

The Eternal Security of the Believer, Part 1

by Lewis Sperry Chafer

The doctrine of eternal security teaches that a person once saved cannot be lost again, and that salvation is a divine revelation of an abiding fact that exists whether it is believed or not.

Scripture: Romans 8:29

Topics: "Eternal Security", "Assurance Of Salvation"

Description

Lewis Sperry Chafer delves into the theological controversy of whether a person once saved can be lost again, emphasizing the contrasting answers of 'Yes' and 'No' to this question. He explores the doctrine of eternal security as a divine revelation that exists regardless of belief, distinguishing it from personal assurance of salvation. Chafer discusses the importance of understanding the foundational question of whether Christ's sacrifice on the cross is sufficient for God to keep a person saved, highlighting the impact of this belief on personal rest, peace, and Christian service.

Transcript

THE question here raised and which has been so long under theological controversy is simply stated in the words, "Can a person once saved be lost again?" To this question two widely differing answers have been given, which are as simply stated in the two words, Yes and No. There is no middle position, or ground for compromise, for both answers cannot be true at the same time. One cannot really be secure if he is insecure as to his eternal keeping by the slightest degree.

The subject of security is somewhat different from the question of assurance already considered. Eternal security is a doctrine of Scripture, a divine revelation of an abiding fact which exists, whether it is believed or not. Assurance is only the personal confidence in a present salvation.

The two schools of belief regarding eternal security have existed for several centuries and certain church creeds have taken positive sides on the question. The belief, or disbelief, in security is, however, more of a personal matter than credal; depending much on the extent of personal Bible study and heart response to the whole revelation of God. Because one is enrolled under a "Calvinistic" creed does not guarantee that he will himself be free from the distractions of mere human reason: on the other hand, because one is enrolled under an "Arminian" creed is no guaranty that he will not eventually learn to rest in every revelation and promise of God.

The question resolves itself to one issue: did Christ do enough on the cross to make it possible for God righteously to keep one saved, as well as righteously to save at all? Since this question strikes at the very heart of the revelation regarding the cross, its importance cannot be overestimated. The solution of the question involves the very foundation of personal rest and peace, and must qualify Christian service as well. No one can rest while in terror of eternal damnation, nor can one be normal in service if he is confronted with the superhuman task of self-keeping in the realm of the new creation.

A careful survey of the whole field of discussion regarding the security of those who are saved will reveal that one group return constantly in their discussions of this subject to the conclusions of human reason, to the uncertain evidence of human experience, and such Scripture as is cited by them, they "wrest to their own destruction." The other group are guided by revelation alone, believing that there is nothing about any phase of salvation that can be explained within the circumscribed limits of unaided reason or knowledge. Salvation began with God in another sphere, and its conditions, character and results are altogether in harmony with the eternal being of God, rather than with the vain imaginations of fallen man. Not one step can be taken toward salvation until the individual is prepared to project his confidence beyond the sphere of human understanding, and believe something of the unseen and otherwise unknowable as it is disclosed in the Word of God. This discussion is undertaken with the hope that it may enable some who have hesitated to go all the way in faith to be more able to do so to the glory of our covenant-keeping God. It need hardly be added that this discussion has only to do with the security of those who are saved in the true and Biblical sense. There is no divine promise of keeping for the mere professor who does not truly believe.

There are a few passages which have been thought by some to teach that salvation is insecure. These are to be taken up first. Following the consideration of these the more positive teachings of the Scriptures will be presented.

In taking up these so-called "insecurity passages," which number about twenty-five, it will be found that they have been given the character of doubt as to the keeping power of God only through misinterpretation. Thus they are made to contradict the much larger body of Scripture in which an absolute security is promised. The misinterpretation will usually be easily discovered by a careful examination of the whole context. Some of the passages to be taken up, it may be stated, have always been considered difficult, this being evidenced by the various renderings and expositions. It should not be concluded, however, that teaching of insecurity is warranted from the difficulties in these passages. The various renderings and expositions made by creditable expositors do not present teachings foreign to the whole counsel of God. God forbid that any effort should be made to "harmonize the Word of God." It is a consistent whole in its testimony, and only awaits our right understanding of all that it teaches. It will not do, therefore, to discredit the clear testimony of a "verily" of the Scriptures with an "if."

The passages in question may best be treated under classified groupings, and for want of space consideration of every passage will not be undertaken. What is true of one passage within a group will be found in the main to be true of the others.

I. Passages Dispensationally Misapplied.

Mat 24:13 (see also Mar 13:13; Mat 10:22): "But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved." This passage occurs in the midst of the "Olivet discourse," which was addressed to Israel only. They alone are "hated of all nations" (vs. 9). The context is a description of "sorrow" and "the great

tribulation" (vs. 8 and 21), which period cannot even begin on the earth until the Church has been removed (1Th 5:9; 4:13-18). It cannot, and does not, apply to any saint of this dispensation. There is a sweet promise here for those in that terrible time who endure to its end.

Eze 33:7, 8 was true under the law; but is not true under grace.

Mat 18:23-35 (cf. Mat 25:30; 20:1-16) is of "servants" in God's vineyard, Israel. This is to be distinguished from the present preaching of the gospel in the "field" which is the world. Forgiveness under the law was as ye forgive (Mat 6:14, 15). Forgiveness under grace is, like all gifts of grace, first, divinely bestowed, and then becomes an incentive in the believer's heart to exercise the same toward others (Eph 4:32). It must be noted that "servants" are not necessarily saved.

II. The False Teachers of "the Last Days."

1Ti 4:1, 2: "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron." There is no reference here to personal faith. Those mentioned are said to depart from the faith. This is "the faith which was once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Very much of 2 Thess., 2 Tim., 2 Pet., 2 Jon., 3 Jon. and Jude concerns the "last days" just before the Church is removed from the earth. None of the New Testament Epistles are concerned with the Great Tribulation which follows the taking away of the Church; for the Tribulation has to do with Israel and the Nations. The Church is warned by an overwhelming body of Scripture against a coming apostacy and that false teaching which is to characterize her "last days" upon the earth. The false teacher who has turned from the Truth is never said to be saved; but God's judgment of him is sure. The above-named Epistles should all be studied with this in mind, especially 2Ti 3:1-5; 4:3, 4; 2Pe 2:1-22; 3:3, 4; 2Jo 1:9-11, and Jude 1:4-19. Jude writes of these false teachers as "they who separate themselves, sensual, having not the Spirit."

III. Moral Reformation.

Luk 11:24-26: "When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest; and finding none, he saith, I will return unto my house whence I came out. And when he cometh, he findeth it swept and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and they enter in, and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first." The Lord's object in thus presenting this truth was evidently to set forth the futility of mere moral reformation. Such a situation could never describe a Christian who from the moment he is saved is indwelt by the Spirit and by Christ.

IV. Christian Profession is Proven by Its Fruits.

1Jo 3:10: "In this the children of God are manifested, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God (note the fundamental divine requirement as stated in Jhn 6:28, 29), neither he that loveth not his brother." There is an important distinction to be made between enduring in order to be saved and enduring because one is saved. The Bible consistently presents the latter test. "If ye continue in my words, then are ye my disciples indeed" (Jhn 8:31). Of all the seed sown in the field but a small fraction became "wheat," the children of the kingdom. The rest sprang up, and was withered, or was caught away, or was choked. The present age is characterized by much merely formal profession. Within the mass of professors is the true "wheat." The divine test is always with regard to the essential character of the true child of God. As compared with the impotent, unregenerate nature, the divine nature does not

sin, but tends to new aspirations and characteristics in daily life. It is so, and it must be so. The child of God still has the flesh, and this is said to "lust against the Spirit." The new nature does not commit sin: the old nature can do nothing else. Proof that one is saved is not found in sinless perfection; but is found in the fact that there are new desires and powers in the new creation. These can prevail over the old desires by the power of the Spirit. The Bible simply demands that there shall be some real evidence of the new life from God.

2Pe 1:10: "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things (mentioned in vs. 6-8) ye shall never fall" (stumble). Election is certainly of God (Rom 8:29). Peter, here, calls on the saints to make full proof, or to give real evidence of their election by the presence of certain virtues in their lives which he has just mentioned in the preceding verses. So, also, Rom 8:16-18 states that true children of God will suffer with Christ, rather than that they become children, or remain children by suffering. Rom 8:13: "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die" (ye are on the way to die) is qualified by verse nine: "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." It is this chapter of this great Epistle of salvation, it should be remembered, which presents the most unqualified revelations of security for the one who believes.

Jhn 15:6: "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned." This difficult passage may best be understood in its probable relation to professors. The reference is to "a man" and not to a branch, as in verse two. In such a case "abide not in me" could hardly mean more than a pretense, or false profession which "men" disallow as they would gather and burn dead branches. This, like Jam 2:14-26, is a matter of justification before men by works which testify to the fact of the presence or absence of the new life. Men are judged only by the outward: "God looketh on the heart," and "He knoweth them that are his." The whole Epistle of 1 John is filled with these practical tests of the Christian's life and conduct. To this may be added 1Cr 15:1, 2 and Hbr 3:6, 14.

V. Various Warnings.

1. Christians are warned: Rom 14:15, "Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died." The effect of this sin is defined in 1Cr 8:11, 12: "But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ." The effect of such sin is, therefore, the wounding of the weak conscience. The sin is most serious; but a true child of God will "never perish," and "will never die" (Jhn 10:28; 11:26).

2. Professors are warned: Mat 25:1-13 is of the ten virgins. Five had no oil, the symbol of divine life, though they had every outward appearance. They heard the judgment "I know you not," which could not be said of the least child of God.

3. Jews are warned: Hbr 10:26, "If we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more a sacrifice for sins." The old Jewish sacrifices had passed and there was no longer that cure for sins. It was either to take Christ, who had died the sacrificial death for all, or to come into terrible judgment. Hbr 6:4-9, "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted of the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." "But, beloved, we are

persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak" (vs. 9). Much is said here as having been divinely accomplished in certain individuals, but it is not a sufficient description of the true child of God; who is light; who is already a citizen of heaven; who has been sealed by the Holy Spirit; who has been regenerated by the washing of the Word; and who has been recreated by the power of God. The passage is addressed to Hebrews and the first part of the chapter concerns their duty of passing from the elements of Jewish faith to Christ, and the warning is of their particular danger of substituting half truths for the full truth in Christ. That the passage is not for Christians is most evident from the closing verse of the context (vs. 9), which is preceded by the illustration found in verses seven and eight.

4. Gentiles are warned: Rom 11:21, "For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee." This message is addressed to Gentiles as contrasted to Israel, and is a distinction between God's dealing with Israel in one dispensation and with the mass of Gentiles in another dispensation, rather than a warning to saved individuals.

5. Two general warnings: Rev 22:19, "And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things that are written in this book." The warning is most general. That no child of God would be permitted to do this, or to come under this judgment, is assured in 1Cr 10:13 and Jhn 10:29.

1Cr 3:17, "If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy (corrupt); for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are." Another general warning of judgments which could never be the fate of the child of the Father (Jhn 17:11).

VI. Christians May Lose Their Rewards, Walk in the Dark, or be Chastened.

1. Rewards may be forfeited, or lost, but this cannot be said of salvation. 1Cr 9:27: "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway" (disapproved). The context is only of rewards and not at all of salvation. The word here translated "castaway" is *adokimos*, which is the negative form, by the prefix *a*, of *dokimos*. The negative form is translated by three English words in the New Testament: "castaway," once; "rejected," once; and "reprobate," six times.

Three of the translations of "reprobate" are given a marginal rendering "void of judgment." Four meanings given to the word by the lexicons are "unable to stand test," "rejected," "refuse" and "worthless." The less severe form of the word is by the lexicons given first, which corresponds with the meaning given to it in the numerous translations in the Bible. The moderate meaning of the negative form of this word is demanded in the passage in question for at least four reasons. (1) The affirmative form of the word *dokimos*, used in the New Testament six times, is always translated in the Bible and defined by the lexicographers, as well, as meaning "approved," or "to stand test."

"For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men" (Rom 14:18); "Salute Apelles approved in Christ" (Rom 16:10); "For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you" (1Cr 11:19); "For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth" (2Cr 10:18); "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2Ti 2:15); "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life which the Lord hath promised to them that love him" (Jam 1:12).

If dokimos is always "approved," or "tested" as to rewards, it follows that its negative form is naturally "disapproved" or "failure under testing." (2) To give adokimos the severest possible meaning of being "cast off forever" would be to ignore wholly the meaning in the context. This is of rewards to the believer for faithful service. The passage opens with the words (vs. 18) "What then is my reward?" And Paul's fear, as has been before stated, is lest through half-hearted ministry he should be disapproved.

Salvation is not in question, for salvation is not once related in the Scriptures to dokimos, the affirmative form of this word. (3) To give adokimos the severest meaning in this passage would be to bring it into direct opposition to all the great promises of God concerning His purpose and power in salvation. (4) It is to choose a meaning of the word which is remote and in no way the usual use made of it in the Scriptures. Conybeare and Howson render the passage: "But I bruise my body and force it into bondage; lest, perchance, having called others to the contest, I should myself fail shamefully of the prize" (Life of St. Paul, Chapter 12).

1Cr 3:15. "If any (Christians) man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire." The whole context, again, is of rewards for Christian service. The work of God must stand. The child of God will himself be saved, though all his works are burned.

Col 1:21-23. "And you, that were sometimes alienated and enemies in your minds by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death" (this is the work of God in salvation), "to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in his sight" (depends, not on His salvation, but); "if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard."

2. Christian fellowship may be lost through sin: "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not tell the truth" (1Jo 1:6). This passage has to do with loss of fellowship (not salvation) through sin. The cure for a Christian's sin is not in a second regeneration and justification by faith, but rather, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (vs. 9). This is the believer's way back into blessed joy and fellowship with his Lord, and should never be confused with the establishment of the eternal grounds of salvation. The unregenerate are not saved by confessing, but by believing. Thus the Prodigal Son, representing the possible return of the Jewish publicans and sinners under the Jewish covenants and relationships, returned to his father on the ground of confession, and not by a birth, or generation. He was lost and was found, which has not the same significance as being lost and saved. He never ceased to be a son, and was restored to the former relation to his father by confession: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." The same underlying truth will be found in the other parts of the same parable: "The lost sheep" and "The lost coin." Thus a saint of this dispensation, being under the new covenant, may return to his place of blessing by confession (1Jo 1:9). David did not pray that his salvation might be restored after his great sin; but he did pray: "Restore unto me the joys of my salvation," and that after his full confession had been made.

3. Christians may be chastened: 1Cr 11:29-32. "For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation (judgment) unto himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord that we should not be condemned with the world." This passage has to do with a possible eating and drinking at the Lord's table in an unworthy manner, and the table is referred to in this passage as being an outward evidence of the believer's true fellowship with his

Lord. He is thus warned against going to that table when there is unconfessed sin in his life, by that act assuming to be in fellowship with his Lord when he is not. The Father's method of dealing with His sinning child is then revealed. The sinning child may first judge himself, which he does by confessing his sins. If he judge not himself, he must be judged of his Father; but the Father's judgment is always chastisement and never condemnation with the world. The chastisement for the unyielding child, according to this passage, is that he may become "weak," "sick," or "sleep" (physical death).

Jhn 15:2. "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away." The reference is evidently to true branches, which is not the case in verse six. From the fact that the Greek word airo has the meaning "lifting up out of its place," here translated from airei, "taketh away," it would seem probable that the reference is to the last form of chastisement mentioned in 1Cr 11:30. Such branches are taken home to be with the Lord (see, also, 1Ti 5:12, "Having judgment" which is chastisement for a child of God).

VII. Christians May Fall From Grace.

Gal 5:1-4. "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath set us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." "Falling from grace," it will be seen from this passage, is not caused by sinning. It is simply departing from the liberty wherewith Christ hath set us free. It is returning to the yoke and bondage of the law from which the death of Christ hath delivered us. Returning to the law, the liberty which is ours in Christ is lost, and Christ, as the grounds of liberty, is of no effect. It is all a question of the enjoyment of that priceless liberty in grace. There is not the slightest hint in the passage that God withdraws His grace, or that any aspect of salvation has been canceled. It is probable that many believers have never had a vision of their liberty in Christ; but this passage is of those who have known such liberty and then have been drawn back into the yoke and bondage of law observance.

From the foregoing it may be concluded that there is no Scripture, when rightly divided and related to the whole testimony of God, that teaches that a Christian may be lost. Nor is there any such example in the Bible. Of all the incidents and parables, none can be made to teach the loss of salvation. Moreover, if it were possible to lose it, there is no promise, or hint, in the Bible that it could be regained. The Bible reveals nothing concerning repetition of regeneration.

There are at least five general and common questions of doubt that are often raised which should also be considered before turning to the positive revelation regarding eternal security.

1. What if a believer's faith should fail?

Faith, it may be answered, is not meritorious. We are not saved because we possess the saving virtue of faith. We are saved through faith, and because of the grace of God. Incidentally faith is the only possible response of the heart to that grace. Saving faith is an act: not an attitude. Its work is accomplished when its object has been gained.

2. What if a Christian dies with unconfessed sin?

It is quite impossible that any believer knows, remembers, or has confessed every sin. Confession, after all, is but telling Him, and this could better be done, perhaps, in His gracious presence than otherwise. It is

impossible that any would see His face if whole confession, or sinless perfection, should be made the condition of entering that blessed Presence. This question grows out of a very imperfect understanding of the finished work of Christ. Christ has died that sin might not keep us from God.

3. Does not the doctrine of security license people to sin?

Biblically, No; Experimentally, No. There is no greater incentive to holiness of life than to know one's own eternal position in Christ Jesus. It is, according to the Bible, God's superlative appeal for true Christian living. To the question, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" the unregenerate would answer "yes"; for that would be the voice of the fallen nature: but the regenerate will answer, "God forbid." To claim that teaching the doctrine of security will license people to sin is to ignore the mighty revelations of the believer's positions and the effect of these upon the life. It is to ignore the fact of the new divine nature which indwells each child of God. It is to ignore the new dispositions and tendencies flowing out of that new life. It is to ignore the imparted energy of God, "for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." It is to challenge every revelation concerning God's plan of dealing with His child.

Experimentally no truly born-again persons have been known to live on a lower plane after they were saved than the plane on which they lived before they were saved, and very few have been known to take advantage of grace. Mere conversion, or reformation, may result in a return to a worse estate (Luk 11:24-26). On the other hand, to hold over people the superhuman obligation of self-keeping in Christ, is but to discourage them utterly in the purpose of true Christian living and incline them to discount the very standards of God. Such must ever be called from a back-slidden state. The Puritans were not self-named. The name was given them because of their great carefulness of life and piety. Yet every Puritan believed in security, and they may be classed with a multitude of the most devoted saints who have lived and believed according to the testimony of God.

4. Cannot we rebel and be released from Christ if we so choose?

A most unscriptural emphasis upon the supposed power of the human will has been made by some. The human will never acts alone (saved persons, Phl 2:13; unsaved persons, Eph 2:2), and God has undertaken to keep His own from all such sin. "And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom" (2Ti 4:18); "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1Cr 10:13); "I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish" (Jhn 10:28); "Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1Pe 1:5). Having really tasted the riches of His infinite grace and then preferring to be lost again would be the clearest evidence of insanity. We may be assured that God keeps any child of His who is so unfortunate as to lose his reason, and if such an one were to ask to be unsaved, and if it were possible, that one would be kept by the power of God through the dark night of insanity. For this he would give unceasing thanks to the Father through the ages to come.

5. Why the failure of so many converts? No one can really judge another; but it is evident that converts who fail are either misguided professors who went out from us because they were not of us" (1Jo 2:19), or they are saved and perhaps so poorly taught, or so neglected in shepherd care, that they are utterly confused and are "walking in darkness" (1Jo 1:6).

Conversion is but a human act of turning about. It can be done many times and even a believer may be converted (Luk 22:32). Being born again is a different experience entirely. With it there is no repetition

whatever, nor occasion for repetition. Some modern revival converts who have heard nothing but appeals for reformation and a general exhortation to be identified with religion, can hardly be expected to come under the same gracious keeping of God, as the one who has come to God by Jesus Christ, and who has intelligently rested in the saving grace of God as revealed in His Son.

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