

Can Salvation Be Lost?

by Sebastian R Fama

Martin Luther held that once a person professed a belief in Christ he was saved for all eternity. Anything he might do from that point on would have no effect on it. He once wrote: "No sin will separate us from the Lamb, even though we commit fornication and murder a thousand times a day" (*Letter to Melanchthon*, August 1, 1521).

Luther's novel teaching was in stark contrast to what we find in Scripture. The apostle Paul clearly believed that salvation, once achieved, could be lost. He affirms this when writing to the church at Corinth: "But you yourselves wrong and defraud, and that even your own brethren. **Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor the idolaters, nor the adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God**" (1 Corinthians 6:8-10).

It is important to note that Paul was talking to a group of Christians. In other words, He was talking to people who Martin Luther would say were saved. And yet Paul is warning them about losing their salvation. Jesus Himself made the same point when He addressed the Church at Ephesus: "Realize how far you have fallen. **Repent, and do the works you did at first. Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place**" (Revelation 2:5).

The lamp stand is symbolic of Christ's presence. To have your lamp stand removed is to be separated from Christ. That they had a lamp stand to remove indicates that they were at one point, "in Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus' command to repent is a warning that they must once again abide in Him. And as we are told in John 15:4-6 we must abide in Him or be cast forth and burned.

Earlier in 1 Corinthians Paul allows for the possibility that even he might not be saved. He wrote:

It is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. **I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.**

Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before **the Lord** comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and **will disclose the purposes of the heart**. Then every man will receive his commendation from God (1 Corinthians 4:2-5).

Paul points out that it is God who pronounces judgment. And he takes the extra step to tell others not to pronounce judgment. That means you can never definitively say that a person is damned or saved. Only God can make that judgment. Paul also said: "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air, but **I pommel my body and subdue it lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified**" (1 Corinthians 9:25-27).

I don't think that anyone would argue with the fact that Paul is a Christian at this point. And yet in this passage he tells us that he can lose his salvation. The reason why Paul, and any Christian for that matter, can lose their salvation is because even after accepting Christ a person is still capable of sinning and remaining unrepentant. And as we saw above (Revelation 2:5) repentance is necessary for forgiveness.

Protestants will point to several verses of Scripture which appear to bolster their argument. For instance:

He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life. I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:12-13).

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 (John 10:29).

In the first reading John tells us that he who has the Son has eternal life. And of course, this raises the question; who are the ones who have the Son? John himself answers that question; those who remain in Him have the Son (John 6:57). He also says that those who believe in Jesus have eternal life. Consequently, those who don't believe don't have eternal life. When you believe in someone you believe in what they say. When asked what was necessary for salvation Jesus replied, obey the commandments and give to the poor (Mark 10:17-22).

As for John 10:29; It is true, no one can snatch the saved from the Father's hand. However, if we have free will we can voluntarily jump out of the Father's hand. And that is just the point we saw illustrated earlier in the readings from 1 Corinthians and Ephesians.

Another argument used to support the Protestant view comes from John 6:39 which reads: "and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up at the last day." And so, the reasoning goes, one who is saved is given to Jesus. Thus, if anyone who has been given to Jesus is subsequently lost it would mean that the will of God had not been realized. Since God is all powerful that could never happen. Hence, once someone is saved they are always saved.

But this is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of God's will. There are three aspects of God's will. First there is what some would call God's Executive will. He says: "let there be light" and without the slightest hesitation there is light. God is all powerful and it simply cannot be any other way. Then there is God's permissive will. This would involve His allowing bad things to happen usually as a result of our bad choices. Lastly there is God's active will. This would involve those things that God desires for us. God only desires good things for us. But He doesn't force them on us. He loves us, and He wants us to love Him. Only someone with free will can choose to love God. Once we accept God our free will is not taken away. One who can choose to love can also choose not to love.

Just as it is the will of God that Jesus not lose one that is given to Him, so it is also the will of God that all men be saved (1 Timothy 2:4). And yet we know that most people will choose hell. Jesus Himself tells us this: "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Matthew 7:13-14)." Is this a failure on God's part? No, it is a failure on the part of those who have rejected God's offer.

I think it might be helpful to understanding how Martin Luther concluded that a Christian could never lose his salvation. Martin Luther suffered from a condition called scrupulosity. A person thus afflicted experiences severe anxiety and guilt concerning his own sinfulness. Some describe it as a religious form of OCD. Luther thought that no matter what he did he was always headed for hell. He would go to confession for hours. At one point his confessor told him that God didn't have a problem with him, he (Martin Luther) had a problem with God.

From his reading of Scripture, he imagined that he had made a startling discovery. He concluded that Scripture taught that we are saved by faith alone. Thus, as noted above, whatever one did or didn't do after the fact was irrelevant. While faith is certainly a vital element in achieving salvation, it is also true that our faith must be evident in our actions. The book of James is very clear on this:

What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead (James 2:14-17).

I have said it before, but it bears repeating, the works spoken of here are not the product of our own intrinsic goodness. They are accomplished by the power (grace) of God. A failure to do good works is a rejection of God's grace. And that brings us back to our original question; can salvation be lost? It most certainly can be lost. And it will be lost when, at any point, a Christian rejects God's grace and remains unrepentant.