

Sermon: Are Believers Secure Eternally?

One of the issues that have divided two of the great families of Christendom is the way that differences between specific Scripture passages, dealing with this matter, are resolved. Some passages appear to be in contradiction. For example:

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. (NIV)

II 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. (NIV)

One of these families within the Christian Church teaches that a real Christian cannot lose his or her salvation. Another of those families, to which we belong, teaches that while it is not at all necessary, a Christian *can* go so far as to break off his or her relationship with Jesus.

In general, proponents of the former view teach one or more of the following:

- A. Those who are truly born of God will not be lost eternally even if they go deeply into sin and die in their sins.
- B. Those who go on living in sin after they have claimed to be Christians, give evidence that they were never truly saved at all.
- C. Those who backslide after they have been truly saved will eventually be brought back to God before they die.

Why do people teach that a true believer cannot lose his or her salvation?

1. First, because of scripture passages, such as the following, which speak of the security of believers. (John 4:14, John 5:24, John 6:39-40, John 10:27-29; Ephesians 1:13-14, Ephesians 4:30, I Corinthians 11:31-32, II Corinthians 1:21-22).
2. Second, because the system of thought dominant in those church circles are rooted in the presupposition that humans can have no part either in the earning, receiving, or maintenance of their salvation. Thus, any failure of one who has been saved to make it all the way to heaven would be God's failure, since it is God who determines who will be saved, and who bestows the irresistible gift of salvation.
3. A third reason, I suspect, comes from a reaction to a form of revivalism which evolved in some circles in which it was almost presumed that between annual revival meetings a person might lose their salvation and be called to get "born again" all over again. "Backsliding" was a common term in those circles. But for those who held a

more scriptural understanding of how a Christian was to live and grow in Christ, and who observed the effects of such a movement, would probably start stressing how true believers don't keep losing and regaining their salvation! I suspect that excesses in both camps have contributed to the distortions in the other!

Now, what shall we make of the view that no matter what a person does, a real Christian cannot lose his or her salvation?

Well, first of all let's affirm that there is a lot of truth in the view. The Bible does not see the Christian life as something we go about losing and getting back constantly. The Bible teaches a confidence that God is able to provide for all our needs so that we can live and grow in Jesus all our days. The Bible affirms that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Jesus. The Bible doesn't teach *insecurity*.

But there are serious problems when the extreme is reached where it is taught that true believers cannot possibly cease to be saved. Let's look at some of them.

1. The view of unconditional security (security no matter what we do) does not take seriously those Scripture passages that warn against falling away. (Galatians 4:9-11, II Timothy 2:11-13, Hebrews 3:6-14, Hebrews 6:4-12 Hebrews 10:26-39, II Peter 2:20-22) To these one might add Paul's references to the loss of many from among God's chosen people Israel -- in I Corinthians 10 -- and to the possibility of he himself not persevering to the end (I Corinthians 9:27).

So problem number one is that along with the many passages that imply the security of the believer, there are also many passages that make it clear that those who have once been believers can come to a point where they no longer trust in Christ for salvation, and do not enjoy that saved relationship. But note, that when we look at these passages, we do not get the idea that believers are insecure; rather we get the impression that believers *can become unbelievers*.

2. A second major problem with this extreme view of the security of the believer, is that this system of thought neglects the important part that humans have to play in the reception and continuance of their salvation. It focuses so singly on the sovereignty of God that it leaves out the fact that in his sovereign plan God has chosen to give humans the responsibility for receiving and cultivating the free gift of salvation through the strength he gives us. See Philippians 2:12-13.

“Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Scripture as a whole makes it clear that God is the initiator and provider of all that has to do with salvation. But it also affirms that he also has decided to “limit himself” to

working with us. As St. Augustine says: "God created us without us, but He cannot save us without us." (Sermon 169)

3. A further problem with the extreme view is that among its proponents "salvation" has been thought of only as something God *does* for a person or to a person, rather than as a *relationship with God*. And as in all relationships, even this one can be strained or broken. Paul uses this language when he speaks of grieving the Holy Spirit.

The church family, in which the view of unconditional security was created and promoted, did not view life in Christ so much as a relationship between persons, as something judicial that is "done" for us and to us. But scripture makes it clear that while there *is* a judicial element, to be a Christian is to be involved in a living relationship of personal trust. And relationships, by definition can be strained and eventually broken -- even when one of the parties desperately wants the relationship to continue.

As with many difficult questions, the truth lies somewhere between the extremes and errors on both sides. Let me try to articulate where the two "ditches" are, and where the central reality lies.

Ditch one offers a view that says that once we are really saved, we can never fall away and miss heaven.

The other ditch leaves the impression that our relationship with God is so precarious that we must live in anxious insecurity.

Thus we find that the one extreme has a defective view of humans (the view that robs people of God-given choice and responsibility for maintaining relationship) and the other has a defective view of God (the view that portrays God as an vindictive sovereign who is just waiting for us to slip up). As we have already seen, neither represents a balanced view derived from the Scriptures as a whole.

I can't think of a better summation that puts it all together than the word of the Second Epistle of Peter chapter 1, verses 3-11.

³ His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. ⁵ For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. ⁸ For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. ¹⁰ Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never

stumble. ¹¹ For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you. (NRSV).

Note that verse 3 makes it clear that salvation is not something that we humans create: "His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness." Yet our author knows that the divine gifts (cf. the character qualities listed in vv. 5 - 7) are realities which believers need to "make every effort" to incorporate into their Christian walk. Though salvation is not something human in origin, we do have *some* responsibility. Verse 8 reiterates that concern, stressing the need to actually *have* these qualities and to be *increasing* in them. Finally, vv. 10 & 11 point to the outcomes of this *having* and *increasing*: "You will never stumble," (v. 10) and "entry into the eternal kingdom" will be ours (v. 11). Salvation as divine gift, *and* as something that requires our co-operation, are thus held together.

Thus the Bible teaches *neither* an unconditional security wherein once we are believers we are all set, no matter what we become, *nor* a salvation that is so precarious that we could lose it at any moment. The Bible knows of a salvation that is a relationship of dependent trust in God (the central meaning of the word 'believing'), a relationship between a free person (you or me) and a very faithful person (God). And if by their very nature, relationships can be strained and broken, they can also be deepened and strengthened. God has given to us the freedom to stop depending and trusting, but he has also given us the freedom to keep depending and trusting and cooperating with our faithful Father who offers to strengthen us and keep us by his Spirit – in which case we are secure, and need never fall.

Let us hear the good news announced by the benediction found in the book of Jude: ***“To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy--to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.”*** [Jude 24]

SUMMARY

Do we believe in the eternal security of believers?

Yes. We believe that Christ is faithful, and that we are secure when following Jesus.

But we also believe, based on scripture, that human beings, bearing the image of God (which includes the awesome gift of freedom), can sometimes, through a long *series* of decisions of their will (not simply through some single impulsive act or acts), change and turn from being “believers” to becoming “unbelievers.” This does not *need* to happen, but the Bible envisions some occasions where, in the exercise of human freedom, this tragedy takes place.

So it is right *both* to stress that believers are secure in Christ *and* to be aware of the fact that unbelief can develop to the place where we cease to be followers of Jesus. A balanced biblical view holds both truths together.

For further reading:

P. Matthew Pinson, ed., *Four Views on Eternal Security* (Zondervan, 2002).

I. Howard Marshall, *Kept By The Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Bethany House Publishers, 1969).

Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance* (Bethany House Publishers, 1989).

Roger E. Olson, "Don't Hate Me Because I'm Arminian," *Christianity Today* (Sept 6, 1999). pp. 87-94.

Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (InterVarsity Press, 2002)

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