

Voices: Can Christians lose their salvation?

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In my previous [article on universalism](#), while commenting on Colossians, I noted that Christians' salvation is contingent upon continuing "in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not [moving] away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard" (1:23). This naturally provokes the question, "Can Christians lose their salvation?"

I believe the [Baptist Faith & Message](#) does an excellent job articulating the position I myself hold: "All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end. Believers may fall into sin through neglect and temptation ... yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation" (Article V).

However, as well as the *Baptist Faith & Message* articulates this point of view, one still must ask: Is it biblical?

The necessity of perseverance

I believe Colossians 1:22-23 on its own makes the requirement of perseverance quite clear. Christ will "present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard" (NASB, emphasis mine).

There are many other texts in the New Testament that also put forward perseverance as a requirement for salvation, including Revelation 2:10, James 1:12 and Hebrews 6:11. Also accompanying texts like these are

passages that warn against falling away, such as 1 Timothy 4:1, John 15:6, Matthew 24:10, etc.

A key text that outlines the relationship between salvation and perseverance is Hebrews 3:14, which reads, “For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end.” In other words, only those who persevere to the end can be said ever to have been truly in Christ at all.

Similarly, 1 John 2:19 says of certain false teachers: “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; *for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us*; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us” (emphasis mine).

If you abandon Christ after professing faith in him and do not repent, you will not inherit eternal life. Does this amount to works-righteousness? Does this make one’s salvation contingent upon one’s inner fortitude and ability to “stick it out” to the end? No. There is more to the biblical picture.

The preserving power of God

Alongside the numerous passages commanding perseverance, the New Testament also contains a variety of passages proclaiming believers’ security in Christ (e.g. John 6:37, 10:27-29; Romans 8:29-39; Philippians 1:6; 1 Peter 1:3-5). So, which is it? Do believers have to persevere, or are we secure in Christ no matter what? Yes.

Nowhere is this delightful paradox clearer than in Jude. Jude says believers are “*kept* for Jesus Christ” (1:1), encourages readers to “*keep yourselves* in the love of God” (1:21), and concludes that God “is able to *keep* you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy” (1:24).

Put simply, the believer's perseverance is a gift from God, a work of his grace accomplished through the New Covenant in Christ's blood and applied by the Spirit (Jeremiah 31:31-34, 32:40; Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3:6-8; Hebrews 8:6-13). Our perseverance does not come from ourselves or our own righteousness. It is the gift of God, who can guarantee our perseverance and keep us from apostasy.

Those who have fallen away?

A major challenge to this view is the (in)famous warning passage of Hebrews: "For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame" (6:4-6).

The description of "those who have once been enlightened" at first sounds like it could not describe anyone except authentic Christians. Surely, a "partaker of the Holy Spirit" who has "tasted the good word of God" *must* be a real believer, no?

Not necessarily. Consider Matthew 7:22-23, which says: "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"

[Sam Storms points out](#) that these people whom Christ addresses "preached, prophesied, performed miracles, and cast out demons in Christ's name ... *but were not saved.*" According to Storms: "These, then, 'have tasted' the power and blessings of the new covenant" but have not actually received the salvation of Christ. And note what Christ says to

them: “I *never* knew you.” Christ did not know them at one point and then stop; he *never* knew them.

One can have some knowledge of who Christ is and even partake of the power of the Spirit in some measure, yet also not truly *know* Jesus Christ and thus not truly be saved. The warning passage of Hebrews 6 is a challenging text, but it does not disprove the doctrine that all true believers will be kept to the end by the grace of God.

Blessed assurance?

Texts like these provoke many Christians to ask, “What if I’m not truly saved?” Can Christians have any assurance of security in Christ?

Note in Matthew 7 the false believers’ false assurance rests on their own deeds, not on the mercy and grace of Christ. True assurance is rooted in the person and work of Christ himself, not in our own works or even in the strength of our subjective faith in him. “Small” faith is enough (Matthew 17:20).

Moreover, concern for whether you truly are in Christ indicates a sort of humility and a heart that desires faithfulness to Christ, neither of which are marks of someone at risk of apostasy (Mark 9:24; 2 Peter 1:10). Security and assurance of the same are available to all who humble themselves before Christ.

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