

Can You Lose Your Salvation?

There are many passages in the Bible that seem to teach that you can lose your salvation if you do certain things:

- Live in sin - Matt 6:15; Eph 5:3-5
- Be arrogant/overconfident in your salvation - Rom 11:18-22
- Revert back to Mosaic Law - Gal 5:2-4
- Be a Faithless Servant - Matt 7:21-23; Luke 12:41-46; Gal 2:2
- Deny/forsake Christ - 1 Chron 28:9; Matt 10:32-33
- Leave the faith before the end comes - Matt 10:22; 1 Cor 9:27; 1 Cor 15:1-2; Col 1:22-23; Heb 3:6,14; Heb 6:2-8; 2 Peter 2:20-22; Rev 2:10; Rev 2:25-27; Rev 3:5

* (There are many more verses like these, but they all fall into these basic categories)

Anyone reading these passages would think that a person can lose their salvation. But we know that there are many passages that are clear and teach we can NOT lose our salvation. So now we must ask: can we lose our salvation? The Bible does not have the sentence "once saved, always saved," so why do so many people say this? What does the Bible teach? Does it teach that we can lose our salvation or not?

Once Saved, Always Saved?

If we examine what the whole Bible has to say on the topic of salvation, we quickly see that the topic of salvation is fairly intricate, with lots of significant details. Quickie sound-bytes like "once saved, always saved" give us all sorts of warm fuzzies, but because they don't hold up well to Scriptural scrutiny, in the end, they create more confusion than clarity. Yes, we frequently read in the Bible that the saved will never lose their salvation, but because this sound-bite doesn't fully address the question of salvation like the Bible does, its conclusion about the permanence of salvation can fall flat. On the flip-side, people who teach that you can lose your salvation aren't doing justice to the many passages and Biblical concepts that teach that it is impossible to lose one's salvation.

So how do faithful Bible students reconcile all this? What interpretive mistakes are made in order to arrive at wrong conclusions about the ability to keep or lose one's salvation? This article lists a few of the common mistakes people fall into when teaching things that don't quite line up with the Bible:

1. Assume Incorrectly

Many passages that are used to endorse the idea of losing one's salvation are hijacked by an incorrect assumption that the person in question was saved in the first place. Here are some classic examples:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matt 6:14-15)

But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful. And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more. (Luke 12:45-48)

Although passages like these are commonly used to teach salvation can be lost, nowhere here is it said that the person in question, even if he is called a "servant," was saved in the first place. Jesus is simply teaching factual statements about forgiveness (Matt 6) and punishment (Luke 12). He's not attempting to explain the principles of gaining and losing salvation. *This error of assumption accounts for the overwhelming majority of passages used to teach that people can lose their salvation.*

2. Miss Metaphors and Hyperbole

Humans can and do use metaphors and exaggeration to make a point. If we lose sight of the point, we are guaranteed to misunderstand both the point and the hyperbole. Galatians 2:2 is a good example of this:

I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. (Gal 2:2)

Although some teachers would have us think that the phrase "run in vain" means to lose one's salvation, a simpler (and more Biblically consistent) interpretation is that he's using extreme language to talk about wasting precious time and resources in sloppy ministry. Because Paul was an apostle appointed by none other than Jesus Christ Himself (Gal 1:1), we can confidently conclude that Paul was saved. Therefore, it only stands to reason that if he sounds like he's saying he could lose his salvation, then we're not understanding him correctly. The same could be said for passages like Exod 32:32-33, 1 Cor 9:27, Rev 3:5. These passages are merely using extreme language to make a point – they're not trying to teach us how salvation works.

3. Disregard Deceivers and the Deceived

If modern Christians dealt more seriously with the topic of false believers, we would go a long way towards understanding these passages that seem to teach a loss of salvation. In truth, this topic gets very little consideration in contemporary Christianity. The Bible has much to say about people who look, walk, talk and act like true believers, but when confronted with the Truth of who Jesus Christ, they peel away and stop following Him. Sometimes they give up when the going gets tough or the doctrine gets too thick (Lk 4:11-15; John 6:66), and sometimes they're not disclosed till the hereafter. But in the final analysis, Judgment Day will "reveal everything" (Matt 7:21-23; Matt 10:26-33), and on that day all false believers will be shown to be false. Matthew 7 lays out this idea quite succinctly:

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 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.' (Matt 7:21-23)

Here Jesus tells us that even though these people cry "Lord, Lord" and do miracles "in Your name," they are not true believers because they didn't do "the will of my Father who is in heaven." They may have been very sincere, but like Mormons, Muslims and Moonies, they were very *sincerely wrong*. Saving faith will always manifest itself by obedience to the Father. If we are not faithful to be obedient to His call, doing the works He prepared for us beforehand (Eph 2:10), we can rest assured that we do not have the right kind of faith (Jam 2:14-26), and we are not His children (Jn 8:39-47).

It is imperative that we understand that there are "many" who look and sound like they are true believers, but they are not. John even calls them "disciples" (Jn 6:66) and "believers" (Jn 8:30-31), even though his point all along is that they were never *true* believers (1 John 1:19), they reject Him and try to kill Him (8:59). If we don't understand this principle of how false believers look very much like true believers, we will misunderstand passages like John 15:1-11, 2 Peter 2:1 and Hebrews 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. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned. (Heb 6:4-8)

Here, we see someone who has fallen away after they have a) been enlightened, b) tasted the heavenly gift, c) shared in the Holy Spirit, d) tasted of the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come. At first read, we would feel obligated to conclude that this is a person who was once saved. But a thorough examination of Scriptures would show that such descriptions do not necessarily mean the person is (or was) a true believer.

- Saul prophesied (1 Sam 10:11), yet the Bible is clear that he was never a true believer and he persistently refused to obey God, and never really cared about carrying out God's commands. By the end of his life, we see that not only did God appoint Saul in anger as a judgment against His rebellious people, but He also rejects Saul in anger for his perpetual sinning (Hos 13:11).

- Balaam lived his entire life as a pagan false prophet yet had multiple conversations with God and even prophesied truth about God's people. Because of his rejection of God's will, God had him destroyed and repeatedly warns us not to follow Balaam's error (Num 22-24; Num 31:8,16; Deut 23:5; 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 1:11; Rev 2:14).
- Judas sat in Jesus' presence, ate miraculous bread, fish and wine, taught Jesus' sermons and participated in many of Christ's miracles (Jn 6:11-14; Jn 2:9-11; Matt 10:1-8). Yet Jesus knew from the beginning that he was a betrayer and not a true believer (Jn 6:64). Psalms 109 predicts Judas' actions, laying out 30 curses against him, his wife, his children and his eternity. Although Judas was deliberately chosen as one of Jesus' disciples, there is no mistaking that he was never saved, or that he never would be saved.

So in the pages of Scripture, we see that it is indeed possible for a person to have genuine interactions with God, collaborate with the Holy Spirit, and even do miracles (Pharaoh's magicians) – yet never experience a saving relationship with God. The point of Hebrews 6:4-6 is that if people have "front-row seats" to the kingdom of God (meaning that they look very much like honest-to-goodness Christians), yet turn on Him and walk out the door, salvation is no longer available for them. A very sober proposition indeed! In other words, one cannot be re-saved if one knowingly rejects the things of God. This is another misconception popular in some Christian denominations. We see this divine rejection in play against the Pharisees (Matt 12:24-27), Esau (Heb 12:15-17), Korah (Num 16; Jude 1:11-13), Jannes & Jambres (2 Tim 3:8), Hymenaeus & Alexander (1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 2:17) and many more.

In 1 John, we also see another very important teaching about those who turn away from the things of God: they were never saved in the first place:

Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:18-19)

John – who occasionally used language like "disciple" and "believe" to describe false believers - is making the point that false teachers constantly crawl among us trying to lure away the faithful, and those that leave and abandon the faith were never genuine believers in the first place. If they were genuine believers, they would have stayed with us. With this passage, we are therefore compelled to not only conclude that a genuine believer cannot lose his salvation, but also that those that *seemed* to lose their salvation were false believers from the outset. They were either trying to fool others about their faith, or they themselves were fooled into thinking they were believers. This is one of the biggest dangers of relying too heavily on the phrase "once saved, always saved:" There are a great number of people who think they are saved and use this phrase to kick back and take it easy. This phrase fails to embrace the Bible's passion that we sit up and take inventory of ourselves to see if we really are saved or if we're just fooling ourselves (2 Cor 13:5; Ps 139:23-24; Heb 4:1-2; Rev 2:5).

4. Reject the Concept of Election

The Bible consistently describes salvation in terms of predestined election. We are repeatedly taught that God elected His people for salvation, by name, before God made the heavens and the earth. (Jer 1:5-6; Is 49:1-3; Rom 9:10-18; Rom 11:5-8; Gal 1:15-16; Eph 1:3-12; Rev 13:8; Rev 17:8). If people are elect and promised salvation before time began (Titus 1:2), then it is incompetence on God's part to elect someone who would be saved then later lose his salvation. This would mean that God is not powerful enough to save, or that man can thwart God's all-knowing, all-powerful will. God could not be King of Kings and Lord of Lords if mere mortals could thwart His will. Such a proposition would be ridiculous in the extreme! God, by definition, does not and cannot make mistakes, nor can anyone truly thwart His plan (Daniel 4:34-35). Every person He has elected will come to salvation and will come to heaven. Romans 8 gives a good example of how election secures our salvation past, present and in the eternal future:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ... For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor

powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:28-31; 38-39)

This passage describes the eternal plan of God as it relates to the salvation of His people. In eternity past He set us apart for a relationship ("foreknew" – not "foresaw"), predestined us for salvation, called us to Him, justified us (ie, made us as if we had never sinned), and will eventually glorify us (take us to heaven). This eternal plan of God demonstrates His all-powerful love for us. There is nothing in heaven, earth or in hell that can separate us from His loving embrace – and since we are something "in creation", that includes us. We cannot jump out of His arms, nor would we want to. Note that when Jesus condemns those in Matt 7, He doesn't say "Depart from Me for I once knew you but you fell away." No, He says "Depart from Me; I never knew you." God does not change His promise about election.

A Better Bite?

Although this article isn't intended to examine every single verse on the topic of losing one's salvation, it does address the bulk of them, including many of the thorny ones. Ultimately, we see that salvation is the outworking of the eternal plan of God and the Person and work of the Son. Man's salvation is based on God - it is as permanent as God. If a person is *truly* saved, he cannot lose his salvation. So we could accurately sum up the discussion with the following observations. If you are heaven-bound (emphasis on the word "if") ...

- ...You were elected by name, and predestined for salvation before time began (Titus 1:2; Eph 1:3-11, Rev 13:8; Rev 17:8)
- ...Your salvation is a work of God, and He sees to it that you make it to heaven and that you stay there (Rom 8:28-31; Gal 3:29)
- ...Nothing and no one (including you yourself) can thwart God's plan of salvation for you, or snatch you out of God's hands (Is 14:26-27; Daniel 4:34-37; John 10:27-29; Rom 8:38-39)
- ...You probably know people who talk, look and act like they are heaven-bound, but they are not. They are deceiving people, and probably deceiving themselves (Matt 7:21-23; Matt 25:11-12; 2 Tim 3:1-9; Titus 1:16)
- ...You will have real works because real faith is always be accompanied by real works (James 2:14-26; Matt 7:21; Eph 2:8-10)
- ...You should know that the "if" should not be taken lightly. You should continually search your heart, faith and works to see if you are in alignment with the Word of God, making any and all corrections as necessary (Ps 26:2; Ps 139:23-24; 1 Cor 11:28; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 6:4; 2 Pet 3:1-11)

Is there a snazzy sound-bite to wrap all this up? "When saved, always saved" or "If saved, always saved" might be good options, and have been used by thoughtful Bible scholars. In the final analysis, rather than trying to come up with snazzy sound-bites, our time might be better served learning what the Bible actually has to say on the topic so that we can answer people when they ask us about the nature of our salvation.

How Does One Get Saved And Stay Saved?

This article would be woefully incomplete if it didn't mention *how* to be saved: we must believe (Acts 16:31) continually and progressively (ie, "abide" John 15:1-8) in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ to save us from the God-ordained penalty of our sin (Rom 3:22-26). This belief must be accompanied by works (aka "fruit"), whereby we do the will of God. We could summarize this by saying "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ", but if that's the only way we explain it, then that sound-bite might create a whole different set of problems and discussions for another day.

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