

What We Believe...About Eternal Security Jude 17-25

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We come today to the last sermon in our series on Christian fundamentals, topics that are basic to our understanding of Christianity. Believe it or not, we started on the first Sunday of June, so we've been at it for three months now, with the exception of two Sundays. Any one of the topics we've covered – God the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, humanity, sin and hope, God's providence, salvation, and now today, eternal security – could have been broken into several sermons, as I did with the three sermons on the Bible, and I suppose that there are any number of additional topics we could cover. But a series that has no foreseeable end can become tedious and I'd rather leave you appreciating what we've done rather than wishing for it to be over.

I also want to commend you for what I believe is one of the strengths of our church, your interest in biblical teaching. Many churches have all but abandoned preaching from God's Word and many more use the Bible as simply a "spring board" into the thought for the sermon, never to be mentioned again. But you have always appreciated a more in-depth approach to learning from the Scriptures and that is increasingly rare in our day.

Our topic today, eternal security, has gone by different names – "once saved, always saved", "perseverance of the saints" – but the essence of the matter is this: can a person lose his or her salvation or not? If we've truly accepted Jesus as our Savior, can we be *sure*, can we be *certain*, that one day we will spend eternity with Him?

I'm a strong supporter of the position that truly saved people *cannot* lose their salvation. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* puts it this way: "They, whom God has accepted in His Beloved [Jesus], effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, *can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace*, but shall certainly *persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.*" When the *Westminster Confession* uses the phrase "can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace" they mean that a true Christian, someone who is *in Christ*, that is, someone who knows Christ as his or her Savior, cannot lose their salvation. When they say "shall certainly persevere therein to the end" they mean that a true Christian will *persist*, or continue to have, saving faith until they are finally with Jesus in heaven.

Why did the writers of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* take that position? Well, they based it on a number of passages in Scripture. For example, the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 1:6 "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you *will carry it on to completion* until the day of Christ Jesus." Jesus Himself said in John 10:27-29 " [27] My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. [28] I give them eternal life, and *they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.* [29] My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; *no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.*" In I Peter 1:4a,5 the Apostle Peter spoke of

[4] ...an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, [5] who through faith *are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*" And of course, there's the passage that was read for us a moment ago from the book of Jude, verses 24-25 "[24] *To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—* [25] *to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*" We could add many more verses to that list, of course, but these seem sufficient to prove that eternal security is a biblical concept.

The idea that true Christians will persevere, or continue to have saving faith, until they reach heaven is also in harmony with what the Bible teaches about salvation in general. If God calls us with the gospel message, regenerates us (by freeing our minds from sin to accept the gospel), justifies us (giving us the righteousness of Christ who paid for our sins), sanctifies us (by uniting us with Christ and making us increasingly holy) and says He will glorify us one day (by giving us eternal bodies in heaven), then it only makes sense He will ensure that ultimately we will reach that goal.

Of course, like most things in the Christian faith, there are those Christians who disagree with eternal security. Some feel that if you guarantee someone's salvation, it takes away the "incentive" to live a moral life. They worry that some people might say, "Well, now that I'm saved, I'm 'in'. Heaven is a 'sure thing'. I can sin as much as I want because I can't lose my salvation." The Apostle Paul answered this objection in Romans 6:1,2 "[1] What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? [2] By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" In other words, Paul was saying a true Christian who is persevering in their faith would never take the attitude that it's OK to go ahead and sin because their salvation is guaranteed. That kind of mindset would indicate that that person is really *not* saved to begin with because they haven't understood salvation.

Another objection to eternal security is that the Bible frequently warns us to not fall away from our faith, the point being, why warn us not to fall away if it's impossible for a Christian to fall away? For example, Hebrews 2:1 says "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, *so that we do not drift away*" and Hebrews 3:13 says "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, *so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*"

It's true, these are sincere warnings to not commit the sin of apostasy, that is, denying Jesus. But God uses them as a *means* to keep us on track, to cause us to continue in our faith, to show that we indeed have true, saving faith. In several places we're told to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12) and to "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves" (II Corinthians 13:5). God's warnings to not fall away are meant to spur us to work hard to make sure the salvation we claim to have is real by continuing to place our faith in Christ.

Some point to Hebrews 6:4-6 as certain proof that a saved person can lose their salvation. It says there, “[4] It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, [5] who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, [6] *if they fall away*, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.” Those verses sure *seem* to be describing someone who is saved and has fallen away from Christ. But a closer look at the context tells the true story. Hebrews 6:9 says “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things *in your case—things that accompany salvation.*” Those described in Hebrews 6:4-6 had participated in significant spiritual blessings but they *had not* experienced true saving faith – the “things that accompany salvation”, something the writer of Hebrews was confident his readers actually possessed. So, Hebrews 6:4-6 isn’t describing Christians who have lost their salvation but rather people who had some spiritual experiences but who were never truly saved to begin with.

Finally, those who object to the idea of eternal security point to some in the Bible who seemed to have saving faith but rejected Christ, the most famous of which was Judas Iscariot, Christ’s betrayer. Speaking of those who appear to have saving faith but then fall away, however, the Apostle John explains in I John 2:19 “They went out from us, *but they did not really belong to us.* For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that *none of them belonged to us.*” In other words, people like Judas can *profess* to have saving faith in Christ but in reality they don’t *possess* saving faith. They don’t have eternal security because they never really knew Christ as their Savior.

This brings us to a terribly uncomfortable truth. I wish as your pastor I didn’t have to teach it but I’d be an unfaithful shepherd if I didn’t. I know many of us have loved ones – children, brothers, sisters, parents, etc. – who at one point in their lives made a claim to know Jesus as their Savior. Unfortunately, their lives since that time give no evidence of true saving faith – they don’t pray, they don’t read the Word, they don’t worship, they don’t serve the Lord, often their lives reflect worldly values and behaviors. What are we to say, are they, too, ‘once saved, always saved’?

I try to be charitable because I can’t see their hearts, only God can. I can’t say whether they *possess* the saving faith they *professed* to have, perhaps many years ago. All I can do is give the warning that Jesus gave that “by their fruit you will recognize them” (Matthew 7:20). In other words, Jesus is saying that if someone is a Christian, you ought to be able to see evidence of it in their life. Then He added these solemn words in Matthew 7:21-23, “[21] Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but *only he who does the will of my Father* who is in heaven. [22] Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ [23] Then I will tell them plainly, ‘*I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!*’” The awful reality is that there will be those who seem to have had a significant spiritual experience but Jesus says *He never knew them.*

Those of you dealing with a child, for example, who may have made a decision for Christ at camp, or a sibling that years ago walked down an aisle to accept Jesus but you know their lives bear no fruit, no signs of true repentance, no love for Christ and no concern for their own spiritual progress – don't be silent. Tell them you love them. Tell them you want to see them in heaven. Tell them you're worried that Satan has lulled them to sleep spiritually. And tell them that the only way to be sure their faith is real is to be growing in the knowledge, love and likeness of Jesus (Colossians 1:10-12) – things that can't be done apart from His Word and His people. And, above all, *pray for them*. It may well be that God in His mercy will open their eyes and they will truly accept Jesus as Savior for the first time or perhaps He will convict their hearts and turn them from their backslidden state.

I say that because eternal security *doesn't mean* that a true Christian can never backslide and perhaps even outright deny Christ for a time. Certainly this was true of the Apostle Peter (Matthew 26:69-75), and King David fell and committed the sins of adultery and even murder (Psalm 51; II Samuel 11:4,14,15). Both of these were restored, however, because unlike the traitor Judas they both had truly possessed saving faith. So never give up on praying for your loved ones, only God can see the heart and only His Spirit can blow on the faint embers of true faith that may be there and restore them again to spiritual vitality.

It only remains for me to say that our eternal security doesn't rest on our own strength but, like all things in salvation, it's dependent on God's grace. We only *persevere* because God *preserves* us. Time after time in those verses I mentioned earlier, it's God's action that in the end brings us safely to Him. "*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion,*" "*shielded by God's power* until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed," "*To him who is able to keep you from falling.*" Thinking of Jesus' powerful words in John 10 "*no one can snatch them out of my hand,*" theologian J.I. Packer says that we aren't strong enough to jump out of the hand of God which holds us close to Him.

The writers of the *Westminster Confession* spoke of rejoicing "in the hope of the glory of God" and that our hearts would be "enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, in love and thankfulness to God" because of the assurance we can have of our salvation (Chapter 18). The Apostle Paul wrote of us being "sealed" with the Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our inheritance (Ephesians 1:13-14). And, in one of my favorite passages, Paul asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" His powerful answer? "[38] For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, [39] neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38,39).

My prayer is that the powerful truth of our eternal security would cause us to love Jesus all the more, to rest in the assurance of His saving grace, and to work diligently to show that His that that grace is real and alive in us.