

Can Christians Lose Their Salvation?

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Can I lose my salvation? This is an age old question that Christians have debated over for many years. It is an unsettling idea that once we are saved and destined for heaven that something we could do would derail us from our heavenly path. What does the Bible say about this? Are we “once saved always saved,” as some believe, or can we lose our salvation?

Salvation by works or by faith?

John 3:16 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.

Ephesians 2:8-9 ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

Galatians 2:15-16 ¹⁵ "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' ¹⁶ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

Works as evidence of salvation

Romans 6:1-4 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

James 2:14-17 ¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

1 John 5:1-5 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. ² This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. ³ This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, ⁴ for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. ⁵ Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

Affirmations of the believer's security:

John 3:16 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.

John 10:27-29 ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

Romans 8:28-30 ²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Romans 8:38-39 ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Philippians 1:4-6 ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

1 John 5:11-13 ¹¹ And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. ¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Indwelling of the Holy Spirit as an affirmation of the believer's security:

All believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation

Ephesians 1:13-14 ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession-- to the praise of his glory.

Romans 8:9 ⁹ You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

Logical Reasons for the Security of the Believer:

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is permanent – a guarantee of eternal life and reward (Eph. 1:14 – see above). If we can lose our salvation then the Holy Spirit can come into us and be removed many times during our lives. His indwelling then becomes dependant upon our obedience at any given moment rather than by faith.

Jesus' death removes the penalty of all sin for all time. Christ died once for all (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 26). His perfect sacrifice guarantees the eternal salvation of all who believe (Heb. 5:9). Because Jesus' death paid the penalty for all sin for all time, our salvation is not in jeopardy when we intermittently sin. In fact, when we do sin (and we will), we have the assurance that Christ is our advocate and will continually "speak to the Father in our defense" (1 John 2:1-2).

If salvation is by faith and not by works (Eph. 2:8-9), how can we lose our salvation by something we do?

Difficult passages

1 John 3:5-6, 9-10

John seems to be saying here that all true believers stop sinning (3:6). In fact, if God is really in him he *cannot* sin (3:9). The key to understanding the true meaning of this passage is the word "continue." The sin warned against here is not the intermittent sin that all believers face (as described in 1 John 2:1-2) but the continual sin that becomes descriptive of a lifestyle. This type of continual, habitual sin is contrary to someone who claims to "walk in the light" as "God is in the light" (1 John 1:7).

Colossians 1:21-23

Every believer has been reconciled to God by "Christ's physical body through death" according to Colossians 1:21-22 and therefore "holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation." This appears to be a very reassuring passage to the believer until you read v.23; that all the above is contingent upon the believer *continuing* in faith – "not moved" but "established and firm". Does this mean we can lose our salvation if we do not firmly continue in our faith?

I do not believe that this verse teaches a potential "loss of faith" but establishes the context of salvation: by faith alone. All believers are reconciled to God by faith. After the moment of salvation the believer continues to live their lives by faith and thus enjoys the hope of God's promise of salvation held out in the gospel.

2 Peter 1:10

Upon first reading, 2 Peter 1:10 seems to indicate that there is something we must do in order to retain the surety of our salvation. Namely, that we should "make every effort add to our faith goodness...knowledge...self-control...perseverance...godliness...brotherly kindness...and love." (1:5). If we do not do this we can "fall" (1:10) and we may not "receive a rich welcome (ie. salvation) in to the eternal kingdom..." (1:11).

This could not be further from the truth. What is at stake in 2 Peter 1 is the believer's quality of life and reward, not their salvation. Peter contends that every believer may participate in God's divine nature in order to escape the corrupting influences of the world (1:4). If a believer does not make "every effort" to participate in God's provision for godliness he is in danger of

becoming “ineffective and unproductive in [his] knowledge of our Lord, Jesus Christ” (1:8) and subject to “falling” (1:10) in sin.

The consequence to being “ineffective and unproductive” is not eternal judgment but the lesser quality of reward. Those who “make every effort” to possess the qualities of the divine nature will receive a “*rich* welcome into the eternal kingdom.” (1:11 – italics added). Those who are unproductive will enter the eternal kingdom but their reward will be reflective of their efforts.

Revelation 3:4-5

In Revelation chapters 2-3, the Apostle John uses the phrase, “he who overcomes” to describe believers who will experience eternal reward. Specifically, in 3:5, John records the words of Jesus as stating, “he that overcomes...I will never blot out his name from the book of life.” Does this imply that if a believer does not “overcome”, he *could* have his name blotted out?

The answer to this question can be discerned in two ways. First, we must define John’s use of the word “overcome.” This is fairly simple because it is a favorite in John’s vocabulary. He uses it 24 times in his writing as compared to it only appearing 4 other times in all the other NT books combined. In relation to believers John defines “overcomers” as those “who believe that Jesus is the Son of God.” (1 John 5:5). So, in this sense, all believers are “overcomers” in John’s use of the term.

Secondly, it must be observed that what Jesus states in Revelation 3:4-5 is that the believers’ names will *never* be blotted out of the book of life. In context, Jesus is reassuring believers in the midst of difficulty. This statement is meant to teach the security of all believers’ salvation, not put their salvation into question.

Hebrews 6:4-12; 10:26-27

These passages in Hebrews must be set in their larger context to come to an accurate interpretation:

The book of Hebrews was written primarily to Jewish believers who, because of persecution, were tempted to revert back to Judaism. The author states that this would be a grave mistake because Christ is superior to Judaism in every way. He is superior to the prophets, to the angels, and to Moses. As a great high priest, Christ’s priesthood is superior to the Levitical priests because he is perfect and continually lives to intercede on our behalf. He establishes a new and better (permanent) covenant through the better sacrifice of His own blood in the heavenly tabernacle. Because of this, the Jewish believers are admonished to confidently embrace their faith in Christ; to persevere and not shrink back and suffer loss of the abundant life offered to those who are obedient.

He likens these believers to the generation of Israel encamped at Kadesh-Barnea, ready to enter the Promised Land (Heb. 3-4 cf. Num. 13-14). Reports of the land’s blessings were well accounted for by the 12 spies who explored the land. However, ten of them did not believe that God could overcome the people of the land in order to give it to them. They ultimately convinced the people of the same. As a result of their unbelief, that generation never entered the land and enjoyed the blessings of its possession.

The believers in the book of Hebrews were also in danger of missing out on the abundant blessings provided by their faith in Christ if they went back to defunct Judaism. The loss of abundant life is what is at stake.

Hebrews 6:4-12

By far, the most controversial passage regarding the security of the believer is Hebrews 6:4-12.

The passage seems to be talking about believers who have “been enlightened” and have “tasted the heavenly gift,” and who have “shared in the Holy Spirit.” They have “tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age.” (6:4-5).

In spite of all the experiences above, the believer falls away and experiences “loss” (6:6). The writer likens such a one to land that produces “thorns and thistles” and is “worthless” (6:8). The “land” is in danger of being “cursed” and in the end, “it will be burned.” (v.8). Worse yet, the state of this person seems to be permanent. They can never come back to repentance, for doing so will result in crucifying Christ afresh and subjecting him to public disgrace (6:6).

By contrast, the writer seems to be confident of the recipients’ salvation as he pens, “we are confident of better things in your case – things that accompany salvation.” (6:9).

But is salvation what is truly at stake here? Or is it the works that accompany salvation? Let’s look more closely at the passage.

What is really being “burned” in 6:8? Is it the land...or the thorns and thistles? The context of the passage is debating what the land produces. In v.7 we have the picture of land that produces a crop that is “useful to those for whom it is farmed.” In v.8 the land produces “thorns and thistles” (which is useless). One product results in “blessing” and the other will ultimately be “burned.”

Furthermore, when the writer then commends the Hebrew believers, his commendation is based upon the “better” things that accompany salvation -- not salvation itself. He ensures them that God, who is just, will not forget their work and the love they have shown him by helping his people (6:10). He exhorts the believers to remain diligent and not to be lazy (terms that imply something to be done).

Nevertheless, there are problematic phrases that are very difficult to understand. What do we do with the fact that whatever state the person began in (whether a true believer or only the appearance of one), once he has fallen away, there is no coming back to repentance? To come back would mean “crucifying the Son of God all over again.” (6:6).

Several interpretations have been offered:

1. The person in question is not a true believer. Their experience with the Christian faith and community was merely superficial.
2. The person in question is a true believer yet they have fallen away from the truth.
3. The person in question is a believer and is in danger of falling away. The idea here is that once you have experienced a certain amount of understanding and enlightenment there is no way of “resetting the clock” or going back to the beginning. The person must either move forward (as the author exhorts) or fall away.

4. This is merely a hypothetical situation. The person does not really exist nor could this situation occur. It is a literary device to spur the Hebrew believers on to good works.

Hebrews 10:26-27

Hebrews 10:26-27 is a warning that the believer is in danger of rejecting grace and turning back to the law. The person who would turn back to Judaism would be deliberately continuing in sin (ie. rejecting God's only provision for salvation) and could only look forward to judgment.

In the above scenario, no one has actually committed this transgression. The author is warning the believers of the futility of the law to save them.

Conclusion:

Because it is God who is responsible for the security of our salvation, he will divinely preserve believers to the end. God guarantees that all who believe will receive eternal life. Nothing can remove us from our secure position in Christ...not even ourselves.

Memorization of the some of the main scripture passages above will help us not only to be confident of our salvation in times of doubt, but enable us to encourage others in their time of need.