

Once saved, always saved

By Ross Callaghan

<http://rosscallaghan.yolasite.com>

“Once saved, always saved” is one of the most controversial of all Christian doctrines.

- Many Christians fervently believe that once someone has received Christ as Saviour they are saved and can never lose their salvation. This is sometimes called having “eternal security” or “the perseverance of the saints”. Those who think this way believe that the work of Jesus on the Cross to win our salvation is a finished work. To lose our salvation is unthinkable because it would mean Jesus’ death and resurrection was not a perfect work.
- Other Christians fervently believe that once someone has received Christ as Saviour they are saved, but if they continue to sin wilfully they can lose their salvation and be lost. The work of Christ on the Cross has brought their salvation, but ongoing salvation is dependent on walking in a close relationship with the Lord. Rejecting Him after having been saved will have eternal consequences.



There are scriptures throughout the Bible that appear to support both of these positions. Christians who believe one way tend to emphasize the scriptures that support their position and ignore ones that don't. Human thinking would say that that the two views contradict each other so one must be “right” and the other “wrong”. But perhaps this just shows the limitations of our thinking!

God has an immense understanding of life and of the human condition, and a much better view of what constitutes “truth” than we do. (After all He is the truth! John 14:6). Maybe **both** of these views are part of the whole truth regarding our salvation? Just like a river flows with two different edges perhaps both of these doctrines can help us get a better understanding of salvation – one that better reflects God’s approach as expressed in so many places in the Bible?

- “Once saved, always saved” will give us a strong assurance of our salvation and a certainty that the work of Christ on the Cross has been effective in our lives.
- “Once saved, we can fall away and lose our salvation” will stop us being complacent about our relationship with God, and will give us a strong motivation to reject sin and walk in God’s ways. It encourages us to *work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.* Philippians 2:12,13.

It is always good to remember what God said about the limitations of our human thinking:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it". Isaiah 55:8-11.

In this study we will look at the main scriptures on both sides of this controversial doctrine. Remember that **all** of them are in the Bible, and that **all** of them will help give you a better understanding of “God’s thoughts” on the important doctrine of “Once saved, always saved”.

Scriptures that teach “Once saved, always saved”

<i>And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. Matthew 16:18.</i>	God’s church is built on the Rock, the Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing can prevail against this church.
<i>I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will 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. John 10:28,29.</i>	Once we are safely under Jesus’ care no-one can snatch us from that care. (Those with the alternative view of “once saved, always saved” will say that while this is true, we can take ourselves out of Jesus’ care).
<i>However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: Romans 4:5,6.</i>	Righteousness in Christ is credited to us on the basis of our faith in Christ, not on the basis of anything that we do or don’t do. If it was on the basis of our works no-one could be saved for all are sinners. Romans 3:23,24. Once we are righteous in Christ nothing we do can change that state, because Jesus’ work on the Cross was a finished work. John 19:30. Romans 5:12-21.
<i>Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Hebrews 7:25.</i>	Jesus saves completely (or <i>to the uttermost</i>) all those who come to God through Him, and then continually prays for them.
<i>Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.</i>	These verses show that God has cleansed us from our sin, so that, being cleansed, sanctified and justified in Christ, we need have no fear of not inheriting the kingdom of God.
<i>In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. 1 Peter 1:6-9.</i>	Genuine faith perseveres to the end, regardless of the trials and temptations it experiences. The end result of our faith is the salvation of our soul.
<i>He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Philippians 1:6.</i>	Our salvation is God’s work, and He will complete this good work right through to the end.

In the book of Romans Paul gives the most systematic description of how we can be saved. The overwhelming message of this book is that we are saved by the grace of God, through faith in the complete and finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. We were chosen by God to be in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), and when we believe in Christ we are justified and able to have a relationship with God in Christ. Nothing we do can add to this wonderful work, and nothing can take anything away from it. Our salvation is totally dependent on Christ and it is a perfect work. Hallelujah!

The book of Romans also addresses the issue of Christians sinning after they have been saved. *“What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin, how can we live in it any longer? Romans 6:1,2.* Paul does not say that we will lose our salvation if we sin, but his focus is on encouraging us to live in a righteous way. This does, however, open up the other side of the “once saved always saved” debate!

Scriptures that teach that we can lose our eternal salvation:

<p><i>But now, please forgive their sin - but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written." Exodus 32:32.</i></p> <p><i>May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous. Psalm 69:28.</i></p> <p><i>The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. Revelation 3:5.</i></p>	<p>These verses show that God has a book in which the names of those who are to be saved are recorded. Revelation 17:8, 20:11-15. It is possible to have someone's name blotted out of this book.</p>
<p><i>I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. Revelation 22:18,19.</i></p>	<p>These verses show it is possible for someone to lose their ability to draw from the tree of life, and thus their place in heaven.</p>
<p><i>"But if a righteous person turns from their righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked person does, will they live? None of the righteous things that person has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness they are guilty of and because of the sins they have committed, they will die. Ezekiel 18:24.</i></p>	<p>This section of Ezekiel deals with situations where righteous and evil people sin and what happens if they do or do not repent. It shows righteous people will suffer eternal consequences if they sin, and evil people can be saved if they repent.</p>
<p><i>For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned. Hebrews 6:4-8.</i></p>	<p>This shows that someone who has repented of their sins, been enlightened and partaken of the Holy Spirit can fall away and be cursed if they wilfully disobey the Lord.</p>
<p><i>No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. 1 Corinthians 9:27.</i></p>	<p>Paul is stating that he believes he could miss out on the prize of eternal life, even though he had been widely used by God to bring blessing to others.</p>
<p><i>For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself. 2 Timothy 2:11-14.</i></p>	<p>If we deny (or reject) the Lord He will deny (or reject) us.</p>
<p><i>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, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. Colossians 1:23.</i></p>	<p>In this verse the proviso for maintaining our salvation is that we continue firm in our faith.</p>

<p><i>"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. John 15:1-6.</i></p> <p><i>"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, each according to his ability..... For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Matthew 25:14-29.</i></p>	<p>Those who are part of Christ can be cut off from Him if they don't bear fruit and His servants can end up in hell if they don't use their talents.</p> <p>This is reinforced by Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-46. The sheep are blessed with eternal life because of what they did for others in need; while the goats go to eternal punishment because they didn't serve those in need.</p>
<p><i>Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. Romans 11:22.</i></p>	<p>The proviso for not being cut off from the Lord is that we <i>continue in His kindness.</i></p>
<p><i>For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain. 1 Thessalonians 3:5.</i></p>	<p>Paul considered that the Thessalonians could be tempted away from the Lord and that this would mean his labours would be <i>in vain.</i></p>
<p><i>If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. ... You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For, "In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay". And, "But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back". But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved. Hebrews 10:26,27,36-39.</i></p>	<p>This is one of the most powerful sections regarding the need for us to persevere if we are to be saved. It shows that if we <i>keep on sinning</i> we can fall away and experience the judgment of God. The writer says that "<i>we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed</i>". In context this applies to the writer and his associates, not to all Christians.</p>
<p><i>The acts of the flesh are obvious I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. Galatians 5:12,13. Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation - but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. Romans 8:8-12,13.</i></p>	<p>These verses show we will lose our inheritance in the kingdom of God if we are controlled by our flesh, rather than by the Holy Spirit.</p>
<p><i>You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. Matthew 5:13.</i></p>	<p>We are the salt of the earth, but it is possible for us to lose this quality and be <i>thrown out. After all, faith without works is dead.</i> James 2:26.</p>
<p><i>Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, 2 Peter 1:10.</i></p>	<p>The implication in this verse is that we can stumble and lose the salvation that God called and elected us to. (Peter would have been very aware that Judas Iscariot, one of his fellow disciples, did just that).</p>

<p><i>So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.</i> 1 Corinthians 10:12-13.</p> <p><i>Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.</i> 1 Corinthians 15:1,2.</p>	<p>These verses are both a reminder that we can <i>believe in vain</i>, and an encouragement to <i>hold firm</i> so that it does not happen.</p>
<p><i>See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.</i> Hebrews 3:12-14.</p>	<p>These verses show we must hold our <i>original conviction firmly to the end</i> if we are to <i>fully share in Christ</i>.</p>

These scriptures shown that once we are saved we can sin and fall away so that we lose our salvation. The case from these scriptures is just as convincing as the case from the earlier scriptures that once we are saved we are always saved! Some have tried to reconcile the two sets of scriptures by saying that when people fall away they were never saved in the first place. Others try to reconcile them by saying that no-one can take us out of the Lord's hand (John 10:28,29) but we can choose to take ourselves out. Every Christian must make up their own mind on what they believe about this, and on how they will react to it.

The main things to gain from this study are:

- a strong assurance that we have been saved through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. If we have accepted Jesus as Saviour and repented of our sin, we are completely and fully saved. We are children of God, part of God's kingdom, have eternal life, and can look forward to spending eternity with God in heaven. We have eternal security.
- a strong motivation to turn away from sin and to live for Jesus every day of our earthly lives. If we know that our continued sin can have eternal consequences we will always be motivated to choose God's way (which, after all, is always the best way!).

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you - unless, of course, you fail the test? 2 Corinthians 13:5.

Discussion questions

Google "once saved, always saved" and look under "Images" to see how people view this controversial doctrine. Why is "once saved, always saved" such a controversial Christian doctrine?

Why does the Bible teach that "once saved you are always saved", and "once saved you can fall away"? How do you reconcile these two positions?

How will believing either side of the debate on "once saved always saved" affect the way that Christians live.

How do peoples' differing reactions to the doctrine of "once saved, always saved" show the limitations of human thinking? How is Isaiah 55:8-11 relevant in this situation?

What have you learned from your study of "once saved, always saved"? How will this affect your Christian life in the future?