

Can a Christian Lose Salvation?

SUMMARY: Throughout the pages of the Scriptures we find the truth that God completes that which He begins. Those who truly love and trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ will never fall away from the salvation which He has promised and provided.

Can a Christian lose salvation? Unfortunately, many Christians would disagree when attempting to answer this question. In particular, those of a more Arminian perspective would say that one can indeed fall from grace while those of a Calvinistic theology would conclude that a true believer can never fail to attain the salvation which the gospel promises.¹ Given that this resource is merely intended to be a brief overview, I will attempt to give just a few reasons why The Village teaches and preaches that a genuine believer can never fall away.

Thinking through this issue, I am drawn to consider the truth presented in Romans 8:28-30.

Romans 8:28-30 *And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.*

I would like to really focus upon the often memorized and quoted verse 28.

The verse begins with “and we know.” This is not merely an assumption that Paul is making, nor is he engaging in profound philosophical speculation, rather, he is presenting inspired truth in accordance with the revelation given to him. He knew and therefore we now know what proceeds to be true. There is no doubt as to its truthfulness or validity.

The next phrase is “that God causes.” This expression asserts that God is the effective agent in the equation. Whether or not you view Him as the beginning, middle, end, or some combination thereof, actor in salvation, this verse confirms that He is active as the cause behind the argument which will be presented.

Before we look at what He causes, let’s look at whom it is that this verse is referencing. The promise is confirmed to “those who

¹ We have a number of resources available on why The Village falls in line with Calvinist theology. Given that the debate is often caricatured (Arminians claim that Calvinists believe things which they do not truly believe and vice versa), you are highly encouraged to search out our resources on this matter. See in particular Chandler’s teaching “Are There Two Wills in God” as well as our introductory FAQ entitled “What is Calvinism?” For further dialogue, you are also encouraged to send an e-mail to theology@thevillagechurch.net.

love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” Surely this is to be interpreted to include any and every believer. Throughout Scripture, we recognize that a love toward God is foundational² and however you interpret the element of His calling, it surely includes salvation. Therefore, whatever is being promised is being promised to all who believe.

So, what is being promised? What is God causing? “All things to work together for good.” This is huge and we must focus ourselves upon this truth. What God has just revealed in His Word is that He will cause everything, every single thing or multiple things, indeed all things, to work together under His direction for our greatest good.

Now, a fundamental problem with saying that a Christian can lose his or her salvation is that we would have to say that God will not fulfill His promises, and this one in particular. To claim that a Christian at one time believed in the gospel is to say that this promise was, at least at that time, addressed to him as a recipient of its truth. Therefore, this Christian at one time loved God and God promised to work all things together for his good and yet that person somehow rebelled in such a way as to nullify God’s promise and fall from grace. How is it good (“all things work together for *good*”) to lose salvation and spend eternity in hell, separated from God? We have a flawed understanding of what constitutes good if it is not anchored to the promise of Christ’s presence. To be separated from Him is the very antithesis of good.

For those who would claim that it is possible to truly be converted and savingly believe in the gospel and then to commit apostasy and fall away from salvation, it is impossible to confidently say that God really causes “all things” to work together for good. They instead imply that “God causes all things to work in accordance with each man’s personal will.” What a far cry from the truth of Ephesians 1:11 which asserts that He “works all things after the counsel of His will.” His will, not ours.

Even without using Romans 8:28 as an evidence that man cannot lose salvation, we have a slew of other texts which demonstrate such an understanding. While a thorough exposition of each of them would be helpful, time and space do not allow for much

² See especially the emphasis upon love in John’s writings, specifically in 1 John. Also note the greatest commandment as Jesus sets forth.

more than a brief listing of some of the more overtly supportive scriptures.

Texts teaching that God's children will not lose salvation:

- ❖ John 10:26-29 *But you do not believe because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, 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.*
 - The very first phrase is helpful in establishing the Reformed (Calvinistic) perspective. It does not say that you are not sheep because you do not believe, but vice versa, that you do not believe because you are not sheep. Whether or not we believe is dependent upon our identity as God's flock, not the other way around. Furthermore, the passage speaks of eternal life (it is not truly eternal if it is somehow lost). Lastly, who is able to snatch the Christian from the hands of both Father and Son? Not even our own wills are up to such a task.
- ❖ Romans 8:37-39 *But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*
 - Neither life, nor death, nor anything at all, including man's sin, will, desire, actions, etc. ("any other created thing"). A true Christian cannot sin himself out of salvation or choose himself to be unsaved, because a true believer would never ultimately desire to be unsaved. This is not to deny that a Christian can sin or experience struggles for these surely come, but we know from the Scripture that sin will not ultimately reign in the life of the believer. God's grace will overcome.
- ❖ 1 Corinthians 1:8-9 *[Jesus Christ] will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*
- ❖ Ephesians 1:13-14 *In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of salvation – having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.*
 - God has made a promise ("the Holy Spirit of promise") and has sealed us as a guarantee ("a pledge") of salvation. To allow anything to compromise God's promise would bring dishonor upon God's own glory as it greatly calls His faithfulness and truthfulness into question.

As you can see from these texts, there is sufficient biblical evidence to confidently conclude that a believer cannot truly fall away from the grace of God. These texts are clear and explicit in assuring that salvation is a work of God and that He completes what He has begun. This position is the clear testimony of God's self-revelation in scripture.

However, it must also be recognized that there are a few texts which initially and superficially seem to contradict this truth. Specifically, opponents to the Reformed (Calvinistic) position point to two texts, Hebrews 6:4-6 and 2 Peter 2:20-22.

Hebrews 6:4-6 *For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.*

For a thorough explanation of why we do not believe this passage to teach that someone truly falls away from saving faith, I recommend that you read Wayne Grudem's response in chapter 40 of *Systematic Theology*. He argues extensively that this passage is not referencing someone who was truly saved, but rather, similar to the warning of Matthew 7:21-23, it refers to a person who has been greatly influenced by the gospel, but has not personally had its truth apprehended and applied within his or her life. Part of the basis for this interpretation is the use of the metaphor in verses 7-8 which is included as a justification or explanation of verses 4-6.³

The analogy presented in verses 7-8 is of water (the influence of the Holy Spirit and/or the gospel) falling upon two different types of ground. Though both receive the nourishment of the environment, only one truly bears fruit. It does not state that one plot bears fruit for a while and then begins to grow thistles and thorns. In light of the preponderance of Scripture linking faith and works (James 2 specifically), it would seem rather clear that the metaphor is speaking of two types of people. The first received the influence of the gospel and bore weeds, thus evidencing no true salvation and no real faith. The second received the influence of the gospel and bore fruit which evidenced true belief and repentance. Therefore, we believe that this analogy confirms the interpretation that although the person referenced in Hebrews 6 has felt the weight and pressure and perhaps conviction of the Holy Spirit, he has not responded in saving faith. Consequently, this passage does not teach that someone can lose his or her salvation, but rather, perhaps more terrifying, that one can have some outward experience which is not spiritually valid and yet is deceptively masked as Christian faith.

2 Peter 2:20-21 *For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them.*

³ Verse 7 begins with "for" which in Greek is *gar* - a conjunction used to express cause, explanation, inference or continuation. The analogy used in verses 7-8 is intended to explain the author's preceding statements.

Once again, it is to be recognized that nowhere in this passage does Peter make explicit that those whom he is referencing are indeed recipients of God's saving grace. Rather, he writes that they have "escaped the defilements of the world" and have "known the way of righteousness." I take this passage to reference those who have heard Christian principles and morality/ethics and consequently decided to act upon them in some manner (choosing monogamy, not stealing, etc.). This action represents some form of escape from the natural order of a fallen world. For example, the person who chooses not to engage in adultery, although he may not be a believer in the truest sense of the word, will most likely experience some greater level of happiness within the context of his marriage than the one who cheats. Not that this is a hard and fast rule with no exceptions, but a part of God's creative design which functions as a general principle. Obedience to the rhythm of God's creation, although not guaranteeing success, even if done outside of saving faith, generally results in some common grace blessings. This is similar to the passages of Proverbs which are not to be taken as literal and exact promises, but as principles of God's creative design. In general those who follow the wisdom of Proverbs can expect the blessings which are mentioned.

Regardless of how you interpret Hebrews 6 and 2 Peter 2, it is dangerous to allow texts which are not primarily concerned with salvation within the given context to override the understanding of those more explicitly relevant passages. Hebrews 6 and 2 Peter 2 should certainly inform our theology, but do not clearly and decisively contradict what elsewhere is clearly attested, namely, that God's elect will overcome and endure to the end. I think 1 John 2:19⁴ is especially relevant to this issue. The author makes it clear within that passage that people will depart from the faith, but only because they were not truly a part of that faith.

The warning passages in Hebrews and elsewhere are certainly of great concern for the believer in the sense of calling us ever toward faith and repentance. If we find ourselves in continued and consistent disobedience to and rebellion against God's will, we should definitely fear lest our faith should prove to be a façade. God will not be mocked (Galatians 6:7). While salvation

4 1 John 2:19 *They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.* – I take this to indicate, that enduring to the end is a sign of a previous work. The reason that some people departed from the faith is that they never truly possessed that faith in the first place. See also Hebrews 3:14 as evidence that perseverance is a sure sign of previously granted faith.

is in absolutely no way dependent upon our works, the way we live our lives is a litmus test to the reality of our belief. It would be naïve, manipulative and even dangerous for us to assume that we are safe from God's wrath because we prayed some prayer or joined a church. Conversion is a work of God and produces a change of heart, godly sorrow and repentance, spiritual faith and good works. Without these testimonies in our lives, we should take heed and assess the genuineness of our belief. If we find ourselves indulging the desires of the flesh and living as though separate from God, let us seek repentance with all that we have.

In the end, we must always remember that there is great hope and assurance for the Christian. God is faithful to complete what He has begun and true faith will not and cannot fail. Let us find confidence in Him and the salvation which He has wrought within us to the praise of His glory.

Hebrews 6:17-19b *In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast...*

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