

Psalm 77:7-15

Oct. 25, 2020

Hebrews 6:4-12; 10:26-31.

Is Salvation Forever?

Yes. Salvation in Christ is forever. His atonement on the Cross eternally paid the price of all sin and opened the way to eternal life with God. Salvation offered in Christ is eternal; our acceptance of that offer is not. Otherwise we would not have free will.

Can You Lose Your Salvation In Christ?

Yet the question arises: can you lose that salvation? The passage in Hebrews that was read earlier has some very sobering words about falling away from faith in Christ. Let's hear those words again: *It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace,* Heb. 6:4-6. Impossible to bring them back?!! That sounds hopeless! It sounds like believers who fall away from the faith are lost.

Further on the letter to the Hebrews seems to confirm this: *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,* Heb. 10:26.

Here stands a warning to us all. The great marvel of Jesus' atonement on the cross for all our sins can be thrown away and put us right back into a state of fallenness, bound once again by the depravity of sin. One of our church's official statements of faith says: *We believe, although we have experienced regeneration, it is possible to depart from grace and fall into sin.*¹

How Do We Avoid Losing Our Salvation?

Last week Andrew spoke about the vexation of Christians who have received the pardon of sin through Jesus Christ yet find themselves falling once again to the temptation of sin. What is to be done?

The answer is simple: confess and repent as we once did when we first received Christ as Savior. The problem enters in when we begin to call sin by other, more polite words. People sometimes do that by labeling it as a mistake, a blunder, a weakness, the result of conditioning or environment, or even a disease. However, transgressing God's holy law is sin--no matter what we call it--and sin destroys our walk with God. Sin causes us to "walk in darkness" instead of walking "in the light" and it eventually leads to death.

It is only when we acknowledge sin for exactly what it is--unrighteousness--that we can avail ourselves of God's provision of cleansing and forgiveness. *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness,* 1 John 1:9. Christians need to stop using synonyms for sin and call it what God calls it. When we do, our fellowship with Him can be restored. The believer remains subject to temptation and prone to fall because human desires are still there. Whatever stage of faith one is at, there remains still the possibility to sin. But God's grace is available to empower one to choose to repent again.²

One purpose of the Church is to encourage and pray for one another as each walks by faith in Christ. We pray for the Holy Spirit to continue the process of regeneration of our dispositions toward holiness. The Apostle John wrote to the early church: *If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life,* 1 John 5:16. When you see a brother or sister sinning, rather than gossiping to others about it or immediately confronting him or her, you are to go to God and ask God to forgive them and give them strength to quit it. God will answer this prayer. The Lord will convict them and that they will choose to repent and do what is right. They are restored by Christ.

A warning: if we are not heedful of the way the Spirit of God works in us we will become spiritual hypocrites. Isn't it true we easily see sin in others and maybe not so much in ourselves? We can turn our discernment into the barb of criticism instead of into intercession on their behalf. The direct penetration of the Spirit of God can reveal their true condition to us, but if we are not obedient to the Holy Spirit, we will become criticizing centers rather than vessels of redeeming grace.

My attitude as a saved and sanctified soul, even as I pray for the salvation or sanctifying of another, is that of profound humble holiness for there is no such thing as "proud holiness." Let me share this from my favorite devotional writer, Oswald Chambers: The holiness that is made possible by the free loving gift of forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ, is a holiness born of an agonizing repentance and sense of unspeakable shame for my sin, and then the amazing realization that the love of God was poured out on me even when I cared nothing for God and His ways. When we are so identified with God's mercy and grace, coming with nothing to offer but a willingness to let the life of Jesus be made manifest in our mortal flesh, we then can whole-heartedly intercede for the sinfulness of others, as God desires.³

Is There Unpardonable Sin?

Reading the rest of John's words on prayer for one another we hear this: *There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that,* 1 John 5:16. Yikes! That sounds a little frightening. Further our official

Methodist beliefs state: *We believe all men stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation.*⁴
Whoa! Another sobering warning.

What is this sin that does not lead to death and the sin that does lead to death? Are some sins worse than others? Don't all sins lead to death? I thought the Bible said: *The wages of sin is death*, Romans 6:23.

"The sin unto death" is not one specific sin. Rather, it is a kind of sin--it is an obstinate hardness and turning away in sin that leads to death. The sin *not* unto death is when one sins but hates his own sin, is ashamed of it and wants to hide it. He really doesn't want to sin. Whereas the sin unto death is when one rejoices in sin and doesn't see anything wrong with it. He or she boasts of it and glories in it.

Take note. There are those who profess a faith in God – but perhaps a faith that is only skin deep. They so presume upon the mercy of God as to utterly forget His justice. They do not allow the work of sanctification to proceed in their lives. They call upon God for their needs, yet never obey His call to be holy and so though once saved they remain mired in their old, fallen, sinful disposition. As John Wesley said: Although he has expressly declared, "Without holiness no man shall see the Lord," yet they flatter themselves, that in the end God will be better than his word. They imagine they may live and die in their sins, and nevertheless "escape the damnation of hell."⁵

To put a finer point on it: this "backsliding" from the faith is really a denial of the power of the Holy Spirit in one's life. After Jesus had cured a man who was possessed by demons the Pharisees and Scribes accused Him of casting out demons by the power of the devil. Jesus responded: *Truly I tell you, people can be forgiven all their sins and every slander they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; they are guilty of an eternal sin*, Mark 3:28-29. The sin involved in these various passages about losing faith is one of openly declaring, either by word or habitual deed, that Jesus is a deceiver of people. The condemnation is not that I am born with the heredity of sin, but if when I realize Jesus Christ came to deliver me from it, I refuse to let Him do so.⁶

Is There Hope For "Backsliders?"

Perhaps you heard about the alternate version of John chapter 8 about the woman was caught in adultery. The Law said she was to be stoned to death. Here's the unauthorized version: Jesus saw a crowd chasing down a woman to stone her and approached them. "What's going on here, anyway?" he asked.

"This woman was found committing adultery, and the law says we should stone her!" one in the crowd responded.

"Wait," yelled Jesus. "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." Suddenly, a stone was thrown from out of the sky, and knocked the woman on the side of her head.

Jesus said, "Aw, c'mon, Dad. I'm trying to make a point here!"

The true version is that no stones were thrown at the woman and Jesus said to her, "*Go and sin no more.*"

Sin needs the cleansing of the blood of Christ. Do not despair if you think you have committed a sin leading to death. You're here today. Soften your heart, turn to Jesus. Ask for forgiveness, claim the blood of Jesus, seek God's face and repent and wait on Him to restore you.

Let's turn again to our official Methodist beliefs, where it says, *Not every sin willingly committed after justification is the sin against the Holy Ghost, and unpardonable. Wherefore, the grant of repentance is not to be denied to such as fall into sin after justification. After we have received the Holy Ghost, we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin, and, by the grace of God, rise again and amend our lives.*⁷

One can depart from whatever grace God has given, because grace does not suppress free will ... one's ability to choose. Being saved by God's grace does not mean one ceases to be free. Forgiveness is offered again and again to a believer who sins, on the condition of repentance. Even when one has fallen away for quite some time, God awaits repentance which is really our choice to receive His forgiveness. Our pardon hinges on conscious readiness to receive God's forgiveness. There are times when Christians wander far from God. The pull of the culture to go along to get along, the allure of this world that is fallen from God's holiness, is so powerful that without the power of the Holy Spirit very few will ever resist.

Peter asked how many times someone should be forgiven Jesus answered: Jesus answered, "*I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times,*" Matt. 18: 21-22. I know Hebrews says: *It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened to be brought back to repentance,* Heb. 6:4-6. For us it is impossible to "save" someone. But as Jesus said: "*With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible,*" Matt. 19:26.

Sanctification Is God's Will

In His life and words Jesus showed us the character of God. He is like the father who welcomes home a wayward son who has squandered all his inheritance, after insulting his father – talk about turning your back on the father. (I like how John Wesley expressed it: "total apostasy from both the power and form of godliness.") God is like the shepherd who seeks out the one lost lamb; God is like the woman who turns her house upside down to find one lost coin. God won't give up on you or anyone. *It is God's will that you should be sanctified,* 1 Thess. 4:3.

Countless numbers of mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers, have prayed long and hard, sometimes over many decades ... prayed for a wayward son or daughter... who once received the grace of God in Jesus, in whom the seed of faith was planted in their heart, but have since drifted away ... drawn away by the cares of the world, the pleasures and problems that arise in everyone's life ... maybe turned off to faith in Christ by disappointment or a sense of their own sufficiency. To all those mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, or any other family members or friends who have prayed earnestly for a loved one, once a believer but now gone astray ... to all I say keep praying, never give up, God's perspective is eternal and God works when we pray. Ask for someone to come into your family members' life who can speak the right words of truth and grace, pray for the Holy Spirit to rekindle the flame of faith in their soul. Our loving God extends His forgiveness to all who repent, even if they repent 7 X 70 times.

Never give up. Do not become wearied of praying for them for God never sleeps. *This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth, 1 Tim. 2:3-4.*

¹ *The Confession of Faith of the EUB Church* Article IX – “Justification and Regeneration”

² Thomas Oden, *John Wesley's Teachings*, Vol. 2, 77.

³ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*, October 20.

⁴ *The Confession of Faith of the EUB Church* Article XII – “The Judgment and the Future State”

⁵ John Wesley, “A Call To Backsliders,” Sermon #86, 1778.

⁶ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*, October 5.

⁷ *The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church*, Article XII – “Of Sin After Justification”