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Once Saved, Always Saved?

A battle has raged in theological circles in the last few decades about the eternal security of the believer, sometimes called "once saved, always saved." Let's examine this issue, as usual, only on the basis of what Scripture says and nothing else. To find and know the truth, we must cast aside whatever preconceptions we have, whatever teachings we have heard from men, and be prepared to accept God's word for what it says.

Why should we bother to consider this subject? Isn't it sufficient to simply have a close relationship with Christ, as a servant of the Lord Jesus, and seek to obey him in all things? For those who have that, of course that is sufficient. But there are teachings, such as the "once saved, always saved" doctrine that cause people to claim to be Christians, pointing with conviction to the day on which they confessed their faith, but thereafter living as the world, indistinguishable from the world. In many communities there is a high level of hypocrisy with "Christians" attending church but throughout the week living lives which rival in wickedness the worst of unbelievers.

Two teachings come immediately to mind which stress the spiritual danger of such beliefs and actions. Jesus limited entrance into the kingdom when he said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven but only he who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Paul narrowed the passage into the kingdom even further when he said, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Romans 8:29). This is not a scripture which states that certain people are predestined to be saved. It is a scripture which states that God predestined the qualification for those who will be saved. There is no salvation for those who do not do the will of God they will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Salvation is limited to those who are conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ, God's Son. The likeness to which all believers can be conformed is the commitment to do the will of God.

It does not matter if someone made a sincere confession of faith at some earlier time if he later does not do the will of God and is not conformed to the likeness of his Son. God predestined this qualification for all who would be saved. Only those who satisfy this qualification will be the brothers (and sisters) of the Lord Jesus. Jesus said, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:48-50).

THE BELIEVER IS SECURE IN CHRIST

Can anyone or any demonic force drag us against our will from the safety and shelter of our Lord? If we are determined in the strength of Christ to believe and be faithful, is there any force on earth that can snatch us from our position in Christ and cause us to be lost? Praise God, the answer is NO! Paul answered that conclusively for us:

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). The Holy Spirit would not have allowed Paul to write that if it were not true.

Likewise, the Lord Jesus said the same: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:27-29).

End of subject. We are secure. Together, Paul and Jesus have enumerated every external thing or person or power that we can imagine could come against us. There is no power anywhere that can separate us from the love of God in the Lord Jesus Christ or that can snatch us out of the hand of our Father or the Lord Jesus! We know that with certainty because Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18).

Though there has been little physical, religious persecution in America, in much of the world Christians are subject to great persecution and even slaughter. That would seem to put in question the prior statements about our security in Christ. But no, just the opposite. Paul taught us: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

We may wonder how that can be when we read of the thousands upon thousands of committed believers who were slaughtered during the Dark Ages. Many were slowly burned to death at the stake. Yet, they kept the faith and would not deny their Lord and His word. Often the victim would be offered, even pleaded with, to renounce his views and save his life. But these early martyrs knew that Jesus said, "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." Yes, they traded their earthly life for eternal life. Paul, not knowing whether he would live or die while imprisoned in Rome said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

The great temptation at the end of the age will be to deny Christ and accept the mark of the beast. Jesus said many will recant the faith (Matthew 24:10) but that will be their choice. God will not permit a temptation even one to deny the faith to come against us that we are not able to bear. If (or when) we face torture or execution for our faith, we can remember with assurance, "Our Lord Jesus knows we can face this and not succumb to the temptation to deny him."

WHAT EXPLANATION IS THERE FOR THOSE WHO LEAVE?

There seems little disagreement that people who have been part of a Christian fellowship do not always continue as believers. Likely most long time Christians know examples of people who have left the faith.

Those who believe true believers can never lose their salvation once truly converted (saved) say that those who do leave the faith were never really saved. That argument is presumptuous. It requires making a judgment about another's spiritual condition without knowing the facts. Innumerable people were once considered faithful but, for various reasons, fell away, sometimes denied the faith and other times became horribly wicked. Usually those who make this argument say that even though they were once considered faithful, they really were not saved. Others say that they remain saved, irrespective of their subsequent actions, infidelity, or denial of the faith.

A GROUP LEFT JOHN'S FELLOWSHIP

They often make this argument from Scripture found at 1 John 2:19: "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us." That statement by the Apostle John is quoted as support for the argument that those who leave the faith were never really part of it.

Was John giving us a spiritual principle? I don't think so. He was simply reciting a fact about something that had actually happened in his church. Through spiritual discernment he was able to say "they did not really belong to us." As additional evidence for that he states that they would have remained had they belonged.

Who these people were we can only speculate. It may have been a group that came into John's fellowship together. They may have already had some exposure to the Christian faith or they may have been inquirers. It seems likely they stuck together and fashioned doctrines opposed to true faith in Christ. They may have been trying to spread these false doctrines within John's church.

The issue that caused these people to leave must have been very fundamental to the faith as John called

them antichrists (1 John 2:18) a very harsh characterization. If these had been people who had fallen away from the faith, he surely wouldn't have used such language.

John stated that if they had been part of the fellowship "they would have remained with us." Doesn't this support the once saved, always saved doctrine? At first blush it seems to, if John is saying that everyone will remain who is truly saved. But is that what John was saying? People who tend to fall away from the faith tend to do so individually, not in groups. It is usually the introduction of a different doctrine or heresy that will cause a group to leave. This was a group of people that left John's church.

John was speaking about something that must have been widely known because he didn't bother to clarify it further or further identify the group which left. He may have spoken of it because of the rumor of a church split, so he may have made this statement to clarify or quash the rumor. His language made clear that this wasn't a mere difference of opinion about doctrine; these people were found to be antichrists and that's why they left.

THE SCRIPTURAL CALL TO PERSEVERANCE

Throughout the New Testament there is a constant call for perseverance in the faith. That call can only make sense if it is possible not to persevere. Otherwise it becomes an oxymoron.

I. Let's look at scriptures that emphasize the need to persevere to be saved and that tell what happens if one doesn't persevere: "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. By 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). This passage should be clear to all without ambiguity. Paul is writing to believers who accepted Paul's gospel. Hopefully we agree that Paul had the gospel right. He did not preach error.

In this passage, Paul is writing to believers he calls them brothers. These people had received Paul's gospel; they had taken their stand on that gospel. Paul assures the believers that they are saved if they hold firmly to that gospel. But then he states clearly, "Otherwise, you have believed in vain." He did not say that if they didn't persevere they had never believed. No, he said if they didn't persevere they had believed in vain.

II. A similar teaching by Paul is found at Colossians 1:21-23:

"Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he [God] 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."

This marvelous passage is a statement of the gospel. Again Paul writes to believers: "He has reconciled you . . . to present you holy in his sight . . ." But then, again, the qualification: "if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel." Paul goes on to say this is the gospel he taught them his gospel. His gospel included the qualification that the believer must persevere to be saved. John's teaching was similar: "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" (1 John 2:24).

III. The writer to the Hebrews wrote in many passages the essential requirement of persevering in the faith. In the first one, he describes a believer who experienced everything God offers to the believer:

"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 writer described an enlightened believer who tasted the heavenly gift, received the Holy Spirit, and knew the goodness of the word of God. Nevertheless, the writer recognized that sometimes even such a person falls away. His warning is severe. He states that if such a person falls away he can never come back a fearful thought! The author is not saying such a person cannot fall away; he implies they can. In one of the severest warnings in Scripture, he warns that such cannot come back to the faith.

IV. The author warns again at Hebrews 10:26-27:

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.

At Hebrews 6:4-6 the author speaks of others. In this passage he includes himself. He says, "If we . . ." There can be no doubt that he is speaking to believers as we can safely assume he is one. He speaks of a person who has received the knowledge of the truth, not just heard it or not just exposed to it. No, someone who actually received it a believer. Here the author is reinforcing the need for a changed life for those who are believers, that they must give up a life of sin, that they must be holy. If they deliberately refuse and continue in sin, they face only judgment and raging fire.

The author makes it clear this is not the discipline for "sons" he later describes in Hebrews 12. No, this is punishment judgment and raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. No believer is subject to that. The author continues to reinforce that teaching at the end of the chapter as he speaks of the righteous:

"But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.' But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved" (Hebrews 10:38-39).

He states the principle we know to be true. The righteous will live by faith. But what if the righteous no longer live by faith? The writer continues with God's response: "If he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him." The author then contrasts those who shrink back with those who believe. Those who shrink back are destroyed; those who believe are saved. The one who shrank back and was destroyed had been a believer, one God described as his "righteous one."

V. Peter spoke to the same subject. He was speaking against false teachers who mouth empty, boastful words and appeal to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, and who entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error, promising them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him (2 Peter 2:18-29). Then Peter describes the fate of people who are seduced by false teachers:

"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 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'" (2 Peter 2:21-23).

He begins by describing a true believer one who has escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Continuing, Peter recognizes that some again become entangled in the world, and overcome. Their final condition, he says, is worse than if they had never known about Christ.

This explanation prohibits the interpretation that this person is just a believer who is being disciplined by God, but who is really saved. How could any believer be worse off than if he had never known of Christ? The end of those without Christ is hell. It appears the punishment in hell is greater for those who have not persevered, who have proved unfaithful after once having known and been in the faith. Peter concludes his letter with the further warning: "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" (2 Peter 3:17).

Peter recognizes that our position in Christ is secure, just as we saw as we began this study. But he says we can fall from our secure position which agrees with the previous scriptures. He warns us to be on guard. He

knows that we can be carried away by the error of lawless men.

VI. Notice how similar is the teaching of Jesus. He contrasts two servants, one who is faithful and perseveres, another who tires and falls away:

"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. "But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. 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 hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 24:45-51).

Note first that both are servants. Both began in the faith serving the Lord. Both are servants with responsible positions in charge of others. Jesus commends the first and assures he will be rewarded for his faithfulness. Not so with the second servant. It didn't matter that he had once been so faithful that he was promoted to a position of responsibility. It only mattered that when the master came back the servant was not fulfilling the duties assigned to him. Instead he was abusing those in his charge and engaging in a licentious life style.

Note the severity of the punishment. It is more severe than in any other parable told by Jesus. Is it because he was an overseer of others? (See James 3:1). He was "cut to pieces" and consigned to hell with the hypocrites.

VII. Jesus taught that there are people (branches) who will be in him (the vine), but who will produce no fruit. He said God will cut off such branches (John 15:2) (people) and throw them into the fire! He said it this way:

"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).

This passage is interpreted very differently by those who claim the doctrine of once saved, always saved. But for those who do not start with that predisposition, the passage is plain. The difference in this passage from prior passages is that the believer must produce fruit. If he does not, he will be cut off. In prior passages we've seen that same result for those who deliberately continue to sin or who are once again entangled in the world.

Jesus taught a parallel teaching in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). You remember that each servant was given a different number of talents to invest before the master left on a journey. Most did well, doubling the amounts entrusted to them. One servant did not. He was given a talent but buried his talent in the ground, offering it back to his master when he returned. In the parable of the vine and the branches, the branch (the believer) was given the life giving sap from the vine but did not use it to produce fruit. In both parables, the servant accomplished nothing with what was given him.

The end is the same for each. Jesus said of the servant who wasted his talent: "Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 25:30).

These two parables show punishment and damnation for not producing fruit, not using that given to us by God to produce gain for the Kingdom. Is this what Paul referred to when he said, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do?" (Ephesians 2:10). If so, it would be a case of disobedience, refusing (or failing) to do that which we were commanded to do, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

A further corroboration is found in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-8, Mark 4:3-8, and Luke 8:5-8). The seed was sown on four kinds of soil. Only one of the soils produced a crop. Of that soil, Jesus explained, "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 13:23). The true believer perseveres and produces fruit, a crop, according to what God has given him to do.

What about the other three soils? Two of those are material to this study. The first is not. Of the first Jesus said that the seed sown on the path is like a person who hears the message but does not understand it; the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart (Matthew 13:19). The second, seed sown on rocky soil, represents a person who hears the word and receives it with joy. He becomes a new believer. 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 (Matthew 13:20-21). He didn't persevere. The third is one where the seed was sown among thorns. He also hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful (Matthew 13:22).

Of the four soils which received the seed, only one persevered and produced fruit. The second and third, though receiving the seed hearing the word failed to persevere. Those who produce no fruit may be disobeying the will of God by failing to do those good works which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10).

From the foregoing scriptures we see that bearing fruit for the kingdom is important. Could we actually lose our salvation because we failed or refused to do those good works which God prepared in advance for us to do? Perhaps that is a form of rebellion against God.

CAN SOMEONE WHO LEFT THE FAITH COME BACK?

We've seen one example Hebrews 6:4-6 where the writer said, "No! He cannot." That seems to be where a believer experienced all that God had for him and still turned away.

One of the arguments of those who claim once saved, always saved, is that people cannot be born again and then unborn, and then born again, etc. But theirs is an argument of man. God said, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). What does God say in his Scripture?

Paul assured the Romans that it is possible to repent and come back to the faith. This discussion is found in Romans 11. He spoke of believers as branches of an olive tree where Jesus is the root and trunk. He first told of the Jews (branches) who were broken off and the Gentiles (wild olive shoots) grafted in. He said those branches (the Jews) were broken off because of unbelief, and you (the Gentile believers) stand by faith. Then Paul's warning: "Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either" (Romans 11:20-21).

Is that clear? Paul is telling Gentile believers who stand by faith to be afraid, that if they fall into unbelief they will be broken off just as the Jews had. Then Paul's call to perseverance and further warning: "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" (Romans 11:22). But then Paul gives the good news, that those who did fall away because of unbelief could regain their faith and their place in the kingdom:

"And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again" (Romans 11:23).

Is that a lone exception in Scripture, that a person who left the faith can come back? Not at all. The entire book of Galatians concerns a church that has strayed into false teaching by the Judaizers. Paul urges them to reject that false teaching and come back to the faith. He tells them, "I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you" (Gal. 4:11).

Can they come back? Paul says, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you . . ." (Galatians 4:19). Paul wants them to be born again, again! Were they ever true

believers? Indeed they were. Paul describes their early state: They received the Spirit, began with the Spirit, God gave his Spirit and worked miracles among them (Galatians 3:2-5).

Doesn't this conflict with Hebrews 6:4-6 which states that once a believer who has experienced all God offers and falls away cannot come back? It first appears to. The passages can be distinguished, however, by why the former believer falls away. If the person falls away through unbelief, or because he falls prey to false doctrine, he can come back to the faith upon realizing his error and repenting. The Hebrews 6:4-6, 10:26-27, and 2 Peter 2:18-29 must refer to those who deliberately choose to continue in sin or who love the world and choose to go back into it.

IS SALVATION CONDITIONAL?

Of course it is! Everyone should know that unless a person has a saving faith they will not be saved. That is a condition: A saving faith. Consider other conditional statements: If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love (John 15:10); You are my friends if you do what I command (John 15:14); We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first (Hebrews 3:14).

In passages reviewed earlier, Paul also conditioned salvation upon perseverance: "By 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). And, "if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel" (Colossians 1:22).

Peter agreed. In 2 Peter he began with an exhortation to the believers to make every effort to add to their faith goodness, knowledge, self control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love (2 Peter 1:5-7). He continued,

"For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:8-11).

Likewise with obedience: Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command; And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever" (John 14:15-16). Imagine that statement! If we love Jesus, we will obey him. If we love and obey him, he will ask the Father to give us the Holy Spirit. Is he saying that only those who commit to obey him receive the Holy Spirit? Consider the corroboration given by Peter: "We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him" (Acts 5:32). Is even salvation linked to obedience? Consider Hebrews 5:9: "He [Christ] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

WHAT ABOUT THE END TIMES?

Many people, including this writer, believe we are likely in the end times of the world as we know it. Jesus specifically discussed this period in Matthew 24. Consider what he said:

"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. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:10-11).

Jesus is describing the great falling away that is to take place in the end times. We already can see it as we look around in Christendom. Many people are falling away. Yet God is doing a new work in others, bringing many to salvation.

IS THE 20TH CENTURY DIFFERENT?

In the Apostolic Age the gospel was fresh and new, told by those who had been taught by Jesus. If it were possible for people to fall away from the faith then, though they had been believers, how is it that many in 20th century Christendom claim that once a person has made a sincere confession of faith he cannot be lost?

Are we so much different or better? Has God changed? Scripture says, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb. 13:8).

FROM THE AUTHOR OF HEBREWS

The author of Hebrews was concerned about the perseverance of the new Christians. Chapters 2 and 3 have many warnings about falling away. I feel a sense of urgency as he warns:

"We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" (Hebrews 2:1-3).

The writer is writing to Christians—people in the faith. But he acknowledges that they can drift away. Lest someone misunderstand, he makes sure the reader understands that he is talking about salvation, not simply rewards or punishment. He implies that the punishment for drifting away will be the punishment due those without salvation.

Next he establishes that our salvation is conditional: "But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" (Hebrews 3:6). Note again the emphasis on perseverance. He's speaking to Christians but states that Christians who hold on to their courage and hope are part of God's house. Those who do not hold on are not!

Finally, the writer establishes that a Christian can develop a sinful, unbelieving heart that can be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. He wrote:

"See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first" (Hebrews 3:12-14).

Again the condition. We Christians share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. Note the parallel with Jesus' letter to the Church at Ephesus where he admonishes that they have forsaken their first love. "You have forsaken your first love. 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).

The writer makes clear that Christians can become hardened by sin and turn away from God. If that were to happen, such a person would no longer share in Christ; such a person has no salvation.

ISRAEL FINALLY LOST THOUGH EARLIER REDEEMED

One of the great stories of the Old Testament is of the Israelites being rescued from Egypt by God under the leadership of Moses. God's mighty power was manifest as he smote Egypt with plague after plague, culminating with the plague of the death of the firstborn of every house that did not have the blood of a lamb put on the top and both sides of the doorframe.

We now know that the salvation of Israel from Egypt was a type of the salvation which Christ would bring. Just as the firstborn were spared by the blood of a lamb without blemish when its blood was put on the doorframe, so we are spared if we are cleansed with the blood of the perfect lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed for our sins on the cross. Israel was redeemed from slavery in Egypt just as Christ redeems us from slavery to sin.

At that point we sometimes stop our analysis of Israel as a type representing the Christian believer. But the analogy can be continued. The author of Hebrews explains it to us: "Who were those who were redeemed from Egypt by God's mighty outstretched hand? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?" (Hebrews 3:16). They all received God's salvation from slavery in Egypt. Not only that, these same people were beneficiaries of many miracles as God protected them in the desert. First he parted the Red Sea so they could escape the Egyptians who were pursuing them. Then he supernaturally provided manna as their daily food. When they were without water, he supernaturally provided water from a rock! When they complained about lack of meat he provided quail.

Not only had these people been saved by God, they witnessed the continuing power of God through those miracles. It is the same with Christians today who have been redeemed, born again and cleansed from sin, and who frequently see God's divine hand providing and protecting.

The Israelites had even more. They were led by a cloud of fire. They knew when to move and when to stay according to when the cloud moved or stayed. Christians today have God's word, the Bible, and God's Holy Spirit to instruct them whether to move or stay.

The Israelites had the incredible experience of Mount Sinai when Moses went up into the mountain and obtained the law—the Ten Commandments—from God. They saw light radiating from him after he had been in the presence of God. Even so, as Christians, we have the occasional mountain top experience with God, powerfully experiencing his love and power and presence.

But the Israelites back slid. When Moses was up on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights, the people became impatient. They prevailed upon Aaron to make a golden calf which they worshipped. Imagine! After all they had experienced from God—the miracles in Egypt, the deliverance in the desert, the supernatural provision of food and water—they went back to Egyptian idol worship.

The same is sometimes true with Christians. Though they had a true salvation experience, they have a relapse, go back into the world and abandon their faith in God through the Lord Jesus Christ. But just as God forgave Israel, so God will forgive the Christian who repents and renews his vows to trust and obey Jesus Christ as his Lord.

CAN ONE REBEL AND BE LOST FOREVER?

The analogy with Israel and the Christian can be continued directly from Scripture. The purpose of the Israelites' trek across the desert was to get to Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey, the hope they had since leaving Egypt, the destination God promised them. Similarly, the Christian leaves Egypt—the world—with the hope of one day getting to heaven, the place of rest God has promised for those who believe in follow and obey—his Son.

The ultimate disobedience of Israel occurred as they were about to enter the promised land. Suddenly they believed the report of giants in the land and were afraid. Why were they afraid? Because they lacked faith in God. They rejected the God that delivered them, that provided for them and protected them. When it came to a new venture, entering the promised land, they feared the giants instead of trusting God. God's response to their lack of faith is given by the author of Hebrews:

"Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he [God] 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 not able to enter, because of their unbelief" (Hebrews 3:16-19).

God was angry with them because of their sins of unbelief and disobedience. How angry? He swore they would never enter his rest. You know the rest of the story. God turned them away from Canaan and forced them to wander in the wilderness another 40 years until all the adults that had left Egypt died in the wilderness (except Joshua and Caleb who were faithful and trusted the Lord).

How many "Christians", I wonder, are the same as the Israelites who refused to enter Canaan? How many fear the world, the enemies of God, or death itself? How can a true Christian fear when he is a servant of the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Son of God who has been given all power and authority in heaven and on earth? All powers are in subjection to Him. Nevertheless, some "Christians" who have had a true salvation experience, like the Israelites, turn back to the world and abandon their faith in God. What of the person who claims a saving faith but fears death?

Is this a reasonable analogy the Israelites about to enter the promised land and the Christian who has the hope of entering heaven and the presence of God? That is for you to decide. God called Canaan the Israelites' promised land "his rest". Isn't the Christians' promised rest in heaven? The writer to the Hebrews makes the analogy between the Israelites and Christians himself:

"Let us [Christians], therefore, make every effort to enter that rest [heaven], so that no one will fall by following their [Israelites] example of disobedience [unbelief]" (Hebrews 4:11).

Almost an entire people the Israelites were once saved but then lost. How then can people say today that if a person is once saved he can never be lost? Jude spoke of the same lesson:

"Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe" (Jude 1:5).

As we saw in Hebrews, disbelief is sin. God judged them for sin, for disobedience, and for unbelief. They are all related. The person who believes will make every effort not to sin and to be obedient. Those efforts are the evidence of a true faith. In spite of all this evidence, there are those who will say, "They were never saved, they never believed, they were always sinful and disobedient. That's why God judged them."

Lest one take that argument seriously, Jude continued with an analogy that cannot be misunderstood: "And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day" (Jude 1:6).

Would these same people say that the angels were never true servants of God? Jude says they had positions of authority. They were faithful to God until Satan tempted them and caused a third of the angels to "abandon their own home" and follow his false promises. God is now holding them for judgment.

CAN THE RIGHTEOUS BECOME UNRIGHTEOUS IN GOD'S EYES?

The premise of the eternal security advocate is that once one has been redeemed and is clothed with the righteousness of Christ that he can never lose that secure position. God made sure we had a very clear passage to disabuse us of such thinking. It comes from the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel. One can guess that an eternal security argument was being made in the time of Ezekiel by those who had once followed God but now were living in sin. They may have been speaking of their past righteousness and obedience and claiming that they were in right standing with God because of their past faithfulness. What do you suppose God said to that argument? First God deals with the issue of repentance, of turning from sin and turning to God. Ezekiel relates to us the words of God:

"But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done, he will live. Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked?" declares the Sovereign LORD. "Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?" (Ezekiel 18:21-23. See similarity in 2 Peter 3:9).

But then God deals with the opposite case, the righteous man who has become wicked. Again, God speaks:

"But if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does, will he live? None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered. Because

of the unfaithfulness he is guilty of and because of the sins he has committed, he will die" (Ezekiel 18:24).

Just the opposite result, isn't it? Repent and live, apostatize and die! Unbelievably, the Israelites gave the same argument to God the eternal security advocates claim today who say God would be unjust to damn a person who was once a believer. The Israelites also said, "The way of the Lord is not just" (Ezekiel 18:25. See also 18:29).

God responded: "Hear, O house of Israel: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust?" (Ezekiel 18:25). That same response is appropriate for those who today claim one can never be lost if once saved. God continued, reinforcing what he had previously said:

"If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die. But if a wicked man turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life. Because he considers all the offenses he has committed and turns away from them, he will surely live; he will not die" (Ezekiel 18:26-28).

Note how similar these scriptures are to the New Testament scriptures we've already reviewed, particularly those in the book of Hebrews (Review Hebrews 6:4-6, 10:26, and 10:39). After giving them these truths, God exhorted the children of Israel. Consider his words as if to the 20th century church:

"Therefore, O house of Israel [O Church], I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel [O Church]? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone," declares the Sovereign LORD. "Repent and live!" (Ezekiel 18:30-32).

Yes, the message is as appropriate today as it was for the house of Israel. There are many among us who claim God would be unjust if once one is saved he can ever fall into perdition. The church has absorbed the world to the extent it is now worldly rather than sanctified (set apart from the world). Indeed, we need a new heart and a new spirit the Holy Spirit that Jesus said will be given to those who obey him (John 14:15, Acts 5:32). Just as God said, "Repent and live," Jesus' first recorded command is, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2). We who claim to be his followers would do well to obey his command. Let us repent of our evil ways, our evil doctrines, and follow him as our Lord and Master.

BLOT OUT FROM THE BOOK OF LIFE

Most Christians are likely aware that in order to be saved, a person must have his name written in the Lamb's book of life. Speaking of the last judgment, 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). This is the place where the devil was thrown, along with the beast and the false prophet (Revelation 20:10).

Most serious students of Scripture are aware of the Lord's admonition to the church at Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6). In it, Jesus speaks of the few people who have not soiled their clothes, who will walk with Him, dressed in white, for they are worthy. Then he says the general statement, "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).

Remarkably, there are those who say, "Jesus said he will never blot the person's name from the book of life. That does not mean that there are others whose name he will blot from the book of life." Such an interpretation assumes Jesus is just suggesting a possibility that will not or can not exist, not meaning what he is saying.

Besides a straightforward reading and understanding of the prior passage, an incident with Moses removes the possibility of such a misunderstanding. The setting is in the desert when Moses has come down from the mountain from a time with God. God warned Moses that the people had become corrupt, that they had cast

their gold in the form of an idol to worship it. God threatened to destroy the people. Moses interceded for the people and God relented. Moses punished the people, then went back up the mountain to intercede again for them before God. He said, "But now, please forgive their sin but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written" (Exodus 32:32).

The Lord replied to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book" (Exodus 32:33). God has said he will blot out of his book those who sin against him. That is exactly the circumstance to which Jesus spoke to the church at Sardis. It was a church which thought itself alive. Jesus said it was dead. He called them to remember what they received and heard; obey it and repent (Revelation 3:3).

PASTOR TO PASTOR

When people in the same vocation talk to each other about their profession, they speak differently than they do to those outside their vocation. Doctors talk to each other in their own language about their unique concerns. The same is true with lawyers, dentists, architects, farmers, bricklayers, coal miners, factory workers, and pastors.

Only a pastor can truly empathize with the hopes and heartbreaks of another pastor. Only he can understand the needs, the problems, the discouragements another pastor faces. As pastors share with one another, they can uniquely encourage each other.

PAUL SHARES WITH TIMOTHY

It was that kind of situation when Paul wrote to Timothy. Not only was Timothy another pastor, he was brought into the ministry by Paul and trained by him. Thus their past relationship helped them communicate. It was only to Timothy and Titus both pastors that Paul told the requirements for deacons, overseers, and elders in the church (1 Tim. 3:1-13, Titus 1:6-9).

Timothy had a special relationship with Paul. Paul called him his son. Doubtless he felt like his father in the faith. He knew Timothy was somewhat frail of health, and that he was young considering his responsibilities. So he spoke in more detail with Timothy about their work and the condition of the people they served than he did with others.

SPIRITUAL CONDITION OF THE PEOPLE

Paul began by reciting real problems in the church, that certain people were teaching false doctrines, devoting themselves to myths and endless genealogies. He reminded Timothy that these promote controversy rather than God's work which is by faith. He told Timothy to command such people to stop such false teachings. He explained, "The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk" (1 Timothy 1:5-6).

Here Paul speaks of people who have had a sincere faith and wandered away from it. Paul reminded Timothy why he was giving him further instructions, "so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith" (1 Timothy 1:18-19).

When Paul enumerated the requirements for overseers, he commanded: "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). This is a most valuable statement to controvert the false doctrine of "eternal security." Paul admits the person is a convert, not just someone who appears to be. Even more than that, he must be a person showing leadership ability and desire to serve. Paul knows that maturity in the faith is necessary so that such a person does not become prideful by being given authority too quickly. Paul demolishes the notion of many false teachers of the eternal security doctrine that such a person will simply lose rewards but not his salvation. Paul says the fate of such a person is the same as the devil to be thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10).

Paul later discussed the various groups of people in the church and how Timothy should act toward each

group. When he discussed young widows he shared special insight that applies to our subject matter:

"As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to. So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan" (1 Timothy 5:11-15).

Paul does not suggest that these young widows were not once true Christians. He speaks of their dedication to Christ. But the desires of the flesh and bad habits can lead to a sinful life. Paul said he knows of instances where they left their dedication to Christ to follow Satan. Paul also warned about those eager to become wealthy. "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).

Paul shared his prophetic insight into the future: "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). Only a person who has something can abandon it. Paul sees through the Spirit that believing Christians will leave the faith for false doctrines.

Knowing the need to remain true to the faith, Paul urged Timothy: "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:15-16). Surely Paul knew that Timothy was a true believer. Nevertheless, he felt it necessary to remind him that he must persevere in the faith in order to be saved.

A final warning closed Paul's first letter: "Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. Grace be with you" (1 Timothy 6:21-22).

Perhaps there has never been a time in history equal to the information age in which we live. If ever there were "opposing ideas" it is now. Darwin's Theory of Evolution is such false knowledge. Without any scientific evidence (fossils) of intermediate types which are necessary if evolution were true the schools, the government, and the world advance this creation denying doctrine in opposition to God. Many in the church have embraced this false doctrine. Have they wandered from the faith?

PAUL'S SECOND LETTER

Imprisoned and expecting to die, Paul recites to Timothy what has happened to him. After encouraging him in the faith, he shared with him a disappointment: "You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes" (2 Timothy 1:15).

Needing Timothy's company, Paul urged: "Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica" (2 Timothy 4:9-10). In order to understand the gravity of the charge against Demas, it is necessary to understand what it means spiritually to love this world. The Apostle John explained that if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him (1 John 2:15). James spoke even more strongly: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

Did Paul suggest that Demas had never been a true believer? No. Is it reasonable to suggest that a person with Paul's spiritual discernment would not know if Demas was just putting on a show, a spiritual front? No. But the pull of the world was greater than the thought of remaining faithful to Christ and staying with a friend who was imprisoned and sentenced to die. According to James, Demas became an enemy of God.

Speaking about those who engage in godless chatter, Paul warned: "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 2:17-18). Again Paul names specific people who have left the faith. He goes further, saying their false teachings have caused others to lose their faith. Never does Paul say that these were people who were never really in the faith. Rather they are people who were in the faith, but who left the faith, who wandered away from the truth, and who destroyed the faith of others.

A MISINTERPRETED SAYING

Finally, Paul gives Timothy a trustworthy saying: "If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Timothy 2:11-13). Consistent with his other writings, but gravely misinterpreted in the 20th century, Paul recites truths of the faith. But those advocating eternal security must twist the obvious. They may say, "If we once died with Christ in a sincere confession of faith or through baptism we will also live with him. There's the promise!" But Scripture says we are daily (Luke 9:23) to die to self and sin. It is not a one time event.

Perseverance is a constant theme of Paul's letters, that if we endure we will reign with him. Then the obvious truth, though disavowed by eternal security advocates: "If we disown him, he will also disown us." They may say that can only refer to unbelievers, those who were never really in the faith. But that flies in the face of experience. Likely anyone mature in the faith has known initially enthusiastic Christians who later wandered from the faith, began to love the world, and finally disowned Christ and Christianity.

Even the last portion of the saying is misinterpreted: "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself." The eternal security proponent gleefully says, "See! Here's the proof. Even though I'm unfaithful, he will be faithful. No matter what I do, I can't lose my salvation." But that's not what the passage says. It says God will remain faithful, he cannot disown himself; it does not say he cannot disown the one time believer. It does not matter if we are faithful or not faithful. God is faithful. To what is he faithful? Is it to man's idea that if we ever once made a sincere commitment to him that he would thereafter remain faithful to save us to take us to heaven? Not at all. The passage says God is faithful to himself, to his character, to his word. Being faithful is part of God's character. God is always faithful to his word. His word says that grave judgment will befall those who do not persevere to the end. The writer to the Hebrews stated: "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). The writer reminds us, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

CONCLUSION

We have seen many links between loss of salvation and continuing in sin. Don't we expect salvation to be based on our faith? How is it, then, that this author frequently tells us that if we keep on sinning, we will be treated and punished as an enemy of God? Hopefully you agree that no Christian will expect judgment and the raging fire reserved for God's enemies.

Faith a saving faith is outwardly manifested (made evident) by obedience and good works. Remember, obedience and good works are not done to earn salvation. Salvation is a free gift. Nothing we can do can earn it. But everyone who is saved has qualified for that salvation by having a saving faith. They will be noted for their obedience and good works, most notably, their love for one another the evidence of a saving faith. If one deliberately keeps on sinning, it is obvious to God and to man that such a person no longer has a saving faith, even though he may have once had such a faith.