

Is Salvation for Keeps or for Keeping? - 2

We're looking at this crucial issue, can a believer lose their salvation? This is a two-part series, and last week we began by seeing why salvation is eternal. We saw the nature of salvation proves that it is not something that can be lost. We saw that the work of the Father proves salvation is eternal. We saw the work of the Son proves it is eternal, and the work of the Spirit proves it is eternal. But there are still many questions to be answered. What about the Scriptures that seem to indicate that you can lose your salvation? What about the practical implications: that once-saved always saved surely encourages sin and false conversions?

The first principle we must lay down is *profession does not equal possession*. What does that mean? It means that professing to know Christ does not mean you possess the genuine article. Jesus Himself underlines this in Matthew 7:21-23: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."

True possession is the key to understanding the issue of eternal security. The issue is not if you can lose what you have in Christ, the question is, did you get the real thing in the first place?

With that in mind, let us look at some Scriptures commonly thought to mean you can lose your salvation. In order to understand them, we must keep in mind that Scripture interprets Scripture. Last week, we saw no less than 20 Scriptures very clearly laying out the security of the believer. When we find some scattered portions that could mean you can lose your salvation, we do not now build a doctrine on these. We compare them with the rest of Scripture to get a holistic, contextual understanding of what they mean.

Without this we have some Scriptures that teach you can never lose your salvation, and others that teach you can, and that is impossible, as God does not contradict Himself.

Now, one of the first ones that often comes up is James 2:22 "Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?" It is said, "There! James is saying, it's not enough to just believe on one day. You must keep working to keep your salvation". But studying that portion shows that that is not what James meant at all.

James, like Paul in other places was countering a teaching called antinomianism. This taught that you could make a profession of faith, and then it didn't matter how you lived, because grace would abound as you sinned more. James is saying, true faith will bring forth the fruit of good works. He is saying Abraham performed those good works, because his original faith was genuine. Like baptism, an outward profession of inner possession. True faith, which is from God, has accompanying works! The works do not save, they simply grow out of true faith. It's like fruit on a tree. We do not look at a tree and say, "C'mon tree, produce fruit, so you can stay alive!" No, we say, 'Oh, it's producing fruit, it is alive'. Fruit does not produce life, life produces fruit. So with good works. Good works do not produce eternal life, eternal life produces good works.

Another Scripture often pointed to is Philippians 3:10-12: “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; ¹¹If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. ¹²Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.”. Does Paul here mean that he is unsure that he is saved, and he is striving to attain salvation? Well, that cannot be because just two chapters earlier he says in 1:23: “For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better:” He is fully expecting to be in glory, as in 2 Timothy 4:8 where he tells Timothy with certainty that a crown of righteousness is awaiting him in glory. So Paul cannot be striving to get saved or to stay saved. What does he mean? The key is in v11. The word for resurrection is found nowhere else in the NT and it means an ‘out-resurrection’. That suggests a life rising out of deadness, or mediocrity, probably a resurrected life! A victorious Christian life. That fits the context as Paul describes how it will look in v10, know Christ, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings. Paul is not desirous to be actually saved, but to be amongst those who rise ‘out’ of a mediocre Christian life.

We then come to 2 Peter 2:20-22: “For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known *it*, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog *is* turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire”. Surely this teaches about true believers who lose their salvation. Well, the context gives it away. From verse 1 of chapter 2, Peter has been speaking about false teachers and apostates. Apostates in Scripture are always described as those who have a knowledge of the truth, but not an inner possession of the truth. In fact, most often, they know the real truth, but reject it and teach falsehoods instead. Thus Peter says that such people would be better off never having known the truth, because they knew it, and therefore are more accountable, but they still rejected it. They are essentially like Judas, one who knew, but never believed. Judas was worse than an average sinner, because he saw God the Son close-up, but still chose covetousness and hardened his heart. He was never saved, and thus had nothing to lose. But he fits exactly into Peter’s description.

Matthew 24:13: “But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved”, is often quoted to mean you must keep hanging on to be saved. But, again, read the context, Jesus says these words in the middle of a long prophetic discourse of future events, and how people must behave during them. But let us add, true believers will never finally or totally turn away from God, because as we saw last week, God is the one working in us, and He will finish what He started in us.

Revelation 3:5: “He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.”, surely here Christ means that some He will erase from that book, and they will lose their salvation. But again, Scripture must interpret

Scripture. If we saw last week how God has promised this eternal life to believers, then it is wrong to immediately assume that this Scripture means that God will be erasing believers from the book of life. Firstly, we must ask, since the names are written in there from the beginning of the world (Revelation 13:8), why write people's names that you are going to end up erasing? Why not just write the names of those who will ultimately get saved and end up in heaven? God knows the future, why 'waste ink', so to speak? The more likely interpretation is that like in the O.T., the book here is speaking of the land of the register of all the living. It is what Moses referred to when he said to God in Exodus 32:32: "Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin--; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.", Moses speaks here of physical death. Christ, I believe, is speaking of physical death, like what occurred to some of the Corinthians because of their disregard of the Lord's Table.

We come now to what some regard as the proof text regarding losing your salvation, Hebrews 6:4-6. "For *it is* impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put *him* to an open shame."

Many interpretations of this passage exist. I believe the writer is referring to real believers as seen by his use of the descriptive terms in verses 4-5. He is speaking about real believers falling away. The key to understanding this passage is that tiny word that begins verse 6, "If". If, a hypothetical situation. The writer is presenting a situation that could not occur, to prove a point. Notice why this is the case: The writer underlines the fact that if you were to lose your salvation, you could never get it back again. This is because Christ would have to die for you again, and this would shame Him and the Father, because it would make His sacrifice seem of very little value if it couldn't keep you saved. Those who believe this passage teaches you can lose your salvation must quickly add that once you lose it, it's gone for good. So if you reject once saved, always saved, then make sure you are consistent and teach, once lost again, always lost.

I believe the writer is using a hypothetical situation to spur his readers on to faithfulness in God. It's rather like a university professor saying to his students, 'It's September! If you could put the clock back to January (which cannot be done), even there, you could not re-enroll for the same course. Therefore put your heads down and study with the time you have left till the exams'. This harmonises with the theme of the chapter, leaving the doctrines we already know, and pressing on toward maturity. The writer is saying, if you were able to lose your salvation, which cannot be done, you could not get it back again. So there is no way ahead but forward. Therefore, don't entertain thoughts of going back, press forward. Notice, the writer underlines that the supposedly 'cursed state' of believers who have lost their salvation described in verses 7 and 8 are not what he believes is true of his readers. V 9 "But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak." True salvation does not bring such things. It's important to understand who the readers of Hebrews were. The book was written to Jewish believers, who under persecution were considering returning to Judaism under the law. The book is written to show them the superiority of Christ, and the futility of going back.

This then also explains Hebrew 10:26: “For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins,”

Some interpret this to mean that if you willfully sin after salvation, you have lost it. Well, I’d personally like to meet the individual who never willfully sinned after they were saved. Even Peter and Paul were not in that category, neither was the apostle John according to his own words in I John 1:8. No, the Hebrew audience explains it. The writer is saying that if the Jews reject Christ as their atonement, and go on to sin, there is no longer any sacrifice to atone for them. It’s Christ or nothing. Verse 29 underlines this, if you regard Christ’s sacrifice as worthless by not regarding it as your means of salvation, you are open to the wrath of God. “Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?”

A common problem when looking at Scriptures like these is the misinterpretation of verses as meaning fiery judgement in hell, when a fiery testing of our works is meant. I Corinthians 3:13-15: “Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. ¹⁴If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. ¹⁵If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire”.

Notice ‘yet he himself shall be saved’ Salvation will not be lost, rewards will. Believers will stand before God, where according to 2 Corinthians 5:10 our works will be judged to see if they are good or worthless. Not our salvation, because Christ has already been judged for our sin, but our works. It would be unjust to try a man for the same crime twice, and thus we will be judged for our works, not our sins. Paul tells us some will suffer great loss, as their works turn out to have not been built on Christ. Their will be great sadness, tears and shame on that day. Yet they themselves will be saved. Others will be rewarded richly and will be greatly honoured. But this is not a judgement about eternal destiny, but of eternal inheritance, rewards. This explains such things as the parable of the steward who was found slothful and punished, of the branches cast into the fire in John 15: it is not burning in hell, but a burning up of worthless works that will cause great shame to the believer. Or Paul’s remark in I Corinthians 9:27, that he does not want to be disqualified. Notice he is speaking in the context of a race with rewards; he does not want to be a competitor who loses out due to disobeying the rules. Ultimately, God will comfort all, and wipe away all tears, but not until there has been a full reckoning of the Master with His servants.

What about Galatians 5:4: “Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.” ‘There’, some say, ‘isn’t that a plain example: *fallen from grace*, lost your salvation’. That is an example of taking a phrase from Scripture and giving it a meaning which it never had. The context explains it. Paul says to those who seek to attain righteousness by the law, that they have missed the boat when it comes to grace. They have fallen from grace, not in the sense of having lost it, but in the sense of having missed it or rejected it if they are looking for righteousness in the law.

Let us ask the main question, what if you stop believing? I mean, sure, salvation is not by works, it's faith right? So what if we lose faith? Don't we lose our salvation? Well, please note that Ephesians 2:8-9 does not teach that we are saved by faith. We are saved by *grace through* faith. Faith is the means by which we receive God's grace. Faith is a one-time event, it is the leap from the burning building to the net below, it is a repentant turn to the Saviour. ***But again, a true believer will not ever totally stop believing***, because their faith is given by God. Someone who 'stops' believing did not truly believe in the first place. On the other hand, true believers may doubt, or struggle, but that does not cause them to lose their salvation. Remember John the Baptist- he sent word to Jesus asking 'are you the Messiah, or should we expect another?' His faith had been shaken, he had real doubts. Jesus didn't cast him off, He re-assured him that He was the one, and then went on to call John the Baptist the greatest prophet ever.

Now, let's close by saying a few things. Many sincere, earnest believers feel threatened at the idea of once saved always saved. Why?

- 1) Sometimes a misunderstanding of the texts we have looked at. A misunderstanding that grace applies to salvation from beginning to end, not just at the start. Also a misinterpretation of Scriptures that deal with a loss of rewards or divine discipline as meaning a loss of salvation or judgement in hell leads them to conclude you can lose your salvation.
- 2) Some feel that if they teach eternal security, it will encourage people to sin. They will take their salvation for granted and sin with a guarantee that they can never be lost. Well, that might seem the case. But firstly, if that is how God has designed salvation, who are we to start tampering with its nature? I'm sure God is well aware of the risks of offering grace. Grace can be abused. The solution is not to change the terms of the Gospel; it is to teach Rom 6:1; Gal 5:13 and 1 Pet 2:16. Don't abuse grace. No true believer will though. I reject any teaching which says you can refuse to submit to Christ and consider yourself saved. If that is your lifestyle, you have not lost anything, you were never saved in the first place. If you consistently reject God's authority and see eternal security as a license to sin, you evidence signs that no work of grace has been wrought in your heart. No regenerated heart will see it that way.
- 3) Some have what I call the 'what about John' attitude. This was Peter in John 21, after Jesus had given him instructions, he looked at John and said 'What about him?' Jesus said, "What is that to thee, follow thou me". Too many believers are looking at supposed Christians living in sin and saying, "Lord, what about him? How can he go to heaven?" Jesus says, what is that to thee? follow thou me. Too many react to the frivolous lifestyles of some by then trying to scare believers into obedience. That doesn't work. Romans 2 tells us it is the goodness of God that leads men to repentance.

One of the greatest proofs of eternal security is that the Bible teaches that assurance of salvation is possible. We said last week that assurance of salvation is somewhat different to eternal security. Eternal security has to do with the very nature of

salvation. Assurance is the *inner conviction* of a believer that they truly possess salvation. Once saved always saved is often abused by some, and it can be abused if an unbeliever is led to believe they are truly saved and can never lose it. The solution is not to teach that they can lose it, it is to teach the doctrine of assurance of salvation. As we said, the key is not ‘can you lose your salvation?’ It is, do you possess the real thing in the first place? The genuine article cannot be lost, but it is fatal to believe you can never lose, what you do not have.

God wants His true children to have assurance of salvation. Assurance of salvation is based upon three things: 1) The promises of God relating to eternal security 2) The inward witness of the Spirit [Romans 8] 3) The fruit of our life. A believer should take the book of I John and read through the descriptions of a true believer and then check, is that true in my life? If he can consistently see them, and senses the Spirit crying “Abba, Father” in his heart, then he can lay claim to the promises of eternal security. But some get it backwards. They say, you can be assured of your salvation because once saved always saved. That’s circular reasoning. Yes, once saved, always saved, but *only* once you are truly, genuinely saved. And assurance or lack of assurance is the alarm bell that God places inside us to check to see if we are truly saved, 2 Corinthians 13:5. Whereas God never tells us to question eternal security, He does tell us to check if we are in fact saved. We must not doubt eternal security once we are truly saved, but we must do our diligence to make sure we are saved in the first place. Confusing the two can lead to false assurance, and that is eternally disastrous. While teaching eternal security, we must never give someone assurance of salvation, that is something they are commanded to check between them and God in light of the Word. A life that bears no fruit is like a tree with no fruit, the lack of fruit has not killed it, perhaps it is simply not alive to begin with. God uses the Word to show us not how to keep our salvation, but what His true salvation should produce in our lives. According to I John 3:9, ongoing habitual sin is not fitting in one who has the life of Christ in him, nor is hatred, or the works of the flesh. Such people will not inherit the kingdom of God. Why? Because they lost their salvation? No, because truly saved people won’t habitually do those things; only unsaved people do those things, and they will not inherit the kingdom.

Peter tells us that we must do our diligence to make our calling and election sure, that is, examine your life to see if what is there resembles the fruit of true salvation. That’s the key to harmonizing eternal security and assurance of salvation.

But at the same time, John writes his epistle ‘that ye may know that ye have eternal life’ I John 5:13. It would be impossible to know this, if our salvation was not eternally secure. It’s also impossible to really enjoy our walk with God if we are in constant fear that if we put a foot wrong, we will lose our salvation. Perfect love casts out fear, and we need to be able to rest in the fact that God does the saving, and He does it perfectly. We can thank God for eternal security.