

How can you believe that God will not save all—be a Christian—and yet believe that God is love? If faith and salvation are gifts of God (Ephesians 2:8; Romans 5:15; 6:23), then can one who truly has saving faith in Christ lose that faith and salvation?

Lutheran and Calvinist (and Baptist) churches, especially, have debated these questions. Calvinists say one cannot lose salvation, Lutherans say one can. The disagreement lies in the fact that the Bible has two seemingly contradictory teachings.

On one hand, the Scriptures promise that God will preserve true believers in His grace from beginning to end. On the other, the same Scriptures clearly teach that it is possible for a true believer to lose their salvation. To make sense of this, both teachings must be further explored to understand how they work together.

Preservation of Faith is God's Work

The Bible clearly teaches that God has promised to preserve our faith from beginning to end. Many passages could be chosen to illustrate this glorious promise; I include only a few. In John 10:27-29, Jesus says, *“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.”*

Writing to the Philippian believers, Paul wrote *“And 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 1:6) The Corinthians are promised, *“[Jesus Christ] will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”* (I Corinthians 1:8-9) Finally, *“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:38-39)

Each passage shows that God will keep those who trust in Jesus in the true faith until the end; nothing in all Creation can stop that from happening. These passages, and others like them, proclaim God's unconditional promise to all true Christians that they will be preserved in saving grace until they go home to heaven.

Falling from Grace

But, we also find abundant evidence that it is possible for believers to lose their faith and fall away from saving grace. This we draw both from clear passages of Scripture that warn against such a falling away and from examples of it happening.

“You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.” (Galatians 5:4) If falling away permanently is impossible then Paul's words have no meaning and his concern is misplaced. The Parable of the Sower (Luke 8) also shows believers falling away (See also I Corinthians 10:12; I Timothy 1:18-20; Hebrews 4:11; Hebrews 12:15; and II Peter 3:17 in context).

Many other passages say that only those will be saved who continue to believe until the end. In Matthew 10:22, Jesus says to His disciples, *“And you will be hated by all for My Name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”* The context makes clear that it is a warning. (See also Paul in Colossians 1:21-23; Hebrews 3:6, 12-14).

How Can One Fall?

If falling away is possible, what causes it? Technically speaking, only not believing in Jesus condemns (cf. John 3:18, 36; Mark 16:16). However, the New Testament also tells us that both rejecting the Gospel and living in sin unrepentantly lead to falling away from the faith.

Rejecting the Gospel can mean putting one's trust in persons or works of the Law in addition to Jesus Christ, such as in the Galatian congregation already mentioned. They, who had been taught to trust only in Jesus for salvation, were beginning to trust in the works of the Law (circumcision) in addition to Jesus.

Rejection may also be a total repudiation of Jesus and the Christian faith, as with Demas, "*who having loved this present world*" deserted Paul and returned to Thessalonica (II Timothy 4:10) or consider Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:25; John 17:12).

It can also be rejecting an essential doctrine of the Gospel. Included are those who denied the resurrection, such as "*Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.*" (II Timothy 2:17b-18)

A traditional example of living in sin unrepentantly is King David. He committed murder and adultery and thus fell away from the faith (II Samuel 11 and 12; Psalm 51), only later to repent. Solomon also followed in his father's footsteps and found despair (Ecclesiastes). Another is Esau (Genesis 25-28; Romans 9:13). There are many more such examples.

In conclusion, we are concerned that fellow Christians who reject the possibility of falling away invite Satan's attacks. With good reason, Paul tells us to put on the full armor of God to fight the devil (Ephesians 6:10-17); so also, Peter warns us to "*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*" (I Peter 5:8) The Scriptures warn us because Satan wants to steal away our salvation (John 10:10a; Ephesians 2:2; II Corinthians 4:3-4; Acts 26:17-18). He not only wants to cause us a discomfort, He wants to "*devour*" us.

Those who naively assume that it is impossible for such a thing as losing faith to happen to them, even if they are neglecting the Word, the Sacrament, and prayer, are left wide open for Satan to steal their faith. Of course, as in the case of David, faith can be restored. And we still have the Bible promises of God preserving our faith.

Reconciling the Mystery of Faith

So, on the one hand, Scripture clearly teaches that God has promised to preserve us in saving grace to the very end: Nothing will separate us from His love. On the other hand, Scripture teaches just as clearly that it is possible for the believer to fall away from faith—even permanently. How can this be?

The mystery is solved when we realize that each of these teachings is directed at different people. The warning against falling away is stern Law intended for our Old Adam (our birth nature). Our sinful flesh wants nothing to do with God (Galatians 5:17-21; Ephesians 4:22). The threat of falling away gets in the face of our Old Adam, who cheapens God's grace, doesn't fear him, is lazy, talks the faith but doesn't live it, and loves sin. This stern warning to our Old Adam comes so we are not destroyed by false confidence and worldly security.

God's promise to preserve us eternally is for our New Adam (Galatians 5:17, 22-24; Ephesians 4:24). The New Adam is who we are in Christ Jesus—our identity as forgiven sinners, saints and children of God—the "real" us. The New Adam loves God, delighting in doing all that pleases Him. The New Adam is sickened by sin, grieves when we do sin, and longs for its heavenly home. This second teaching is pure Gospel. It is meant to be the sweetest comfort and encouragement to our New Adam, so he is not overcome by the doubts of the flesh.

Both teachings are God's Word. Both teachings are true. Both teachings are needed. Both teachings must be taught in Christ's Church. Thus, Scripture answers the question, "Are true Christians 'once saved always saved'?" in two ways. Speaking to the Old Adam (carnally secure, neglectful of all

that is Christian, yet still claiming to be Christian), the Bible's clear answer is, "No! It is very possible to permanently fall away from saving faith, and you are in danger of doing so!"

When speaking to the New Adam (struggling with sin but humbly trusting in the Savior alone for forgiveness and heavenly citizenship, yet knowing the weakness of the flesh and wondering if he'll make it), the Bible's unmistakable answer is "Yes! Though you are weak, though you stumble—even though you sin—nothing will ever separate you from God's love in Christ Jesus. He is faithful and He will confirm you to the end! Amen!"