity.

Introduction

- The question about eternal security is a hotly debated one.
- There are Christians who hold to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints or unconditional eternal security: i.e., salvation cannot be lost.
- These Christians follow the teachings of John Calvin (1509-1564).
- There are others who hold that salvation can be forfeited or lost. These Christians are sometimes called Arminians because they follow the theology of the Dutch Reformed theologian, Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). John Wesley is among them.

Introduction

- This question is complex because it relates to the doctrines of election and predestination, God's sovereignty and free will, divine grace and human agency, etc.
- The focus of this talk, however, will be on Scripture.
- I will argue that the Bible does not teach that Christians cannot forfeit or lose their salvation.
- I will show that the teachings, exhortations and warnings in the NT will not make much sense if Christians cannot forfeit their salvation.

Unconditional Eternal Security: A Summary

- Westminster Confession of Faith (1646):
They whom God hath accepted as Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally or finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved (17.1).
- Loraine Boettner (Calvinist theologian):
'If God has chosen men absolutely and unconditionally to eternal life, and if His Spirit effectively applies them to the benefits of redemption, the inescapable conclusion is that these persons shall be saved' .
- Wayne Grudem (theologian):
'The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God's power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again' .

Unconditional Eternal Security: A Summary

- I Peter 1:3-5:
Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into *an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*
- John 10:27-29:
My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and *they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand.* My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; *no-one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.*

A Closer Look at Scripture

- The most contentious aspect of this debate on salvation is how Christians holding different positions interpret Scriptures.
- Some argue that the two groups have their own set of Scripture passages that they use to substantiate their positions.
- But the real issue is how the different groups interpret the same Scriptures.
- Although theological and doctrinal questions are important, we will spend more time taking a closer look at the Bible.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- **John 3:16:** 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever believes in him shall not perish* but have eternal life' .
- Those who hold that Christians cannot lose their salvation have pointed out that in this passage Jesus says very clearly that those who put their faith in him 'shall not perish' .
- 'Shall not Perish' is synonymous to 'have eternal life' . The two phrases refer to salvation.
- There is a clear promise here that those who believe in Jesus will not perish. Their eternal security is guaranteed.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- This passage, however, does not suggest that the security of the believer cannot be forfeited if the believer were to reject Christ.
- The word 'believe' in Greek (πιστευω) is a verb, present, and active. This means that Jesus promises that only those who continue to believe in him will not perish.
- The assurance of salvation is given to those who continue to put their faith in Jesus until the very end.
- This passage does speak of the eternal security of the believer. But this security is conditioned on the believer's continued faith in Christ.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- **John 5:24:** 'I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me *has eternal life and will not be condemned*; he has crossed over from death to life'.
- The Greek for 'believe' (πιστευω) here is in the same tense as John 3:16 (verb, present, and active).
- Those who 'keep believing' that God has sent his Son Jesus Christ 'has eternal life and will not be condemned'.
- Although this verse does not directly address the issue whether salvation can be lost, it teaches that only those who continue to believe in Christ will escape condemnation and inherit eternal life.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- **John 10: 27-28:** 'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them from my hand' .
- Here we have a wonderful promise and assurance that those who continue to follow Christ will never perish, and that no one can snatch them from his hand.
- Those who maintain that salvation cannot be lost have based their position on this passage. If salvation can be forfeited, Jesus is a liar.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- This wonderful promise must be properly understood. To do this, we must ask: Who is Jesus referring to in this passage? To whom is this promise made?
- Answer: verse 27, 'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me' .
- Here Jesus is referring to only one category of people: disciples (believers, sheep, followers of Christ).
- Only the disciple of Christ meets these conditions, and is the recipient of the promise of salvation.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- The Greek that is translated as 'follow' (ακολουθευ) is a verb, present, indicative (actual), active – an action that is presently being performed.
- This means that as long as the action of following Jesus is being performed, the believer or disciple in question will not perish.
- The promise here applies to the disciple of Christ. It does not apply to someone who may have believed in Christ at some point, but who no longer does.
- Some Christians tend to read the words 'under any circumstance' after the words 'never perish'. But these words are simply not there.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- **Romans 8:1:** 'Therefore, there is now *no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death' .
- Some Christians maintain that once a person accepts Christ as Saviour he is free from condemnation, even if he lives a life of disobedience.
- This interpretation suffers from an inadequate understanding of what it means to be 'in Christ' . To be 'in Christ' one must accept Christ as Saviour *and* Lord.
- To be 'in Christ' is to yield to the Spirit of God and not the flesh.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- **Romans 8:5-7:**

‘Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of the sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God ...’

- Those who live in accordance to the sinful flesh could no longer be described as being ‘in Christ’. Paul therefore warns his Christian readers: ‘Therefore brothers, we have an obligation – but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. *For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if you live by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God*’ (**Romans 8:12-14**).

A Closer Look at Scripture

- **1 Peter 1:3-4:** ‘Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection and into *an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade* – kept in heaven for you’.
- Christians who hold that salvation cannot be forfeited support their position with this passage.
- This passage, however, does not address the question whether salvation can be lost. It merely says that the inheritance of Christians are secure.
- This passage does not suggest that the inheritance of Christians cannot be forfeited because of unbelief or disobedience.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- Paul has elsewhere issued very clear warnings that believers can forfeit their salvation as the result of living in sin.
- **Galatians 5:21:** 'I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God' (5:21). This warning was directed at the Galatian Christians.
- Paul elaborates on the lifestyle in question in verses 19-21:
'The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like' .

A Closer Look at Scripture

- **1 John 3:9:** 'No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning because he is born of God' .
- Some Christians have argued that since it is impossible for true Christians to return to a life of sin, it is impossible for them to lose their salvation.
- Some commentators maintain that this passage refers to the new believer who has just experienced liberation from slavery of sin.
- This passage must be seen in light of other passages. If Christians are incapable of returning to a life of sin, Paul's admonishments would be superfluous.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- In 1 Timothy 5:11-15, Paul talks about widows who are unable to control their sensual desires.
- Some of them have yielded so much to their sensuality that they have departed from the faith altogether. Paul says in verse 15: 'Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan' .
- Again, it is important to note that Paul was referring to people who were previously Christians.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- **Luke 8:13:** 'Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away' .
- This is the Parable of the Sower that describes the seeds that fell on four different types of soil.
- The people that Jesus describes here were true believers. They are not pre-believers or pseudo-believers.
- This is further enforced by the description 'fell away' . One cannot fall away from something that one was never truly a part of.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- **Galatians 5:4:** 'You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace' .
- Who was Paul referring to in this context? Christians or Jews? Paul was referring to Christians who think that apart from faith in Christ they need to follow the law to be saved.
- They were in every sense Christians, but were led astray by the teachings of the Judaisers. Thus, Paul describes them as being 'alienated from Christ' and having 'fallen away' .
- This passage does not only show that falling away from God's grace is possible. It refers to Christians in Galatia who have actually fallen away.

A Closer Look at Scripture

- There are many other passages in the NT that warns of the danger of falling away from the faith:
 - **1 Cor 10:12:** 'So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!
 - **1 Tim 1:18-20:** 'Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme' .
 - **2 Peter 3:17:** 'Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position' .

The Danger of Apostasy

- The Greek word for apostasy (αποστασια) is originally used to signify political revolt or rebellion.
- In the LXX, this word is used for Satan's rebellion against God.
- In Acts 21:21 Paul was accused to committing apostasy for teaching his followers to abandon the ceremonial laws of Moses. In 2 Thess 2:3, reference is made to the prophecy of apostasy.
- In the NT apostasy refers to falling 'from the faith'. This means that only true Christians can commit apostasy.

The Danger of Apostasy

- **1 Tim 4:1-4:**
 'The Spirit clearly says that in later times, some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer' .
- Paul defines apostates in this context as those who 'have abandoned the faith' because they have embraced and were promoting a heresy.
- Paul describes the heresy as 'things taught by demons' .

The Danger of Apostasy

- **2 Peter 3:17:** 'Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position' .
- We have already encountered this passage. Bear in mind that Peter was writing to Christians.

The Danger of Apostasy

- **Hebrews 6:4-8:**
 'It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned'.
- The writer of Hebrews issues a clear warning against apostasy to his Jewish-Christian audience. Though his audience is not yet guilty of this, they are vulnerable if they are not careful with their spiritual life.

The Danger of Apostasy

- The people who are warned are described as ‘those who have been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age’. Many commentators would agree that only true Christians fit this description.
- But there are some Christians who argue that the people who received this warning are not Christians. They have been introduced to the Gospel but have not fully committed themselves to Christ.
- Wayne Grudem maintains that the people that this warning is directed at have not really experienced salvation.

The Danger of Apostasy

- Grudem argues that these people have only ‘tasted’ (γευομαι) the heavenly gift, and therefore are still unconverted.
- Some scholars make the distinction between ‘tasting’ and ‘eating’. Those who have only tasted are still unconverted.
- But this fails to take into account the way the author of Hebrews used the word. In Hebrews 2:9, the author says Jesus ‘tasted’ (γευομαι) death. This clearly means that Jesus really died, and not merely appeared to have died.
- ‘Tasting the heavenly gift’ can mean nothing else than experiencing the gift of redemption in Christ.

The Danger of Apostasy

- The same approach should be taken for the word 'enlightened' (Φωτιζω).
- According to Grudem 'enlightened' does not carry the sense of 'believed in the Gospel' or 'came to faith'.
- Some have argued that 'enlightened' refers to having undergone the ritual of baptism. Thus, this passage refers to those who have been baptised, and are participating in some church activities, but who have not really put their faith in Christ.

The Danger of Apostasy

- But Philip Hughes argues that the same verb 'enlightened' is used in John 1:19 to refer to 'the activity of the eternal Word who came into the world to enlighten men'.
- Hughes concludes that to be enlightened means to receive the knowledge of truth, the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.
- William Lane: 'What is signified is not simply instruction for salvation but the renewal of the mind and life' (*Hebrews 1-8*, 141).
- The other descriptions – 'shared in the Holy Spirit', 'tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age' – also refer to Christians.

The Danger of Apostasy

- There can therefore be no doubt that Heb 6 teaches that it is possible for true believers to commit the sin of apostasy and fall away from the faith.
- If it were not possible, then the warning found in this passage is not only superfluous but also disingenuous. It is merely an empty threat that serves no purpose at all.
- The Epistle of Barnabas (100 AD):
 'Let us then utterly flee from all works of iniquity, lest these should take hold of us; and let us hate the error of the present time, that we may set our love on the world to come: let us not give loose reins to our soul, that it should have power to run with sinners and the wicked, lest we become like them (4:1-2)'.

The Danger of Apostasy

- Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD) warns:
 'By such works let us confess him, and not by those that are the opposite. And it is not fitting that we should fear men, but rather God. For this reason, if we should do such [wicked] things, the Lord hath said, 'Even though ye were gather together to me in my bosom, yet if ye were not to keep my commandments, I would cast you off, and say unto you, Depart from me; I know you not whence ye are, ye workers of iniquity (2 *Clement* 5)'.
- Irenaeus of Lyons:
 'When, however, they believe and are subject to God, and go on and keep his doctrine, they are the sons of God; but when they have apostasized and fallen into transgression, they are ascribed to their chief, the devil – to him who first became the cause of apostasy to himself, and afterwards to others (*Against Heresies*, 4:41.2-3)'.

Salvation: A Relational Understanding

- These passages show that there is a profound link between salvation and the sinner's relationship with God in Jesus Christ.
- These passages opposes 'easy believism': the idea that it is enough for the sinner to simply acknowledge Jesus as his Saviour for him to be saved.
- This understanding seriously distorts the Biblical teaching that presents salvation as having to do with the sinner's relationship with God in Christ marked by obedience and discipleship.
- These passages teaches that to truly acknowledge Jesus Christ as *Saviour* is to also acknowledge him as *Lord*.

Salvation: A Relational Understanding

- To fall away from the faith is to terminate our saving relationship with God in Christ.
- Why do believers fall away from the faith? The first reason is unbelief, which can be defined as rejecting the Gospel.
- Rejecting the Gospel can mean a few things:
 - Total rejection and repudiation of Jesus Christ and the Christian Faith. E.g., Demas (2 Tim 4:10).
 - Putting one's faith in persons or the works of the Law in addition to Jesus Christ. E.g., the Galatian congregation (Gal 5:4).
 - Rejection of an essential doctrine of the Gospel. E.g., resurrection (1 Cor 15; See also 1 Tim 1:19-20).

Salvation: A Relational Understanding

- The second thing that will cause the Christian to eventually fall away from the faith is a life of sin and rebellion.
- Now of course all Christians sin daily and will continue to do so until death. But the NT warns about living continually in sin. The faith of the believer who continues to live in habitual unrepentant sin will eventually die.
- Hebrews 10:26-27 warns:
'If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgement and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God' .

Salvation: A Relational Understanding

- Salvation has to do with our continual relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.
- In speaking about the persecution that his disciples (and the Church) will encounter, Jesus stresses that those who remain steadfast until the end will be saved.
- Matthew 10:22: 'All men will hate you because of me, *but he who stands firm to the end will be saved*' .
- This passage emphasises the importance of remaining in the faith in the face of persecutions and hardships. Only those who persevere to the end will be saved.

Salvation: A Relational Understanding

- There are many other passages that stress that only those who continue to be steadfast in the faith (i.e., continue in the relationship with Christ) will be saved.
 - ‘Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – *if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel*. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant’ (Col 1:21-23).
 - ‘See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ *if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first*’ (Heb 3:12-14).

Salvation: A Relational Understanding

- All these passages teach the same thing:
 - Salvation is based on our faith in Jesus Christ.
 - Those who put their faith in Christ are believers; they have entered in to saving relationship with him.
 - But falling away from the faith (and from that relationship) is a real possibility.
 - Be watchful!
 - Only those who remain in the Gospel will be partakers of Christ in eternity.

Salvation: A Relational Understanding

- In Philippians 2:12-13, Paul writes: 'Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – *continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose*'.
- Salvation is something that God works in us: we are saved by his grace. But in the same passage Paul exhorts his readers to 'work out their salvation', pointing to human effort and responsibility.
- The Christian can speak of eternal security because his salvation is secure in Christ. But the Christian's eternal security (and therefore salvation) is conditioned on his continual faith in Christ, and evidenced by obedience.