

## THE ETERNAL SECURITY OF THE BELIEVER – ONCE SAVED, ALWAYS SAVED

Floyd Nolen Jones, Th.D., Ph.D. – 1999

The question of the "eternal security of the believer" has been the cause of much controversy throughout the church for centuries - and it still creates confusion, distress, and division among many Christians.<sup>1</sup> It is hoped that this brief paper will help the reader understand the real issues.

Those who believe in "falling away" or "falling from grace" accuse those who believe in "eternal security" of promoting "cheap grace" – but "cheap grace" is both an un-scriptural term as well as an un-scriptural principle. "Cheap grace" implies that too small a price has been paid. To call grace "cheap" is actually a denial of grace. Grace, however, must be absolutely free and without any portion whatever being earned on man's part; whereas the price paid on God's part was infinite. For man to think that his works can play any part in either earning or keeping his salvation cheapens grace. It devalues God's infinite gift to the level of human effort.

To speak of "falling from grace"<sup>2</sup> as meaning having to do with losing one's salvation involves the same error. Since our works had nothing to do with meriting God's grace in the first place, Godly logic demands that there is nothing we could do that would cause us no longer to merit it – and thus "fall" from it. Works determine reward or punishment – not one's salvation. Salvation is wholly the result of God's grace. The crux of the problem is a confusion about grace and works.

### Understanding Grace

1. We must be absolutely clear that insofar as salvation is concerned, grace and works can never mix. Paul declares, "...if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work" (Rom 11:6). Salvation cannot be obtained partly by works and partly by grace.
2. We must be absolutely certain that works have nothing to do with salvation – period. The Bible clearly states, "For by grace are ye saved ... not of works" (Eph 2:8-10). True to such Scriptures, evangelicals firmly declare that we cannot earn or merit salvation in any way. Eternal life must be received as a free gift of God's grace, or we cannot have it.
3. Salvation cannot be purchased even in part by us, because it requires payment of the penalty for sin – a payment we can't make. If one were to receive a speeding ticket, it wouldn't help to say to the judge, "I've driven many times within the 55 mph limit. Surely my many good deeds will make up for the one bad deed." Nor would it do to say, "If you let me off this time, I promise never to break the law again." The judge would reply, "To never break the law again is only to do what the law demands. You get no extra credit for that. The penalty for breaking the law is a separate matter and must be paid." Thus Paul writes "... by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his [God's] sight..." (Rom 3:20).
4. If salvation from the penalty of breaking God's laws cannot be earned by good deeds, then it cannot be lost by bad deeds. Our works play no part in either earning or keeping salvation. If they did, man could boast that whereas Christ had justified them – they had kept themselves saved by their good lives. God would thereby be robbed of having all the glory in eternity.

---

<sup>1</sup> The position presented herein is neither based upon Calvinism nor Arminianism as the author is neither. A significant portion of this paper has been adapted from a 1998 pamphlet entitled "Once Saved, Always Saved?" by Dave Hunt.

<sup>2</sup> "Falling from grace" is a biblical expression (Gal.5:4), but its context has nothing to do with the loss of one's salvation. It is used to refer to those who are born again under grace but who are then trying to go on to sanctification by keeping the Law (cp. Gal.3:3 with 4:9, 21 and 5:1). But sanctification is also accomplished by grace acting through the power of the indwelling Spirit of God. Indeed, grace is not referred to as salvation itself but as the means on God's part to man's salvation; that required on man's part is faith in God's one and only plan of redemption (Gal.2:21; Eph.2:8).

5. Salvation can be given to us as a free gift only if the penalty has been fully paid. We have violated infinite Justice. Such requires an infinite penalty. As finite beings, we could not pay it except we be separated from God for all eternity. As God is infinite, He could pay an infinite penalty but because He is not a member of our human race, it wouldn't be just. Therefore, in love and grace, God – through the virgin birth – became a man so that through death He could pay the debt of sin for the entire human race!

### **It Is finished!**

"Tetelestai" (τετελεσται = It is finished!), the Greek word which Christ cried out from the cross, was a victory cry – an accounting term meaning that the debt had been paid in full. Justice had been satisfied by full payment of its penalty, and thus God could "be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Rom 3:26). On that basis alone, God offers pardon and eternal life as a free gift to all. He could not force it upon anyone or it would not be a gift. Neither would it be just to pardon a person who rejects the righteous basis for pardon and offers a hopelessly inadequate payment instead – or offers his works even as "partial payment."

Salvation is the full pardon by grace from the penalty of all sin – past, present, and future; eternal life is the added free bonus. Denying this cardinal truth, all cultists (Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormon, Catholic, etc.) reject salvation by grace and insist that it must be earned by one's good works. They accuse evangelicals of teaching that all we need to do is to say we believe in Christ and then we can live as we please, in the grossest of sins, yet be sure of heaven.

Evangelicals don't teach that at all, yet a similar complaint is made by those who believe in "falling from grace". They insist that "once saved, always saved" encourages one to live in sin because if we know we cannot be lost we have no incentive for living a holy life. On the contrary, love and gratitude to the One who saved us is the greatest and only acceptable motive for living a holy life. To know one is secure for eternity gives us a higher motive for living a godly life than the fear of losing one's salvation if one sins! Actually, the liberty that comes with learning the truth about security always reveals the condition of the heart. The individual that responds: "well, if that's true then I can do anything I want and still be saved" does not show the evidence of having become a new creature with a circumcised heart. The truth of security has exposed his unregenerate condition. Before, he was self-deceived as to his true standing with God. Such an attitude will soon begin to express itself in sinful actions, the intent being that the sinner will eventually come to see that which God saw all along. His actual spiritual condition exposed, it is intended that he will repent. God's truth is designed to set us free – free, not to continue in rebellion but to serve the living Lord.

While Christians who believe in "falling from grace" are clear that good works cannot earn salvation, they teach that salvation is kept by good works. Thus they maintain that one gets saved by grace, but thereafter salvation can be lost by works. To teach that good works keep one's salvation is almost the same error as to say that good works can earn salvation. It denies grace to say that once I have been saved by grace, I must thereafter keep myself saved by works.

Rather than glorifying Christ, Hebrews 6:4-9 teaches that such holds Christ Jesus up to shame and ridicule before the world for two reasons. If we could lose our salvation, then (1) Christ would have to be crucified again to re-save us; and (2) He would be ridiculed for dying to purchase a salvation but not making adequate provision to preserve it – for giving a priceless gift to those who would inevitably lose it. If Christ's dying in our place for our sins and rising again was not sufficient to keep us saved, then His great once for all sacrifice was in vain.

If we could not live a good enough life to earn salvation, it is certain we cannot live a good enough life to keep it! To make the salvation he procured ultimately dependent upon our works would be the utmost folly. Moreover, if the Scriptures teach that salvation is in any way left up to man – then I would agree that we could lose it. Indeed, I am totally confident that were there any way to lose one's salvation – we all would certainly find it. Such is the fallen nature.

But if Scripture teaches that once we truly repent of our sins and commit our lives to the Savior it is up to Him to keep that which we "have committed unto him against that day" (II Tim.1:12) – that which He purchased at so great a ransom price – then I must conclude that one's salvation cannot be lost. Again, the Scriptures contend that man cannot be saved by his own good works – that to remove us from the family whereby Satan was our father (Jn 8:44) and place us in the family of God came at the cost of an incredibly great purchase price. The very blood of the Creator (Acts 20:28). Thus, neither good nor bad deeds can remove us from one family and place us in another. Hence arises the question, with what would Satan use to re-purchase us back from God's family? Satan neither so values us as to be willing to offer so great a purchase price nor does he possess anything of equal inestimable value as is required for mankind's redemption.

Moreover, Ephesians 1:13 and 4:30 teach that we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit until the day of the redemption of the purchased possession. To insist that a sealed believer could lose his salvation would mean that the Holy Spirit failed in His ministry and that the Lord Jesus failed "to save them to the uttermost" in His High Priestly intercession (Heb.7:25). It seems most dangerous to this author for any who name the Name to uphold a doctrine whereby both the Holy Spirit and our Lord are said to have failed in their respective ministries.

"Falling away" doctrine actually makes us worse off after we are saved than before. At least before conversion we can get saved. But after we are saved and have lost our salvation (if we could), we can't get saved again, but are forever lost. Hebrews 6:4-6 declares, "If [not when] they shall fall away .. it is impossible (v 4) ... to renew them again unto repentance." If the context of these verses is that of losing one's salvation [which it is not],<sup>3</sup> then such an interpretation would logically force us to conclude that if we could lose our salvation, we could never get it back without Christ dying again upon the cross. Such thinking is folly! He would have to die an infinite number of times (i.e., every time every once-saved person sinned, was lost, and wanted to be "saved again"). Thus, those who reject "once saved, always saved," can only replace it with, "once lost, always lost!"

### God's Assurance

John assures us, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know [present knowledge] that ye have [present possession] eternal life..." (I Jn 5:13). To call it eternal life would be a mockery if the person who had it could lose it and suffer eternal death. On the contrary, eternal life is linked with the promise that one cannot perish – a clear assurance of "eternal security" or "once saved, always saved." John 3:16 promises those who believe in Jesus Christ that they "should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 5:24 again says, "hath everlasting life" and adds that they "shall not come into condemnation." One could not ask for clearer or greater assurance than the words of Jesus: "I give unto them [my sheep] eternal life; and they shall never perish" (Jn 10:28). If after having received eternal life we could lose it and perish, would such not make these words of Christ untrue and Him a liar?

If sin causes the loss of salvation, what kind or amount of sin would it take? There is no verse in the Bible that tells us. We are told that if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (I Joh.1:7 & 9) – so apparently any sin can be forgiven (except the sinner's final rejection of Christ). Even those who teach "falling away" rarely say they got "saved again." Rather, they confessed their sin and were forgiven. Hebrews 12:3-11 tells us that every Christian sins, and that instead of causing a loss of salvation, sin brings God's chastening upon us as

---

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word "parapesontas" translated "fall away" is not derived from "apostasia" (αποστασια) – to apostatize – but "parapipto" (παρπιπτο). It means to have gotten "side-tracked" or off the right track, and it applies to those just spoken of in Heb.5:11-12. These verses answers the question of what to do with such backsliders who are not "going on" (6:1), and they teach us that we do not "re-save" them – we do not lay the foundation again as it has already been laid. Foundations are to be built upon, not continually re-laid. Verses 7-12 makes clear that the context is that of "things that accompany salvation" (not the loss of salvation) which these passages reveal to be "fruit" and the blessings that follow the same.

His children. If when we sinned we ceased to be God's children, He would have no one to chastise – yet He "scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." Indeed, chastening is a sign that we are God's children, not that we have lost our salvation: "if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons."

### **Not by works**

Some teach that one must be baptized to be saved; others that one must "speak in tongues." Both embrace salvation by works. Some people lack assurance of salvation because they haven't "spoken in tongues," others are confident they are saved because they believe they have. Both are relying on their works to prove they are saved, instead of upon God's grace. To insist that one must speak in tongues before it will be accepted that they are saved is relying upon a sign and our Lord said that only an "evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign" (Mat.12:39).

Those who believe in "falling away" would say of a professing Christian who is living in unrepentant sin that he has "fallen from grace" and has "lost his salvation." But the ministry of time is a most important factor in such matters. If the professing "Christian" continues indefinitely in such an ongoing rebellious life-style, those who believe in "eternal security," while no more tolerant of such conduct, would say of the same person that probably Christ "never knew him" – he was never a Christian. However, if conviction from the Holy Spirit eventually leads him to repent and turn from the besetting sin into which he had become enmeshed, the individual had probably been a Christian all along who had fallen into sins snare (such as David, Solomon, or Peter when thrice in one night he denied he even knew Jesus). When speaking to the lost, Jesus did not say, "You were once saved but lost your salvation." He said, "I never knew you." This is an important distinction. We must give the comfort and assurance of Scripture to those who are saved; but at the same time we must not give false and unbiblical comfort to those who merely say they are saved but deny with their lives what they profess with their lips.

Are we not then saved by our works? Indeed not! In I Corinthians 3:12-15, every Christian's works are tried by fire at the "judgment seat of Christ" before which "we must all appear" (II Cor.5:10). Good works bring rewards; a lack of them does not cause loss of salvation. The person who hasn't even one good work (all of his works are burned up) is still "saved; yet so as by fire" (I Cor.3:15).<sup>4</sup> We would not think such a person was saved at all. Yet one who has truly received the Lord Jesus Christ as his Savior, but who has few good works as evidence and may seem outwardly not to be a Christian, is "saved as by fire" and shall never perish in spite of his lack of works.

Do we then, on the basis of "once saved, always saved" encourage Christians to "sin that grace may abound?" With Paul we say, "God forbid!" We offer no comfort or assurance to those living in sin. We don't say, you're okay because you once made a "decision for Christ." Instead, we warn: "If you are not willing right now to live fully for Christ as Lord of your life, how can you say that you were really sincere when you supposedly committed yourself to Him at some time in the past?" To all we say with Paul, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves" (II Cor 13:5).

Our confidence for eternity rests in His unchanging love and grace and the sufficiency of God's provision in Christ – not in our worth or performance. Only when this is clear can we have real peace with God. Only then can we truly love Him and live for Him out of gratitude for the eternal life He has given to us as a free gift of His grace – a gift He will not take back and which He makes certain can never be lost!

---

<sup>4</sup> Of course, if one lives very long past his conversion experience, if his faith is genuine and the conversion real – he will eventually produce some good works, else his faith was not true (as the Book of James and the Lord Jesus Himself taught, Mat.5:16; 7:21 & 24; Luk.7:36-50). Faith in Christ Jesus is the means of our salvation; works are the evidence of the genuineness of that faith. Genuine faith sets the Holy Spirit free in us and will produce good works, but works will not produce saving faith. God-produced works are an outward expression of a genuine inner faith. God sees the inner faith; man sees only the outward evidence – the works.