

Christian Ministry Unit 1

Introduction to Theology

Week 5 – The Security of Our Salvation

Introduction

This week we will address the question of the security of our salvation. Both for your own sake and for other Christians whom you will serve, you will need to be able to provide biblical answers for the following questions:

- Once I've made a decision for Christ, can I lose my salvation?
- Do I receive God's forgiveness and acceptance via a process—or all at once?
- Is salvation earned (or kept) by good works or observing rituals?
- Can I forfeit my salvation through sin?
- Could someone have genuinely received Christ and not grow spiritually?
- What about people who claim to have received Christ, but no longer believe in him?
- How should I respond to those who reject eternal security?

Tonight we want to cover the **BIBLICAL BASIS** for eternal security, its **PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE** for growth and ministry, and **HOW TO RESPOND** to contradictory views.

The biblical basis for eternal security

“Eternal security” refers to the position that a true Christian's salvation is secure and cannot be lost.

Passages which clearly teach eternal security:

1 Pet. 1:3-5 – Peter is going out of his way to stress that believers' glorification (final destiny in heaven) is guaranteed (“imperishable;” “undefiled;” “will not fade away;” “reserved in heaven for you.”). In the meantime, Christians are “protected by the power of God.”

Rom. 8:1*,31-39 – Paul stresses the security of believers' salvation throughout this passage:

8:1 emphatically states that because of our union with Christ, we are completely exempt from God's condemnation.¹ Note that this affirmation is the reason why Paul praises God through Christ even though he is still a sinner (7:25).

8:33,34 stresses that God will never accept a charge against or condemn believers because Christ justifies us and intercedes for us (i.e., continues to apply his atoning sacrifice to our ongoing sins).

¹ INSTRUCTORS: Note KJV and NKJV textual error: “. . . who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit.” The KJV was based primarily on the Latin Vulgate, but since 1611, earlier Greek texts have been found which clearly indicate that this phrase does not belong in this verse. “The King James scholars in 1611 had to use printed editions of the Greek NT that rested upon the late Greek manuscripts, none of which was older than the 10th or 11th century. Translators today use editions of the Greek New Testament that rest upon manuscript evidence from the third and fourth centuries.” Bruce Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content* (2nd ed., Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1983), p. 286.

8:35,38,39 is a comprehensive statement—no one and nothing (inside or outside the Christian) can separate us from the love of God.

Heb. 7:25 – The author emphasizes that Jesus saves us forever because (as in Rom. 8:34) he applies his finished work as often as we sin. In other words, if we lose our salvation because of sin, Christ will have failed as our High Priest.

Jn. 10:27-30** - Jesus uses strong language to stress that his “sheep” (believers) can never be lost.²

Eph. 1:13,14; 4:30* - Paul uses two illustrations from 1st century Roman life to emphasize the security of believers’ salvation.

In both of these passages, Paul speaks of the Christian as having been “sealed.”

When the Roman emperor stamped the wax seal of an official document with his signet ring, this seal communicated that the power Rome guaranteed safe passage of the document to its destination. In the same way, at the moment of our conversion (1:13 “having believed”), God has given believers the Holy Spirit as his “seal” which guarantees our safe passage to heaven (1:14 “a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession;” 4:30 “. . . by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption”). Although we can grieve/displease God by our poor behavior, this does not change our status with him. In 4:30, Paul affirms that a sinning Christian (one who is grieving the Spirit) is still sealed.

“Pledge” is a similar idea. It means “down payment.” When we pledge that we will pay the full purchase of a house, we put down a percentage of the price in cash. God has given us his Holy Spirit as his “down payment” that he will complete our salvation. Our present experience of God’s love through his Spirit (Rom. 5:5) is God’s personal guarantee that we will one day receive our full inheritance in God’s eternal kingdom.

Phil. 1:6 - The work of salvation, which God has begun with our justification, he *will* finish at the day of Christ (his return).

Rom. 8:29 - Predestination means “foreordain the destiny of.” This passage does not teach that God chooses who will believe in Christ. But it does strongly affirm that God sets the ultimate destiny of the believer. You have free will to choose whether you will step back from the rim of the Grand Canyon or jump over it. But if you choose to jump, though you can do a lot of things on the way down, your destiny has been set – you will splatter all over the canyon floor. In the same way, we have free will to choose to receive or reject Christ. But once we choose to receive him, though we may grow a little or a lot, God sets our ultimate destiny – we will be completely conformed to Christ and be glorified.

² "Verse 28 is especially emphatic . . . In the clause ‘and they shall never perish,’ John uses the double negative *ou me* with the aorist subjunctive, which is a very emphatic way of declaring that something will not happen in the future. Jesus is categorically excluding the slightest chance of an apostasy by his sheep. A literal translation would be something like: ‘They shall not, repeat, shall not, ever perish in the slightest.’ . . . All in all, this passage is as definite a rejection of the idea that the true believer can fall away as could be given." Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987) p. 1010.

1 Cor. 1:8 - Recall the moral failure the Corinthian church had (sexual immorality, drunkenness at communion, divisions, softness on Jesus' resurrection, etc.). Paul could not have made this affirmation unless he believed in eternal security! Instead of threatening them with loss of salvation, Paul repeatedly affirms their security in Christ.

The personal importance of eternal security

- *We cannot relate to God with confidence unless we know he accepts us as we are, with all of our sins.* Christians who don't know and rely on their security in Christ cannot interact with God in humble confidence because their acceptance before God is still practically based on their own righteousness. Therefore they avoid God's presence, sometimes because they despair of his acceptance ("I am too sinful") and sometimes because they are self-righteous and self-deceived ("I am already good").

"I am accepted' - accepted as though my life displayed the spiritual perfection of the Messiah himself - ought to be the automatic response of our hearts whenever we wake, like the compass needle that always points north. This is a response which is always relevant to our current spiritual condition. We never make such progress in sanctification that we can depend on it for (God's) acceptance. And our continuing record of sin and failure never expands beyond the limits of the love of Christ, who has covered our debts for all time, past, present, and future . . . (This is why) *assurance of salvation is necessary for healthy spirituality.* Christians need to know that they have a secure status as adopted sons and daughters of God in order to behave naturally in his presence. For us to be phasing in and out of sonship according to our behavior, constantly testing our experiences to make sure we are in a 'state of grace,' short-circuits the reality of grace."³

"We all automatically gravitate toward the assumption that we are justified by our level of sanctification, and when this posture is adopted it inevitably focuses our attention not on Christ but on the adequacy of our obedience. We start each day with our personal security resting not on the accepting love of God and the sacrifice of Christ but on our present feelings or recent achievements in the Christian life. Since these arguments will not quiet the human conscience, we are inevitably moved either to discouragement and apathy or to a self-righteousness which falsifies the record to achieve a sense of peace."⁴

- *We cannot relate to others appropriately unless we are secure in God's acceptance.* Resting in God's undeserved forgiveness and acceptance is the dynamic that motivates us to humbly accept and forgive others. Unless we are secure in Christ, we will tend to take our security from others' acceptance of us and/or our comparison to others, both of which lead to a host of relational dysfunctions.

"Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons . . . Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce defensive assertion of

³ Richard Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life*, pp. 142-143.

⁴ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 211.

their own righteousness and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other . . . styles . . . in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger . . . Envy, jealousy and other branches of the tree of sin grow out of their fundamental insecurity . . . It is often necessary to convince sinners (and even sinful Christians) of the grace and love of God toward them, before we can get them to look at their problems. Then the vision of grace and the sense of God's forgiving acceptance may actually cure most of the problems . . . The faith that . . . is able to warm itself at the fire of God's love, instead of having to steal love and self-acceptance from other sources, is actually the root of holiness."⁵

Ministry application of eternal security

- *Our conviction about eternal security affects how we communicate the gospel to non-Christians.* We should be clear that genuine willingness to bow to Christ and humbly receive forgiveness is necessary—but just as clear that salvation is a free gift, and that you may come as you are without any actual ethical change preceding your decision. This is what makes the gospel good news! Unless this is strongly emphasized, non-Christians will usually perceive the invitation to come to Christ through a moralistic grid (e.g., “I need to clean myself up, start coming to church, etc.”).
- *Our conviction about eternal security affects how we assure other Christians of their salvation.* We should stress that what the Bible says about their security in Christ is foundational because this is objective and unchanging. Experiential changes (conviction of sin, insight into the Bible, desire to share your faith, recognition of kinship with other Christians, personal communion with God, etc.) are also important and should be pointed out because new Christians often do not see them. But these should be subordinate because they are subjective and fluctuating. Unless the objective security is stressed, new Christians will doubt their salvation when their experience of God temporarily wanes.
- *Our conviction about eternal security affects how we discern professions of faith.* What about individuals who claim to be Christians, but you are unsure if they really are?

Many Christian workers ask: “When did you become a Christian?” This might be helpful, but some true Christians cannot point to a date, while others who point to a specific time when they “received Christ” may still be unsaved.

Consider asking him to explain how one becomes a Christian. This often exposes a religious/works view of Christianity. When this is the case, it is good to explain why we cannot earn God's acceptance, and why Christ had to die for our sins. Then urge him to admit his sinfulness to God and ask God to forgive him through Christ.

Consider asking her how becoming a Christian has changed her life. If she is unable to point to any change (e.g., relationship with God, others, moral freedom, etc.), explain the gift of the Holy Spirit, share your testimony—and urge her to open the door of her heart to Christ.

⁵ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), pp. 211-213.

But if they are able to explain the gospel and have experienced the Holy Spirit (even if long ago), we should accept their profession of faith and urge them to walk with Christ and grow spiritually. This was Paul's approach with carnal Christians like the Corinthians.

Four biblically objectionable views

Satan knows that our security in Christ is the power of dynamic Christianity, so he tries to erode this message in many ways. Works-righteousness cults (Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, etc.) deceive non-Christians and new Christians. But there are other forms of this deception that are more “mainstream,” but which we must be able to recognize and refute in order to help people come to Christ and grow in him.

- **RADICAL ARMINIANISM** – “Arminianism” refers to the belief that we have free will to receive or reject Christ. (We will discuss this more next week.) Radical Arminians teach that Christians can lose their salvation by falling into “serious” and/or chronic sin. They usually use the verses below to support this belief. We admit that the plain sense of some of these passages seems to indicate you can lose your salvation. But we must harmonize the Bible because God is its author. It is easier to harmonize these verses with the eternal security passages than it is to try to harmonize the eternal security passages with these verses.

Heb. 4-4-8 – The author seems to be saying that true Christians can “fall away”—forfeit their salvation and wind up in hell. But note:

Is this about falling into sin? *No.*

- Recall the historical background of Hebrews. Many of the Jews reading this letter did not consider Christ's atoning death adequate for them and persisted in relying on temple sacrifices to atone for their sin. This explains the strong language: “they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put him to open shame” (4:6). If they were Christians, their loss of their salvation would not have been the result of sin, but the result of a choice to reject Christ and his sacrifice.

Were they Christians? *Probably not.*

- All of the phrases in 4:4,5 stop short of definitely describing a regenerate person. Even “partakers of the Holy Spirit” can refer to people who “shared in” (*metecho*) the Holy Spirit by witnessing his work through real Christians when they were in fellowship.
 - Note the strong contrast between “they/them/those” in 4:4-6 and “beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning *you*” (4:9). This contrast suggests that the people mentioned in 4:4-6 are not Christians.

What is meant by the statement “it is impossible for them to be renewed to repentance?” This may mean that since they had received the full light that God has to give them and rejected it, there wasn't any further possibility of salvation for them. OR “since” in 4:6 may also be translated “while”—in

which case the author is simply saying they can't be accepted by God as long as they reject Jesus as their Savior.

CONCLUSION: The “falling away” here is not about falling into drunkenness, sexual immorality, etc—but about rejecting Jesus as the One whose death pays for our sins.

Heb. 10:26-31 – The author seems to be saying that true Christians (“sanctified” by Christ’s blood) who persist in sin (“go on sinning willfully”) will lose their salvation and go to hell. But note:

Is this about falling into sin? *No.*

- “Sinning willfully,” in light of the following context (10:29) is defined as rejecting Jesus as the Messiah—denying that his death had any atoning value, and insulting the Spirit’s conviction about Jesus—*not* simply any sin we might purposefully commit.

Were they Christians? *Probably not.*

- 10:29 says Jesus’ death “sanctified” these people. This may mean that Christ’s his death sets all people apart in a more general sense (see 9:13; 13:12; see also 1 Corinthians 7:14). “Receiving the knowledge of the truth” (10:26) may refer only to understanding the gospel.
- If 10:26ff is about a Christian losing his salvation because of sin, the author of Hebrews is doing an about-face. His letter contains some of the strongest affirmations of eternal security (see 7:25; 10:10-14,19-25). Rather, the author seems to be warning that fellow Jews (this could explain the author’s use of “we” in 10:26) who keep relying on temple sacrifices will never benefit from Christ’s sacrifice.

CONCLUSION: The “falling away” here is not about falling into drunkenness, sexual immorality, etc—but about rejecting Jesus as the One whose death pays for our sins.

Gal. 5:4 – Paul seems to be saying that true Christians can be severed from Christ and fall away from God’s grace.

Were they Christians? *Yes.* The “you” refers to the Galatian Christians rather than the Judaizers (see 5:7-10).

Is this about falling into sin? *No.* The issue here is “seeking to be justified by law.” Just as in Hebrews, these folks were returning to works of the law (in this case circumcision) as a safeguard to get/keep God’s acceptance. Paul says that receiving circumcision for this reason is antithetical to why they trusted in Christ (to be justified by grace through faith).

Is this referring to loss of salvation? *No.* If they begin to operate with this mentality, they will pull the plug on God’s sanctifying power (see 5:1,2 and especially “Christ will be of no benefit to you”). Paul argues in a similar fashion in Gal. 3:3.

Col. 1:21-23 - Being found holy and blameless on judgment day seems to be conditioned (“if indeed”) on continuing in the faith and remaining steadfast throughout one’s life.

Paul may be using the terms “holy and blameless and beyond reproach” to refer to spiritual maturity (see Phil. 1:10; 2:15; 1 Tim. 3:10; Titus 2:8 for such usage). If this is the case, he is simply saying that God has reconciled (justified) us through Christ in order to present us to himself as spiritually mature people, and that this will happen as long as we continue to focus in faith on the gospel.

If Paul is using the terms “holy and blameless and beyond reproach” to refer to acquittal on judgment day, he may be saying that true Christians will continue to confess Jesus and the gospel (see also Heb. 3:6,14). Conversely, those in the church who reject the gospel reveal themselves to have never been true believers (see 1 Jn. 2:19). The word “if” in 1:23 should be translated “if indeed” because it communicates confidence that they will continue to hold fast to the gospel.

2 Tim. 2:12 - This sounds like if Christians deny Christ, God will deny them (take away their salvation).

Is this about falling into sin? *No*. This verse mentions denying Christ, not committing certain sins. Paul is quoting a “theological confession” that may be using “we” in the widest sense of the word—all different kinds of responses to Christ:

“If we died with him, we shall also live with him.” – This could refer to anyone who receives Christ.

“If we endure, we shall also reign with him.” – This probably refers to the walking Christian.

“If we deny him, he also will deny us.” – This could refer to people who had apparently received, but then later denied him, or simply to people who never respond to the gospel.

“If we are faithless, he remains faithful . . .” – This probably refers to a common Christian struggle with being consistently faithful.

NOTE: There are two different versions of non-eternal security which may appear similar, but which are very different:

Salvation can be lost by rejecting Christ (Heb. 6,10; 2 Tim. 2:12) – Those who hold this position agree that our acceptance by God is based solely on the finished work of Christ. But they argue that just as we choose freely to receive this gift, we may choose freely to reject it. Notice that most of the passages above emphasize denying/rejecting Christ and/or his sacrifice rather than committing sins. Taking this position does not violate salvation by grace through faith alone. Properly understood, it doesn't really threaten the Christian's security since they don't intend to reject Christ.

Salvation can be lost by moral lapses (Radical Arminianism) – Some groups teach that “backsliding” Christians who revert to sinful habits forfeit God's

acceptance. This is heresy, because if we can lose God's acceptance by our sins, then we must be maintaining God's acceptance (at least in part) by our good works.

- **ROMAN CATHOLIC SOTERIOLOGY** – According to official Roman Catholic doctrine, no one's salvation is secure. The Catholic Church holds this position, in part, because Catholic canon law teaches that saving grace, while purchased only by Christ's work on the cross, is conferred in an ongoing way through the sacraments which must be officiated by the ordained priesthood.⁶ In Catholicism, therefore, one can never be sure of God's full and final acceptance in this life.

The Bible, however, insists that personal faith alone secures saving grace (Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8,9), and that believers have already been completely forgiven (Col. 2:13,14).

NOTE: *We should not say that there are no saved Catholics!* There are, in fact, many Catholics who know the Lord and serve him. We are simply saying that official Catholic theology is in error on this vitally important issue.

NOTE: *It is unwise to attack your Catholic family and friends!* We want to help them receive Christ's total forgiveness and have assurance of their salvation. Instead of criticizing Catholic doctrine, it is usually more effective to positively emphasize the biblical teaching on salvation as a free gift and your personal testimony.

- **WATER BAPTISM REQUIRED FOR SALVATION** – Many people and denominations teach that water baptism is necessary for salvation. Passages such as Acts 2:38, Mk. 16:16, 1 Pet. 3:21, Rom. 6:3,4 and Col. 2:12 seem to teach this position. However, on closer examination, this teaching is not scriptural for the following reasons:

The biblical teaching on salvation by grace through faith alone is very clear (John 1:12; Eph 2:8,9; Acts 16:30,31; Rom. 3:24; Titus 3:5). Gal. 2:16 is especially significant, since Paul is refuting the Judaizers' insistence that faith in Christ is not sufficient for salvation, but that circumcision is also required. These are parallel teachings in that both require submission to a biblical ritual for salvation. Jesus' promise to the thief on the cross (Lk. 23:43 – "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise") also argues strongly against any ritual as a requirement for salvation.

Passages used support this view can be harmonized with the "salvation by faith alone" position described above:

Acts 2:38 & Acts 3:19 – Acts 2:38 gives two imperatives ("repent" and "be baptized"), followed by two results ("forgiveness of sins" and "you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit"). Note that in Peter's next speech (Acts 3:19), he omits the command to be baptized. If water baptism is required for forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, why did Peter omit this imperative? It is best to understand the promises of Acts 2:38 as connected to the command to "repent" alone. Peter also announced that it is God's will for believers to be water baptized, but he did not mean that baptism was necessary for salvation.

⁶ "The Church affirms that for believers, the sacraments of the New Covenant are *necessary for salvation*." The Holy See, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 1994) p. 292.

Mk. 16:16 is part of the “long ending” of Mark (16:9-20) that was not part of the original text. For more information on this textual issue, see Mark Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 601-605.

In **1 Pet. 3:21**, Peter says, “. . . corresponding to that, baptism now saves you.” The “that” refers to how God rescued Noah and his family from the flood (3:20). “Corresponding” is *antitupon*, or “anti-type.” Peter thus identifies the ark rescue as a prophetic type of our rescue through Christ. Noah and his family were NOT saved by being water baptized, but by being put into (baptized into) the *ark*. In the same way, believers in Christ are rescued from God's judgment by being put into (baptized into) Christ. Therefore, the “baptism” in 3:21 refers to the baptism by the Holy Spirit into Christ (see 1 Cor. 12:13), which happens the moment we believe the gospel (Eph. 1:13,4). Peter seems intent on making this point by adding “. . . not the removal of dirt from the flesh . . .”

Rom. 6:3-4 & Col. 2:12 both refer to Spirit-baptism into Christ rather than to water baptism, since Paul says clearly in 1 Corinthians 12:13 that Spirit-baptism is the baptism that unites us with Christ.

NOTE: Jesus commands us to be water-baptized (Matt. 28:19), but not for salvation.

We should be baptized after receiving Christ because Jesus has told us to proclaim our faith in him in this way (see Acts 2,8,10,16 for examples of this). Like many other commands in scripture, we should obey them out of trust in Jesus and gratitude for our salvation, not as requirements for our salvation.

- **LORDSHIP THEOLOGY** – This view affirms eternal security, but defines saving faith in a way that requires complete commitment to Christ and denies the possibility of carnal Christians. This has the same practical effect as the above “losing salvation through moral lapses” view: unless you live a righteous life, you have no basis for thinking you are saved.⁷

This view rightly rejects mere mental assent to the gospel as saving faith, and insists that it involves a willingness to follow Jesus as well as to receive forgiveness from him. But by defining saving faith as “complete commitment to Christ,” it makes the opposite error of making saving faith too difficult. Only self-deceived, self-righteous people could claim that they are always “completely committed” to Christ.

If saving faith requires full commitment, then why do the epistles urge Christians to commit themselves more fully to Christ (Rom. 12:1; 1 Pet. 3:15)? Why do the epistles acknowledge that there are carnal Christians (1 Cor. 3:3,15), and why do they urge *Christians* not to submit to the reign of sin (Rom. 6:12,13)?

⁷ “. . . Eternal life is indeed a free gift . . . that does not mean there is no cost in terms of salvation's impact on the sinner's life. This paradox may be difficult but it is nevertheless true: salvation is both free and costly . . . It (saving faith) is an exchange of all that we are for all that Christ is. And it denotes implicit obedience, full surrender to the lordship of Christ. Nothing less can qualify as saving faith . . . This is the kind of totally committed response the Lord Jesus called for. A desire to follow him at any cost. Absolute surrender. A full exchange of self for the Savior. It is the only response that will open the gates of the kingdom.” John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According To Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 140, 141.

Conclusion

Our salvation is secure!! Jesus has fully accomplished our salvation, and we receive complete and permanent forgiveness when we entrust ourselves to Jesus. As we have seen, the vast majority of verses on the topic support this position. The verses that seem to imply otherwise are few and alternate interpretations can be found that harmonize with the rest of scripture. The teachings that one must add rituals to faith, or that one can lose salvation through sin or 'backsliding,' are unbiblical and spiritually harmful.

Memory Verses

Romans 8:1* – Christians will never be condemned by God.

Ephesians 4:30* – Christians are sealed by God for safe passage to heaven.

John 10:27-30** – Jesus will not allow anyone to snatch believers out of his hand.

Assignment