

## Can a Christian lose their salvation?

This is a question over which evangelical Christians have come to different conclusions. Those from the Arminian tradition have typically answered, 'yes, it is possible for a genuinely born-again Christian to lose his/her salvation'. Those from the Reformed tradition have answered, 'no, it is not possible for those who are truly converted to lose their salvation'.

I am persuaded that a genuinely born-again Christian cannot lose their salvation, for the following reason<sup>1</sup>:

### **Our eternal security does not rest on us but on God:**

Jesus says that 'whoever believes in the Son has eternal life' (John 3:36). True Christians have eternal – lasting forever – life now. Their eternal future is already secured.

Jesus promises that it is the Father's will that He loses none of those whom the Father has given Him (John 6:39) and that whoever believes in Jesus, 'should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day' (John 6:40). Jesus will see to it that the Father's will is done, and that true believers will make it to the resurrection.

Jesus promises in John 10:27-29 that He gives His sheep eternal life and 'they shall never perish'. Best of all, 'no one will snatch them out of my hand'. But does that mean that a true Christian could still jump out of Jesus hand? The answer must be 'no': 'no-one' in v29 means *no-one*, including the believer himself, can remove a believer from Jesus' grasp.

In Romans 8:30, Paul spells out that everyone whom God predestines, He calls; those He calls, He justifies; and those He justifies, He glorifies. When God begins the process of salvation He guarantees seeing it through to the end. Everyone He calls will be glorified on the last day.

In addition to these promises, the Holy Spirit is given to all true believers as a down payment, a deposit, guaranteeing their future inheritance in Heaven (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Consequently, Paul can reassure the believers at Philippi, 'I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ' (Philippians 1:7). Similarly, Peter can tell those he is writing to that they are among those 'who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time' (1 Peter 1:5). It is God who guards true believers and promises to bring His work to completion in their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I largely follow Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (IVP, Nottingham: 1994) 798-803.

However, if this is the case, what are we to make of those passages that appear to imply that Christians can lose their salvation?

The key passage here is Hebrews 6:4-6:

'For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.'

Who are these people the writer is referring to? They have certainly been *enlightened* by the gospel. They understand the truths of the gospel. But that is not necessarily the same as responding to the gospel with saving faith.

They have tasted the heavenly gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come. They have known the influence of the Holy Spirit on their lives, they have heard God-honouring preaching from the word of God, to some extent they have got involved with the practices and activities of the church. But that is not necessarily the same as coming to a true, saving knowledge of Jesus.

They have obviously known some measure of repentance in their lives, or else the writer could not say 'it is impossible... to restore them *again* to repentance'. But, this need not mean they had previously experienced saving repentance. It could simply mean they had experienced 'sorrow for sin.'

So rather than referring to genuine Christians falling away from faith, this passage may instead refer to those who have heard the gospel, known some measure of sorrow for their sin, experienced something of the Holy Spirit's work in the church and their own life, been involved in church activities, but have subsequently turned their back on that. Such people, says the writer, cannot be brought back to repentance.

### **Summary**

Can a Christian lose their salvation? Whilst genuine Christians are divided on how to answer this, the weight of the Bible's teaching reassures me that, no, a genuine Christian cannot lose their salvation because, ultimately, it does not rest on our power to save ourselves, but on God's promise that He will guard us through to the end.

Martin Slack  
Pastor  
Westlake Church Lausanne