

CAN ONE LOSE ONE'S SALVATION?

by Jim Seghers

Recently a Protestant friend sent an e-mail with the following question: "Where is the good news in the idea that we have to perform, do good works, or obey the Ten Commandments to get to heaven?" His question was influenced by the utterly bogus idea, once saved, always saved, that is, a Christian has a guarantee of eternal salvation regardless of his behavior. This false claim has no Biblical foundation. It even defies common sense.

For those who wish to study this question beyond this essay an excellent book on this subject is *How Can I Get To Heaven? The Bible's Teaching On Salvation Made Easy to Understand*, written by Robert A. Sungenis. Robert left the Catholic Church and became a Reformed Protestant at the age of 19. He received his BA from George Washington University and his Masters from the Westminster Theological Seminary. Before returning to the Catholic Church he served as an elder, itinerant preacher, adult education director, and radio Bible instructor.

Introduction

The idea that one can't lose one's salvation is connected with the error that one is saved by faith alone, *sola fide*. If good works are rejected as necessary for salvation, it might seem logical to some that bad works can't cause one to forfeit ones salvation.

Calvin taught the absolute impossibility of losing justification. *Luther* said one's salvation could be lost only through the sin of unbelief, that is, by undoing the act of faith and rejecting Christ, but not by what Catholics and the Bible call Mortal Sin (1 Jn 5:16-17).

Presbyterians and most *Baptists*, and those who have been influenced by Presbyterians and Baptists, including many *non-denominational churches* teach once saved, always saved. On the other side *Catholics*, *Eastern Orthodox*, *Anglican*, *Methodist*, *Pentecostals*, *Church of Chris*, *Lutherans*, and a host of others teach that it is possible for Christians to lose their salvation.

Biblical Passages Alleged to Support Once Saved, Always Saved

1 Jn 2:19 - (Similarly Mt 7:21-23) "*He who says 'I know him' but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected.*"

This passage doesn't directly teach once saved, always saved. Rather it is used to argue that the so-called Christian who sins never was a true Christian to begin with.

The first problem with this conclusion is that it goes beyond the text. It takes a specific truth, namely, that some of those who sin are false Christians and expands it into a universal principle that everyone who sins is not a Christian. Secondly, if failure to keep the commandments determines that one is not a Christian it is a refutation of the idea that one is saved by faith

alone because it concedes the necessity of keeping the commandments – good works. Finally, there is no Biblical basis for claiming that Christians can't sin.

Romans 8:38-39 - *"For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, 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."*

This passage, it is claimed, teaches that a Christian can't lose his justification because Paul affirms that nothing can separate the Christian from the love of God.

However, each item in Paul's list that can't separate us from the love of God is *external* to the individual. Yes, there is nothing outside of a person's free choice that can make him lose his salvation. However, Paul does not claim that a Christian can't freely choose to abandon Christ by sin and thus endanger his salvation. For example, Paul does not list *deception, adultery, fortification, homosexuality, drunkenness, idolatry, sorcery, impurity* and *stealing* among the list of things that cannot separate us from the love of God, because in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Galatians 5:19-21, and Ephesians 5:5 he specifically affirms that these sins do separate us from the love of Christ.

John 3:16 - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*

This passage is used to affirm that all one must do is accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and salvation is assured, that is, the Christian is confirmed in grace and can't lose it. It is claimed that faith is the only requirement to have eternal life. Failure to keep the commandments will not place one's salvation in jeopardy.

The New Testament was written in Greek not English. Therefore to properly interpret this verse it is necessary to understand something of Greek grammar and vocabulary. Let's begin with the difference between the aorist and the present tenses.

Aorist – There is no English equivalent to the aorist tense. The word 'aorist' comes from the Greek word *aoristos*, which means 'undefined' or 'undetermined.' The aorist simply states that an action took place in the past without regard to its duration. It is used to describe a past event that is undetermined in time. Normally the aorist is translated in English with a simple past tense.

Present – The present tense conveys the idea of progress, that is, an ongoing action in the present.

Let's examine the translation of Jn 3:16 in lieu of Greek grammar. *"For God so loved [aorist – past and indefinite] the world that he gave [aorist - past and indefinite] his only Son, that whosoever believes [present – an ongoing action, "is believing"] in him should not perish but have [that is, continue to have, present tense] eternal life."* Believing and having eternal life

both describe present, ongoing actions. The implication is obvious. If the believing stops, so does having eternal life. There is nothing in this passage that even suggests the mere act of faith, accepting Jesus as ones Lord and Savior, places one in the magic elevator that only opens in paradise.

In addition, the word “believe” in Greek, *pisteuo*, embraces the concept of **obedience**, not a mere intellectual assent or trust in God. (See: Gerhard Kittle, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*; W. E. Vines, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*; (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984). The antonym or opposite of *pisteuo* is *apeitheo*, which means “disobey.”

Thus Jn 3:36, twenty verses later, gives an identical teaching to the affirmation in Jn 3:16. *“He who believes [pisteuo, present active participle – “is believing”] in the Son has [active indicative] eternal life; he who does not obey [apeitheo, present active participle – “is not obeying”] the Son shall not see [future] life, but the wrath of God rests [present active] upon him.”*

Saving faith requires obedience, which is why Paul frames his entire letter to the Romans with the expression, “the obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 16:26), and speaks of “faith working through love” in Gal 5:6. Both must be current, ongoing realities. Paul makes it patently clear that violating the commandments place ones salvation in danger (1 Cor 6:9-10, Gal 5:19-21, and Eph 5:5). John 3:16 and the companion verse in Jn 3:36 refutes once saved, always saved; they do not support it.

It’s ironic that this passage is sometimes used to support the idea that a Christian has a guarantee of eternal salvation regardless of his behavior. The passage actually refutes.

John 10: 28-29 – *“and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall 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.”*

This passage is also used to argue that a Christian has a guarantee of eternal salvation regardless of his behavior. The argument goes like this: When Jesus gives us “eternal life... no one can snatch” it from a Christian because he is in Christ’s hands.

This interpretation ignores the context of the passage (Jn 10:26-29) that portrays Jesus as the faithful shepherd who protects the flock from those who would steal the sheep. As we saw in Rom 8: 38-39, this passage affirms that no one, that is, nothing external to the individual, can snatch the sheep from Jesus’ hands. However, Jesus does not teach that the sheep cannot decide to leave his fold by sin.

Sacred Scripture Rejects Once Saved, Always Saved

Mt 7:21-23 – *“Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he 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 evildoers’.”

Let us examine this passage in some detail.

Not every one – Jesus opens with the idea of loss. Some won’t make the grade.

Lord, Lord – In Matthew’s Gospel only believers address Jesus as Lord. It is obvious that Jesus is speaking of his followers, Christians.

But he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven – Jesus makes it clear that the criteria of his judgment will be obedience.

On that day – This refers to the Day of Judgment.

Prophesy in your name, cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name – The New International Version translates “mighty works” as “miracles.” Clearly only believers prophesy, cast out demons and do mighty works in Christ’s name.

I never knew you – This is covenantal language. It’s knowing by experiencing, sharing, and becoming one. John uses similar language in his first letter. “And by this we may be sure that we *know* him, if we keep his commandments. He who says ‘*I know him*’ but disobeys his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him” (1 Jn 1:3-4).

Depart from me – This is the condemnation, eternal condemnation.

You evildoers – The reason for Jesus’ verdict is that they were disobedient.

1 Cor 9:24-10:12 – *“Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, less after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”*

This important passage also needs to be considered in detail.

“Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize?” - Paul begins his instruction by using the training of athletes to demonstrate the discipline that is required of the Christian. Note that in this opening sentence he introduces the idea of loss.

“So run that you may obtain it.” - Why is this command necessary? Isn’t Paul writing to Christians? Hasn’t Paul heard of sola fide and once saved-always saved?

“Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.” - What’s the relevancy of self-control for Christians if they are already assured of their salvation?

“Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” - St. Paul emphasizes the necessity of avoiding sin by using himself as an example. The Greek word that is translated as “disqualified” is *adokimos*. This word means “not standing the test,” “rejected,” “condemned.” Paul is certainly a Christian, yet he understands that he can fail and lose his salvation. He can be condemned.

“I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” – Paul sees these Old Testament events as types of Baptism and the Eucharist.

“Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased;” – God was displeased with most of the Hebrew people because their deeds were not righteous.

“for they were overthrown [“condemned” because of their sinful behavior] in the wilderness.”

“Now these things are warnings for us.” – Why are warnings necessary or even meaningful unless one can lose ones salvation?

“not to desire evil as they did.” - Clearly, Paul understands that desiring evil is sinful, an act that can cause Christians to suffer damnation. He then specifies specific sins that must be avoided.

“Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance [Ex 32:4, 6 – Golden Calf].’ We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day [The worship of Baal of Peor with the Moabite women. Num 25:1-18]. We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents [Num 21: 5-6]; nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer – [Num 16:41,49 – The revolt of Korah, Dathan and Abiram - 14,700 died from the plague. God, of course, is the Destroyer.]”

“Now these things happened to them as a warning [a repeat of v. 6], but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come.” – A “warning” is meaningless if there are no negative consequences – God’s wrath. The biblical perspective is that Christ’s coming ushered in the last of the age.

“Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.” – Paul draws his conclusion. He explicitly rejects the false security of once saved-always saved.

1 Jn 5:16-17 – *“If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask [pray], and God will give life to such a one – to those whose sin is not mortal. There is a sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal [Catholics have given it the name of venial sin.]”*

John makes a clear distinction between sins that kill the life of grace in the soul, called mortal sin, and sins that do not kill the life of grace in the soul. This teaching presupposes that there is a life of grace that can be killed in the soul. The life that mortal sin kills is the life of grace that comes from Jesus’ atoning death. The very idea of mortal sin becomes meaningless unless it endangers one’s eternal salvation.

2 Cor 5:10 – *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body.”* Clearly, Paul is addressing Christians. They, along with everyone else, will be judged by what they do: good or evil. This passage refutes the idea that Christians have a guarantee of salvation even if they sin.

1 Peter 1:17 – *“And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds [ergon in Greek], conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.”* This passage also makes it clear that God judges every one, including Christians, on their behavior. If a Christian had eternal security regardless of his deeds, why would it be necessary to conduct himself with fear. This warning is very similar to St. Paul’s statement that he is working out his salvation in “fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12).

The “deeds” of verse 17 are clearly connected with the obedience of verse 14-16: “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” If a Christian can’t lose his salvation there would be no evil consequences if he “conformed to the passions of his former ignorance.”

Rom 2:6-8 – *“For he will render to every man according to his works [ergon]; to those who by patience in well-doing [good works] seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being [no exceptions] who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.”*

Rev 22:12 – *“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done.”* The message of the Holy Spirit is quite clear. Everyone, including Christians, will be judged on the basis of what they have done.

1 Cor 3:8 – *“He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each shall receive his wages according to his labor.”* Paul introduces the idea of reward or merit. It is based on what people do.

The following passages also refute the absurd idea of eternal security regardless of our behavior – the false idea of once saved, always saved:

- Mark 9:43
- Luke 8:13; 12:43-46
- John 12: 47-48; 15:6
- Acts 13:43, 46; 20: 29-30
- Romans 8:12-13; 11:20-22
- 1 Corinthians 3:17; 6:8-9; 15: 1-2
- 2 Corinthians 5: 20-6: 2; 11:3; 12: 21-13:5
- Galatians 5:19-21; 6:7-9
- Ephesians 5: 5-6
- Philippians 3: 10-16
- Colossians 1:21-23
- 1 Thessalonians 4: 1-8
- 2 Thessalonians 2: 13-15
- 1 Timothy 4:1; 5:15; 6:10-19; 6:20-21
- 2 Timothy 2:12; 2:17; 4:10
- Titus 1:16; 3:10
- Hebrews 2: 1; 3: 1,6; 3:12-14; 4:1, 11-13; 4:14; 6:4-6; 6:11-12; 10:26-27, 35-38; 12:1, 3, 14-17, 25, 29
- James 1: 14-16, 21-22; 2: 13-14; 4:4; 5:9
- 1 Peter 4:17-18; 5:8
- 2 Peter 1:9; 2: 20-22; 3:14-17
- 1 John 2:24-26, 28
- 2 John 9
- 3 John 9-11
- Jude 5
- Revelation 2:5, 10, 16, 23, 26; 3:3, 11, 16, 21; 16:15; 22:19

February 12, 2004