

YAMs

Summer Midweek 2009



Week Four:

Once saved, can people go to Hell? If I sin or become rebellious and then die, will I go to Hell?



covenant chapel

Question: Once saved, can people go to Hell? If I sin or become rebellious and then die, will I go to Hell?

Short Answer:

No, genuine believers and followers of Jesus cannot lose their salvation. Salvation is the work of God, regenerating our heart to love and worship and desire him above all else. To say that we could reverse the work of God in this matter would give us too much credit and too much power.

There are many people who would claim to be Christians who have never truly been saved. It is possible to outwardly appear and talk like a genuine believer without actually being one. Many such people will turn away from Jesus - but they will not be turning away from genuine salvation, but turning away from their former nearness to the gospel

Lastly, even though genuine believers can't lose their salvation, this does not give license to sin or be lazy. The genuine believer will desire to follow Jesus and strive and fight and endure and persevere to the end.

Long Answer:

The question of eternal security, (also known as perseverance of the saints or "once-saved, always-saved") has been endlessly debated for centuries. A quick Google search will show just how violent and entailed some of these debates get. We will only scratch the surface in what follows.

So before we start, let's agree to remain humble, respectful and tactful. As with week one on election and free-will, I believe this is an issue where a genuine follower of Jesus can hold either of the two views. So let's define them.

First, those who believe in eternal security, or perseverance of *all* saints, believe that a genuine follower of Jesus cannot lose his or her salvation. Second, those who believe in conditional security, or perseverance of *some* saints, believe that it is possible for a genuine believer in Jesus to reject Jesus and lose his or her salvation.

Both sides look to the Bible to support their position:

Conditional Security and the Bible

Proponents of conditional security – those who say it is possible to lose salvation – will cite upwards of 200 verses as support for this position. But among all those, the primary one comes from Hebrews:

Hebrews 6:4-6 - For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the

age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

In other words, this verse would appear to say that there will be genuinely saved people who fall away, and consequently are unable to be saved again. And if this verse does refer to genuine believers, then apparently it is possible to lose salvation.

Here are some other verses commonly cited by those who think a genuine believer can lose his or her salvation:

- Exodus 32:33 – God will blot out the names of those who sin against him
- Deuteronomy 29:20 – God’s wrath burns against those who fall away
- 1 Timothy 1:19-20 – people who shipwreck their faith
- Hebrews 10:26-27 – sinning after truth means no more sacrifice for sin
- James 5:19-20 – people who wander away from the truth

Eternal Security and the Bible

Though there are many verses to support eternal security, the primary one used by people who believe this way is in John.

John 10:27-29 – My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.

In other words, Jesus’ sheep, or genuine followers, are known by God. God gives eternal life and because God is God, no one or no thing is able to cause the believer to lose his or her salvation.

Here are some other verse commonly cited by the proponents of eternal security:

- Romans 8:31-39 – nothing shall separate us from the love of God
- Romans 11:29 – the calling of God is irrevocable
- Ephesians 1:4 – believers are chosen before creation to be redeemed and forgiven
- Philippians 1:6 – God will finish the good work he began
- 2 Thessalonians 3:3 – the Lord is faithful and guards against Satan
- 2 Timothy 1:12 – God guards until the Day
- 2 Timothy 4:18 – God rescues and brings safely to his kingdom
- 1 Peter 1:8-9 – the outcome of faith is salvation
- 1 John 2:19-20 – true believers persevere; other people don’t
- Jude 24 – God keeps believers from stumbling

So there are Biblical passages that seem to support both views. And the way you interpret these passages – and consequently what you believe about eternal security – will largely be shaped by whether you believe in election (predestination) or free-will.

Eternal Security and Election

The belief in eternal security comes logically for those who believe in election – what we talked about in week one. Election says that salvation is all God’s doing, and that man has no part in it. In other words, even man’s belief is something given by God and therefore the work of God. Eternal security, then, is simply God actually saving those he has chosen.

Ephesians 1:4-7 – he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace

God chose people before the world was created and gives them redemption through his blood and forgives their sin. It would be logical that God would actually save the people he has chosen. It would be based on his perseverance, not ours.

Instead, if, we hold a view that we play some role in our salvation, eternal security will be a difficult concept. For an illustration, think back to the lifeguard and the drowning swimmer analogy from week one:

Recall that in the free-will (Arminian) position, God the lifeguard reaches out to me, the drowning swimmer, and the drowning swimmer reaches back. In the election (Calvinist) position, God the lifeguard dives in and does all the work to save the swimmer.

If we hold to the free-will thought that we reach back to God, then clearly we have some decisive part in gaining our salvation. Similarly, we could theoretically have some decisive part in losing our salvation. We could, in this illustration, let go of the lifeguard’s hand and drown.

However, if we hold to the election teaching that God does all the work, we have no decisive part in gaining our salvation and therefore no decisive part in losing our salvation. In this illustration, God the lifeguard is pulling me to shore and the only way I would drown is if he lets go. Salvation is based on God’s perseverance, not mine. And because he’s God and he’s perfect, of course he will persevere.

For this and other reasons, Covenant Chapel teaches eternal security. We believe that a genuine believer cannot lose his or her salvation because God chooses people and eternally secures them for salvation.

Genuine Believer?

Those who believe in eternal security must still examine and answer questions that arise from passages like Hebrews 4:4-6. After all, it is in the Bible, and therefore we trust that it is truth.

So while some would say this passage refers to genuine believers losing their salvation, those who believe in eternal security will say that this verse does not refer to genuine believers. Instead, people like me would say this passage refers to those who have participated with believers and seen evidence of the Holy Spirit, but have never truly believed themselves.

But does that happen? Is it possible for someone to appear like a true believer and not actually be one? Absolutely.

One major example of such a person is Judas Iscariot, the apostle who betrayed Jesus. But before he did that, recall that Judas was one of the twelve apostles chosen by Jesus. That is elite company.

Judas had every appearance of a genuine follower of Jesus. He was sent out with the twelve to preach the gospel and heal people (Luke 9:1-6). And at the last supper when Jesus told his apostles that one of them was about to betray him, no one had a clue it was Judas.

John 13:21-22 – After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly I say to you, one of you will betray me.” The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke.

Judas did not end up in heaven (Mark 14:21). Therefore Judas was not saved from his sins. So there are two options: Judas either had his salvation and lost it, or he never had it in the first place.

The Bible never explicitly states if Judas was or was not at one time a genuine follower of Jesus. Those who believe you can lose your salvation will say that he was a believer at one time, and those who believe you can't lose your salvation will say that he never was. We are left to context clues to determine it.

I believe it is clear that Judas, despite his outward appearance, never was a genuine believer whose heart had been transformed by God. For one thing, as the “treasurer” for Jesus and the apostles, Judas would steal from the moneybag. (John 12:6).

But Judas was an apostle who went out preaching the gospel and healing people. Isn't that evidence that he at one time was a believer?

Not at all. In Matthew, Jesus makes it clear that there will be people who have claimed to follow him and have even done things in his name, yet are not genuine believers:

Matthew 7:22-23 - On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

Notice what Jesus says here: I *never* knew you. Never. Not knew at one point and then didn't know anymore. It is possible to verbally believe in Jesus and live the way he calls his followers to live and yet never be a genuine believer who receives salvation.

This is the difficult, saddest, even angering thing about the doctrine of eternal security. Because, by implication, it means there are people who can claim to be Christians who are not. These "Christians" will have spiritual experiences, inside and outside the church, and may be religious people, but will not be genuine believers. And I believe there are thousands – even millions – of such "Christians" in the world today.

Understanding Salvation

Part of this problem comes with a wrong understanding of salvation. Probably every single one of us who have grown up in church have been taught for years that to begin a relationship with Jesus, you "get saved" by praying a prayer with the ABCs – Admitting you're a sinner, Believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and Committing your life to following Jesus (or some variation of that).

And while there's so much truth in that, it is not a prayer or a mental assent to a few truths about the death and resurrection of Jesus that saves us. The Bible is unmistakably clear that merely agreeing with the facts of the gospel is not salvation:

James 2:19 - You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!

What James is saying here is that even demons believe in God and believe Jesus was who he said he was. In fact, in the New Testament, demons do a better job recognizing Jesus for who he is than religious people (Matthew 8:29; Mark 1:34; Luke 4:41).

But that doesn't mean that demons get to go to heaven. Demons are not saved. So who is? If mental assent to a few truths is not how we receive salvation, how do we?

The answer is that we are saved by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. We repent of sin. We have genuine faith and belief in the truth of the gospel. We do commit our lives to following Jesus. But it is all done out of a regenerated heart.

REGENERATED (a short definition) – when God transforms your heart from its hardened, sinful, rebellious state to love, worship and desire him above all else. God literally gives you a new spiritual heart (Ezekiel 36:26). Out of this new heart comes genuine repentance, faith and obedience to Jesus. Consequently the mark of every genuinely saved follower of Jesus is that their heart has been regenerated by God.

Please see the difference here: Salvation is the work of God in our lives. Salvation belongs to the Lord! (Jonah 2:9).

God regenerates our hearts to love and worship and desire him above all else. God gives the new heart. So more than a prayer, more than the ABCs, more than “fire insurance,” genuine believers are transformed to treasure Jesus above all lesser treasures. Genuine believers live and work and speak and think out of this new heart that is given by God.

Therefore, genuine believers and followers of Jesus cannot lose their salvation. Salvation is the work of God. To say that we could reverse the work of God in this matter would give us too much credit and too much power.

In our Bibles and in our lives we will see “Christians” who turn away (1 Timothy 19-20; Hebrews 6:4-8; James 5:19-20) – but they will not be turning away from genuine salvation, but turning away from their former nearness to the gospel.

What Should We Do?

This has huge implications for genuine believers. First, it means that we can't assume that every person in church is a genuine believer – regardless of how long they've been there, how involved they are, what ministries they lead, etc.

But let's agree not to start a witch hunt to figure out who's who. Instead, let's be intentional in our relationships with other believers. Let us pursue true community with believers where there's love and accountability and where you can be discipled and disciple others in the truth of the gospel.

Furthermore, (like we've talked about with grace and forgiveness) eternal security is not a license to sin. And it is not a license to be lazy. God does not intend his genuine believers to rely on the truth of eternal security, sit back and do nothing. If this is our response, we have clearly not been transformed by God.

Instead, God has appointed us to work hard, to endure hardships, to labor without ceasing, to persevere with our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is how God has designed our lives and our purpose as followers of Jesus. And this is the means God has appointed so that we can be sure our salvation is genuine – and therefore eternally secure.

Rather than be lazy and sinful, here are several ways we are called to live and act:

We are to test ourselves

2 Corinthians 13:5 - Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!

This and other statements in the Bible exist as sober warnings so that we will not “get saved” by praying a prayer and then go on living life as usual. We are to examine ourselves to see whether we really do have faith in Jesus. As we’ve seen, it is very possible to mentally agree to truths about the gospel and yet not be a genuine believer. Our lives and our hearts must give evidence of transformation.

We are to make our calling and election sure

2 Peter 1:10-11 - Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Don’t mistake this for salvation by works. That would contradict the clear teaching of the Bible that we are saved by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). But clearly, we are supposed to practice and possess certain qualities and work hard at them to “make our calling and election sure.”

Our hard work is evidence of our salvation and transformation, and therefore God’s appointed means of our “entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

We are to fight to take hold of eternal life

1 Timothy 6:12 – Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses

Fighting is not passive. We are to take hold of the eternal life that is ours in Jesus. And notice specifically that this comes after Timothy has already made the “good confession.” Fighting for faith and for eternal life is not something we do one time for salvation and call it quits. It is persistent and lasts our entire lives.

We are to be diligent

Hebrews 4:11 - Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.

Again, *strive* is not a passive word. We are to be diligent in working for the sake of the kingdom of Jesus so that we are not tempted to disobey and worship any lesser treasure than Jesus himself.

We are to hold our confidence to the end

Hebrews 3:14 – For we have come to share in Christ if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

Perseverance to the end is evidence of genuine belief and salvation. Therefore ongoing perseverance in our lives – enduring hardship, fighting violently against sin, continually trusting Christ – provides confidence and assurance that we truly do share in Christ.

We are to keep close watch on our life and teaching

1 Timothy 4:16 - Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Notice what Paul says to Timothy here: by closely and persistently watching our lives and our teachings, we will save ourselves and our hearers. Now we know that we cannot grant ourselves salvation or give salvation to anyone else. Salvation comes from God (Jonah 2:9).

However, watching our lives and teaching is evidence we have been saved. And what's more, God chooses to use the lives and teachings of his genuine believers to inspire other people to receive salvation and to persist in it to the end.

It is always God

Finally, to conclude this thought, nothing says it better than Paul's words from 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 15:10 - But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

As we rejoice in the truth of eternal security, let us not become lazy. Clearly there is no excuse or rationale for that.

Instead let us work harder than anyone. But let us always remember and recognize that it is God who is working in and through us. God has authored and granted our salvation. God works in and through us to strive and fight and

endure and persevere. And God himself will persevere and eternally secure the salvation of those he has chosen as his genuine followers.

Learn More

From the Bible:

Eternal Security (Perseverance of the Saints)

- **John 10:27-29** – no one can snatch them out of God's hand
- **Romans 8:31-39** – nothing shall separate us from the love of God
- **Romans 11:29** – the calling of God is irrevocable
- **Ephesians 1:4** – believers are chosen before creation to be redeemed and forgiven
- **Philippians 1:6** – God will finish the good work he began
- **2 Thessalonians 3:3** – the Lord is faithful and guards against Satan
- **2 Timothy 1:12** – God guards until the Day
- **2 Timothy 4:18** – God rescues and brings safely to his kingdom
- **1 Peter 1:8-9** – the outcome of faith is salvation
- **1 John 2:19-20** – true believers persevere; other people don't
- **Jude 24** – God keeps believers from stumbling

Conditional Security (Perseverance of some Saints)

- **Exodus 32:33** – God will blot out the names of those who sin against him
- **Deuteronomy 29:20** – God's wrath burns against those who fall away
- **Hebrews 6:4-8** – impossible to restore those who have fallen away
- **Hebrews 10:26-27** – sinning after truth means no more sacrifice for sin
- **1 Timothy 1:19-20** – people who shipwreck their faith
- **James 5:19-20** – people who wander away from the truth