

Testamentum Imperium
An International Theological Journal

www.PreciousHeart.net/ti

Volume 1 – 2005-2007

**Perseverance of the Saints or the
Security of the Believer**

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A. Will Our Salvation Last?

We are never satisfied. After studying how God made peace possible through Christ's death on the cross, we want to know, "Will this last?" Some people are sure that once we have salvation, we will always have it. Others are just as sure that we can have it today and lose it tomorrow. There are some terms with which we should be acquainted if we are going to do justice to this study. These definitions will be from Erickson unless otherwise indicated.¹

1. Apostasy: a "falling away", usually a deliberate and total abandonment of the faith previously held.
2. Falling from grace: After a person has been saved, he may "fall from grace or lose his salvation. The term is derived from Galatians. It points to salvation being temporary rather than permanent. (My definition).
3. Perseverance: The teaching that those who are genuine believers will endure in the faith to the end.
4. Backsliding: A temporary or partial diminution of one's spiritual commitment. It is less serious or major than apostasy.

¹ Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*.

The majority of denominations teach that a Christian can fall from grace. The Presbyterians and Baptists are the exceptions. The majority opinion will be considered first. The question is, “How can a person, who is genuinely saved, lose his salvation? Several answers are given.

1. By committing a terrible sin. The view is that some sins may disrupt our relationship with God. The ones that are most often mentioned are murder, adultery, and suicide. A person who murders someone is such a corrupt and vile being that he cannot be forgiven. One that commits adultery is beyond God’s forgiveness. However, all sin is against God and makes us his enemies. “Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness” (1 Jn. 3:4). Are there sins that God will not forgive? They do not seem to be murder or adultery; Jesus forgave both of these. Catholics divide sins into two groups—mortal and venial. Mortal sins bring spiritual death unless confession is made to a priest. Venial sins are less serious. They would say that if a mortal sin were unconfessed, it would cause a person to lose his salvation. Suicide is a particular problem for those who believe all sins must be confessed to be forgiven. How can we confess suicide after you have done it? If we confessed before we killed ourselves, we would repent and there would be no suicide. The Bible does not list adultery, murder, or suicide as sins that cause a person to lose his salvation.²
2. By not doing enough good works. John Wesley said, “[works] are the condition of your final salvation.”¹ Therefore, their argument is that salvation can be lost if we do not do enough good works. The quantity and quality of our works is important.
3. We have freedom to accept Christ before we are saved; don’t we have enough freedom to reject him after we are saved? We have even more freedom after salvation than we did before. So this is the most creditable of the arguments. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1).

The question is not whether we could reject Christ if we wanted to, but would we reject Christ after we have experienced him? If we know that Christ came into the world to save us, died for us, and invites us to depend on him for eternity, would we then turn away from Jesus and reject him? Have we found something better? My viewpoint is that we wouldn’t want to reject Jesus after we have really known him. But the Bible warns us that it would be tragic if we took such action.

² John Wesley, Works, Vol. VIII, p. 289.

¹ Ibid.

B. Scriptures that Teach We Can Fall from Grace

Denominations would not believe in apostasy without Scriptural basis. The following Scriptures are used as representative Scriptures used to support falling from grace. “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—If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel” (Col. 1:22,23). “If you continue” could mean that we must endure to the end to be saved. “We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first” (Heb. 3:14). But the classic support for the view of falling from Grace is:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, 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 (Heb. 6:4-6).

The descriptions of the believer being enlightened, tasting the heavenly gift, and sharing in the Holy Spirit surely are about a saved person. Some seek to support the permanency of salvation by saying these people that are described were not really saved. If language means anything they were saved. The author of the book was warning Hebrew Christians that it would be most serious for them to consider returning to Judaism instead of remaining faithful to Christ. They may well have been persecuted more as Christians. If they took this step to renounce Jesus, it would have disastrous consequences. It would be impossible for them to repent and be restored. They would be “goners”; they would have no hope. This warning should have caused them to think about the peril of retreating from Christ. They could reject him, but the author was ‘confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation’ (Heb. 6: 9). We could renounce Jesus; we are not helpless. But a love that is born of thanksgiving for Christ’s sacrifice would not lightly take such a step. Those who have authentic faith would not even consider turning against Christ after they turned to him for salvation.

What other evidence is cited as supporting the view that people will fall from grace? The main argument often is that we know people who have fallen. I have often heard people say, “He used to

come to church all the time; now he never does. He used to be saved; now he is not.” Examples in the Bible are frequently given. (1) Saul was saved before he became irrational and then he wasn’t. The Spirit came upon him early in his reign, and when the Spirit left he was unsaved. (2) Judas was saved, but then he betrayed Jesus and he wasn’t. (3) Demas was saved before he left Paul, “having loved this present world.” It is never a good theological premise to base our doctrine on our observation of people. Our observation may be faulty, and we certainly do not know all about anyone. We don’t know if they were truly saved, and we don’t know if they made a rejection of Jesus Christ. Saul had some malady; we should not describe it as apostasy. Jesus described Judas, “Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil” (Jno. 6: 70). He doesn’t seem to ever have been regenerated. Demas left because he was attracted to this world. Our salvation would be very precarious if we lost it every time we moved our eyes off of Jesus and on to the things of the world.

Acknowledgement has been made of the Scriptures that seem to support apostasy. But I am convinced that those Scriptures that support the view that salvation is permanent greatly outweigh the others.

C. Several Reasons that Salvation will Last

(1) The very nature of salvation points to its being a lasting experience. When a person encounters Christ and is converted, he is so changed that he will never be the same again. The only terminology adequate to describe his dynamic experience is to say that he has been born again. He is a new creation in Christ Jesus. Guided and guarded by Jesus, he will continue to be saved. Those who make works the condition of final salvation underestimate the power of the union that takes place between a sinner and the Savior. A man who has come to be in Christ will not perform good works as a condition of final salvation, but he will abound in works as a natural outgrowth of the new man he has become. The nature of salvation does not eliminate the idea of falling from grace, but it points us in the direction that the experience of eternal life is so serious that we will not agree to fall.

(2) God’s power in salvation is more potent than man’s performance. The weight of the biblical message is always that God’s role in salvation is more prominent than man’s. To teach that

without good works the Christian will fall from salvation is to ignore the preponderance of the biblical emphasis on God's power to preserve man's salvation, rather than on man's ability to persevere. The Bible reveals that the triune God is intent on accomplishing our complete salvation. Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6). God began the work of salvation in us, and he is just as intent on finishing the work he started. "To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Jude 24). Jude's doxology is based on God's ability to keep us. His assurance should be ours. Just prior to this vote of confidence in God's power and desire to keep us, he expresses the view that we ought to build ourselves up (become more than we are) "as we wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to bring [us] to eternal life" (Jude 21). In one place he stresses God's keeping and in another he insists on our efforts. Both are taught in the Bible, but it is God's keeping that is prominent.

The Father is determined to save us and keep us. We are not surprised that Jesus joins in the desire God has for us to be initially and finally saved. He said, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10: 28-30). This is a picture Jesus paints of his holding on to us. We will not perish because we are in his hands, and he is able to keep us. It is much like when we hold on to the hand of a child to lift the child over a mud puddle. Will he fall? It depends on our ability to hold the child, not on his ability to hold on to us. Jesus also portrays us as being in God's hands, who has the power to preserve us. It is not primarily that we hold on to God, but that he holds on to us.

The Holy Spirit is also described as working to preserve our salvation. "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30). The same emphasis is found when Paul wrote, "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, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption” (Eph. 1:13,14). A seal was as important as the one authorizing it. In this case, it is the Holy Spirit who seals us unto the day of redemption. The same Spirit is devoted to our remaining saved, that convicted us of our need to be saved. All his efforts are directed toward keeping us. The Holy Spirit is also described as being the deposit or earnest money guaranteeing our salvation. He is the down payment guaranteeing that the transaction will be completed. Summing up: the Father is devoted to our being saved and remaining saved, so is the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All of God’s being is dedicated to our continuing in salvation. All the praise for man’s salvation belongs to God. He initiated our redemption and he will insure its completion. To say that our salvation is dependent on works is to attempt to share in God’s glory, and this attitude is fraught with peril.

(3) An emphasis on the endurance of salvation insures that works will be performed for the right motive.

Fear of falling from grace may be the motive that impels service instead of service resulting from the constraining love of Christ. The Bible emphatically states, “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor. 13: 3). We are to be moved to do good works because of “the mercies of God” (Rom. 12:1), rather than to serve to preserve our crown of salvation. Fear is a great motivator to get people to do things, but the Bible reveals that it is not an acceptable reason for us to serve God.

(4) The lasting character of salvation leads to certainty rather than uncertainty. Those who teach that the continuation of salvation depends upon works can never shout with assurance, I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day (2 Tim. 1:12). The great saints of the New Testament approached life with confidence in God’s ability to enable them to perform their tasks. Theirs was not an attitude of fear but of assurance that God was more than able to preserve them and to empower them.

(5) That salvation lasts eliminates the necessity of constructing a method of restoration when salvation is lost. The Bible teaches that it is impossible to renew anyone to repentance if

they fall (Heb. 6:4-6). These verses are the ones most often used to show that salvation may be lost. There is no doubt that they contain a serious warning, but they do not say anyone will be unsaved. They warn that if it occurred, restoration would be impossible. Every denomination that accepts the premise that Christians can fall from grace, also sets forth a method of restoration. They all agree that the method of renewal is through repentance. But repentance is precisely what these verses teach is impossible. If we do lose our salvation, there is nothing that can be done. We are saved by faith, and we are kept by faith. God gives faith as a gift, and it is also our response to God's gift of salvation. If he does not enable us to continue in faith, we will not. "Our wavering faithfulness is upheld by God unwavering faithfulness."² Nobody would be saved if God left us to our own devices, but the great message of the Bible is that he does not leave us alone. He guides, empowers, enables, seals, keeps, guards, guarantees (earnest), infills, indwells, and holds every believer.

(6) For salvation to endure takes seriously the biblical description of salvation as eternal life. Eternal life is described as a present, rather than a future possession of believers. "Eternal life already belongs to him who fulfills the condition of its realization, but it looks forward to the future for its completion."³ One of the most frequent descriptions the Bible uses for salvation is eternal life. If it is eternal in nature, it will last. Eternal has to do with the God who gives it, and with the length of time we possess it. We already have it, and it lasts forever. This characterization of salvation alone should answer our question, "How long does salvation last?" "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jno. 5:11-13). If we know we have eternal life, we can serve God boldly and live our Christian lives with confidence. We will not fail because God will not fail us. Our salvation is eternal. In the first three chapters of the Gospel of John "eternal" or "everlasting" is used ten times to describe the life we

² L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 478.

³ Stevens, *The Theology of The New Testament*, p. 232.

have in Christ through faith. This description is too important to ignore.

God's love for his children is unconditional. He forces no one to become saved or to remain saved. However, he can be trusted to keep his side of the covenant, and God's commitment to the salvation of his creatures surpasses by far their ability to remain faithful to him.⁴ We should also focus on the teaching that some people appear to fall because they were never really Christians. "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1Jno. 2:19).

The uncertainty about the continuation of salvation is often derived more from reason than revelation. Some who teach this have failed to be either practical or definitive. No explanation is given of how many good works are required for salvation to be retained, or how much unrighteousness causes the Christian to fall away. Of course we should heed warnings of Scripture that it would be very serious if we were to fall.

That salvation is retained by works is part of the centuries old emphasis, which focuses upon man's achievements to the neglect of God's glory. Whenever works are made to be a prerequisite to salvation or a requisite to continuing in salvation, the great biblical doctrine that salvation is based solely on personal faith in God has been violated. "We are kept by the power of God through faith (1 Pet. 1:5). Only at great peril can we even momentarily forget that salvation from beginning to consummation "is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9 KJV). Salvation must never be thought of in terms of self-reliance but of God-reliance. The perseverance of the Christian is based primarily on the fact that God takes the initiative in perfecting the believer's salvation. "Thus the biblical stress is more on the perseverance of the Saviour than on the Perseverance of the saints."⁵

⁴ Bilezikian, *Christianity 101*, p. 168.

⁵ W. Boyd Hunt, "Perseverance", *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* (ed. Norman Wade Cox, II; 1958): p. 1087.