

Salvation: Here A Little; There A Little

The False Doctrine of Eternal Security

Introduction

Many denominations and churches today preach the doctrine of eternal security for the believer. More commonly presented by its casual name, the teaching of “once saved – always saved” has permeated much of Christianity. Such teaching holds that if a person has fulfilled the initial plan of salvation that they are from that point in their life always and irrevocably saved and headed to eternal life despite whatever evil their future actions may produce. In its most common form, this doctrine is presented as, “if a person truly believes in Christ, then they are destined for heaven no matter what.” The purpose of this study is to point out the origins of this damnable doctrine, prove from scripture that it is a false teaching, and bring the realization that the coldness and deep spiritual slumber that much of Christianity is in today is a direct result from this false teaching.

The Origin of “Once Saved – Always Saved”

The first church leader in history to believe in the false doctrine of eternal security was Augustine (A.D. 354-430). The doctrine of eternal security was the offspring of another false doctrine, namely the doctrine of predestination of the individual. Augustine developed this belief and here is a synopsis of what he believed from a church historian:

“Now, as grace is a free gift of God, and precedes all acts of faith on man’s part, and as experience shows that not all men become converted and are saved, it must follow that God absolutely predestinates a certain number to salvation and that the rest are left to their merited damnation.”¹

At the time of his writings, Augustine’s belief of the doctrine of predestination was not widely believed or heralded until many years later when it was picked up and championed by some of the early Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. John Calvin (A.D. 1509-1546) in particular emphasized the doctrine and it was Calvin who took Augustine’s doctrine and began to teach the idea of eternal security, for if God “predestined man to life or death” before they were born, then certainly nothing that the believer does or does not do in this life can change his or her eternal course. “Calvinism” as this teaching is now commonly called has spread and been modified into countless variations, the most common being that of the “once saved – always saved” teachings so prevalent today. We must point out that Calvinism also holds to the concept of “limited atonement” that Christ only died for some people and not for all. To destroy the false teachings of predestination and limited atonement, we only have to read one scripture:

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

The scriptures that speak of “predestined” always speak of the church as a group and never refer to the individual. Like the ark of Noah’s day, the church is predestined to lead to salvation, but it is the individual’s choice as to whether or not they get on board! And certainly John 3:16 states that God “loved the world” not just half of or a part of it and certainly Jesus Christ died so that all should reach repentance. But realizing the truth of what we have just stated, we must ask ourselves the question, “if the principles upon which the doctrine of eternal security was founded are false, is not what was birthed false also?” The resounding answer is, “yes” and to prove that, we turn to scripture.

Common Scriptural Passages Used to Support “Once Saved – Always Saved”

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John Fletcher Hurst, *Short History of the Christian Church* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1893). Pgs 50-51. Also see Augustine, trans. J.F. Shaw, ed. Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 11:269.

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Salvation: The False Doctrine of Eternal Security

Advocates of the false doctrine of eternal security are guilty of focusing on a few verses and ignoring hundreds of others. Before we get to the many that refute such doctrine, let's take a brief glance at two of the most common passages used to try to "prove" the doctrine of "once saved – always saved." The first is the teaching of Jesus in John 10:

Salvation: The False Doctrine of Eternal Security

John 10:27-28 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

To understand what Jesus referred to when He said that “no one will snatch them out of my hand” we must not snatch this verse from the context of the entire chapter that surrounds it. In the tenth chapter of John, Jesus taught about the Shepherd (Himself), the sheep (the saved believers), and the sheepfold (the church). He also affirmed His deity and contrasted between the good shepherd and the hireling shepherds. A hireling shepherd flees when wolves and trouble comes and does not care about the welfare of the sheep. Jesus, the good shepherd, however is willing to lay down His life for the sheep. When Jesus says “no one will snatch them out of my hand,” He is contrasting His faithful watch over the sheepfold with the actions of the hireling shepherd. As long as the sheep remain under the careful care of the shepherd and in the protection of the sheepfold, they will be safe from harm, but if they under their own volition leave the sheepfold and the protection of the good shepherd, then they will be destroyed because of the decisions made by their own volition.

The most common passage used to teach the doctrine of “once saved – always saved” is Paul’s words in the 8th chapter of Romans:

Rom 8:35-39 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? 36 As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." 37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 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.

Again to rightfully understand this passage, we must read the entire chapter. The first part of the chapter declares that:

Rom 8:6-7 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

Remember this letter was written to the pastors of the churches in Rome! And yet Paul is admonishing them to choose to live after the Spirit and live rather than live after the flesh and die. This verse was written to believers and so was verse 13:

Rom 8:13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

“If you” implies a condition that must be met, and it is clear from the rest of the book that Paul is not talking about “physical death” but “spiritual death” meaning a separation from God’s will and grace. For Paul’s admonitions in these preceding verses to mean anything at all, then certainly the last verses of the chapter must not teach a “once saved – always saved” doctrine. And if Paul believed such a doctrine why does he spend the entire book of Galatians trying to turn around the behavior of a people that were backsliding and turning away from their faith in Christ? If such actions had no eternal effect, then why bother to plead with them so earnestly to return to living holy before Christ?

Refuting the Doctrine of Eternal Security – The Teachings of Jesus Christ

Jesus certainly did not teach such a doctrine but clearly taught the opposite of such teachings:

John 8:31-32 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." NIV

If just believing in Jesus was all that was required and no further action was needed, then why did Jesus tell them they were only true disciples if they “hold to my teaching?” Another key scripture from the words of Jesus:

Salvation: The False Doctrine of Eternal Security

Matt 10:22b But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

In context, Jesus is talking about facing persecution and opposition and we are told that we “must endure to the end” to be saved! Jesus taught the importance of not just believing in the beginning but also “abiding” or remaining in Him:

John 15:5-6 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

If the metaphor used by Jesus means anything at all, here, then it must be possible to be attached to the true vine (Jesus Christ) and yet not abide or become detached from Him and wither and die. Many other teachings of Jesus indicate that He taught that a person could at first be right with God and then turn and miss out on eternal life:

- Peter was a believer in Christ, but yet Jesus prayed that his faith would not fail (Luke 22:32).
- We are the salt of the earth, but it is possible for the salt to lose its savor, upon which it is “good for nothing” (Matthew 5:13)
- We the light of the world, but it is possible for the light to be hid or extinguished. (Matthew 5:14).
- We are His disciples, but it is possible for His disciples to walk away (John 6:66-67)
- We are the sheep of His pasture, but it is possible for sheep to go astray (Matthew 18:12)
- We are saved from the destruction of this world, but “remember Lot’s wife” (Luke 17:32)

Lot’s wife was saved by the angels from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, but was still destroyed when she “looked back” towards what she had been delivered from and thus ignored the commandment of God. If it were not possible for the believer to “look back” to their sin and still be destroyed by judgment then what purpose would it serve for Jesus to command us to “remember Lot’s wife?” Why warn against something if it is not possible?

The parables of Jesus are full of proofs that it is possible to turn from living righteously and be lost. For example, in the Parable of the Sower, people’s lives are likened to seed falling on stony ground and among thorns² and these two classes of people obeyed and found God but did not last or endure to the end. In similar fashion, in the Parable of the Ten Virgins we find ten bridesmaids believing that the bridegroom is coming and taking steps to prepare and await his arrival and yet five are wise and make it and five are foolish and are locked out of the wedding feast. In similar fashion, the Parable of the Two Sons show that it is not just what we say that matters as much as what we do! A quick perusal of the parables of Jesus will definitely show that He did not teach such doctrines as “once saved – always saved.”

Refuting the Doctrine of Eternal Security – The Teachings of the Epistles

As we move to the rest of the New Testament and the epistles written by the apostles, we must ask ourselves that if the doctrine of eternal security is true, then why are there even epistles and letters in the New Testament in the first place? The four gospels tell of the coming and teaching of Jesus Christ. The book of Acts records the formation of the Apostolic church which Jesus formed through the men and women that He chose. We can clearly learn how to be saved from our past sins from these writings alone, and so if nothing after that experience can cause us to miss out on eternal life, then why did Paul, Peter, John, Jude, and James spend so much time writing to instruct on how to live holy and righteously and to repeatedly warn the church lest they slip from where they were? If “once saved – always saved” is correct, then why do we even have the majority of the New Testament in the first place? What is the purpose of warnings against things that cannot happen!? Why warn against the devil who walks around as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour?³ Why write that we must present our bodies as a living sacrifice if it is not necessary?⁴

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See Luke 8:4-15.

³ 1 Peter 5:8.

⁴ Romans 12:1-2.

Salvation: The False Doctrine of Eternal Security

Not only do the epistles by their very existence prove such doctrines false, but there are many specific teachings in them that directly refute the doctrine of eternal security as well. It was Simon Peter who warned us – as we have already mentioned – that we must guard against the devil. We thus begin with some of Peter's other writings:

2 Peter 1:10 Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, NIV

Why the "if you do these things" if the doctrine of eternal security were true?

2 Peter 2:20-22 For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. 21 For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. 22 What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire."

This scripture speaks clearly by itself and is really the only scripture that is needed to refute the "once saved – always saved" doctrine. If a person has escaped the world through the knowledge of Jesus Christ and returns to it, then how can the last state be worse than the state before unless they are lost?

2 Peter 3:14, 17 Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. . . . 17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.

We must be diligent to be found by Christ "without spot or blemish!" We must take care lest we "lose ... stability." It is obvious that Simon Peter joined with Christ in teaching that it is possible for a believer to backslide and lose out on eternal life. They do not have to do such things and certainly Peter instructs us on how to avoid backsliding, but by the very presence of such instructions, it must be possible or these writings are pointless.

The writer of Hebrews also did not believe in such false doctrines of eternal security for a believer:

Heb 3:6 but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

Heb 3:12-14 Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

Notice the "if" clauses of these verses.

Heb 6:4-6 For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

We will thoroughly cover the teachings of this scripture in a later lesson, but right now just notice that it must be possible somehow to "fall away" even after having been "enlightened" and having "tasted the heavenly gift" of the Holy Spirit and the word and power of God.

Heb 10:26-27, 35-36 For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. . . . 35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

Salvation: The False Doctrine of Eternal Security

Heb 12:14-16 Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. 15 See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. 16 See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. NIV

The Apostle Paul may or may not have written the book of Hebrews, but there is much proof in the rest of his writings to know that he did not in any shape or form believe the lie of “once saved – always saved.” There are so many such passages in Paul’s epistles that we will only have room to hit the highlights:

Rom 13:11 Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

Salvation has not been achieved already but is “nearer to us now than when we first believed.”

Col 1:21-23 And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, 23 if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

“If indeed you continue in the faith” and “not shifting from the hope of the gospel.”

1 Tim 1:19-20 holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith, 20 among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

2 Tim 2:15-19 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. 16 But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, 17 and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. 19 But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

Obviously Hymenaeus and Alexander had left the true faith and began to believe and teach false doctrine.

Gal 4:9 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more?

Gal 5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Gal 5:4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

The Galatians were returning to their previous lifestyles and thus had “fallen away from grace.”

1 Cor 10:12 Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

If this were not possible, then why warn against it?

1 Thess 3:5 For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

If this were not possible, then why was Paul concerned?

Salvation: The False Doctrine of Eternal Security

1 Tim 3:6-7 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

This is part of the qualifications to be in ministry in the church – obviously it is possible even for the ministry to “fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.”

1 Tim 4:1 Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,

1 Tim 4:16 Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Furthermore both Paul – in Galatians 6:1 – and James – in James 5:19-20 – instructed us in how to handle a brother or sister who was “caught in a transgression,” had “wandered from truth,” and in need of restoration. If this were not possible, then why instruct in how to deal with it?

The Apostle John, joined in with Jesus, Simon Peter, James, and Paul in refuting the doctrine of eternal security:

1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

Again, notice the “if” as in “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light.” We must not only come to the light, but must walk appropriately in the light.

Rev 2:5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Rev 3:5 The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

For God to give such a promise to those who “conquer,” It is obviously possible, for God to “blot us out of the book of life.”⁵

Rev 3:15-16 "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

Jude joined in with the other writers of the New Testament in decrying the “once saved – always saved” doctrine and used Old Testament history examples as a warnings against those who turned to sin in the apostolic church⁶. If such a thing were not possible, then why warn against it? He also commanded us to:

Jude 21 keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.

We, as believers, have a duty and responsibility to “keep ourselves in the love of God!”

Dangers of the Doctrine of Eternal Security

The Bible-study teacher, writer, and long-time pastor, Carlton Coon, gives the following as resulting dangers from believing in “once saved – always saved.”

1. It removes the fear of God from the believer’s life.
2. It destroys the desire to fast and pray.
3. It promotes worldliness and sin among believers.

⁵ Compare Exodus 32:33.

⁶ See Jude 5-7.

Salvation: The False Doctrine of Eternal Security

4. It stops faithfulness to church services and activities.
5. It retards strong consecration and dedication to God.
6. It discourages paying of tithes, offerings, and helping the needy.
7. It denies the possibility of Satan overcoming us. (See I Thessalonians 3:5; I Peter 5:8.)
8. It breeds separation in marriage, divorce, and immoral living.
9. It renders church ordinances, standards of conduct, rules and regulations, and the twenty-one Epistles useless and unworthy of our attention and adherence.
10. It creates a false sense of spiritual security, causing laxity in every aspect of our service to God, though the Scriptures warn us to be prayerful and watchful.

We see the truth of these statements all around us in the lifestyles of “Christian believers” who although “professing Christ” largely disregard the commandments of Christ and His apostles.

Conclusion

There are 1,522 “ifs” of scripture that express condition to the promises of God. God will do what He has said, “if” we perform our duty and responsibility as given in the Word of God. I have often said that “if” is a “big little” word that is important not to miss. A believer does not have to fall and will make it to heaven “if” they obey the clear direction of the Word of God, but certainly the scripture does teach that to fall short of glory after having believed or been saved from your past sins is a possibility. As Jesus said, “he that endures to the end shall be saved.”

To review: the false doctrine of eternal security or “once saved – always saved” was a byproduct of another heresy, the false teaching of individual predestination. This idea was first developed by Augustine, a full two and a half centuries after the New Testament was completed. It only became popular when some of the reformers, most notably John Calvin, began to express their belief in it.

This doctrine not only does not find its beginnings in scripture, but finds clear and repeated refutation in scripture. The Bible teaches that the church is predestined to be saved, but it is each individual’s choice whether or not to become a part of the church. Furthermore, we are saved by grace through faith, but it is possible to “fail the grace of God”⁷ and “depart from the faith.”⁸ We are saved by obeying the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but it is possible to be “moved from the Gospel.”⁹ We are saved because of God’s great love, but we must “keep ourselves in the love of God.”¹⁰ We are saved by the blood of Jesus, but it is possible to receive that blood and then turn and “count the blood of the covenant as an unholy thing.”¹¹ We can be enlightened and delivered from the corruption of the sin of the world and yet choose to return to it like a dog to its vomit and thus receive an even worse fate had we never been delivered in the first place.¹²

Moreover, when believed, this damnable doctrine tends to cause an insincere and lapse Christianity to arise that has almost complete disregard for the clear commandments of the New Testament. We have witnessed such results from the majority of Christians of our day. The right response is to realize the unsoundness of this false doctrine, turn from it, and every day seek to please God with all of our might. Let us endeavor to obey the commandment of the apostle Paul:

Phil 2:12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed — not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence — continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, NIV

We will reap, if we do not faint and grow weary in well doing!

⁷ Hebrews 12:15; Galatians 5:4.

⁸ 1 Timothy 4:1.

⁹ Colossians 1:23.

¹⁰ Jude 21.

¹¹ Hebrews 6:4-5; 10:29.

¹² 2 Peter 2:20-22.