

Can I lose my salvation? * Q's from the Pews

August 18, 2019 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

I know that I say this every week, but this morning's question is a good one. And while we've looked at some really great questions this summer, this one is probably the most important when it comes to our lives of faith.

Can I lose my salvation?

That is a question that has vexed generations of believers and I personally spent a long time wrestling with it early in my Christian life. This salvation that God has given me – the forgiveness of sin and relationship with Him and eternal life – that is probably the most valuable thing that I have – can I lose it?

Now I'll be honest with you – this is one of those places where faithful people who love Jesus have differed on the details of following Him over the years. There are some people, some of whom I really respect, who find evidence in the Bible that you CAN lose your salvation. And at the same time, there are OTHER people that I really value, who believe for good biblical reasons that we can NEVER lose our salvation. So who's right? And where do we land?

In the interest of giving you an honest and balanced answer to this question, I want to explore both sides with you and so we're going to explore the biblical evidence that says NO, you cannot lose your faith, and the warning passages of Scripture that suggest that you CAN. And then once we've done that, I'll bring it all together into a big idea and work out what that means for our lives. So that's the plan for today, and I do encourage you to have your Bible open in front of you.

So, let's get into it and let's start with the evidence that says – No – you cannot lose your salvation. In theological terms, we call this the doctrine of perseverance – that is, someone who believes in Jesus will inevitably persevere in faith and be saved in the end. In other words, 'once saved, always saved.'

There's good reason that this has been a central doctrine of the church for ages – not only is it a comfort for our souls; it is also deeply rooted in Scripture. Over and again, the Bible tells us – if you have trusted in the Lord, then you WILL be saved.

Philippians 1:6 is a very concise expression of this idea - in Philippians 1:6, Paul writes "...He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Phi 1:6 NIV). You can't get much clearer than that, can you? The hour you first believe God begins a good work – a work of salvation - in your heart and God will complete that work on the day that Christ returns. Simple as that. We can't lose our salvation because God Himself is committed to making it happen.

Paul uses different words to say the same thing over in Ephesians 1. In Ephesians 1, starting at verse 13, Paul says –

13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,
14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession--to the praise of his glory (Eph 1:13-14 NIV).

Let's trace the logic there. If you have believed, then you have received the Spirit. And if you have the Spirit, you have a down payment guaranteeing that you will inevitably share in the benefits of redemption that God has promised to His people. We cannot lose our salvation because God has guaranteed it through His Spirit.

And again, over in Romans, Paul says the same thing again – once theologically and once pastorally.

Theologically speaking, Paul describes salvation as a process, in which we believe and then are inevitably drawn to our eternal salvation. That's Romans 8:30 – “30 And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Rom 8:30 NIV).

Historically, Christians have called this ‘the Golden chain of salvation’ because Paul describes a process wherein each step is inextricably linked to the next. If God predestines you, He will call you. If He calls you, you'll believe. If you believe, He justifies you – that means – makes you right in His eyes through Jesus' sacrifice. If He justifies you, He will glorify you – and that's salvation – being made perfect, in eternity, with Him.

I almost like to think of it as a conveyor belt – and admittedly ‘the golden conveyor belt of salvation’ doesn't sound nearly as nice as ‘the golden chain’ – but the idea is right. Once you are on this conveyor belt, you CAN'T fall off. God WILL bring you through and glorify you in the end.

Now that's a pretty complex theological idea and maybe Paul realized that as he was writing his letter, so I think gives it another go a couple verses later in much more pastoral terms.

Look at v. 38 -

38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,
39 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 (Rom 8:37-39 NIV).

And if there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God, then there is no way that we will ever lose our salvation. Sure, there will be things that roar and rage and threaten our faith,

but in God's sovereign love, none of them will separate us from Him. We cannot lose our salvation because we are inextricably linked to the God who saves.

Now, I don't want you to think that Paul is the only one who talks about perseverance in the Bible, so let me point out a couple of other passages in the Bible that say that you cannot lose your salvation. And these come from Jesus Himself.

In John chapter 6, verse 37, Jesus says - 37 All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.

38 For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.

39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day (Joh 6:37-39 NIV). 40 For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (Joh 6:40 NIV).

This is a really succinct description of salvation – anyone who looks on the Son and believes will have eternal life – and no one who believes will lose their salvation because the Son who saves (according to v. 39) WILL NOT LOSE any one who believes in Him.

In a sense, this is a bit like one of those tour groups - you know, where the tour guide has a little flag or something so that you can see where they are and follow them? Well in this case, Jesus is the tour guide. By looking to Him in belief we join the tour, which inevitably leads to eternal life, and this tour guide will lose no one. None who believe will be lost; all who believe will be saved.

And again in John 10, Jesus says the very same thing – verse 27 -

27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.

28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.

29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand (Joh 10:27-29 NIV).

Again, can anyone snatch us out of God's hands? No. We cannot lose our salvation because we are safe in our Father's hands.

So that's an overview of the doctrine of perseverance. And I think that that makes a pretty compelling case that we CANNOT lose our salvation. There are other passages that agree, but that gives you a pretty good sense of the most important assurances that we have in Scripture.

Now that being said, there are some other passages in the Bible that seem to imply that we CAN lose our salvation, and I think that if we are going to be faithful to Scripture and well-informed in our faith, then we need to carefully think about those too. And as I say, some denominations hold this as a doctrinal conviction that you CAN lose your salvation. So let's think about why they believe that.

Now there are two kinds of passages that suggest that it is possible to lose your salvation – one - the warnings passages in Scripture and second - the encouragements that urge us to persevere in our faith. So let's look at those in turn, starting with the warnings.

There are a variety of warning passages sprinkled through all of Scripture but far and away, the most dramatic warnings come from the book of Hebrews. For example, Hebrews 10, the author of that letter writes –

26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left,

27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

28 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

29 How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (Heb 10:23-29 NIV).

There is a warning here that says if a Christian tramples on the Son of God, insulting the Spirit of grace, then they have forfeited their salvation (no sacrifice left) and have only judgment left for them. That's a sobering thought, isn't it? There appears to be sin that can cause a Christian to lose their salvation.

Now historically, a lot of believers have looked at a passage like this and said 'oh, well this must be talking about a person who says they believe, but doesn't really. They have a KNOWLEDGE of the truth but no real faith and so this warning is for them.'

And there's something to that. There are certainly people through history who have claimed the name of Christ without really believing in Him and Jesus Himself 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 who is in heaven. (Mat 7:21 NIV).

And certainly, if a person hears about Jesus and ignores His grace, there IS nothing but wrath for them ahead.

But the book of Hebrews does not exclude genuine Christians from this warning. The book of Hebrews wants us as born again, tried and true believers to take both our salvation and these warnings very seriously.

Look at Hebrews 6, verse 4 - It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, (genuine Christians)
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.

7 Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God.

8 But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

This passage is talking about true believers. Remember Ephesians 1:13? The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of salvation and this passage specifically talks about a Spirit-filled person – that’s a Christian – falling away with no chance for repentance. That’s a sobering thought.

And I should probably show you that this is not just a weird anomaly in the book of Hebrews. Over in Galatians, Paul is talking to a group of believers that he himself pointed to Christ (Galatians 4:13). They looked upon the Son and trusted in Him and they were marked by the Spirit for salvation. But now, Galatians tells us - these people were turning from Christ to trust in their own effort to keep the Law, trying to bring to completion the work that God had begun. And look at what Paul says in chapter 5, verse 2 –

2 Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all...

4 You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

‘You who have trusted in Christ reject Him by turning from Him and so you will be cut off from Him and lose your salvation.’ That’s a sobering thought too.

There are passages in the Bible that suggest that it IS possible to lose your salvation.

Not only that, there are passages in the Bible that call us to cling tight to our salvation too. If we were saved and then the rest of our lives didn’t matter, then we wouldn’t need these reminders to live faithfully. But they’re there, which means the way that we live as saved people must be important.

For example, Paul writes in Colossians 1 -

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.

22 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--

23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.

Jude says something very similar in his little book – Jude, verse 21 - 21 Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. (Jud 1:21 NIV).

And Peter spends a whole lot of time talking about how we live once we've been saved – 2 Peter 1 – he says 'God's power has given us everything we need to avoid sin and live holy lives' and continues – verse 5 -

5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;

6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness;

7 and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

8 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.

9 But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

10 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,

11 and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

(2Pe 1:3-11 NIV).

If it were impossible to lose our salvation, then what difference would our behaviour make? And yet time and again, the Bible warns us against sin and encourages us to faithful living. And so both the warnings and the encouragements suggest that it is at least possible to lose our salvation.

So what do we do with that? There are some sobering passages here and admittedly not the most fun to talk about. And I know that some churches would be happy just to hear the assurances and ignore the warnings. I remember in grade 6, our teacher gave a lesson on how to use a broom to sweep the floor – he said 'sweep it under the rug or just go like this (sweep sweep sweep) and it will all go away.' I promise I don't do that any more. (Very often).

But we can't just do that with these passages. That's not responsible. It's actually a little dangerous, like taking the warning label off a hazardous chemical. If your behaviour impacts your salvation, then it would be wrong of me to not tell you and wrong of you to do nothing about it.

So let's talk about it.

How do these warnings and assurances fit together?

Well, first off, I think we should clarify that confessed sin will not make you lose your salvation. As Tom Schreiner writes “Those who persevere are not perfect, but they never turn away from Jesus” (*Run to win*, 114). We will sin as followers of Jesus and we will stumble and fall but as long as we confess it and return to Jesus, that sin will not cause us to lose our salvation.

That’s why Jesus taught us to pray – ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.’ If believers were sinless, it would make no sense for Jesus to tell us to ask for forgiveness; but He did, because He knew that His followers would sin.

AND John tells us – “8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1Jo 1:8-9 NIV).

As long as we are confessing sin and returning to the Lord, this kind of ‘every day sin’ will not cause us to lose our salvation. Now listen, that is not an excuse for sin and a licence to do whatever you want, knowing that God will forgive you anyways; but I do want you to know that if you legitimately resist sin and repent when you fall, you will not lose your salvation.

But hold on Graham you might say – didn’t Hebrews 6:26 say - 26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, then there is nothing but judgment for us? If that’s not confessed sin then what is he talking about?

Good question. And the answer is this – the sin that Hebrews talks about is not any old sin but the outright rejection of God. Tom Schriener puts it like this – “‘Sinning deliberately’ doesn’t refer to any and every sin committed; the author has in mind apostasy, the rejection of Christian faith” (*Commentary on Hebrews*, 324).

And Matthew Henry, writer of one of the most beloved Bible commentaries of all time says –

1. From the description he gives of the sin of apostasy [the author defines apostasy as] *sinning wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth*, sinning wilfully against that truth of which we have had convincing evidence. This text has been the occasion of great distress to some gracious souls; they have been ready to conclude that every wilful sin, after conviction and against knowledge, is the unpardonable sin: but this has been their infirmity and error. The sin here mentioned is a total and final apostasy, when men with a full and fixed will and resolution despise and reject Christ, the only Saviour,--despise and resist the Spirit, the only sanctifier,--and despise and renounce the gospel, the only way of salvation, and the words of eternal life; and all this after they have known, owned, and professed, the Christian religion, and continue to do so obstinately and maliciously... (Note V.1. on Hebrews 10:26-27).

And I’m confident that these men are right because of the way that the author talks about sin in the following verses. These are not ‘minor infractions’ that a person regrets and repents of. Verse 28 is talking about rejecting the Law and so God Himself and verse 29 talks about

trampling the Son of God and insulting the Spirit of grace. This is high handed, unrepentant rebellion that slams the door on Christ and the salvation that that person once enjoyed. They are publically proclaiming 'this Christ whom I once loved is not worth anything' and that's what leads to judgment.

I think you see that in Hebrews 6:4 – they are turning away from Christ and making a public disgrace of him.

I think you see that in Galatians 5:4 – where they are abandoning Jesus to trust in themselves.

And you certainly see it in Matthew 10:32 – Jesus says –

32 "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.

33 But whoever disowns me before men (implying that you already knew Him), I will disown him before my Father in heaven (Mat 10:32-33 NIV).

You cannot 'lose' your salvation, but sure looks like you can 'reject' it.

Well then, you might say, that kind of throws a wrench in your doctrine of perseverance, doesn't it? Because if you believe and the Spirit of God indwells you, but you can legitimately choose to reject Him and thus fall away, doesn't that mean that your salvation is NOT in fact guaranteed in the first place? If I'm 'once saved, always saved,' then why are there passages suggesting the possibility of not being saved?

That's a good question and I think it all comes down to the function of those warning texts. They are there to point believers away from danger. AND all believers WILL heed their warnings and cling to Christ and receive the eternal life promised to them when God called them. Losing your salvation may theoretically be possible, but the assurances of God suggest that believers will necessarily pay attention to the warnings and follow the encouragements to safety.

In a sense, they're like a big flashing warning sign telling you that the bridge is out. In theory, I guess it is theoretically possible that you could choose to ignore the sign and drive around it and find yourself falling into the abyss, but any reasonable person would heed the warning and follow detour signs – the encouragement passages – that show you the way to safety. And I think that's how perseverance works. We, who have tasted the goodness of God and hold the Holy Spirit as guarantee of our salvation will inevitably pay attention to those warnings, cling to Christ and receive our promised salvation.

And that's why I think we can wrap this whole thing up in this one big idea. Once we are saved, we will always be saved to live out our salvation. Once saved, always saved to live out our salvation.

I think that the assurance passages in Scripture give us ample reason to believe that we can never lose our salvation. Nothing can separate us from God's love; nothing can snatch us away from the Triune God; and the good work that He has begun in us, He WILL bring to completion on the day that Christ returns. Once saved, we are always saved.

But being saved does not mean that our behaviour doesn't matter. We cannot lose our salvation but we dare not take it for granted. We are saved to live out the salvation that God has freely given us.

And I think that the author of Hebrews uses a really helpful metaphor here – right after the warning in chapter 6 verse 7, he writes -

7 Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God.

8 But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

Perseverance doesn't mean that no matter what we do, we will inevitably be saved; perseverance means that we actively live the life of faith that God has given us: that we stand firm in faith, that we grow in faith. This is not a works-righteousness that earns our salvation; this is us receiving the grace of God as life-giving rain and producing a crop of goodness that glorifies God.

If a person said to me – 'it doesn't matter how I live because I'm on the golden conveyor belt to salvation' I would probably say 'are you sure you're on the conveyor belt?' Because the conveyor belt necessarily leads to growth in Christian maturity.

If a person said to me – 'I'm a Christian' but their life was full of bitterness and complaint and inaction, I would probably say – 'Are you sure? You can tell a tree by its fruit and I see a lot of thorns and thistles here.'

We are once saved, always saved to live out our salvation.

To actively resist and confess sin when necessary.

To heed the warnings and embrace the encouragements.

To grow in faith.

To bear witness to the God who has graciously saved us for all eternity.

To serve others sacrificially.

To live in a manner worthy of the calling that we have received.

We are saved and guaranteed salvation so that we will apply that saving grace to all parts of our lives.

So let me boil this right down for you. Can I lose my salvation?

Well, first, I would ask, do you have salvation to lose? Have you looked to the Son and believed in Him, trusting in Him with all your heart? If you have, then you are saved. If you haven't, I would invite you to. Jesus died for you to deliver you from judgment – receive His grace and be saved.

Now if you are saved, can you lose that salvation?

To all of you who have humble and tender hearts,
To all of you who resist sin and confess when necessary,
To all of you who reject worldly priorities and make God's values your own, let me say, unequivocally no. You CAN NOT lose your salvation. God has begun a good work in you. He WILL bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus. Nothing can separate you from His love so that you can know – once saved, you are always saved. In the providence of God, you will heed the warnings and apply the encouragements and He will raise you up on the last day. I want you to have every confidence that you will not lose your salvation because God Himself is holding you firm.

I want to close with someone who had a lot of experience with this. The apostle Peter. He had his fair share of ups and downs and he knew the joys of perseverance and the sorrows of sin. He served as Satan's mouthpiece, telling Jesus not to go to Jerusalem. He abandoned Jesus in His time of need. He caved to social pressure and rejected Gentile believers – and yet in the grace of God, Peter repented every time and returned to Christ and I am confident that he will be with us in eternity.

Here's what he thought about this whole thing – and this was the first message in our 1 Peter series earlier this year –

3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade--kept in heaven for you,
5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1Pe 1:3-5 NIV).

We are saved by grace into a living hope which God Himself is keeping for us and He is keeping us safe too.

Once saved, always saved to live out our salvation.

BENEDICTION

16. 1 Th. 5:23-24 - Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.