

ONCE SAVED, ALWAYS SAVED?

There are so many lethal views about what constitutes the true gospel, it boggles the mind. Second Timothy 4:3, 4 says plainly, “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.”

It is with some trepidation that I suggest that many sincere Christians have wholeheartedly consumed these toxic ideas about how to be saved, because believing in these counterfeit doctrines has potentially severe and eternal ramifications.

One such view is called “once saved, always saved,” also known as the doctrine of eternal security or the “perseverance of the saints.” It is a belief that, I believe, can cause deadly spiritual atrophy.

The roots of this teaching go back to a giant of the Protestant Reformation, John Calvin. This man of deep faith was a sincere Bible student and a brilliant scholar. But like all people, including Martin Luther and John Wesley, his theology was not perfect. It’s been said that “great men often hold to great heresies,” and I believe this was true of Calvin, who attempted to systematize his concepts of salvation, which form the basis of Calvinism.

The five points of Calvinism can be summarized by the acronym TULIP. While this article focuses primarily on the last teaching, it is probably helpful for us to briefly review the others since they are all connected.

What Is TULIP?

Calvin’s first foundational belief is “Total depravity”; that is, all people are born sinners. This idea is plainly taught in Scripture. The second point is “Unconditional election,” which teaches that God Himself has chosen who will be saved and who will be lost, a view with which I respectfully disagree. While God knows all things, the Lord does not arbitrarily choose who will be saved.

The third point is “Limited atonement.” It teaches that Jesus died to redeem only those who were pre-chosen, the elect, and not everyone. Of course, this notion contradicts 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15, which says, “Christ died for all.” The fourth point is “Irresistible grace,” which says humans are saved only by God’s will, with no choice on our part. I believe both of these are toxic teachings.

The fifth point, and the main focus of this article, is the “Perseverance of the saints.” In short, it states that those who are predestined to be saved cannot be lost, even by their own choice. Once you are saved, you are always saved. You can never lose your salvation.

Is this doctrine biblical—or is it a dangerous teaching that provides a false sense of security and could actually derail a person’s salvation? Though many Bible

references are listed for this concept, we'll look carefully at those most used to support the idea that once a person is saved, he or she is forever locked into that decision.

We'll begin by considering the teaching of unconditional election.

Predestination

Unconditional election (also called “unconditional grace” or “predestination”) teaches that before the world was created, God predestinated some people to be saved (the elect) and the rest to continue in their sins and, therefore, be damned, consigned to the eternally burning fires of hell. Human choice, it asserts, plays no role in salvation. A key passage used to support this view is found in the apostle Paul's writings—

Whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified (Romans 8:29, 30).

Certainly, Bible passages can be used to support the concept that God knows all things past, present, and future. “All things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:13). Bible prophecy affirms that God knows the future, but future events do not happen because God “foreknew” them; rather, they are known by God because they will take place.

Moreover, because God knows something will happen does not mean He wills it to happen.

Did God predestinate that only some would be saved? Paul writes elsewhere that God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). If only some are predestined to be saved, why would Jesus offer salvation to all? Christ said, in the closing chapter of the Bible, “Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely” (Revelation 22:17, emphasis added).

The Contemporary English Version Bible translates Romans 8:29 more precisely, stating that God “has always known who his chosen ones would be. He had decided to let them become like his own Son, so that his Son would be the first of many children.” While everyone is called to salvation, not everyone responds. But to those who choose to come to Christ, these are transformed into His likeness.

One reason Calvin argued in favor of predestination was to make sure God receives all the glory. He believed that if you have any part to play in your salvation—even your own choice to accept Jesus—then you would deserve some credit. Therefore, he concluded, you really do not have a choice. God's sovereignty, he taught, does not permit human free will.

It's an interesting theory, but it is not biblical.

I like to think of God's foreknowledge as something like a helicopter pilot flying above a mountain with a one-way tunnel dug through it. Since the mountain is composed of solid granite, the engineers decided to blast only one lane through the rock, placing a stop light at either end so that vehicles would take turns going through the narrow tunnel. But on a particular day, one of the stop lights was broken.

When the pilot looked down, he first saw a big eighteen-wheeler entering one end at sixty miles per hour. Then he noticed a little red sports car zipping into the tunnel from the other end. The helicopter pilot knew what was about to happen; however, his knowledge did not make the inevitable accident occur; he simply had foreknowledge of a coming collision because of his perspective.

God has an all-knowing perspective. He knows whether you are going to be saved or lost, but this knowledge does not take away your free choice. We know this because of the many Scripture passages that demonstrate our freedom to choose. Joshua told Israel to "choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15). The story of the fall of humanity shows the high value (and high price) that God gave to Adam and Eve when He let them choose whether to obey or disobey Him.

Pharaoh's Heart

What about the verse in the Bible that says, "The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh"? (Exodus 9:12). Did God make Pharaoh stubborn so that He could use him to teach Israel a lesson? Did Pharaoh have no choice whatsoever in whether or not his own heart would be hard? Keep in mind, there are several other verses that indicate Pharaoh hardened his own heart. "Pharaoh hardened his heart at this time also; neither would he let the people go" (Exodus 8:32; see also Exodus 8:15; 9:34; 1 Samuel 6:6). How did Pharaoh's heart become hardened?

I believe God sent circumstances to Pharaoh in order to soften his heart. But the repeated warnings given by Moses were ignored by the Egyptian leader. Every time another manifestation of God's power came upon his land, Pharaoh refused to listen and his heart, by his own choice, became more and more hardened. If he had but submitted to God's messages, his heart would have become soft, pliable, and teachable.

Have you ever noticed that the same circumstances coming to different people do not always produce the same responses? Think of the warm sun that shines on the earth. If you set a lump of clay and a lump of wax side by side underneath the same beams of light, one would become hard and the other would melt. Pharaoh chose to be like clay when God's appeals came to the proud ruler; God's light hardened his heart.

Predestination teaches that God arbitrarily decides who will be saved and who will be lost. In other words, Pharaoh simply would have had no choice but to be lost. It indirectly teaches that the Lord chooses for some people to sin. But in so doing, it makes Him an accessory to sin. Instead of offering to save you from sin,

predestination presents a God who stands back and allows you to struggle in sin. This is a dangerous belief because it distorts the compassionate character of a God who poured out all of heaven to save us!

God does not harden people's hearts. He is desperate to save everyone. "As I live," says the Lord God, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11).

He sends us truth to help us move in the right direction. It is the rejection of His messages that make us resistant to light from heaven. When people repeatedly turn away from the appeals of God's agencies, such as Pharaoh did, it is then that they become resistant, hardened like clay, to the further convicting calls of the Holy Spirit.

Secure in Christ

Some may be wondering: "If it's possible to lose our salvation, can we live with any security and assurance of eternal life?"

Well, what are the conditions for being secure in our salvation?

Let's consider another passage often quoted to support the theory of "once saved, always saved." A proper understanding of these verses will clear up misconceptions about salvation.

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone 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 My Father's hand (John 10:27–29).

A similar verse states, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37). It is certainly true that when we hear the Shepherd's voice and come to Christ, we are safe in His hands. No one, not even the devil, can take away our assurance.

But do these verses indicate that once we come to Jesus, we lose the freedom to turn away from Him? We know that the Bible says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8) and that love does not force love. You cannot force someone to love you. Let's face it—forced love is rape! God promises that when we freely come to Him, He will never turn us away. Yet it is against the very nature of God to force us to stay with Him if we tire of His kingdom, just as Lucifer grew weary of it. Thus, these passages focus on God's side of the equation. We may trust that when we come to the Lord, we will not be rejected. But we are always free—because of His love—to walk away.

If we abide in Him, God will never let go of us, but we are always free to let go of Him, to stop abiding whenever we please. Faithfulness in a marriage requires commitment on the part of both parties.

The security of our salvation could be compared to putting your money into a bank. Lots of banks like to use the word “security” in their title to emphasize that your money is safe with them. The message they want you to believe is, “You can trust us with your cash.”

Suppose you visit a bank and are given a tour of the facilities. One of the tellers shows you all the alarms and cameras set up to catch bank robbers. The teller points out the bulletproof glass, the many security guards, and the secured vault. Finally, you are told your money is federally insured. So, feeling safe, you decide to deposit your money into this bank.

What would happen if, the next day, you decide to withdraw \$100 and that same teller tells you, “You cannot withdraw money from our bank.” You protest but are told, “Look, we promise you that your money is in the bank and is secure; you just can’t take any of it out.” Of course, that’s not security—it’s robbery! Likewise, when you lose your choice to walk away from God, you are no longer freely serving Him. You have become a hostage.

Still, God wants you to be secure in your salvation. “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5:13, emphasis added). The condition for knowing you have eternal life is continuing to believe in the name and character of Jesus.

Falling Away

Once you have accepted Jesus into your life, is it possible to fall away? Consider Jesus’ parable of the sower, which describes the gospel seed being spread on different types of soil. Notice what happens when the truth falls onto one type of heart:

Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away (Matthew 13:5, 6).

Now, if the seed “immediately sprang up,” it means these people welcomed it into their hearts. They believed what they heard, and the seed sprouted. Thus, if it “withered away,” something that was once living had died. That means some people who have received salvation at some point lost it because they did not grow deeper roots in Christ.

A Bible example of someone who was chosen by God and even Spirit-filled, but then fell away, was King Saul. He was not picked through a general election, but was chosen by God. Did the Lord choose Saul to make an example of him and then cast him away? No! God chose this Benjamite because he was the Lord’s choice. At first Saul was filled with the Spirit and even prophesied, but he allowed pride to spring up in his heart, grieved away the Holy Spirit, and then lost his salvation.

Judas was one of Jesus' twelve disciples. When Christ sent him out to preach the gospel (along with seventy others), they all came back to report, "Even the demons are subject to us in Your name" (Luke 10:17). Judas was certainly among this group of successful evangelists and was used by the Lord to witness to others.

We sometimes picture Judas as going around constantly rubbing his hands together with evil delight, trying to steal other people's money. When Judas joined the disciples, his heart had been touched by the teachings of Christ. His intentions were good, yet he eventually allowed his own opinions to guide him more than the teachings of Jesus. Slowly he began to resist the Savior's plans because he felt he knew better and he eventually fell away. Stories of people like Judas, Saul, Balaam, and others are given to us "as examples, and they were written for our admonition" (1 Corinthians 10:11) so that we would not follow in their ways.

Jesus makes it clear in His message to the church of Sardis that if the people did not repent and turn from their bad behavior, they would lose their salvation. "He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels" (Revelation 3:5).

You Are Chosen

What then does it mean to be "God's elect"? (Titus 1:1). The Greek word for elect, *eklektoi*, means "chosen ones" or "picked out." I once heard a minister explain that election means that God has cast His vote for you, the devil has voted against you, and you have the tie-breaking vote. Everyone is called to follow the Lord, but not all respond. When Jesus told the parable of the wedding feast, He described how many of the initial guests made excuses and didn't come. So the king told his servants to "go into the highways, and as many as you find, invite to the wedding" (Matthew 22:9). God has not invited a select few to receive the gospel invitation. He wants as many as possible to enter the kingdom. Jesus ended this story by explaining, "For many are called, but few are chosen" (verse 14).

God's elect are those who respond to His call. Those who heed the Lord's bidding are the chosen ones, but everyone is given the call. The message is to go "to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Revelation 14:6), but not everyone will accept the invitation. Some will even turn to God but then will turn away. "The Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith" (1 Timothy 4:1). How can you depart from the faith unless you were first in the faith?

The doctrine of predestination, as taught by Calvin, is dangerous because it gives people a false sense of security. Paul warned, "I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:1, 2, emphasis supplied). The word "if" suggests that ongoing faith is a condition for our salvation. If we do not hold fast, we are believing in vain.

It is unbiblical to teach that we continue to be among God's chosen when we go off and do our own thing.

By this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked (1 John 2:3–6).

When you have an abiding trust in Jesus, you can know that you are a child of God and that He will finish what He began in your life. "Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). How do we complete the race that we began when we first accepted the Savior? "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2).

We can have the assurance of salvation if we keep our eyes on Christ and hold fast to His Word. We can know that we have eternal life when we continue to walk in God's ways by faith. But if we believe that once we accept Jesus we can turn away from Him and still be saved, we are swallowing an artificial gospel that could leave us with great disappointment.