

WHEN ARE CHRISTIANS FINALLY SAVED?

by

Bernie Koerselman

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All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. . . Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. . . To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations¹

(Matthew 10:22, 24:13, Revelation 2:26).

Introduction

For purposes of this article, the phrase “finally saved,” is defined as salvation that is once and forever possessed, never to be lost.

The term “saved” is used loosely. A person may say, “I was saved on . . .” giving the date of his conversion. Pastors sometimes speak to their congregations as if they believe the entire congregation is “saved.” A phrase sometimes used to mean the same thing is “born again.” People sometimes speak of themselves as “born again,” intending that to mean they have salvation that cannot be lost.

When is a Christian finally saved? The popular answer to that question is when a person makes a sincere confession of faith. Once a person has made a confession of faith, he is often thereafter referred to as “saved,” usually meaning having salvation never to be lost.

There are many difficulties with that popular view. The confession of faith is the beginning of the troubles with this view. As I have written in many other articles, the confession of faith used in many churches is biblically wrong or inadequate. As I have repeatedly observed, many churches exhort their people to accept Jesus as their Savior, promising them they will then have eternal life. As I have exhaustively written, that is a false statement, not found anywhere in Scripture. The biblical way to seek salvation is to ask Jesus Christ to become your Lord and to pledge to obey him as best you can the rest of your life. Jesus is the Savior of all for whom he is Lord (see Romans 10:9-10, 13, 14:9; Acts 16:31, Acts 20:21; 1 Corinthians 6:11; 2 Corinthians 4:5; 1 Peter 3:15; Colossians 2:6-7; Acts 10:36, 5:14, 9:42, 11:21, 16:15, 18:8).

Even if a person confesses faith in the Lord Jesus, as stated above, and does so sincerely from the heart, is that person then finally and forever saved? That question will elicit extremely varied answers throughout Christendom. Those who claim the false doctrine of unconditional eternal security declare that a person is finally and forever saved upon making a sincere confession of faith, as that false doctrine is based on the premise that salvation once obtained cannot be lost. Such a claim has grave practical and theological difficulties. Many people who claimed a saving faith and even displayed evidence of such a faith for weeks, months, or even years, later leave the faith, thereafter showing no

¹*The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 (electronic ed.) Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

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evidence of spiritual regeneration. Others make a confession of faith but quickly disappear from the church, showing no evidence of any spiritual change.

This issue is of extreme importance – a watershed issue. If one accepts the popular view that salvation has been determined once and for all at the time of confession of faith, how one lives out the Christian life becomes relatively unimportant. Personal holiness, righteousness, and obedience cannot be of critical importance if one is already assured of heaven. It is hard to motivate those already assured of heaven. Pastors advocating this view have to rely on exhorting their congregation to seek rewards in heaven they say are given to those who are righteous, holy, and obedient.

Pastors who teach this popular view are often selective in use of the Scriptures. How else will they explain scriptures that clearly say there is no inheritance in heaven for those who act wickedly? I sat in such a well-known pastor's audience as he finished the tenth chapter of Hebrews. I was eager to hear how he would explain the last two verses. He didn't. He simply avoided them. People accepting the notion that salvation is final upon confession of faith either ignore or rationalize away the many warnings given by Jesus and the Apostles about wickedness resulting in loss of salvation.

From this popular view come various non-biblical rationales. When people who once confessed the faith thereafter fall away from the faith, some people claim they were never saved in the first instance. Others, such as we will see from Dr. Charles Stanley, remain consistent and claim that such persons are saved even if they fall away from and even deny the faith.

On the other hand, those who believe that one is finally saved at the point of death are concerned about righteousness and holiness in their everyday life. They accept that the warnings about wicked behavior that deny salvation would apply to them if they were to become wicked. They fear God and know that God will judge all mankind and that each will be repaid according to what he has done.

As always, as Bereans (Acts 17:11) our job is to search the Scriptures to see what God has said about this issue in his Word. We will start that investigation with the teachings of the Lord Jesus.

Jesus Said to Persevere To the End

Jesus frequently taught, often in parables, about the need to persist in purity and holiness to the end. We should note that for each of us the "end" will be our death or the rapture. If we are still alive, we are not at the "end." Consider the following three promises of Jesus:

All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. . . Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. . . To him who overcomes and

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does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations (Matthew 10:22, 24:13, Revelation 2:26).

In all three instances, Jesus is warning his disciples about persecution to come. He says it is those who persevere (stand firm) to the end who will be saved. Jesus implied that those who do not persevere to the end will not be saved. Jesus told a parable that was right on point (on all fours, as we saw in law):

“Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.

“But suppose the servant says to himself, ‘My master is taking a long time in coming,’ and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants 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 is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers (Luke 1:24-46).

The parable tells of two people who start out as Christians. One remains faithful, the other does not. Jesus said it will be good for the faithful servant when he returns.

But our concern is the other servant. Let’s remember this second servant begins as a servant of the Lord. He is given responsibility for the other servants. The parallel is to someone who was faithful with responsibility in the church. But that servant grows weary waiting for the return of his master and begins to abuse the servants he is responsible for. Don’t we see that parallel in some ministries? The leaders seem to have lost sight of the Master – the Lord Jesus, and now seem to have their own agenda, raising money to build even bigger churches, as if creating a kingdom of their own.

Our question is whether that second servant was still saved, even though he became unfaithful. This parable answers that question ever so clearly. The Lord Jesus will return, judge the unfaithful servant, and “cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.” Are unbelievers saved? NO! Is this unfaithful servant saved? NO! He began as a servant entrusted with duties to discharge on behalf of the Master. But how he began was not important. How he ended is all that was important.

Jesus told another parable that is especially powerful. The over-riding thrust of the parable has to do with forgiveness. But for our purposes, we want to examine how the Lord dealt with one of the servants, the one who had been forgiven a vast sum. As you read this familiar parable, remember that we are reading about a servant who had been entrusted with much by his Master. Our question remains to determine whether a person who once was a trusted servant is guaranteed eternal life. Jesus said,

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“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart” (Matthew 18:23-35).

A servant to whom the Master entrusted millions would have been well-known to his Master. Very few deserve that kind of credit. We observe this to show that this servant was certainly “saved” according to the popular definition. Did he have salvation guaranteed to him because he had once been a notable, faithful servant?

After the Master learned that the servant refused to forgive a fellow servant a small sum, the Master became very angry with him. Jesus said, “In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.” The master reinstated the debt he had formerly forgiven. The servant couldn’t repay the debt when he was free. How could he repay it if he were in prison being tortured? He couldn’t of course. Thus his punishment would continue forever – the duration of punishment expected in hell.

Does this have application for you and me? Note the next verse. Jesus warned, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” Notwithstanding our prior history with the Lord, even if we had been given great responsibility as had this servant, we will be turned over to the torturers forever if we do not forgive our brothers from our hearts. Does it matter if we once had a conversion experience? No! All that matters is whether or not we forgive our brothers from our hearts. If we will not forgive, we can expect awful, eternal punishment in hell’s fire.

Jesus’ emphasis on perseverance was echoed by other writers of the New Testament. Paul told Timothy, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if

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you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Timothy 4:16). The writer to the Hebrews wrote, “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first” and “So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised (Hebrews 3:14, 10:35-36). The Apostle John wrote, “See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promised us—even eternal life (1 John 2:24-25).

Can Conduct Cost Salvation?

Much of the church has failed to teach Scripture’s warnings about the judgment awaiting those who do not live the Christian life demanded in Scripture. Consider the following:

The Barna Research Group found that professing Christians had moderately higher rates of divorce than the general population, including atheists and agnostics. Looking at the statistics more closely shows even more surprising trends: 27% of those describing themselves as “born-again Christians” are previously or currently divorced compared to 24% of the general population. But in the Baptist and nondenominational Protestant churches which dominate the Bible belt in the U.S., 29% and 35%, respectively, were divorced, more than any other Christian denomination.

A CNS News report dated January 21, 2002, said, "Born-again Christians are just as likely to get divorced as anybody else in American society, and the vast majority of those identifying themselves as divorced and born-again actually got their divorces after converting to Christianity, according to a new book called *The Divorce Reality*."

Baptist churches almost universally hold to the false doctrine of unconditional eternal security. They cannot be consistent with that false doctrine and also teach that a person’s conduct can deny them salvation. Apparently they are consistent, as their adherents have the second highest rate of divorce of any group in America, according to Barna research.

Jesus said the only reason his followers can divorce is for marital infidelity. He said to divorce for any other reason and then to remarry, the person getting the divorce, the innocent spouse (if he or she remarried) and the person who married the innocent spouse would all commit adultery. Scripture does not allow a woman to secure a divorce at all. (See examples given at 1 Corinthians 7:11-13). For a more complete discussion, please read the article “May Christians Divorce (and Remarry)?” at www.bereanpublishers.com | Important Issues.

Perhaps most churches advocating the false doctrine of unconditional eternal security refuse to teach what Scripture clearly says because they believe conduct does not matter.

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After all, how can it matter if their congregants have salvation that cannot be lost? Doubtless they can do anything they wish without fear of losing their salvation.

But, as we shall see below, such teaching (or lack of teaching) is false or misleading. We will later examine two false doctrines that war against Scripture's teaching that Christians must live lives characterized by holiness, righteousness, and obedience to the commands of our Lord Jesus.

Jesus' Warnings

Jesus taught we should take extreme measures not to sin: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell" (Matthew 5:29-30).

Jesus made this a very serious matter when he warned that the result of sinning could be to be thrown into hell. Did Jesus qualify this and say that if you had once made a confession of faith that this did not apply to you? No, of course not! He taught this to his disciples, as well as all the others who heard him.

Jesus also taught about the importance of doing the will of God: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). The process of discipleship is to bring a person to a knowledge of the truth, have them begin their relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ through a conversion experience, then teach them to obey all Jesus' teachings and commands (Matthew 28:18-20). What happens if such a person begins, but then falters, then does not do the will of God? Will he be finally saved, even though he began correctly, confessing faith in Jesus as his Lord? No, he will not! To say otherwise would make Jesus a liar. For such a person to be saved, he would have to repent, confess his sin to the Lord, ask his forgiveness, and thereafter persevere in doing the will of God as best he can, repenting each time he failed.

Jesus added other criteria of a saving faith that he linked directly with salvation. He said, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). Who is Jesus talking to? He is speaking to his disciples and the surrounding crowd. Did he speak quietly to his disciples and say, "This doesn't pertain to you"? NO! Why not? Because it did pertain to them. Among them was Judas, then Jesus' disciple, but who would later betray his Master, even to death.

Jesus spoke directly to the issue we are investigating when he talked about remaining in him. He said, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much

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fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned (John 15:4-6).

Jesus began by saying that we can bear fruit only if we remain in him. Note that he was speaking of people who were in him. But then the ominous warning: “If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.” Note the imagery. If we don’t remain in the Lord Jesus, we will be thrown away. We will wither. We will be picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. Does that sound like a reward, or lack of reward, for a true believing Christian? Of course not. It sounds very much like hell fire. And this has to do with remaining – persevering, exactly the issue we are examining. Any professing Christian who does not remain in the Lord Jesus has only the fires of hell to look forward to. It doesn’t matter how well you started. It only matters how you finish.

Blotted From the Lamb's Book Of Life

Those who claim their salvation cannot be lost once gained must have grave difficulty with the idea that their names could be erased from the Lamb’s Book of Life. As you recall, it is essential that all believers have their names in that book. The Apostle John wrote, “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15). No one will be saved whose name is not written in that book.

The first mention in Scripture of a person’s name being removed from the book of life occurred in an exchange between God and Moses:

So Moses went back to the LORD and said, “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”

The LORD replied to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book (Exodus 32:31-33).

Who did God say would be blotted out of his book? Those who sin against him.

Now consider what Jesus told the church at Sardis. Jesus accused the church at Sardis of having the reputation of being alive, but they were dead. He told them to repent and to obey what they had received and heard. “Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels” (Revelation 3:5).

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Of the church at Sardis, there were only a few people whose names Jesus said he would never blot from the book of life – those who had not soiled their clothes (they were righteous), those who will walk with Jesus, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

Would Jesus say he will not blot someone's name from the book of life if it were not possible? We know it is possible from the exchange between Moses and God. Jesus warned that a person could have his name (and salvation) blotted out.

Jesus also told us whose name will not be blotted out of his book of life. It is "He who overcomes." That is the same as saying he who perseveres to the end. Overcoming seems to imply hurdles and difficulties that must be overcome. Persevering has the same sense – persevering through hardship and trial.

Those who would be saved must overcome. This is not the sense of making a one-time confession of faith. There is no overcoming in that. It is the sense of overcoming one difficulty and obstacle after another until the end of one's life.

In both the Old and New Testament examples, names would be blotted out of the book of life because of sin. People can lose their salvation by sinning. This will be made clear by Paul's warnings.

Paul's Warnings

Throughout many of his letters to the churches, Paul taught the believers how to live in order to please God and do God's will. He also gave explicit warnings about the results of wickedness.

When Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, he addressed the letter to "the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 1:1). Even though he regarded them as saints and faithful in Christ Jesus, he warned them:

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. ⁴ Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. ⁵ For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient (Ephesians 5:3-6).

Who was he warning? He began by saying, "But among you . . ." Paul was warning the saints about what would happen to them if they were to become immoral, impure or greedy. Would these saints still be saved even if they became immoral, impure or greedy? NO! Paul said no such person has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

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Then Paul warned them against those who would deceive them with empty words. What words would Paul be warning against? In the context of what he said, he would be warning against those who would say their conduct did not matter, that it would not affect their salvation, and perhaps that they were saved for all time when they made their confession of faith.

Likewise Paul warned the Galatians:

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21).

Paul greatly expanded the list of unacceptable, salvation-denying actions adding debauchery, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, and orgies. Lest we think the list is all-inclusive, he added, “and the like.”

Once again, lest we think our actions do not matter to our salvation, Paul made it crystal clear: “I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” What about those who fall away from the faith, who once met the above criteria, but now have lapsed into their previous ungodly lifestyles? Are they going to heaven as “saved” Christians? NO! They will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Lest anyone attempt to deceive you and claim that one can be saved without inheriting the kingdom of God, let’s look at Jesus’ final warning in Scripture:

“But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

Will false teachers also claim that being thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulphur is not being thrown into hell? That is the destination for those who do not inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul told the Galatians, “A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up (Galatians 6:7-9).

That teaching told the Galatians a lot. There was no exception for the person who had confessed faith in Christ Jesus. Paul was addressing an entire church that had confessed

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faith in the Lord Jesus. He told them that if they lived according to their sinful nature, they would be destroyed, but if they persevered they would reap a harvest for doing good.

For additional evidence of loss of salvation through wicked conduct, please study Colossians 3:5, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8, and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

There is a one more strong warning against sinning we should not miss. The writer to the Hebrews warned, “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Hebrews 10:26-27).

Does conduct matter? Yes, indeed. We worship and serve a holy, righteous God. He rightfully demands that those who seek salvation through our Lord Jesus become like Jesus (Romans 8:29). Those who wrongly believe they can be saved and deliberately keep on sinning face judgment and a raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Notwithstanding such clear warnings in Scripture, in our presence a well-known pastor told his church of approximately 15,000 that those who were “Christian” adulterers and “Christian” homosexuals did not face loss of salvation, but loss of rewards in heaven, and less than the abundant life here on earth. Is that what we’ve read? Not at all. How many will hear that false message, and confidently continue in their sin, only to face hell’s fire and damnation?

Peter’s Warning

Peter warns about false teachers in the second chapter of his second epistle. He harshly criticizes them because they are leading people astray and destroying the faith of those who follow them. He said, “For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him” (2 Peter 2:18-19).

I think of the similarity of Peter’s description of these false teachers to what we see in the church today. Peter said they appealed to the lustful desires of sinful human nature. Isn’t that what is done today by those who claim you can have salvation, never to be lost, by making a sincere confession of faith, and thereafter whatever you do cannot affect your salvation? Peter says these false teachers entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error – those whose faith is not yet strongly grounded. They promise them freedom – to do what they want – while the freedom promised in Scripture is freedom from slavery to sin.

Then Peter speaks of the people who are deceived:

If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the

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end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: “A dog returns to its vomit,” and, “A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud” (2Peter 2:20-22).

Peter’s description is powerfully on point to our subject. Peter describes people that have begun the process of salvation – “they escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” The false eternal security teachers would say such people are eternally secure in their salvation. But Peter said that if they are again entangled in the corruption of the world and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. He went on to say they would be worse off to have known the way of righteousness and then turn their back on it. How could they be worse off? Because we will all be judged and punished according to what we know (Luke 12:47-48).

When Peter says they will be worse off at the end than they were at the beginning, we must understand that at the beginning they were sinners who would receive hell’s fire at the final judgment. If they had received a never to be lost salvation upon knowing the Lord Jesus, they could not have been worse off at the end because they would have had salvation at the end. Peter demolishes the claims of the false eternal security teachers.

Scripture Warns Against Unbelief

There are also passages of Scripture that speak to those who are in the faith but warns them about not continuing in the faith. An unusually explicit passage is found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain (1 Corinthians 15:1-2).

Paul calls them brothers, a term reserved for fellow believers – those who are brothers in Christ Jesus. He speaks to them about the gospel he preached to them. He reminds them that they received that gospel and took their stand on it. He assures them they are saved by that gospel, but then qualifies that assurance, saying, IF you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. What happens if later they do not hold firmly to that gospel? They have believed in vain. Are those saved who have believed in vain? Of course not! It is as though they had never believed.

Paul also discussed with the Romans the relationship of the Jews and Gentiles as pertains to salvation. He told the Roman Gentiles that most of the Jews had rejected the Gospel. He used the analogy of an olive tree and its branches:

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If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root,¹⁸ do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.¹⁹ You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.”²⁰ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid.²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.²³ And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again (Romans 11:17-23).

Paul characterized the Jews as some of the branches that have been broken off and the Gentiles as wild olive shoots. The olive root is the Lord Jesus. Paul points out that the Gentiles were grafted in to the root while the Jews were broken off. Paul sternly warned the Roman Gentiles, “Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.” Why were the Jews broken off? Paul explained: “They were broken off because of unbelief.”

Lest anyone misunderstand, Paul became even more explicit in his warning, saying that God is kind to the Gentiles, provided they continue in his kindness. What if they do not continue in his kindness? Paul continued, “You also will be cut off.” The passage is all about salvation. To be cut off because of unbelief means to forfeit salvation. Will unbelievers be saved? No! If one who formerly believed is later cut off because of unbelief, will that former believer be saved? No! It is not how we start, it is how we finish that counts.

Paul also warned the Colossians in his letter to them, saying, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant” (Colossians 1:21-23).

In that short passage, Paul summarized the gospel beginning with God’s initiative in providing a way for us to be reconciled to him. He tells the purpose of Christ’s sacrificial death – to present us holy in God’s sight. But then he presents the qualification: “If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.” We are not only to continue in our faith – the perseverance we are examining in this article – but we are to be established and firm in our faith. This is also what Paul told the Corinthians – “you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.” This is not to be a casual faith. No. We are to be firmly established in our faith. Again the promise is only for those who continue – those who persevere.

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What happens to those who do not persevere? I have contended that they have no salvation and will instead receive the wrath and punishment of God. Those who do not persevere are those who lapse back into unbelief, and those who revert to their former ungodly lifestyles and sin. Paul speaks directly to the issue of those who do not believe and obey. The context is Paul's letter of comfort to the suffering church at Thessalonica. The believers are being persecuted for the sake of the gospel. Paul assures them:

All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. ⁶ God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you ⁷ and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. ⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power ¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10).

Paul describes the punishment of those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus: "They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power." Is there any question about the destination of those who do not know God and do not obey? It is those who persevere in their faith in our Lord Jesus and obedience to his gospel who are granted eternal life.

The writer to the Hebrews added his own warning, one that is especially grim. He speaks of those who have known in full the Christian life, but then fell away. He warned:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, ⁶ if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace (Hebrews 6:4-6).

This may be the most frightening passage in all of Scripture. Paul told the Roman Gentile Christians that the Jews could be grafted in again who had been cut out because of unbelief. But here we have former Christians who had it all – they tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age. No thinking person could claim these people had not been saved. Yet the author warns about them falling away, but with the grim warning that if they do they can not be brought back to repentance. Hopefully this does not apply to any of us. We can know it does not apply to us if the Father again draws us back to Jesus in repentance and gives us the indwelling Holy Spirit.

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Example From Israel's History

Three times in the New Testament there are discussions about the Israelites after they were delivered from Egypt by God. These examples give an insight into God's response to unbelief and sin. Let's look first at Paul's recital to the Romans.

Paul recounts the delivery of the Israelites from Egypt. He makes a point of making sure that we understand that all were initially saved:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea.² They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.³ They all ate the same spiritual food⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert.

Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry."⁸ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died.⁹ We should not test the Lord, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes.¹⁰ And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! (1 Corinthians 10:1-12).

Paul likens the Israelites deliverance from Egypt to the deliverance from sin that all of us experience upon conversion to faith in Christ Jesus. Egypt is often used as a "type" for sin. Paul emphasized the blessings they had received, saying they were all under the cloud, they all went through the sea, they were all baptized into Moses, ate the same spiritual food, drank the same spiritual water that came from the rock which was Christ. Yet, most of them were not ultimately saved but died in the desert due to their sinfulness and unbelief.

Twice Paul said these things occurred as examples (1) to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did and (2) as warnings for us. He concluded his warning by saying, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." What was the example for us in our inquiry? The entire nation was delivered (saved) by God from Egypt. Yet almost all the adults fell away through sin and unbelief and were condemned.

God used this example from the Old Testament twice more in the New Testament. The writer to the Hebrews wrote: "Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were

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not able to enter, because of their unbelief” (Hebrews 3:16-19). They all left Egypt, and were delivered through the Red Sea – they began a walk with God. But when they came to Canaan and God wanted them to enter and conquer it, they rebelled. As a result, God condemned all but a few of the adults to death in the desert, forcing the nation to wander in the desert for 40 years until they all died. It was irrelevant that they all were initially delivered by God.

In the third instance, Jude wrote, “I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe” (Jude 4).

Three times God’s word recounts those who began with God but fell away only to be condemned. God made it clear they would not enter his rest – they were not finally saved; they were instead condemned.

Just as new believers are immediately delivered from slavery to sin upon conversion, so were the Israelites delivered from Egypt. But being initially delivered from sin does not prevent us from lapsing back into sin and falling under God’s condemnation, just as happened to the Israelites. During their trek to Canaan, the Israelites were able to see God’s miraculous hand delivering them and providing for them over and over. Yet most of them did not keep a firm faith and finally rebelled. Later, when they tried to change their mind, God would have none of it. God condemned them to wander in the desert and die. He would take others into his rest in Canaan, those who would trust and believe.

Paul’s View Of His Own Life

Let’s examine how Paul viewed his own assurance of salvation. Did he feel he was guaranteed a place in heaven because he had an incredible conversion experience on the way to Damascus? Surely Paul might believe he would be guaranteed an honored place in heaven because of his work for the Kingdom, his suffering, deprivation, beatings and imprisonment as well as writing more of the New Testament than any other apostle.

But Paul did not take his salvation for granted. Paul often described living the Christian life as a race. “However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24). Note his use of the words “if only I may finish the race.”

Paul also described the Christian life as a race:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.²⁶ Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air.²⁷ No, I beat my body and

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make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Did you carefully read verse 27? Paul, the great Apostle, preacher, and evangelist said he disciplined himself so he would not be disqualified for the prize. In the earlier passages we examined Paul's warnings to the churches against sin (or acts of the sin nature). Paul says in v. 27 he beats his body and makes it his slave so he will not be guilty of those acts and be disqualified for the prize – salvation itself.

Is the prize eternal life as I have stated? Or is it merely some reward in heaven? Paul answered that himself when he wrote the Philippians:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:10-14).

Again Paul humbly states (in v. 13) "I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it." And what is the prize – that for which God called Paul heavenward in Christ Jesus? That is eternal life in the presence of the Lord Jesus and God our Father.

Paul had the same reservation about himself and others when he wrote the Romans: "Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently" (Romans 8:23-25).

Paul was still waiting for his adoption as a son of God. How can this be? It is possible if our adoption as sons occurs at our death, after we have persevered to the end.

But there came a time when Paul felt differently. He knew his time was up. He was now much older. He had remained faithful. He expected to be executed soon. This older Paul said:

For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

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Now Paul is confident he has fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. He looks forward to the crown of righteousness in store for him.

During his life Paul knew he could fall away. He disciplined himself so that he would remain faithful. Finally, when he was about to die he felt certain of his reward.

Concern That Churches Have Fallen Away

Paul expressed his concern that entire churches had fallen away from the faith. When writing to the Thessalonians he said, “I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless” (1 Thessalonians 3:5). The only way Paul’s efforts would have been useless is if the church at Thessalonica had lost their faith, or abandoned their faith, or subscribed to a false gospel. If their members would still have been “saved,” Paul’s efforts would not have been useless as the people would still have received eternal life. Paul would not have had such concerns if the people could not have lost their salvation.

Paul was gravely concerned about the church at Galatia. Jews from the circumcision group had visited them and taught the Galatians that in order to be saved they must follow the Jewish traditions as well as following Jesus. Paul wrote them, “You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you” (Galatians 4:10). You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. . . . You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? . . . If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other (Galatians 5:4,7,15).

Paul’s letter to the Galatians sought to expose the lies and false doctrines of the Judaizers (the circumcision group) and to get the Galatians back to the knowledge of the true gospel. He said, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19). Paul knew that the church at Galatia may have fallen away due to the false doctrines the Judaizers taught them and he was agonizing for them (as if in childbirth) to come back to the Lord. He suspected some had fallen away, those who were seeking to be justified by law. Paul said of them, “You . . . have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” Could anyone be saved who has been alienated from Christ? Or who has fallen away from grace? NO! Those saved are in Christ! It is by grace we are saved!

When Jesus told John to write to the seven churches, he warned several of the churches that they had serious problems, threatening their relationship with him and even their salvation. To the church at Ephesus, Jesus said, “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. ⁵ Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (Revelation 2:4-5). Jesus warned the church at Pergamum about people in their midst who held to false teachings and commanded them to repent,

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warning that otherwise he would come and fight against them. Jesus warned the church in Thyatira that they tolerated the false prophetess Jezebel, that she was leading Jesus' servants into sexual immorality and eating of foods sacrificed to idols, and that they must repent of her ways. Jesus warned the church at Sardis that they were dead though they had the reputation for being alive. Jesus commanded them to obey what they had received and heard and to repent. Jesus said a few people in Sardis remained who were worthy.

Jesus castigated the church at Laodicea, saying,

“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see” (Revelation 3:15-18).

What is the spiritual result for those Jesus would spit out of his mouth? It is damnation, not salvation. We are commanded to remain “in” Christ Jesus or we will be cut off, picked up and thrown into the fire.

Jesus warned all of the churches, in the quotes above, that their salvation was at stake if they did not take steps to remedy their situation. Jesus would not have warned them as he did if the churches (and their members) were unconditionally, eternally secure in their salvation.

Examples of Those Who Fell Away

If people are finally saved at the conversion experience we won't be able to find any examples of people who fell away. But that is not so. As we will see, there are numerous recitals of people who fell away from the faith:

Paul discussed the plight of some younger widows. He concluded by saying, “Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan” (1 Timothy 5:15). Paul's statement presumes they were in the faith but turned away from it to follow Satan – with the certain result being condemnation by God.

Paul gave Timothy instructions about overseers, saying, “He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil (1 Timothy 3:6). Here we have a person being appointed to a church office, who was obviously a convert (Paul warns that he not be a recent convert), and who could develop pride at being elevated to a responsible position in the church and be condemned with the same judgment as the devil – being thrown into the lake of fire.

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Paul warned Timothy, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10). To wander from the faith presumes they were first in the faith and have now left it.

Paul also wrote about specific individuals who fell away:

Paul wrote Timothy exhorting him to hold on to faith and a good conscience. Then he said, “Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith. Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme (1 Timothy 1:18-20).

Paul warned, “Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some (2 Timothy 2:16-18). No only have these individuals wandered away from the truth, but they destroy the faith of some, another indication that people who once had the faith can have their faith destroyed by false teaching, reinforcing that just because faith may once be had, there is no assurance that it will continue.

“Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica” (2 Timothy 4:10). [The person who loves the world becomes an enemy of God. (See James 4:4 and 1 John 2:15).]

There are also the examples of Ananias and Sapphira who lied about the price of the land they sold and dropped dead when confronted by Peter (Acts 5:3, 9). The Scripture has many such examples and warns repeatedly about falling away from the truth or the faith.

Parable of People Falling Away

The parable of the sower illustrates how and why people fall away. This is an excellent example, not open to disagreement over interpretation because Jesus interpreted it for us. Let's first look at the parable:

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown” (Matthew 13:3-8).

The disciples asked Jesus what the parable meant. Jesus explained:

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“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown” (Matthew 13:18-23).

The parable gives four examples of people who heard the gospel. When the first does not understand the gospel, Satan snatches away what was sown. This example is not on point to our discussion, as the person who heard did not become a believer.

In the second instance, however, these people heard and received the gospel with joy. They would be typical of the tens of thousands who come forward and make a commitment for Christ, but then almost immediately fall away. Jesus said, “Since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. You will see that illustrated below in the research of Ray Comfort.

In the third instance, the people heard and received the word. But over time the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. These people also have fallen away. They have drifted away, likely hardly realizing their condition, still believing they are saved believers. Instead, they are like the church at Laodicea of which Jesus said, “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16). Does anyone believe they can be saved if Jesus is about to spit them out of his mouth?

Only in the fourth instance did the people receive the word and reproduce themselves a hundred, sixty, or 30 times, and were saved. Of the three categories who received the word, only one category retained the word and produced fruit. The others are examples of people who received the word but later fell away from the faith. The parable clearly shows the second and third categories both began (were saved in popular thinking) because we know the plants began to come up. Both fell away, one withered, the other was choked.

The importance of producing fruit is illustrated by the Apostle John as he quotes the teaching of Jesus. Again, this is directly on point to our discussion of whether people once committed to the Lord Jesus can thereafter lose their salvation. Jesus taught:

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“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (John 15:1-2).

Just as we saw in the parable of the Sower, those who do not produce fruit are cut off (or fall away). Does anyone believe that he can be saved if he is cut off from Christ – the vine? Please notice that this refers to people who were “in me.” These were not people who did not know Jesus or “were never saved.” They were in Jesus but who thereafter failed to produce fruit and were cut off. What happens to those branches? “If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned” (John 15:6). Does anyone believe that a believer is thrown into the fire and burned? In this instance, believers “in Christ” failed to produce fruit for the kingdom and were cut off by God. They were condemned.

Jesus reveals God’s thinking regarding those who fail to produce fruit:

“A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

”“Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down’” (Luke 13:6-9).

God won’t tolerate unproductive believers in his kingdom. He looks for fruit from those who are his servants and expects to find it. Even Jesus (the man who took care of the vineyard) agreed that the tree should be cut down if it did not produce fruit the next year.

Please note that this tree was in God’s vineyard. It represents someone who made a commitment to the Lord Jesus, but thereafter coasted, not producing anything for the kingdom. If he did not change, he would be cut down. Again I ask, does anyone seriously believe you can be saved if you are cut down by the Lord Jesus? Spectators is another name for such people. Perhaps they come to Sunday church services, but then leave only to return the next Sunday. But they produce no fruit for the kingdom.

Prophecies Of People Falling Away

Jesus and Paul prophesied about falling away in the end times. Paul prophesied that in later times there would be those who will abandon the faith:

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons (1 Timothy 4:1).

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Jesus prophesied about turning away from the faith in the end times, saying, “At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people” (Matthew 24:10-11).

Both Paul and Jesus are referring to people who were in the faith. People cannot abandon or turn away from a faith they did not have. Earlier in this article we have seen warnings to those in the faith and now warnings that in later times, perhaps the end times, people will turn away and abandon the faith. All those people had confessed faith in Christ Jesus and had been in the faith. But they are no longer. Are they still saved? You know the resounding answer is NO! It is those who persevere to the end, Jesus said, who will be saved.

The book of Revelation contains the prophecy that the Anti-Christ will force everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name (Revelation 13:16-17).

God’s people are forbidden to take the mark:

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand,¹⁰ he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb.¹¹ And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.” This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus (Revelation 14:9-12).

Doubtless in the great falling away prophesied for the end times, many will take the mark even though they consider themselves Christians. Why shouldn’t they take the mark? Weren’t they taught that they could never lose their salvation? All who take the mark, according to Scripture will be condemned. They will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. The saints are called on to endure, to obey God’s commandments and to remain faithful to Jesus. Those believers who take the mark will fall away, never to be granted forgiveness again, and will be condemned.

Are We In Those Later Times?

Ray Comfort's *Bride of Heaven, Pride of Hell* may lead you to believe we are in those later times about which Jesus and Paul prophesied that many would turn away from the faith.

Ray quotes statistics of a major denomination in the United States that disclosed it obtained an incredible 294,784 decisions for Christ in 1990. Yet, in 1991, it could only

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find 14,337 in a Christian fellowship. There were 280,447 decisions that couldn't be accounted for. The leadership had no clue as to why this happened, but could only conclude, "Something is wrong!"

The trend continued. In August, 1996 a leading U.S. denomination revealed that during 1995 it secured 384,057 decisions, but retained only 22,983 in fellowship. It couldn't account for 361,074 supposed conversions.

Ray told of another crusade at which 600 decisions were obtained, no doubt with much rejoicing. But 90 days later, follow-up workers couldn't find even one person who was going on in his or her faith. In 1991 in Cleveland, Ohio, 400 decisions were obtained in an Inner City Outreach, but, again, later not one person could be found who continued in the faith.

Ray quotes Charles E. Hackett, the Division of Home Missions National Director for the Assemblies of God in the U.S.: "A soul at the altar does not generate much excitement in some circles because we realize approximately 95 out of every 100 will not become integrated into the church. In fact, most of them will not return for a second visit."

This phenomenon is not unique to the U.S. According to Ray, a pastor in Boulder, Colorado sent a team to Russia in 1991 and secured 2,500 decisions. The next year they found only 30 persevering in their faith. In Leeds, England, a visiting U.S. speaker acquired 400 decisions for a local church. However, six weeks later only two were going on, and they eventually fell away.

A pastor who traveled to India every year since 1980 told Ray he saw 80,000 decision cards stacked in a hut in the city of Rajamundry, the "results" of past evangelistic crusades. But he maintained that one would be fortunate to find even 80 Christians in the entire city. That is 1/10 of 1%.

Ray also cited statistics of the Barna Research Institute that indicated 62% of Americans say they have a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ. However, a Gallup Poll, taken around the same time, revealed something interesting about a special group of 6-10% of Americans who say they are Christians. Mr. Gallup said of them:

"These people are a breed apart . . . they are more tolerant of people of diverse backgrounds. They are involved in charitable activities. They are involved in practical Christianity. They are absolutely committed to prayer."

Neil Anderson in *The Bondage Breaker*, page 107, states a similar statistic, saying, "It is my observation that no more than 15 percent of the evangelical Christian community is completely free from Satan's bondage." Neil generously speaks of the remainder as Christians, though from his description of them they have the behavior traits of those

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described in Galatians, Ephesians and Revelation who (Scripture says) will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.

False Doctrines Teaching Never-to-be Lost Salvation

As we have seen from the numerous proofs above, there is overwhelming evidence that there is not an unconditional salvation experience when one has an initial conversion. Over and over there are warnings about Christians losing their salvation, and having no inheritance in the kingdom of God if they act wickedly. Others scriptures warn about simply not believing anymore with that firm and steadfast faith required of those who will persevere to the end.

Notwithstanding such overwhelming evidence, Satan has induced false doctrines that tickle the ear. What could tickle the ear more pleasantly than that eternal life can be gained by a one-time confession of faith and thereafter can never be lost. If that were true, it means that whatever a person does after that conversion experience cannot affect his salvation. How different the scriptures we saw. But how readily tens of millions grasp tenaciously to this false doctrine, believing (and wanting) it to be true.

Let's look first at the false doctrine of Unconditional Eternal Security. Likely because it is so popular, it continues to spread and infect more and more churches. It is my opinion that tens of millions of people will be deprived of salvation because of this false doctrine.

Unconditional Eternal Security

According to Dr. Charles Stanley, a leading proponent of the doctrine, the definition of unconditional eternal security is "eternal security is that work of God in which He guarantees that the gift of salvation once received is possessed forever and cannot be lost."²

Dr. Stanley says:

"It is not lying, cheating, stealing, raping, murdering, or being unfaithful that sends people to hell."³

Scripture says the exact opposite. The writer to the Hebrews said that God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral (Hebrews 13:4). Hebrews 13:4 makes no exception for someone who once received the gift of salvation. Paul's warnings included the sins mentioned by Dr. Stanley. In each case Paul warned that the person that did these things had no inheritance in the kingdom of heaven.

² Stanley, Charles, "Eternal Security What Do We Have To Lose?", Tape #6, MI090.

³ Ibid, p. 70.

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Jesus says that sin caused by your eye or your hand will indeed cause your whole body to be thrown into hell. Jesus says it is better to cut off or gouge out the offending part of the body than to be thrown into hell. Jesus did not limit his warning to unbelievers.

However, Dr. Stanley writes:

But if a man or woman who has been rescued once from a state of unforgiveness need not worry. For once 100 percent of a man's or woman's sins have been forgiven, the potential for being unforgiven has been done away with. The risk factor is zero. There are no more fires from which the believer needs to be saved.⁴

As you see from the prior quotation, those who subscribe to the eternal security doctrine will assure you that nothing you do after a sincere confession of faith will affect your salvation if you are certain that you once were rescued from a state of unforgiveness. They claim that at the moment of receiving salvation there is forgiveness of all sins, both past and prospective. NO scripture makes such a claim. Just the opposite is stated, however. Peter wrote, "he has been cleansed from his past sins" (2 Peter 1:9). Only the sins of the past are forgiven at the time of conversion and at any time of repentance. After that, each time we sin we must repent and turn from our sin. Scripture tells a forceful, frightening reinforcement of that understanding:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God (Hebrews 10:26-27).

That scripture speaks of people who have had a conversion experience – they received the knowledge of the truth. Obviously they are the ones being warned, because the warning pertains to them. The author includes himself, saying "we." Could there be a clearer example from Scripture itself that believers can lose their salvation?

Dr. Stanley's heresy goes even further. He wrote:

"The Bible clearly teaches that God's love for His People is of such magnitude that even those who walk away from the faith have not the slightest chance of slipping from His hand."⁵ On other occasions Dr. Stanley taught, "Even if a believer for all practical purposes becomes an unbeliever, his salvation is not in jeopardy"⁶ and ". . . believers who lose or abandon their faith will retain their salvation . . ."⁷ [Emphasis added.]

⁴ Ibid, pages 79-80.

⁵ Ibid, page 74.

⁶ Ibid, page 93.

⁷ Ibid, page 94.

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Once again, Scripture teaches the opposite:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace (Hebrews 6:4-6).

The first thing the above scripture does is describe believers who have experienced all there is of the Christian faith. They lack nothing. But the scripture warns that if such persons fall away (the very thing Dr. Stanley and advocates of the doctrine of unconditional eternal security claim is impossible) they cannot be brought back to repentance. It also says the opposite of Dr. Stanley's claim who says even apostates who have once believed will retain their salvation. This passage says that those it describes, who fall away, cannot come back to a saving faith.

What should people conclude who accept the doctrine of unconditional eternal security? Is divorce a problem? Of course not. Adultery? How could it be? According to Dr. Stanley, if a person once received the gift of salvation and was once forgiven 100% of his/her sins, then all future sins have also been forgiven and he/she cannot lose their salvation.

We are seeing the fulfillment of Paul's prophecy to Timothy, "For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

Never Saved In the First Place

The popular response about those who fall away (primarily from those who claim the doctrine of unconditional eternal security – that a person once saved can never fall away) is, "That person was never saved in the first place." However there are no scriptures that speak of someone leaving the faith who "was never saved in the first place," (1 John 2:19 is often cited as an example of those who were never saved [which may be true] and left the fellowship – the passage does not show why they left John's fellowship) though there are numerous examples in Scripture of those who left the faith, as we have already seen. It is ridiculous, in fact, to talk of someone leaving something they never had. And it presumes that the Apostle Paul wasn't able to discern those who were sincere in their faith from those who were not. It is primarily Paul who repeatedly refers to those who have left the faith or wandered from the faith or shipwrecked their faith or wandered from the truth.

Both Jesus and Paul speak of those who are cut off. Jesus speaks of it when referring to those who do not bear fruit and do not remain in him. Paul speaks of those who are cut off because of unbelief. Scripture warns that names will be blotted out of the Lamb's book of life because of sin.

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Hopefully you are convinced beyond question that falling away from the faith or turning away from the faith is a frequent subject in Scripture. It is the subject of warnings to Christians as well as prophecies of that which will happen in later times.

Calvinism

Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination is similar to the false doctrine of unconditional eternal security and may even be the source of the latter false doctrine. Calvin's doctrine of Predestination says that God decided (predestined) the fate of each person before the foundation of the earth. Those God predestined to be saved will be saved; those God predestined to be damned will be damned. There is nothing any person can do to change what God has predestined. Those that are predestined to be saved will be saved, if necessary through irresistible grace that will overwhelm the person and cause him to be saved. Any who would wish to be saved but who God has predestined to be damned will not be able to come to a saving faith.

There is hardly any man-made doctrine that is harsher, or that more maligns God. After I first read these doctrines in Lorraine Boettner's *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, I said, "This is not the God I worship and serve."

The Doctrine of Predestination limits the people for whom Jesus died to those who God predestined to be saved. It is contrary to the clear teachings of Scripture which says, "This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4) and "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Over and over Scripture says "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Peter 3:18, see also Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 26, 10:10).

You can easily see how Calvinists would want to believe in the doctrine of once saved, always saved (unconditional eternal security). If they are those predestined to salvation, according to their doctrine, there is nothing that can change that. According to that false doctrine, their salvation is secure if, and only if, they are predestined to salvation. But Calvinism (according to Lorraine Boettner) takes into account the many people who have appeared to have been in the faith, but later fall away from the faith, by something they call evanescent grace. According to them, a person can appear to be in the faith (saved) who was not predestined to be saved. Their appearance of being saved is what is called evanescent grace. At some time God will remove this grace and the person will be damned. My God does not do this. My God's character is good and is love. He is not capricious. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

We have seen innumerable examples of how false it is to believe salvation cannot be lost even though a person may have been sincerely in the faith for a long time. The Lord Jesus speaks of salvation only for those who stand fast, who persevere, and who

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overcome to the end. The Scripture recites many examples of those who did not persevere, who failed, and who did not overcome, as we have already seen and prophecies that many more will fall away from the faith in the end times.

A program on the Netherlands mentioned that Holland had gone directly from Calvinism to Hedonism. One can easily understand why. If one's only exposure to Christianity is through Calvinism and the doctrine of Predestination, it is simple for any person to understand that nothing one can do will make any difference in being saved. If you are to be saved you will be saved, no matter how you have lived in the past. Nor will it make any difference how you live in the future, because whether or not you will be saved has been predestined from the beginning. Why shouldn't Holland have gone to pleasure-seeking Hedonism? Most only knew Calvinism.

Holland is a good example of the fruit of a false doctrine. Calvinism is not only false, it is evil. It maligns God. It describes a god who is not all good in his character, but instead one who is capricious. Who wants to serve such a god? Should it surprise us that the Dutch people do not? As a result, such deceived people are not concerned about their conduct, whether it be wicked or holy because it can't matter. Their salvation was determined before the foundations of the earth.

For substantial additional discussion of the falsity of the doctrines of Calvinism, please study the articles at: www.bereanpublishers.com | False Doctrines | "Foreknowledge or Predestination," "Foreknowledge: Jacob and Essau," and "The Doctrine of Predestination." There are three additional articles that are worth studying.

Salvation Tests Must Always Be Satisfied

Paul exhorts the Corinthians, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?" (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Is Paul speaking to unbelievers? No, he is writing to the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia (2 Corinthians 1:1). He is writing to believers, to saints, and telling them to examine themselves to see whether they are in the faith.

If we are finally saved at the time of conversion, Paul's statement is meaningless. Why would one bother to examine oneself? Whether one is in the faith or not is immaterial, as one's salvation is already assured. Doesn't that seem patently absurd? It is. Paul's exhortation only has meaning if it is possible for saints to lose their salvation. It is possible for them to find that Christ Jesus is not in them – that they fail the test.

There are many tests that true believers must satisfy if they would have salvation. A basic one is given by Jesus: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Jesus limited salvation to those who do (present tense) the will of his

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Father who is in heaven. There is no time at which this test does not apply until we finally close our eyes in death.

There are many other tests given by Jesus, Paul, and the Apostle John in his first epistle. For a more complete discussion of them, see www.bereanpublishers.com | Salvation Issues | “The Many Facets of a Saving Faith” and “Saving Faith – What Is it?”

One point to our discussion in this inquiry is that the requirements described in the above articles are to be fulfilled by us all our lives – to the end. We are to persevere in them. If we do not, we no longer fulfill the requirements of a saving faith; unless we repent and restore our relationship with the Lord, we will not be saved.

Conclusion

Churches that teach false doctrines are often the ones that flourish and grow. Calvinism seems to be gaining adherents. Likely most churches in the western world subscribe to the false doctrine of unconditional eternal security. It would be perfectly logical that churches teaching false doctrines would flourish and grow as such churches would not have Satanic opposition. They would be doing Satan’s work for him, twisting the truth of God’s word into a lie, depriving many who would be saved from being saved.

Though there are many additional proofs, I have attempted to show there is overwhelming evidence that any one of us can fall away from the faith at any time before we die causing us to forfeit salvation. Jesus tells parables about falling away, not producing fruit, being wicked, and losing salvation. Paul wrote to many of the churches with the warning that living wickedly will deny persons who do so to have any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Scripture even tells of the possibility of having one’s name blotted out from the Lamb’s book of life. It further says that anyone whose name is not in the Lamb’s book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire – hell.

If you have subscribed to the false doctrine of once saved, always saved, please search your soul after reading this article. Are you clinging to this doctrine so you can continue a wicked lifestyle? Is Satan blocking your mind and understanding so you cannot recognize the truths so clearly presented in Scripture showing that the doctrine of unconditional eternal security is false? If so, ask the Lord Jesus to take the scales from your eyes so you may see his truth and understand his word.

Paul warned, “the Lord Jesus . . . will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus . . . with everlasting destruction” (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9). The gospel of our Lord Jesus says we can lose our salvation through sin and unbelief.

We end with Peter’s close to his second epistle: “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. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.”