

Do We Have 'Eternal Security'?

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The Methodist church near the church office often posts quotations and sayings on their roadside sign. One spring day, the sign read, "We ARE open between Easter and Christmas." Not only does this reflect a common, modern American attitude about church attendance, it is typical of Protestantism and Protestants' views on the unimportance of behavior.

This attitude and viewpoint spring from a doctrine that is a foundation of that particular brand of Christianity. This doctrine is itself founded upon the belief that human beings possess immortal souls, a lie that Satan foisted on mankind in the Garden of Eden:

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" (Genesis 3:1-3)

Earlier, God had informed Adam and Eve that sin exacts a penalty, death—the cessation of life—and, if a person will not repent of sin, this means total death—no chance for eternal life. This threat God has held over mankind's head from the beginning. Notice, however, how the Devil replies:

Then the serpent said to the woman, "*You will not surely die.* For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (verses 4-5)

Here is the lie: "Look, Adam and Eve, you have an immortal soul. God cannot enforce His threat." In its various forms through the centuries, this doctrine of man having eternal life already has appeared time and again.

In theological terms, this belief is the basis of the "Doctrine of Eternal Security." What is worse, this heretical doctrine has resurfaced in the church, having been part of the latest apostasy. It cannot stand, however, before the light of God's Word. God has a far superior way of dealing with humanity—both righteous and incorrigible.

Salvation Assured?

Briefly, most Protestants believe their salvation is assured once they accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. Many call this doctrine by the very familiar phrase, "once saved, always saved." To them, this means that God's grace eternally covers them, and thus they have eternal security that God will save them. God is bound to accept them and to give them salvation no matter what occurs after they accept Jesus. In his worldwide crusades, evangelist Billy Graham has popularized the Protestant hymn, "Just as I am, Lord," which sings the praises of this doctrine.

To us, this idea of "eternal security" is a completely ridiculous concept. God is pure and holy (I Peter 1:15-16). He will not accept people who are not as He is. He forsook His own Son, Jesus Christ,

when the sins of the world were placed on Him (Matthew 27:46)! Why would He accept us, who are far more personally sinful, if we failed to repent of our sins and came before Him demanding Him to save us "just as we are"?

An analogy from the real world may be helpful. Just because a criminal is absolved of committing a certain crime does not mean that he will never again be guilty of another crime. For example, if the governor of a state commutes a murderer's sentence, but he commits another crime later in his life, he is not innocent. The law says he is guilty of the later crime.

In the same way, a Christian who commits sin is guilty even though God's grace has covered him in the past. If he continues in the sin until it becomes a habitual way of life, he is in danger of losing the salvation promised to him. Notice Paul's quite concise statement in Hebrews 10:26: "For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins."

This is plain. If we sin in rebellion against God, setting our will to go against God and His way of life, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ no longer applies. In essence, we have spit in His face. Paul continues by telling us what applies at that point:

. . . a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The Lord will judge His people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (verses 27-31)

Peter says, "For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God" (I Peter 4:17), and if we live a life of sin, we will reap the punishment that those sins deserve. Our God is a God of justice. The idea of "eternal security," then, is foreign to the Bible. It is puzzling how theologians could develop such a doctrine when the Bible repeatedly comments, warns, and advises that we can lose it all through sin.

Uncomfortable Passages

To many Protestant theologians, the apostle Paul is the champion of grace. Frequently, they quote his epistles to give credence to their doctrinal positions. For instance, Martin Luther built an entire Reformation on one verse—Ephesians 2:8—which he proceeded to mistranslate and misuse! His rallying cry, "By grace you have been saved through faith alone," adds the word "alone" to Paul's thought. Luther is famous for disparaging the epistle of James as "an epistle of straw" because he despised James' assertion that Christians are justified by faith with works (James 2:14-26).

However, such theologians are uncomfortable with certain portions of Paul's writings because he fails to toe the once-saved-always-saved line. One of these passages is Romans 2:1-16, which expounds upon the judgment of God. Probably the best-known verse from this chapter is verse 13: "For not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified."

What a blow! Paul agrees with James! Keeping God's law is vital to our justification! This has important ramifications for those who refuse to change their behavior after accepting Jesus as their Savior: Failure to keep God's law is sin (I John 3:4), and those who sin "will be judged by the law" (Romans 2:12), and "the wages of sin is death" (see Romans 6:23; Ezekiel 18:4, 20). Jesus Himself says, "I tell you, . . . unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5).

Paul presents this teaching clearly in Romans 2:

But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. . . . [God] "will render to each one according to his deeds": eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil . . . but glory, honor, and peace, to everyone who works what is good. . . . (verses 2, 6-10)

This instruction refutes the doctrine of eternal security. He writes this letter to converted Romans, those who had already accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior. As God does in Genesis 3, the apostle threatens these Christians with God's utter abhorrence of sin and His unwavering promise to judge it.

Paul later illustrates this process of judgment to the Hebrews:

For the earth [Christians] which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessings from God; but if it bears thorns and briars, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned [in the Lake of Fire]. (Hebrews 6:7-8; see verses 4-6; Matthew 13:47-50; 25:31-46)

A Final Blow

For those who believe in the doctrine of eternal security, II Peter 1:10-11 is a particularly difficult teaching to dispute because it exposes the lie in this infernal teaching. It does this by stating a simple command that God asks us to carry out:

Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The inverse is also true; if we fail to do what Peter advises, then our calling and election are *not* sure. Beyond that, if we stumble, an entrance will not be supplied to us into the Kingdom of God.

God has done His part. He called or elected us out of all the billions on this planet. He forgave us, granted us repentance, and gave us His Holy Spirit. He opened up the truth to us and revealed Himself and His way of life to us. He made the New Covenant with us, supplying us with spiritual gifts, love, and faith. There is no end to what He has done for us.

Nevertheless, if we do not reciprocate, the relationship He has begun will fall apart. Our calling and election are not certain without us doing our part. We can fall away and not make it into the Kingdom of God.

Why did Peter write this to the whole church (verse 1)? He wrote this because the church at the time was experiencing various apostasies (II Peter 2:3). False teachers were bringing into the church destructive doctrines to turn the people away.

Why would Satan put false teachers in the church if there was no chance for the people to fall away? If church members have eternal security, why waste his time on them? However, Satan himself knows that Christians do not have eternal security, and he tries his best to turn us into apostates. We *can* fall away!

Peter was writing in this atmosphere. The people in the first century church were living in a time of false teachings, false teachers and apostasy; and he needed to warn them. "For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth" (II Peter 1:12).

This, too, begs the question: Why did Peter command them to make their calling and election sure? If they had the truth, and he admitted that they were established in it, why did they have to make it "sure"? In making their calling and election sure, they would be doing the one thing that would keep them on the right path to the Kingdom. Christians keep themselves from falling into deception, error, and sin—keep themselves from apostatizing and losing their salvation—by validating their conversion.

When a thing is validated, it is objectively determined to be genuine, true, real, authentic, or legitimate. How do Christians validate their calling and election? The answer is simple. Jesus describes it in Matthew 7:16-20:

You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn-bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

The way we validate our calling and election is by producing fruit. Jesus expounds on this in His Passover message in John 15:

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away. And every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. . . . As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered. And they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. . . . By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. (verses 1-2, 4-6, 8)

This blows the eternal security doctrine to smithereens. Our Savior, Jesus Christ—our Judge—says that if we do not bear fruit, God will take us away and throw us into the fire! If we bear fruit, however, we will glorify the Father and truly be disciples of Christ, that is, true Christians!

We validate our calling by growing in grace and knowledge (II Peter 3:18). If we are showing love to the brethren, if we are serving as opportunity permits, if we are deepening our relationship with God, we can be certain that our calling and election are still firmly in force.

Assurance Through Growth

Peter closes his epistle with a stirring warning and call to action:

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless. And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (II Peter 3:14-18)

Peter ends the epistle with the same thought with which he began: We live in spiritually dangerous times, and the way to stay on the beam is to keep on growing. *If we grow, our salvation is assured.* God is faithful; He has promised us salvation, and He will give it to us if we are faithful.

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight— *if* indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard. . . . (Colossians 1:21-23)

Jesus Christ earnestly wants to present us holy, blameless, and irreproachable to the Father in His Kingdom, but we have a part to play too. These things will happen *if* we uphold our half of the covenant. We must continue in the faith. We must remain grounded and steadfast. We must keep on growing. We must continue in the hope of our resurrection and eternal life.

We will do well not to take God's salvation for granted, thinking we have some kind of eternal security without obedience to God's way of life. Instead, let us all strive to make our calling and election sure!