

Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 1 – 2005-2007

Apostasy and Eternal Security

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Introduction

Whether or not a believer in Christ can sin so grievously so as to forfeit his justification is an important question relating to the doctrine of eternal security. Perhaps the most devastating sin a Christian could commit would be to abandon his faith. Is the commitment of apostasy by a true Christian enough grounds for the loss of eternal salvation? This paper will examine this issue.

The Securing Work of the Triune God

Eternal security is based on the work of the Triune God in the process of securing eternal salvation for every person who believes. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each guarantees that eternal life, once obtained, can never be lost.

The Securing Work of God the Father

The fact that God the Father chose some to salvation as part of His eternal plan guarantees the security of the believer. Ephesians 1.4 says that God “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world.” If the believer is not secure in God’s sovereign election, then that election would be nullified. In addition, God will glorify all who He has predestined, called, and justified (Rom 8.30). The destiny of the elect is certain.

Election is in love (Eph 1.3-4), is gracious (2 Tim 1.9), and is part of God’s eternal purpose (Rom 8.28; Eph 1.4; 2 Thess 2.13; 2

Tim 1.9; Rev 17.8). It is related to the sovereignty (Acts 13.48; Eph 1.4; 1 Pet 2.8), omniscience (Job 37.16; Ps 147.5), and foreknowledge (Rom 8.29; 1 Pet 1.2) of God.

Since God is sovereign, omniscient, and foreknowing, it is inconceivable that a believer in Christ, one of His elect, could, for any reason, become one of the non-elect. This would mean that God's omniscience and foreknowledge is imperfect and His predestined plan for all things is flawed.

Election makes certain the security of the believer. If sin could undo justification, then the sovereign and eternal purpose of God in choosing a person is nullified. Apostasy simply cannot negate the perfect plan of a sovereign and omniscient God

The power and purpose of God is unconditionally able to deliver the believer safely into His presence. Speaking of His sheep, Jesus said, "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 10.29). In the benediction of Jude we read, "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24). And there is nothing or no one in the universe that can "separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8.39).

The Securing Work of God the Son

Jesus Christ is the object of faith which results in eternal life. The only condition of eternal life is faith in Him (John 3.16; 6.47). A person possesses eternal life at the very instant he believes in Christ: "He who believes in Me has everlasting life" (John 6.48). And since it is eternal life, it cannot be lost, otherwise it would not be eternal. Since no conditions are ever attached to faith alone in Christ alone for eternal salvation, no action of man can change what has been supernaturally wrought in a person.

Because of the work of Christ as our Advocate (1 John 2.1) and intercessor (John 17.11-12; Rom 8.33-34), believers have a secure salvation. Jesus "always lives to make intercession" (Heb 7.25) for the sinning believer. If sin could undo salvation, then the interceding efforts of Christ are ineffective.

Christ will lose no believers: "This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me,

that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6.39-40). Believers are secure in the hands of both the Father and the Son (John 10.28-29).

The finished once for all work of Christ on the cross secures the salvation of the believer (Heb 10.1-14). In the Levitical sacrificial system, the priests had to make sacrifices for sin year after year (10.1, 3, 11). But these sacrifices of bulls and goats could only deal with sin on a temporary basis (10.4). But the sacrifice of the Lamb of God was a once for all time sacrifice (10.10) which could actually take away sins (10.11).¹ The cross was “one sacrifice for sins forever” (10.12, 14). This means all sins—past, present, future, confessed, unconfessed, known, and unknown.

The permanence and sufficiency of the finished work of Christ on the cross for all sins of all time is further confirmed by the perfect tense of the verbs (“sanctified”) in Heb 10.10 and (“perfected”) in Heb 10.14. The perfect tense denotes continuing effects from a past action. So the “setting apart” (10.10) and “perfecting” (10.14) of believers is an ongoing state.

The Securing Work of God the Holy Spirit

The fourfold work of the Holy Spirit in salvation guarantees the security of the believer.

First, once the believer is *regenerated* (given eternal life), how can this new divine life be undone? Believers are “born from above” or “born again” (John 3.3). Becoming “unborn” is an impossibility. Also, since this act of regeneration is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit (John 1.12-13; Tit 3.5-6), how can any act of man undo it?

Second, according to Romans 8.9, the *indwelling* by the Holy Spirit within the believer is permanent: “Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.” In John 14.16, Jesus promised that the coming Holy Spirit will indwell the apostles forever. If believers are not eternally secure, then these verses are wrong.

Third, according to 1 Corinthians 12.13, the Holy Spirit *baptizes* those who believe into the body of Christ: “For by one Spirit we were

¹ This does not teach sinless perfection in the *condition* of the believer. But it does mean that in our *position* in Christ, we are holy and blameless.

all baptized into one body.” If eternal security was not true, then this placing of the believer into union with Christ could be undone. But there is no Biblical text that states that this is possible. This supernatural work by the Holy Spirit cannot be undone.

Finally, the *sealing* of the believer by the Holy Spirit is permanent for it is “for the day of redemption” (Eph 4.30). The One who seals the Christian is “the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession” (Eph 1.14). Scripture nowhere states that a believer can become “unsealed.” Sin simply cannot undo the seal of the Holy Spirit.

Some Relevant Passages

The following is a brief exposition of some passages that impact eternal security. While not all of them directly address the issue of apostasy, they are indirectly related in that, correctly interpreted, they show that the passage does not teach the loss of salvation.

Matthew 16.24-27 (cf. Mark 8.34-38; Luke 9.23-26)

In Matthew 16.24-27, Jesus exhorts His disciples to a life of daily self denial and cross bearing (16.24). This is what is entailed in being a follower of Him. The Lord goes on to relate this kind of lifestyle to the saving and losing of life (16.25) and the losing of the soul (16.26).

Two aspects of the passage should be considered. First, the same Greek word (*psuchē*) translates both “life” and “soul.” There is no reason to change the translation of the word from “life” in 16.25 to “soul” in 16.26. “Life” is the correct rendering of *psuchē* throughout the passage.

Second, the point of the passage is reward: “For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works” (16.27).

Jesus is asking His disciples to consider their lives here on earth. What will they invest in? If the believer lives in such a way so as to gain “treasures on earth” (Matt 6.19), he will ultimately lose the full experience of life in eternity, i.e., rewards. On the other hand, if the believer lives his life now with an eye to “treasures in heaven” (Matt 6.20), he will ultimately gain the full experience of eternal life, i.e., rewards.

Luke 8.11-15 (cf. Matt 13.18-23; Mark 4.13-20)

In Luke 8:11-15, Jesus explains the meaning of the parable of the soils (8.4-8). In that parable, Jesus told of four different kinds of soil that received the word of God. The second sowing of seed “fell on rock, and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture” (8.6). Jesus explains this sowing: “But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away” (8.13).

The falling away here does not concern the loss of salvation. The issue in the parable is fruitfulness. The third soil, which is full of thorns, is thus explained: “Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and *bring no fruit to maturity* (8.14; emphasis added). Likewise the fourth soil: “But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and *bear fruit* with patience” (8.15).

The believer who fails in the face of trial produces no fruit in his life. The passage does not even hint that this person has forfeited his justification.

John 15.1-8

This passage is also concerned with bearing fruit (15.2, 4, 5, 8), the key to which is abiding in Christ (15.4, 5, 7). Believers are clearly in view because, as branches connected to the life giving vine, they are “in Christ” (15.2).

Some have maintained that the believer who does not bear fruit loses his salvation because he is “taken away” (15.2), “cast out,” “withered,” and “burned” (15.6).

The verb translated “takes away” in 15.2 relates to lifting the branches off the ground to promote growth. “He lifts up” might be a better rendering.

The severe consequences in 15.6 relate both to the temporal discipline that the Lord may inflict on the unabiding believer or the seriousness of the coming Judgment Seat of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 3.11-15). Fire will clearly be a part of the experience of the unrewarded believer there.

1 Corinthians 1.2

A reading of the book of 1 Corinthians demonstrates that the Corinthian believers were not living like they should. If any group of believers could forfeit their eternal security through sin, it would be the Corinthians. And yet Paul could still call them “sanctified” and “saints” in his greeting to them (1 Cor 1.2). Even though they were often carnal, their position in Christ was secure.

1 Corinthians 9.24-27

In 1 Corinthians 9.27 Paul speaks of the possibility of being disqualified. The interpreter who does not believe in eternal security will say that Paul understood that he could lose his salvation because of a lack of perseverance.

But the passage concerns reward (9.24-25). Paul employs the athletic metaphors of the runner and boxer who work hard and “play by the rules” to earn a “perishable crown” (9.25). In the same way, the believer should pursue that hard work of discipleship so that he might receive an “imperishable” crown (9.25). Paul concludes by saying that if the disciple does not “train” and live by the “rules” of the word of God, then he may forfeit the eternal reward that he might have otherwise earned. Paul realized this was a real possibility, even for an apostle.

Galatians 5.4

In Galatians 5.4, Paul says that one who seeks to be justified by the law has “fallen from grace.” Some see this as a loss of salvation.

The primary thrust of Galatians concerns sanctification legalism. Many of the Galatian believers were trying to live by the law (3.3) rather than grace. Hence they “have fallen from grace” to a lower level of living.

Galatians 5.19-21

Following his list of sinful actions and lifestyles, Paul says that “those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Some would handle this passage by saying that the sins listed are enough to keep a believer out of heaven. Others would say that the presence of these sins prove the person was not a believer to begin with.

But these interpretations ignore several things. First, in 5.16-18, Paul exhorts the Galatian believers to walk by the Holy Spirit and not by the flesh. He then lists “the works of the flesh” (5.19). In other words, the believer who lives according to his own sin nature may manifest any or all of these sins. He then draws the contrast with the “fruit of the Spirit” (5.22-23).

Second, the loss for the believer who lives according to his own sin nature is a loss of inheritance. Some mistakenly understand 5.21 as “will not enter the kingdom of God” rather than “will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Inheritance does not equal entrance. Inheritance refers to reward in the kingdom (cf. Col 3.23-25). Paul is warning the believer that a carnal lifestyle now will result in a loss of kingdom reward.

2 Timothy 2.12

The way for the believer to reign with Christ in the world to come is to live a life of endurance now. But Paul also says, “If we deny Him, He also will deny us.” Some would say that denial of Christ results in a loss of salvation.

But in the context and the parallelism of the verse, the opposite of endurance is denial by the believer, and the opposite of reigning with Christ is denial by Him. So the denial by Christ is simply the denial of the future reign with Christ. This loss of reward occurs because of a non-enduring lifestyle.

If assurance of eternal security is based on performance, then no believer in Christ would ever have assurance. An objective person will understand that there will always be something else that he could have done for Christ. There will always be some other good work that could have been performed, but wasn't.

If assurance of eternal security is based on works, then the unbeliever who believes that he is eternally saved by works, is being assured of his eternal security when in fact he is lost!

In 2 Timothy 2:11-13, Paul recounts a short hymn or proverb that was perhaps well known in the church:

11 This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him.

12 If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us.

13 If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.

Verses eleven and thirteen confirm that the believer is eternally secure with Christ, regardless of his level of faithfulness. But verse twelve, “surrounded” by the fact of unconditional eternal security, holds forth the possibility of failure. The denial spoken of is a lack of perseverance in this life and a loss of reward in the next. The parallelism of the verse makes this clear:

If we endure ... we shall also reign with Him

If we deny Him ... He also will deny us.

If a believer in Christ seeks his assurance of eternal security from his performance, he will never be assured. Assurance of eternal security is simply based on the promise that, if a person believes in Jesus Christ, he has the gift of eternal life.

Hebrews 6.1-8

This passage has sometimes been understood to refer to a loss of salvation or a reference to people who professed to be believers but really were not.

The readership of Hebrews were evidently immature in the faith (5.12). The choice for them was to change course and move on to maturity or stay in their present condition (6.1). That these are believers is clear from terminology like “enlightened,” “tasted the heavenly gift,” “have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,” and “have tasted the good word of God” (6.4-5).

When the author writes that it is impossible, once these have fallen away, “to renew them again to repentance” (Heb 6.6), he is suggesting a hardening of the hearts of these who have been lured back into Judaism, to the system that hung Jesus on a cross. In this way “they crucify again for themselves the Son of God” (6.6). Renewing their commitment to Christ will be impossible. Their conversion to Christ is not in view, being a settled issue.

The warning is amplified by reminding them that fruitfulness will bring the blessing of God (6.7), but a lack of fruitfulness brings temporal judgment, loss of reward, and perhaps even physical death (6.8).

Implications for Christian Living

Gratitude

All Christians should be grateful to Christ for dying in their place and providing the way to eternal life through faith in Him. This gratitude should be reflected in the way we live. Because God loved us and sent His Son as the perfect sacrifice for sin (Rom 5.8; 1 John 4.9-10), we should also love Him: “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4.19).

And this love we have for our Lord will translate to good works for Him: “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14.15). And as we keep His commandments we love Him more: “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me.” (John 14.21).

This is a cycle of victorious Christian living: The more we love Him, the more we obey Him. And the more we obey Him, the more we love Him. Gratitude for our eternal security in Christ will produce a powerful desire to please and obey God.

The Motivation of Eternal Rewards

In his final epistle, Paul, facing his imminent death (2 Tim 4:6), declared to Timothy: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (4:7). Paul could look back over his life and rest in the fact that he had done his best for Christ.

But there is more. For this life of enduring faithfulness, Paul could count on reward of reigning with Christ: “Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (4.8).

Paul in no way viewed his service for Christ as the way to assure his entrance to heaven. That issue was long ago settled on the road to Damascus (Acts 9.1-9). His service for Christ assured him of his reward in heaven.

Assurance of Eternal Security Is Not Based on Our Works

If assurance of eternal security is based on performance, then no believer in Christ would ever have assurance. An objective person will understand that there will always be something else that he could

have done for Christ. There will always be some other good work that could have been performed, but wasn't.

In John 6.47, Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life." This foundation of assurance of eternal security in Christ is not based on performance, faithfulness, obedience, or commitment. The foundation of assurance of eternal security is the simple promise of God that the one who believes in Christ possesses eternal life. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

If assurance of eternal security is based on works, then the unbeliever who believes that he is eternally saved by works, is being assured of his eternal security when in fact he is lost!

If eternal security is based on works, then a believer serves God because he has to, not because he gets to or wants to. God is more honored by the latter attitude than the former.

Conclusion

Eternal security is based on the supernatural work of the triune God on behalf of the one who believes. The fundamental question is this: Can any act of man undo the supernatural work of God? The biblical answer is a resounding no! The believer in Christ is secure, now and forever.