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Eternal Security: Can a Believer Lose His Salvation?

by David Dunlap

For many years, sincere Christians have quarreled over the subject of the eternal security of the believer. Heated debates between Christians on this subject have mostly resulted in rancor, discord, and controversy. Nevertheless, this doctrine, more than any, other highlights the unfailing love of God for His own. During a lively debate on the subject of eternal security between dispensational scholar J. N. Darby and Methodist church leader Dr. Daniel Steele, the love of God soon became the central issue. Dr. Steele was delighted with Darby's spiritual insight, but he could not accept his view of the eternal security of the believer. At a certain point, Dr. Daniel Steele could contain himself no longer and interrupted Darby with a question, "But supposing a real Christian was to turn his back on the love of Christ, what would happen then?" "Then," replied John N. Darby after a momentary pause, "the love of Christ would shine on his back as he turned away!"¹ The God who possesses this kind of love is not so small as to remove the gift of salvation because of the failings of His children. The eternal security of the believer is an important doctrine because it casts light on God's character, His attributes, and His love.

"Once saved, always saved" is a phrase which many use when referring to God's work of salvation. Essentially, that is a good definition of what is known as the eternal security of the believer. However, a phrase which more accurately portrays this truth is "Once in Christ, in Christ forever."² When a man is genuinely born again and his life has been truly transformed, his salvation is safe in Christ for eternity. Let us examine some of the many reasons to believe in this biblical doctrine.

1. THE ETERNAL PURPOSE OF GOD

"For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified" (Rom. 8:28-29). What does this have to do with eternal security? Everything. For God's eternal purpose anchors our salvation in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This passage teaches that *all* (not some) who are justified will eventually be glorified. These are the ones He predestinates, and the ones He predestinates are the ones He calls. The ones He calls are those He justifies, and the ones He justifies are the ones He glorifies.

*"There are those
who believe they
can save
themselves and
those who believe
they need a Savior.
Only Christianity
offers a Savior. And
only the Christian
gospel guarantees
every believer a
place in the
Father's house.
Because salvation
is of the Lord—plus
nothing."*

William McDonald

—*"Once in Christ in Christ
Forever"*, GFP, 1997

Commenting on this verse, Bible scholar Dr. Norman Geisler writes,

*To claim that God begins but does not complete our salvation is to say He doesn't finish what He starts. But this is contrary to His character and practice.*³

We may say with certainty that there are no lost sheep in God's flock. There are no broken links in God's "golden chain" of salvation. No, the ones He "justifies" are the same people that He glorifies.

Notice that the word "glorified" is in the past tense. In the Bible, when the prophets spoke, they would often use the past tense to speak of something which was still future, in order to show the certainty of its fulfillment. Greek authorities call this tense usage, "the past tense of prophetic action." In this verse, Paul is looking on Christians as being already glorified; so he writes in the past tense and says they *are glorified*. It could have been translated, "He will glorify." He leaves it in the past tense, however, to show that there is no doubt about the outcome.

2. THE SAFEKEEPING OF THE FATHER

First Peter 1:3-5 says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope...to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation."

The word "kept" (v. 5) is a military word meaning to "garrison." A city could be garrisoned a couple of ways. It might be garrisoned by positioning the whole army around it so that nobody could go in or out. It could also be garrisoned from the inside so that if a commander wanted to catch a prisoner, he would put a guard around the inner walls of the city and not let anybody go out until he caught that person. That is the same word that is used here. Believers are garrisoned like a city guarded by an army. This spiritual "garrison" is by the power of God. Is there any power that is greater than God's garrison? No, the only thing that can break a siege on a city is a stronger army; so, the only force that can break the garrison of God's salvation is a force that is stronger than God. Satan and all the forces of hell—including circumstances, trials, and spiritual weakness—are no match for the power of God. So, Peter in this passage says there is an inheritance in heaven which is being preserved and reserved for the believer, who is also assured of being guarded until the day of Christ. This is all done by the preserving work of the Father.

3. THE PROMISE OF THE SON

"I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand" (Jn. 10:28). This verse presents a three-fold bond of confidence. First, "I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish (v. 28). A look at the Greek construction of this verse sheds light on this promise of salvation. Greek scholars explain that the phrase "shall never perish" is a "conjunctive of emphatic negation," meaning this is the strongest way of expressing this thought. Some have translated this statement with the words, "They shall by no means perish." Secondly, the Lord said, "Neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand." This safekeeping is the unbreachable, vise-tight security of the Lord Jesus Christ. He who said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18) will secure His children forever.

*"We truly
love Him and
live for Him
out of
gratitude for
the eternal life
He has given
us as a free
gift—a gift He
will not take
back, and
which He
makes certain
can never be
lost."*

Dave Hunt—from
Once Saved, Always Saved?

Thirdly, He says, "My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all, and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand." This indicates that there is a hand—"the Father's"—over the hand of the Lord Jesus and nothing is able to take the believer out of the Father's hand.

4. THE PRAYER MINISTRY OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

Hebrews 7:24, 25 states, "But this man (Jesus), because He continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them." In John 17, where our Lord prays for His own, He says, "I pray not that Thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that Thou shouldest keep them from the evil (one)" (v. 15). If the Lord Jesus is praying in this manner for every believer, we may then be assured that Satan will be restrained from ever robbing a believer of his salvation in Christ. The Lord is presently praying for His saints concerning their salvation—and will continue to pray today, tomorrow, and in all the days to come. Furthermore, when the believer sins, Christ is still praying for him. 1 John 2:1 says, "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

5. THE EMPOWERING WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

John 14:16 reads, "And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever." The English word "comforter" today implies putting one's arm around somebody who's weeping and encouraging him and giving him solace. But the word originally came from the Latin word "com", meaning "alongside," plus "fortis", meaning "strength", or "strong." So it here means "a strong one at one's side." The Lord Jesus was a Comforter in the sense that He was a strong person alongside of and with the disciples. The Holy Spirit similarly is the believer's Comforter alongside of or with him in the sense that He has been called alongside for his preserving help and strength. Does sin present in a believer's life sever this work of the Holy Spirit? No! However, that is what some Christians teach, although that is not what we read in the Bible. For the Lord Jesus says, "He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever. "

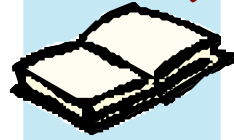
6. THE SEALING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Ephesians 4:30 states, "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption." What does sealing mean? It may help to think of Pilate's sealing of the tomb of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 27:66). His seal indicated that no one could break that door open unless he possessed a greater force. The disciples couldn't break it, the soldiers couldn't break it, the Pharisees couldn't break it—no one could break it except God. Likewise, Satan cannot break God's seal, angels cannot break it, other Christians cannot break it—no human being can break His seal. However, some teach that *sin* can break the seal of God. But look at the verse again: "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God." What grieves the Holy Spirit? The only thing that will grieve the Holy Spirit is sin in the believer's life. The same verse goes on to say that every believer is sealed forever by the Holy Spirit. If sin could break the seal of the Holy Spirit, this verse would contain a conditional statement, such as "sealed, if a believer doesn't sin..." Thankfully, sin does not disturb the

"The Holy Spirit is described as 'the earnest of our inheritance.' The word 'earnest' is 'arrabon.' The bestowal of the Holy Spirit is God's part payment in salvation. He gives to the believing sinner that part payment guaranteeing the full delivery of all parts of salvation."

Dr. Kenneth Wuest

former Professor of Greek at
Moody Bible College



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seal of salvation for the believer.

7. THE PLEDGE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:13-14, "In whom ye also trusted after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise." Then we read in verse 14, "Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of His glory." The word "earnest" here actually means a "down payment."⁴ Now would God ever make a first installment payment and then default in the rest of His payments? Of course not! God has guaranteed by the presence of His Holy Spirit within a believer that the believer is eternally saved.

CONCLUSION

It is probably evident by now that the doctrine of eternal security is rooted in the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the Holy Trinity. Moreover, it is through this immeasurable power of God that the Christian is kept secure, not through his own feeble efforts. Jude beautifully reminds us, "Now unto Him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy" (v. 24). That is the eternal security of God present in every believer's life! Then Jude adds in verse 25, "To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen." What spiritual effect should the doctrine of eternal security have in a Christian's life? It should cause one to fall down and worship God! This doctrine does not lead to carelessness in the Christian life; on the contrary, it leads the believer to bow his knee in reverence and to rise in thankfulness for the glorious salvation he possesses in Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

1. Max S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby*, (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1990), p. 144
2. William MacDonald, *Once in Christ, in Christ Forever*, (Grand Rapids, MI: GFP, 2004), 11
3. Norman Geisler, *Four Views on Eternal Security*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 81
4. Kenneth Wuest, *Word Studies: Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953), 49