

Eternal salvation. Can we be sure?¹

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A question

Can anyone believe in Jesus Christ and then, later on, cease to believe in him? It would appear to be so. We may know people who professed to believe in Christ, showed signs of hope and love and were used by God but then, fell away and even denied the faith they once professed.

Christ himself talked about people who heard God's word and began to respond but then fell away from the truth. *Hebrews* also tells us about people who had been enlightened, experienced God's gift, shared in the Holy Spirit, tasted the word of God and the power of His coming reign but turned their backs on it all.

[Matthew 13:19–22; Hebrews 6:4–8](#)

We may protest that we could never forsake Christ but not understand our own hearts. We remember that Peter, who protested strongly that he could never forsake Christ, had to learn that his certainty depended on someone other than himself.

Doubts come to us at times, and we fear that our faith may fail. We should note that in *Hebrews*, the writer went on to say that he believed better things of the people to whom he was writing.

[Hebrews 6:9–11](#)

However, confidence concerning the life to come is essential to what Christ proclaimed. He spoke often of eternal life and the certainty of our inheriting it.

['and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand' \(John 10:28\).](#)

This certainty is essential to living as a Christian because we cannot live in love while we are afraid concerning the life to come. We have been born as children of God who have no fear of wrath but, rather, anticipate sharing the heavenly home. It is because of this joy and freedom that the message of Christ has been confidently shared across the world for 2000 years.

[Romans 8:15–17; John 14:1–3; I John 4:17–19](#)

The promises of eternal life and the warnings about falling away from faith belong together. We need to understand why they are there and hear them both. In many cases, the assurances and warnings are given together.

This matter affects us deeply so we need to be taught this truth by the Holy Spirit, hear it as a word from God—something by which we can live.

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The promises

Jesus said all who believe in him would have eternal life.

'All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out' (John 6:37).

'My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. 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 10:27–29).

These promises are made to believers and depend on the person continuing to believe in Jesus Christ. However, God is able to keep those who belong to him. Jesus prayed for this before his death.

'I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are. While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me; and I guarded them and not one of them perished but the son of perdition, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled' (John 17:11–12).

Peter believed that Jesus had the words of eternal life, and believed he would be faithful to Christ, whatever happened. But Jesus knew that this boasted faithfulness was false and prayed that Peter's faith would not fail. No-one could be his disciple if they did not take up their cross and follow him, and Peter, by denying Christ, refused to take up his cross. This was a critical time for him. He knew his failure and wept bitterly, but, strangely, his faith endured. His early faith had been mixed up with confidence in his own loving. Jesus spoke of the time when he would be converted—and this is what happened. Peter would no longer change his faith to suit what he was prepared to confess. His faith was changed from confidence in himself to confidence in the love of Christ.

Luke 22:32

After his resurrection, Jesus asked for his disciples, and Peter, to meet him in Galilee. By referring especially to Peter, Jesus made sure that he would be there. Despite his lapse in faith, Jesus had restored him and would make him faithful. Later, Peter knew that he loved Christ, and Christ knew too. He told him by what death he would glorify God.

Mark 16:7; John 21:19

Peter now tells us that God's power is able to guard us so that we will receive our eternal inheritance. Our faith will be tested but will be found to be genuine. What keeps us is what kept Peter, the power of God.

¹ Peter 1:3–5. 'Through faith means that faith trusts the guarding and protecting power of God's almighty power. In every danger our faith turns to God, prays to him that he may use his power to shield us, make a way of escape for us (1 Cor. 10:13)' (R. C. H. Lenski).

Paul also taught that we would be kept faithful to the end.

[Our Lord] will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Cor. 1:8–9).

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. (Phil. 1:6).

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass. (1 Thess. 5:23–24).

These things are important because anxiety throws attention back on ourselves and our experience is always deficient. Our strength lies in the promises of God and his Son.

What is faith?

We may think of salvation as something God begins and which we complete by our faith. This would make us a link in the chain of our own salvation and, before long, we would discover we were the weakest link! What then? Is our salvation only as strong as our faith? What then if our faith fades? What if it gets compromised by careless sinning?

Can a person lose their faith? This depends on whether it is a work of God's grace or whether it is a human decision based on human considerations. Any decision a person makes can change. On the other hand, people do not just believe. They are brought to faith by God's grace in Jesus Christ. Then, as Peter knew, faith is sustained by the loving intercession of Christ and renewed by the proclamation of God's forgiveness.

God saves those who believe. The reason for linking salvation to faith is so that it can depend on his grace, and so, be guaranteed. To our sight, faith looks like a weak link, but it is actually the human side of God revealing his grace to a person. God's whole purpose has been focused on this, turning us from our works to his grace so that we could be assured of eternal life.

Romans 4:13–16

Faith is a gift of God. It is also an urgent responsibility, but it is actually created by God speaking to us. It is sustained, not by looking at our own faithfulness but at whom we have come to trust. We need to know this and to rely on it, and all the more when we see the frailties of others and feel the frailties of ourselves. It is impossible to be strong in faith unless the promise of God is stronger than the frailty of our believing. Simply being confident that we will continue to believe is not Christian faith.

Acts 5:31; 11:18; 13:48; 14:27; 26:18; Ephesians 2:8

The matter can be expressed even more strongly. Christ is not just a trustworthy person who has taught us to trust in him. He was born in our flesh, felt our sorrows, endured our temptations, bore our sins and was raised for our justification. God sent his Son to be our brother. In him, God has created a trusting humanity. It is in him that we know what sin is, what the judgment of God is, what holiness is, what reconciliation is, and so, know what a gracious Father we have. It is in him, then, that we know how secure we are for now and eternity.

We begin to believe and continue to believe because of the new humanity God created in Jesus' birth, in his loving trust of his Father, in his obedient submission to death, and in his resurrection. We don't turn to him and then Christ does these things for us. He has done these things in our place. We repent of our independent life and begin to live in him. This is faith. When we

believe, we have not just changed the object of our trust but are participating in Christ's life—his faithfulness in particular. It is not as though Christ did our changing for us. Rather, in him, we have been changed. *Hebrews* says Jesus is the Author and Completer of our faith.

Galatians 2:20–22; Hebrews 12:1

What is eternal life?

Eternal life means that we will not come under God's wrath or judgment. We no longer live under a threat of death and accusation. We will be raised up on the last day and will live forever. Jesus said:

'He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him' (John 3:36).

'Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life' (John 5:24).

'For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.'" (John 6:40).

Eternal life is not just surviving death. It is knowing the Father and the Son. It is what the Father has himself and what he has revealed. It is what we have through fellowship with him and his Son. God gave us his Son so we could know beyond doubt that we have eternal life.

John 17:3; 1 John 1:2–3; 5:11–13, 20

Assurance of eternal life means we are not being condemned. That is why it depends on the gift of Christ to us in the cross. If he has borne the judgement that stood against us, all reason for uncertainty is gone.

'What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? ...' (Rom. 8:31–35).

We noticed that Peter was kept faithful through Christ's prayer and by being restored after his failure. He encountered the love of God in Christ. So it is with us. Through Christ's eternal intercession before God, we are kept from the power of accusation and know the love of God in Christ.

Assurance is not available by making a deal with God. It is being persuaded that Christ's sacrifice has dealt with every sin of ours—past, present and future—giving us a clear conscience. It is guilt that makes cowards of us. On the other hand, it is justification that gives us assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

Some ask if a person can lose their salvation. I don't ask that question because it ignores what and who we are talking about. If we are considering a human being we must talk about changeableness and failure. But saving is something that God does. We don't save ourselves. The question to ask is, 'Can God lose anyone whom he has saved?'

Other questions follow. Can someone who is a child of God be thrown out of the home? Can someone who is born from above die again? Can eternal life

become temporary? Can the weakness of human decision thwart the gracious purpose of God?

John 3:16, 36; 6:39–40; 14:1–3; Ephesians 1:11

The warnings

What should we think about people who reject the word that had begun to have good effect in them, or who turn away from the faith they once had?

The parable of Jesus about seed that began to sprout but then died off or was crowded out warned the disciples not be too quick to say this or that person was a hearer of the word. True disciples would continue to pay attention to the word of Christ (John 8:31). Jesus warned us all when he said,

'He who has ears, let him hear' (Matt. 13:9).

Perhaps the people described in *Hebrews* who fell away from faith in Christ were never real believers. Enlightened people, who have tasted God's gift and shared in the Holy Spirit seem to be Christians. We could compare the case of Simon Magus, a man who heard Paul preach and was baptized, but was full of bitterness and still a captive to sin. In the following years, history shows Simon Magus was a most determined opponent of apostolic Christianity. The writer of *Hebrews* may be describing an often observed fact, that it is impossible to renew people to faith who have turned away from it.

Acts 8:13, 18–21

It is not possible to argue from our experience of people falling away that people can lose their salvation. We don't always know who belongs to the Lord and who doesn't. Jesus spoke of some who had said 'Lord, Lord' but whom he would reject on judgement day. That is, they never did belong to him.

Matthew 7:21–23

But the warnings remain and we should heed them. Jesus said,

'At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. "Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved' (Matt. 24:10–13).

'If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned' (John 15:6).

Those who fell away, that is, the non-fruit bearing branches, were pruned off by Christ. This had already happened to Judas.

Paul warned the Corinthians about having idols, and about immorality and grumbling against the Lord. Israel had done this before and suffered grievously.

'Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it' (1 Cor. 10:12–13).

Playing with heresy, anger, pride, lust or idols is a sign that we are, for the moment, secure in ourselves. We are warned in case this should go on and become irreversible. The warnings remind us that we are in a battle, and show

us where we have moved from faith and they direct us back to Christ's promises.

The Galatians had a different situation to face. If they mixed faith in Christ with trust in something else they had fallen away from Christ. Paul did not believe this applied to his readers, but he still warned them.

'It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace' (Gal. 5:1–4).

'I have confidence in you in the Lord that you will adopt no other view; but the one who is disturbing you will bear his judgment, whoever he is' (Gal. 5:10).

Hebrews tells us to beware of unbelief.

'Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end' (Heb. 3:12–14).

This is addressed to those who share in a heavenly calling and have confessed Christ (v. 1). We would say they are Christians, but then, it is God who knows who belongs to him. Jesus taught Israel that many are called but few are chosen. He also taught us that there would be some who confessed his name and would never be received by him. What we need to notice is that people who look like Christians and who feel like Christians may in fact fall away from the living God. Christ never knew them.

II Timothy 2:19; Matthew 22:14; 7:21–23

Returning to *Hebrews*, the writer says,

'Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience' (Heb. 4:11).

The writer thought better things applied to his readers (v. 9; 10:39) but he still considered that they needed the warning.

'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. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb. 10:26–31 NIV).

Peter knew the awfulness of failure, and now, because his eyes were on Christ, knew the reality of persisting in faith. He warned us about those who do not care how they live.

'If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud' (II Pet. 2:20–22).

Christ speaks to us, his people.

'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent' (Rev. 3:15–19).

God disciplines his people to bring us to renewed repentance when our love grows cold.

Warnings about losing this salvation are part of the way God keeps us faithful. The warnings and assurances come together. Warnings teach us that we cannot be indifferent to hearing God's word and pursuing peace with all, and holiness, without which it is impossible to see God. They set off alarms if we have drifted into self-confidence and direct us back to the love of Christ again. The promises of God are not a guarantee to be filed for reference if anything goes wrong. They are given to nurture a loving trust in the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

I Thessalonians 5:5–11

God's faithfulness and ours

Scripture stresses the faithfulness of God and the necessity of faithfulness in us. The question is, do we give one of these greater value than the other? Faith is giving glory to God. Therefore, the believer, knowing he or she needs to remain in faith, will do so by focusing on God's faithfulness.

Romans 4:20

Perseverance is a matter of worship and prayer. It is not in ourselves. It is not something we can demonstrate to others but something for which we trust God. We cannot prove anything to the sceptic because God's assurance is a word only heard by those who receive it as a gift of love. So, we tremble at his word and love the God who speaks. We pray for ourselves and pray for others asking that none of us will fall away. Our fears concerning our own weakness find their rightful resting place in the faithfulness of God.

Summary

The references I have quoted show that the source of our certainty is not in ourselves, though it is for ourselves. From a human point of view, we could fail, and many seem to do so. However, salvation is not having certainty about ourselves but about God. We are warned against falling away from God but he makes sure that we don't. His warnings are part of that certainty.

We may be thinking of ourselves as a container into which salvation has been poured. However, a moment of thinking should make us realise that salvation is never something we possess as in a container. It is God and his Christ who hold us. Is it possible for God to fail in what he has set out to do? Is it possible that Christ is not able to keep us to the end?

Thinking of ourselves as containers is not taking account of what we are as human beings. We are made in God's image and are responsible for our

actions. Have we actually entrusted ourselves to Christ to save us? Do we hate every false way?

We may all know people who have professed faith in Jesus Christ, drifted away, ceased to believe and perhaps, have become enemies of Christ. It is important not to draw conclusions from these experiences because we don't know the whole story about someone's faith or falling away, or their possible restoration.

We need to ask: Can God fail in his purpose to save someone? Then we should ask: Am I looking at myself or at the God who has saved me? This is not putting us back on ourselves but showing whether we have truly abandoned self-trust and entrusted ourselves to Christ and his gospel.

Thanks be to God who has given us such a great salvation, and is able to keep us from falling! Thanks be to God also because he does not let our pride prosper in his presence but brings us to true meekness and enduring faith.

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