

Essentials of the Faith Lesson 8

Eternal Preservation: “Can Christians Fall Away?”



I. INTRODUCTION

a. Eternal Preservation (perseverance of the saints):

- i. Those who have been elected by the Father, effectually called through the Spirit, redeemed by the substitutionary death of Christ, and converted by repentance and faith in Christ will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and only those who persevere until the end have been truly saved.

b. Eternal Preservation must be understood in terms of:

- i. The sovereignty of God over all things (Lesson 1) and election of the church to salvation, prior to creation (Lesson 3).
- ii. The congenital depravity of humanity (Lesson 2).
- iii. The atonement of sin for those who trust in Christ (Lesson 4).
- iv. The effectual call of the elect to salvation (Lesson 5).
- v. The conversion of the elect, and those effectually called, by repentance of sin and trusting in Christ (Lesson 7).

c. Therefore, the issue of eternal preservation answers the following questions:

- i. Can a once saved individual lose their salvation?
- ii. Can someone become a Christian then no longer be one at some point?
- iii. Can Christ lose someone whom he has redeemed? Will Christ take back a forgiveness he has once granted?
- iv. Can an individual commit severe enough sin such that they lose their forgiveness?
- v. Can individuals who have been sovereignly chosen for salvation by God prior to creation, effectually called to put faith in Christ, redeemed from sin by the substitutionary atoning work of Christ, justified/declared righteous by faith in Christ, and converted by repentance and faith in Christ, fall away from the faith so as to not enter heaven but eternal punishment?

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vi. Can the very work of God in a saved person be undone?

II. BIBLICAL TEACHING

a. The Person and work of God the Father in salvation ensure our eternal preservation:

His purpose -- Romans 8:28, Ephesians 1:11-12

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:11-12)

His power -- Jude 24, 1 Peter 1:5

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy... (Jude 24)

...who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:5)

His love -- Eph 1:4-5

...just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will...

and His relationship to the Son -- John 17:10,11,20

And all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them. (John 17:10)

I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word. (John 17:20)

b. The Person and work of the Son in salvation ensure our eternal preservation:

His death -- Romans 8:1, 34; Hebrews 10:14

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Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. (Hebrews 10:14)

His resurrection -- Romans 4:24-25.

...but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, *He* who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

His intercession -- Hebrews 7:25; 1 John 2:1.

Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25)

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; (1 John 2:1)

His assurances -- John 5:24

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.

His strength (along w/ the Father) – John 10:27-30

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will 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. I and the Father are one.

c. The Person and work of the Holy Spirit in salvation ensure our eternal preservation:

His sealing -- Ephesians 1:13, 4:30. (Sealing ministry; marking you out for his own; branded)

In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise. (Ephesians 1:13)

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Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. (Ephesians 4:30)
Will God “unseal” us before the day of redemption?

His indwelling -- John 14:16

I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever;

His ministries -- 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

d. Eternal preservation is ensured based on the scope of salvation.

- i. In other words, eternal preservation is sure based upon the nature of the change in the believer, namely his regeneration, justification, union with Christ, adoption, and sanctification, plus being a joint-heir with Christ (Romans 8:17).
- ii. From God’s perspective in our salvation:
 1. He secures the final salvation of all true believers--He preserves the believer.

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)

- iii. From our side of salvation
 1. We persevere by responding positively to God’s work in our lives (the word of God, one-anothers, conviction of sin, etc.) even as God preserves -- Philippians 2:12-13; 1 John 3:9; Jude 21, 24; 2 Timothy 2:19

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13)

Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. (Jude 21)

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy... (Jude 24)



Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, “The Lord knows those who are His,” and, “Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.” (2 Timothy 2:19)

Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you. (1 Timothy 4:16)

(God’s elect will persevere, however, there is always a visible means by which God works and they obey to the end, i.e. paying attention to one’s life and doctrine)

e. Salvation in Scripture is a process from eternity past through eternity future

For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. (Romans 8:29-30)

f. Is there a higher authority and judge than God who can revoke God’s work of justification on his people?

What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *is* against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. (Romans 8:31-34)

g. Assurance is the humble and joyful confidence which a believer has that he is irrevocably a child of God and has eternal life.

For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*. (Romans 8:15-17)

For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day. (2 Timothy 1:12)

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These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)

And though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory. (1 Peter 1:8)

- h. So, it must also be remembered that security and assurance, while related, do have different perspectives:
 - i. From the Divine perspective the issue is black and white--genuine believers are eternally secure.
 - ii. From the human perspective, we may not always have unshakable assurance.
 - 1. Disobedience can lead us to doubt.
 - 2. Trusting in our works can lead us to doubt.
 - 3. Improper shepherding and teaching on salvation (the sovereignty of God, election, the atonement, conversion, etc.) can lead us to doubt.
 - i. Theologically, eternal security cannot be made to mean that the person who believes is saved no matter what he does and how he lives.
 - i. This does not mean that good works maintain an individual's salvation.
 - ii. It does mean that good works evidence a genuine salvation, which will persevere until death/glorification. Works are not that which keep one's salvation, but evidence that one's salvation is kept by God.
 - iii. Those who continue in the practice of sin and apostasy are doomed.

Ephesians 5:5-6 For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Philippians 3:18-19 For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose

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god is *their* appetite, and *whose* glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.

Hebrews 10:26-29 For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on *the testimony* of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

j. Constructively, then, the teaching on security and the apostatizing warnings combine

- to provide the believer with assurance, and
- to motivate the believer to strive after godliness

The writers of the New Testament wrote their books to people--ones who had attached themselves to the church by a profession of faith. They were not so naive as to presume that all who would come into contact with their letters were regenerate individuals. However, they did not question or disparage the professed faith of their readers. The apostles addressed the church according to its profession and in this manner included tests, exhortations, and admonitions to depend solely upon grace, and warnings against apostasy by which the readers could measure their own profession and ascertain their status [Ardel Caneday, “Reciprocal Vital Union and the Perseverance of the Saints in Johannine Literature,” Unpublished post-grad seminar paper, GTS, March 1977, pp. 1-2].

The practical implication of our understanding of the doctrine of perseverance is that believers can rest secure in the assurance that their salvation is permanent; nothing can separate them from the love of God....On the other hand, however, our understanding of the doctrine of perseverance allows no room for indolence or laxity [Erickson, 1007].

k. God disciplines his true children when they are in sin as a gracious means to preserve their salvation:

Hebrews 12:5-14 ⁵ and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; ⁶ FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.” ⁷ It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? ⁸ But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

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⁹ Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He *disciplines us* for *our* good, so that we may share His holiness. ¹¹ All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. ¹² Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, ¹³ and make straight paths for your feet, so that *the limb* which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. ¹⁴ Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

Thus, God’s discipline ought to give us assurance of salvation.

I. The perseverance of God’s people through trials evidences a security in salvation

1 Peter 1:5-9 ⁵ who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, ⁷ so that the proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; ⁸ and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, ⁹ obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

III. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- a. We did nothing to contribute to our salvation so neither can we do anything to lose it.
- b. It seems impossible, given all the information above, to conceive of affixing negative prefixes to salvation's terminology (e.g. disredeemed, dejustified).
- c. It seems impossible to conceive of the opposite of passing from death to life. However, God prevents this misconception the 41 times he says, ζῶν αἰώνιον, “eternal life.”
- d. It seems equally impossible, given the declarations of Scripture on absolutely nothing being able to take the believer out of the Father’s hand (John 10:29) or separate him from God's love (Romans 8:38-39), to conceive of a man's own act so doing.
- e. It is impossible to deny the clear declarations on preservation unto blamelessness at the end (1 Corinthians 1:8-9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; Jude 1, 24), of being revealed at the end (Colossians 3:4; 1 Peter 1:4-5), and being raised up at the end (John 6:35-44).

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f. On biblical assurance:

- Biblical assurance is the most valuable possession anyone can have.
- Biblical assurance is certainty concerning your eternal destiny.
- Popular assurance is uncertainty concerning your eternal destiny.
- Assurance of salvation has a potentially powerful impact on one's service for Christ.
- Assurance foundational for the Christian life.

[From Wilkin, *Grace in Focus*, (May/June 1997): 2-8.]

g. Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 17)

- I. They, whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.
- II. This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which arises also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

h. John Calvin

- In fine, we are sufficiently taught by experience itself, that calling and faith are of little value without perseverance... But Christ has freed us from anxiety on this head; for the following promises undoubtedly have respect to the future: “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me, and him that comes to me I will in no wise cast out.” Again, “This is the will of him that sent me, that of all which he has given me I should lose nothing; but should raise it up at the last day” (John 6:37, 39).
- from Institutes, Book 3, 24, 6
- Moreover, it cannot be doubted, that since Christ prays for all the elect, he asks the same thing for them as he asked for Peter—viz. that their faith fail not (Luke 22:32). Hence we infer, that there is no danger of their falling away, since the Son of God, who

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asks that their piety may prove constant, never meets with a refusal. What then did our Savior intend to teach us by this prayer, but just to confide, that whenever we are his our eternal salvation is secure? (Institutes, Book 3, 24, 6)

- i. Eternal preservation of the saints brings God great glory:
 - i. If it were possible for a believer to sin his way out of salvation, he would do so, and quite quickly.
 - ii. The great reality that heaven is, and will be, vastly populated, confirms indeed that God preserves the salvation of the elect.
 - iii. However, God is shown as powerful in keeping hold of justified individuals who, though being conformed to the image of Christ, yet fail.
 - iv. God is shown as true in keeping hold of justified individuals. He never loses one. “Eternal life” really means “eternal.”
 - v. God is shown as the sole accomplisher of salvation (he will not undo what he has done).
- j. “Once saved always saved” is not the best way to think of eternal preservation.
 - i. Promotes a passive view of salvation and sanctification.
 - ii. Though we are not saved by works, nor do we remain saved by works, God only saves those who persevere in the faith (Jay Adams).
 - iii. Perseverance, genuine belief in Christ as Lord and Savior w/ accompanying fruit (not perfection), is the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.
 - iv. That work of the Spirit enables us to keep on believing.
- k. Those who “fall away” from Jesus Christ, despite an appearance of devotion in the past, unless repentant, prove to never have been elect, effectually called, and converted to Jesus Christ.

1 John 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not *really* of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but *they went out*, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us.
- l. Though we may struggle to hold onto Christ, we can be sure that he holds onto us.

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- m. The very reason we hold onto him is that he is holding onto us (cf. John 10:27-30).
- n. Practical implications
 - i. Be comforted in the fact that God will never abandon us.
 - ii. Be diligent to use God’s appointed means of grace to persevere (do not remove yourself from regular Bible study, prayer, corporate worship, discipleship)
 - iii. Be steadfast in trials and persecutions since Christ will never abandon us.

IV. SOURCES

- a. “The Cross and Salvation” (Bruce Demarest)
- b. “After Darkness, Light” (Ed. R.C. Sproul Jr.)
- c. “Institutes of the Christian Religion” (John Calvin)
- d. “The Master’s Seminary Theology 3 Syllabus” (Dr. Trevor Craigen)
- e. “Systematic Theology” (Wayne Grudem)