

The Apostle John wrote his first epistle to "you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God" (1 John 5:13). Apparently the apostle taught that a believer could know whether he or she was saved. If a believer can know that he is saved then it logically follows that he has assurance that his salvation is secure. The teaching that a believer can be assured of his salvation is commonly known as "eternal security, the perseverance of the saints, or in laymen's terms, the 'once-saved, always-saved' doctrine."¹

The doctrine of eternal security has sparked a debate between believers that has been waged for centuries. The Roman Catholic Church has long taught that it is impossible for anyone, including the pope, to be assured of his or her salvation. Anybody committing this so-called "sin of presumption" is anathematized by Rome.² During the

¹ John F. MacArthur, *The Security of Salvation: Why You Can't Lose It* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1983) p. 1.

² Canon 15 on Justification states, "If anyone saith that a man who is born again and justified is bound of faith to believe that he is assuredly in the number of the

Reformation men were able to read the Bible for themselves and many noticed that it seemed to teach that a believer could not lose his salvation. They began to realize that salvation was accomplished by Christ on the cross rather than through a person's works. Others stayed closer to the Catholic position that Christ accomplished the initial work of salvation but a person must remain faithful to the end in order to be saved. These arguments were brought to the forefront in the disputes between Calvinists and Arminians. The Calvinists maintained that salvation was entirely God's work and that man could not add to it in any way. The Arminians believed that eternal security violated man's free will and therefore was unbiblical.³

Four hundred years have not been enough for Christians to reach an agreement on this issue. Many churches today still teach that a person can lose or give back his or her salvation.⁴ Meanwhile, fundamental and evangelical churches

predestinate; let him be anathema." Roman Catholic Church, *Dogmatic Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1977) p. 52.

³ Interestingly enough, Jacobus Arminius did not believe this, it was later taken up by his followers who were opposed to Calvinism. He stated, "At no period have I asserted 'that believers do finally decline or fall away from faith or salvation.'" Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This?* (Sisters, OR: Loyal Publishing, 2002) p. 77.

⁴ Among others, the churches of the so-called "Restoration Movement" which includes Churches of Christ and Christian Churches teach that salvation is a gift that can be given

typically affirm the doctrine of eternal security. They point to the numerous passages of Scripture that seem to teach this rather than looking at human emotion or will to find their answer to this question.

This approach is the correct one. The Bible must be the sole authority on this issue rather than human reason and church history. Only by studying what the Bible states regarding salvation can this issue be resolved. The remainder of this paper will focus on the Biblical teaching regarding the security of believer's salvation. John Ankerberg and John Weldon correctly noted regarding this approach:

"Only one situation can exist that would cause this issue to be unresolvable: lack of clarity on the subject. Since both positions - of security and of loss of salvation - cannot simultaneously be true, clarity on one position by definition disproves the other."⁵

Later the authors state, "Once this doctrine is established to be true, no other Scripture can possibly contradict it."⁶

back if one does not remain faithful or does not want it anymore. Since this group abhors human creeds it is difficult, if not impossible, to find a doctrinal statement or book teaching this: however, this student was raised and trained in this movement and has had numerous discussions and disagreements on this subject with members of these churches.

⁵ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Knowing the Truth About Eternal Security* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers 1997) p. 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.

In studying the passages related to the eternality of one's salvation four important points can be made. First, the doctrine is consistent with God's eternal purpose to save completely those who are called. Second, the Bible always refers to eternal life as it relates to the believer as a present possession. Third, the Bible clearly states in numerous passages that salvation cannot be lost. Finally, salvation is secure because it is based on Christ's work and not on human merit. These four points will be examined in order. Attention must also be given to a couple of passages that apparently teach that a believer can lose his or her salvation.

God's Eternal Purpose in Salvation

There are many passages that could be cited to prove that God's purpose in salvation is to utterly save those who are perishing. Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians provides a clear example of this. He wrote:

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because *God from the beginning chose you for salvation* through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and *given us*

everlasting consolation and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work." (2 Thes. 2: 13 - 17, italics added)

Paul clearly stated that God chose the believer for salvation from the beginning. This idea served to console the believer for eternity.

Paul taught these same concepts in Ephesians 1: 4 in which he wrote that God chose believers "before the foundation of the world." Since God is omniscient and He chose believers for salvation before anything was ever made then He must have known every single sin that each of the elect would ever commit and yet He still chose them. God could never be surprised by a believer's actions so there is nothing that could force God to change His mind or alter His purpose of salvation.

Salvation: The Believer's Present Possession

Throughout holy writ salvation and eternal life are described as possessions that have already given to the believer and are available to the unbeliever. "Scripture teaches that believers have eternal life as a present possession now - they don't need to wait to die in order to

know they have eternal life.”⁷ The Apostle John provides a clear example of this in his gospel. He recorded Christ’s following controversial words to the Jews:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears my word and believes in Him who sent Me *has everlasting life*, and shall not come into judgment, but *has passed* from death into life” (John 5: 24). (italics added)

According to John MacArthur, this may be “the most monumental statement ever made in the Bible relative to the security of salvation.”⁸ Jesus stated in unambiguous terms that the believer had already passed from death into life and would never come into judgment. This could only be possible if one’s salvation was assured. If the believer could possibly lose his salvation at some future point then Jesus would have had to say that a believer might from death into life and might not come into judgment. Of course, it is impossible to read that into the text.

This idea is repeated in the next chapter of the Gospel of John. Once again Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life” (John 6: 47). It is plainly stated that everlasting life is something already owned by the one who believes in Jesus

⁷ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Knowing the Truth About Eternal Security* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers 1997) p. 14.

⁸ John MacArthur, Jr., *Saved Without a Doubt: How to Be Sure of Your Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992) p. 15.

Christ. John records yet another statement of Christ that teaches this idea. In what is likely the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3: 16, Jesus said that whoever believed in Him "should not perish but have eternal life."

John wrote much concerning the believer's present possession of salvation in his gospel. It is therefore not surprising that he mentions it in his first epistle. In fact, the entire letter of 1 John is centered on that very theme. As noted earlier, he stated, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5: 13). Based on this, MacArthur wrote, "Assurance is an inextricable part of saving faith"⁹ and that "the Christian faith is a secure faith."¹⁰

John was not alone in stressing this comforting truth. The Apostle Peter also taught that a believer possessed eternal life in his first epistle. He stated that God had given believers an incorruptible inheritance that "does not fade away" and is "reserved in heaven" for believers (1 Pet. 1: 3 - 4). The inheritance that is reserved in heaven Peter mentioned is the eternal life that belongs to every believer. The New Testament is abundantly

⁹ John MacArthur, Jr., *Saved Without a Doubt: How to Be Sure of Your Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992) p. 100.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

clear that the one who trusts in Christ already has eternal life and will never face judgment.

Salvation Cannot Be Lost

Not only is eternal life the believer's present possession and part of God's purpose in salvation but there are also numerous passages that plainly teach the security of salvation. The Gospel of John once more outlines this doctrine as clear as any New Testament book. Using the analogy of a shepherd and his sheep, Jesus said:

"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand" (John 10: 27 - 29).

According to Jesus Christ, no one can take a believer out of His hand. He emphasized His statement by claiming that no one could snatch a believer out of His Father's hand.

Despite the fact that God is omnipotent, many who deny the security of a believer's salvation claim each believer could remove himself from God's hand. These people believe that "there is one condition that invariably will lead to loss of salvation, and that is when a believer forsakes the

faith and finally apostatizes."¹¹ In light of Jesus' promises found in John 10: 27 - 29, this simply cannot be the case. The believer who would allegedly fall away must also be included in Christ's statement that "no one is able to snatch them out of" His Father's hand.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul emphatically puts an end to the notion that a believer can remove himself from salvation. The entire eighth chapter of this book conclusively demonstrates the truth of eternal security. In the very first verse Paul affirms "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8: 1). Paul ends the eighth chapter with an irrefutable declaration of the believer's security. "In verses 35 - 39 we are told that literally nothing can separate us from the love of Christ."¹²

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution,
or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As
it is written:

*"For Your sake we are killed all day long;
We are accounted as sheep for the
slaughter."*

Yet in all these things we are more than
conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am
persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels
nor principalities nor powers, nor things present
nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any

¹¹ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Knowing the Truth About Eternal Security* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers 1997) p. 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8: 35 - 39).

Paul began this passage with a question that has only one obvious answer. No one can separate the believer from the love of God. To stifle any possible opposition Paul further explains what he meant by that statement by listing every conceivable person, being, or force that may have the potential to part the believer from God's love. At the close of his list Paul stamps out any doubt by stating that nothing in all creation could separate the believer from the love of God. This certainly would preclude the believer from losing his salvation.

The only possible way to get around the implications of this verse is to believe that an uncreated being could cause the Christian to lose his salvation. God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit are alone in being uncreated. Fortunately for the believer, no member of the Trinity would ever allow one to lose salvation. Jesus declared, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6: 37). This statement, along with Paul's teaching in Romans 8: 38 - 39, eliminate every possible option that could separate the believer from Christ. No creature can do it and God has promised the He would not do it.

In Ephesians 1: 13 - 14 Paul stated that believers are given the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of their inheritance of eternal glory. "If loss of salvation were possible, then the Holy Spirit could be defeated...which of course is impossible."¹³ Paul repeated this truth in his second epistle to the Corinthians: "[God] also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee" (2 Cor. 1: 22). The believer's salvation is secure unless the Holy Spirit, who is God, fails. Since that is impossible it logically follows that it is impossible for the believer to lose his or her salvation.

Salvation is Based on Christ's Work - not Man's

Salvation could only be secure if it is based on Christ's work on the cross. This is most certainly the case according to Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast (Eph. 2: 8 - 9).

"The doctrine of security...depends on what God has done."¹⁴

The Bible is clear on this issue. When Jesus was on the

¹³ Karleen, Paul S. *The Handbook to Bible Study: With a Guide to the Scofield Study System*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁴ Ryrie, Charles Caldwell, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972).

cross He proclaimed, "It is finished" (John 19: 30). There is nothing that any man can do or say that can assist him in gaining salvation. Jesus Christ paid it all on Calvary's cross and has forgiven believers of "all [their] sin" (Col. 2: 13). God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5: 21).

The foundational teachings of the atoning work of Christ affirm the doctrine of eternal security. Since Jesus paid for all the "sins of the world" (John 1: 29) then this would include every sin a believer has ever committed or will ever commit. There is no future sin that a believer could commit that would ever separate him from the love of God because Jesus has already forgiven him of that sin before it was ever committed.

Since the believer cannot work for his salvation then what could he ever do to lose it? The Biblical answer is: nothing! Not only has the Father promised to keep believers and the Spirit is given as a guarantee but Christ forever lives to intercede on behalf of the believer. The author of Hebrews wrote that Christ "is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7: 25). "If a believer could be lost it would imply Christ is

ineffective in His work as the believer's Mediator."¹⁵
Obviously, it is impossible for Christ to fail so it must follow that the believer is secure.

Verses that Apparently Teach Insecurity

Those who teach the insecurity of salvation inevitably point to several "proof-texts" to support their view. While some difficulty may exist in reconciling a few verses with eternal security it can be done. It is best to understand these difficult verses as referring to unbelievers who know about Christ but never knew Him as Savior or surrendered to Him as Lord. When seen in this light the passages make perfect sense. If these verses must be understood to teach the loss of salvation then every verse teaching eternal security must be reinterpreted, altered, or removed from Scripture.

In Galatians 5: 4 Paul speaks of people who have fallen from grace. Some have interpreted this to mean that these people had lost their salvation; however, when the context is considered the true meaning can be discovered. It is crucial to understand that "Paul was not referring to the security of the believer but to the contrasting ways of

¹⁵ Enns, Paul P. *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1997.

grace and law, faith and works, as means of salvation.”¹⁶

Paul was writing about those who had come to understand the truth of the gospel but had rejected Jesus Christ. These apostates had fallen from grace in the sense that they turned their back on God after He had graciously exposed them to the truth.

This idea can also be seen in another passage which some use to promote the idea that salvation can be lost.

Hebrews 6: 4 - 6 states:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame (Heb. 6: 4 - 6).

Those who teach insecurity assume that the author Hebrews is referring to individuals who at one time were saved but had lost their salvation. The text never clearly states this. It does mention people who had been enlightened, partook of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the heavenly gift, the good word of God and the powers of the age to come. Undoubtedly, these were people who had seen God's power at work in the early church. They had seen miracles and knew all about Jesus Christ and they still rejected Him. The

¹⁶ John MacArthur, Jr., *Saved Without a Doubt: How to Be Sure of Your Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992) p. 25.

author of Hebrews stated that it is impossible for such a person to be renewed to repentance. This mirrors Christ's teaching regarding those who blasphemed the Holy Spirit in Matthew 12: 31.

God gives people a limited number of opportunities to come to Him. Pharaoh hardened his own heart after the first five plagues but eventually God was the One who hardened Pharaoh's heart.¹⁷ Just prior to His crucifixion, Jesus remained silent before Pilate. Pilate had already rejected Christ even though he knew that Jesus was innocent.¹⁸ These two leaders saw God's power and righteousness but rejected Him. As a result, God took away their opportunity to be saved. This is precisely the type of situation that Hebrews 6: 4 - 6 is referring to. If it is speaking of believers who lost their salvation then hundreds of verses are in error and the Bible needs to be thrown out.

Conclusion

It is the clear and consistent teaching of the Bible that a believer's salvation is secure. It is God's eternal purpose to save completely and to the uttermost those who

¹⁷ Exodus 7: 14 - 12: 42.

¹⁸ John 19: 1 - 16.

are called. The Bible also consistently refers to eternal life as a present possession of the believer. It also plainly teaches in scores of passages that salvation cannot be lost. Nothing can separate the believer "from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8: 39). The believer is also secure because salvation is based on Christ's work at the cross and not on a man's own merits. Were salvation left up to the individual then no one would ever be saved because all have sinned.

The so-called problem passages are easily cleared up by understanding the context and by comparing Scripture with Scripture. Since the Bible cannot contradict itself then these verses must not be referring to people who had lost their salvation. These verses are better understood to refer to men and women who knew the gospel but never placed their trust in Christ but instead rejected Him. As a result, these men and women had their hearts hardened and their opportunity for salvation was lost.

The doctrine of eternal security is one of the great truths of Scripture. It provides assurance to the individual believer and helps him have a proper perspective on his works. He does not work so that he can be saved but because he has already been saved. God did this so that He will receive all the glory from believer's lives. If

salvation were based upon human performance then man would have to receive some of the credit for it. The position of insecurity is inconsistent with the rest of Scripture because it requires a man to work to keep his salvation. MacArthur concluded that since salvation is "all of God, then [one] can know with certainty that He will not fail to secure it. Anyone who is truly God's child need never fear losing his citizenship in heaven."¹⁹

¹⁹ MacArthur, John. *Truth for Today: A Daily Touch of God's Grace* (Nashville, TN: Countryman, 2001) p. 267.