

## Once Saved Always Saved?

Most of us assume that the moment we turn to God and put our trust in Jesus Christ we are guaranteed an eternal destiny with God. We are 'saved' and we know we are going to heaven when we die. We've got our ticket to heaven and our mansion is booked! Whatever happens, nothing can stop you getting there. Once saved, we are always saved!

But some would question this blessed assurance! Can we really be so confident that simply by believing in Christ we are eternally secure? Though we start off with faith, must we not then add some works in order to finally 'make it' to heaven? Can't we wander from the path or turn back and so never reach our heavenly destination? Does sinning really have no effect on whether I am ultimately saved? Is it really once saved, always saved?

These are important questions. It should not be too difficult to see the implications of telling people that they are in danger of losing their salvation. If that is possible it should certainly affect what we say to 'backsliders' or double-minded Christians. In this study, I will examine the different positions held on this issue, and seek to make clear my understanding of the Bible's teaching. The result I hope will not only be to clarify our understanding, but to strengthen us in our faith and challenge us to progress in our Christian life.

### What Does the Bible Say?

As with most debates between Christians, each side has their 'proof-texts.' There are dangers in 'proof-texting' but it is reasonable to start with some pertinent passages on the subject.

#### *Passages used in favour of OSAS*

##### 1.

*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.*

(John 6:37-40)

For many this proves that "those given to the Son by the Father will not be lost"<sup>1</sup> Others point out that the verbs for 'believes' is in what is called a present continuous tense which should read '*is believing*' and implies '*goes on believing*.' They deduce from this that it is only those who continue in faith who are guaranteed eternal life. The present continuous tense however may simply be used to suggest that the experience of spiritual realities is intended to be an ongoing thing and doesn't really have a bearing on our eternal security. We might look at '*going on being filled with the Spirit*' (Eph.5:18) as another example.

##### 2.

*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one."*

(John 10:27-9)

Though some have quibbled that the fact that other people cannot snatch us out of Christ's hand doesn't mean that we can't extract ourselves from his grip. We might retort that the '*no one*' includes ourself, but the even stronger argument come from the phrase '*they shall never perish*.' The word '*perish (apollymi)*' is the same word used in John 3:16:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

In this context 'perishing' is used as the opposite to having eternal life or 'being saved.' It seems quite clear that if we belong to Christ's flock, then we are guaranteed an eternal life that cannot be destroyed. These two words - 'eternal' and 'guarantee' - are used often by proponents of OSAS to defend their position.

### *Eternal*

Although it is true that in spiritual terms 'eternal life' includes within its meaning a quality of life that comes through a relationship with God through the Holy Spirit<sup>ii</sup>, the actual meaning of the word 'eternal (aionios)' points to a primary sense of everlasting or endless.<sup>iii</sup>

### *Guarantee*

When we were born again we received the Holy Spirit and Paul describes this as being 'marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession--to the praise of his glory.' (Eph.1:13-14) The word used for 'guarantee (arrabon)' means 'a first installment, a deposit, down payment, pledge'<sup>iv</sup> The presence of the Holy Spirit within us then is God's pledge and guarantee of our eternal inheritance which we will receive in fullness at the redemption of our bodies. Some might argue that not all pledges or deposits are fulfilled, and are therefore not an absolute guarantee. But this is God's deposit, God's guarantee and God is not a man that he should lie. He who promised is faithful. We can say that 'God's own faithfulness is pledged to bring it about'<sup>v</sup>

## 3.

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

(Rom.8:38-9)

David Pawson, a modern critic of the OSAS position, writes: 'in the lists of persons and things that cannot separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus and cannot pluck me out of his hand, I myself am missing.'<sup>vi</sup> In other words if we stay in faith nothing can separate us from his love, but we can remove ourselves from his hand by our own unbelief and disobedience. One could argue that we are included in 'anything else in all creation' but also the whole burden of the statement is not to list things that cannot separate us and leave the option of some things that can. Its whole thrust is that the amazing love of God revealed in Christ is what guarantees our absolute security!

## 4.

*That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*

(Rom.10:9)

R.T.Kendall,<sup>vii</sup> a proponent of the OSAS position makes much of this verse, believing that it shows that the only thing we have to do to be saved is to inwardly believe so that we outwardly confess the lordship and deity of Christ. It is perhaps the most succinct statement of what we do to 'qualify' for salvation and nothing is added to it about continuing in faith or faithfulness. It seems to suggest a one-off event, though it is true to say that it will be followed by evidence of the lordship of Christ in our life subsequently.

Other passages used to support OSAS include 1 Pet.1:5, Phil.1:6, Rom.8:1, 1 John 5:18, Jude 24

### *Passages used against OSAS*

## 1.

*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, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case--things that accompany salvation.*

(Heb. 6:4-9)

2. Alongside this passage, is another passage from Hebrews:

*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 judgement 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?*

(Heb. 10:26-9)

There have traditionally been three main ways in which these passages have been understood:

1. It describes people who have genuinely been saved and then lost their salvation.
2. It describes people who were never truly born again, but only brought under the influence of the gospel for a time.
3. It is a hypothetical argument to warn and encourage Christians but could never actually happen because God would keep them in faith.

None of these arguments fully satisfy but see below (under Judgement of Christians) for an alternative reading.

3.

*"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.*

(John 15:5-6)

Quite clearly the branches represent Christians who have been united to Christ. It is argued that like the branches in this analogy, we can remove ourselves from Christ and then we will be 'thrown in the fire' which is taken to mean hell. An explanation of this 'fire' is given below, but it is worth noting here that with figurative language, such as parables, illustrations etc. you must be careful not to try to make every part of the illustration fit.

Other passages used to argue against OSAS include Matt.10:22, Col.1:22-23. Heb.3:12,14, 2 Pet.3:17

### **The Truth Context**

As well as looking at biblical texts, it is important to try to put the issue against the background of clear Scriptural truths

#### ***Grace***

A primary attribute of God celebrated everywhere in the Bible is his goodness.

*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.*

(1 Chron.16:34)

Grace is this essential goodness of God made active toward us. It is goodness in action, directed towards us solely on the basis of that goodness and not on any merit of our own. Whatever we receive from God is based on his goodness, his benevolence and not because we deserved it.

### *The Extent of Grace*

The grace fully revealed in Christ is foreshadowed in the OT revelation as the lovingkindness (hesed) of God which referred to his covenant love (Deut.7:9). This love is said to be everlasting (Jer.31:3) and unailing (Ex.15:13) despite the many times the disobedience and rebellion of the Israelites tested it. God was faithful to them despite their faithlessness, because he had bound himself to them in his covenant of love. It is shown to us most remarkably in the story of the prophet Hosea who was married to a faithless adulterer as a dramatic illustration of God's love for faithless Israel (see Hosea 2:9). If this was the case under the old covenant, how much more might it be true under a new and better covenant in Christ.(see Heb.8:6) The strength of this love is made even clearer to us in the grace that it is in Christ and it is this love that Paul speaks of when he states nothing can separate us from such love.

### *The Priority of Grace*

Grace is the only means and source of our salvation. There is nothing we can do either to merit salvation or to contribute to it. The only way in which it can be appropriated is through faith. Faith is simply the active receiving of a free gift. This is the clear teaching of Paul:

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast.*

(Eph.2:8-9)

Some believe this verse implies that even the ability to have faith is a gift of God's grace. But what is absolutely clear is that salvation is not received by works. This grace which saves us was working toward us before we were born and even before the beginning of time:

*God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life--not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,*

(2 Tim.1:8-9)

We are saved only by grace through faith!

### *The Motivation of Grace*

Some have feared that teaching we are eternally saved by grace, no matter what we do, encourages people to use the grace of God as a licence to carry on sinning because they know that it won't affect their salvation. But anyone who thinks like this only demonstrates that they haven't experienced a true work of grace in their hearts. For I have found that it is the grace of God that actually most encourages you and motivates you toward godliness, (Titus 2:11-12) not the fear of losing your salvation. And the mercy and kindness of God can provoke the fear of the Lord (Psalm 130:4) Far from making me careless over my life, the experience of the wonderful grace of God makes me desperately want to please him.

### **Justification By Faith**

#### *Faith, Not Works*

We are brought into this grace by being justified – that is, 'declared righteous' – by faith (Rom.5:1-2):

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.*

(Rom.5:1-2)

In actual fact, the basis for this justification is Christ's atoning work on the cross, the power of which is enough to establish that we are saved from the wrath to come:

*Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath, through him!*

In both these verses, the emphasis is that our justification, and therefore our acceptance before God and ultimate salvation, is dependent upon him. It does not even our faith that it rests on. Faith is simply the receiving of the free gift of righteousness. Paul's letter to the Romans makes it absolutely clear that the only way we can be declared righteous is by receiving that righteous verdict by faith. (Rom.3:28) There is absolutely nothing that we can do to receive it.

There is nothing more required, insofar as assurance of heaven is concerned. If more were required, then we would have to say it is by grace through faith plus works --or by grace through faith on the condition of faithfulness. The stigma, or scandal, of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that heaven is offered to everyone who believes.<sup>viii</sup>

### *Faith That Works*

Some have mistakenly felt that James' letter contradicted the teaching of Paul, by teaching that it was faith and works that saves us (James 2:24). But James was simply teaching that the reality of the faith is shown by the outward works. It is not faith *and* works but faith *that* works. Paul would have totally agreed with this. It is true to say that we are not saved *by* works but we are saved *for* works, (see Eph.2:10) and these continue to be works of faith motivated by God's grace (Gal.5:6), not based on human power and self-effort.

### *So That It May Be By Grace*

Paul tells us that the reason we receive the promise of righteousness by faith is so that we might know it comes entirely from the grace of God. And not grace is the grounds for our guarantee.

*the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring*

(Rom.4:16)

The wonderful and awesome truth of justification makes it absolutely clear that salvation comes from God alone (Rev.7:10). The problem with those who argue that you must stay faithful in order to finally be saved are in grave danger of putting the onus upon ourselves for our own salvation. They admit that we begin our salvation by the free gift of righteousness, the slate wiped clean, but then we have to maintain it by our own effort and discipline. But the wonder of being '*justified freely by his grace*' (Rom.3:24) is that this free gift of righteousness is not affected by anything I do either before or after receiving it. It is totally unmerited. It is totally and utterly by grace.

### **Regeneration**

We start off on our experience of salvation the moment we are born again (John 3:3). We are impregnated with the seed of the Holy Spirit (1 Pet.1:23; 1 John 3:9) and become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet.1:4). This new birth is the culmination of a process that begins when God chose us before the creation of the world (Eph.1:4-5). Is it possible that this divine purpose could be reversed? And can one who has the life, the seed of God in them then have that life taken from them? Can those born become unborn?

The issue of regeneration has been focused on by some proponents of OSAS as a way of accounting for those who do not persevere or who turn away from the faith. One traditional way of explaining it is to say that backsliders were never genuinely born again in the first place. This is how some explain the Hebrews passages we looked at earlier. They were people who had '*tasted the heavenly gift*' but had not actually inwardly digested it! Although I don't find this a convincing reading of these particular passages I am sure that some of the problems we have with people 'falling away' are due to people not being truly born into the kingdom. We are warned of this possibility in Scripture. Paul warns people to

test themselves whether they are in the faith (2 Cor.13:5). Jesus rejects some who had clearly regarded themselves as followers. They had even cast out demons in his name, but Jesus said of them, '*I never knew you!*' (Matt.7:21-23). They may well simply have been like those pictured in the parable of the Sower, where they seem to show some fruit but they wither away because they have 'no root' (Mark 4:16-17). Others were deliberate deceivers who '*wormed their way in*' (Jude 4) to undermine the sound doctrine of the gospel. John says of them:

*they went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.*  
(1 John 2:19)

It is as well to remember that in the NT, the apostles who wrote to churches in a region could not be guaranteed that all were true believers and this accounts for some of the things that they say. Pawson makes this mistake when he uses the exhortations we find in many of the letters to the churches in the NT which seem to indicate they must persevere in order to finally be saved, (e.g.Col.1:22-23)) as proof against OSAS because he argues they are all written to Christians. But he fails to realise that they had 'mixed' congregations then as now.<sup>ix</sup>

It is a sobering thing that should not undermine assurance. If we are genuinely born again we will have the inner witness of the Holy Spirit (Rom.8:15-16). We will seek to obey God (1 John 3:9) we will love our brothers (1 John 4:7) and we will ultimately continue in the faith. But it should make us vigilant in our evangelism. We encourage nominalism if we make becoming a Christian just a matter of reciting a prayer. And we have to consider this in our subsequent approach to some 'Christians.'

### ***Salvation and Inheritance***

Salvation does not just refer to when we were first born again, but to our continuing experience of it here and now and to our ultimate entry into heaven.. We are saved, we are being saved and we will be saved. This is the differing 'aspects' of our experience of the same gift of salvation, not three different gifts.

Those who argue against OSAS say having received the gift once we can give it back or throw it away subsequently by not continuing in faith. Pawson uses the popular illustration<sup>x</sup> of us as a drowning man. God throws us the lifeline (therefore salvation is by grace). We must take hold of the line (our faith response) in order to experience salvation, though we would never say that we had saved ourselves but that the one who had thrown us the line was our Saviour. But Pawson goes on to argue that at anytime we could let go of the line and so fail to make it to the firm ground (heaven). However, I believe this shows a misunderstanding of salvation. The moment we first believed was not just taking hold of a lifeline and then the rest of our Christian life is to be viewed as being dragged out of the raging sea until we finally reach safe ground! The moment we believed we are taken right out of the waters and placed on firm ground – in Christ. That is our actual position now. The Christian life then is about learning to live in the good of this spiritual reality by faith. It is not about hanging desperately on to a lifeline but standing firm on highground. (see Eph.6:13, Gal.5:1)

What I referred to as living in the good of our position in Christ is what is meant by the present ongoing experience of salvation. It is comparable to the OT illustration of entering the land of promise, Canaan. This is not heaven but the position of being in Christ which is entered into, lived in and enjoyed through the 'rest' of faith (Heb.4:1-3) and held onto and consolidated by fighting the fight of faith (1 Tim.6:12). It is our present inheritance. What is tragic is that so many Christians don't live in the good of it. They live like drowning men even though the Bible describes them as being in Christ.

This is relevant to our argument as it shows that the issue is not about losing our inheritance but wasting it! It is not that the deposit of spiritual life will not be followed by the full payment in the after life, but that the deposit was not drawn upon in this present life. We failed to enjoy our inheritance in Christ.

### **A Neglected Truth: Judgement for Christians**

Some struggle with the concept of OSAS because they find it hard to believe that even if a Christian doesn't continue in obedience they can still be saved in the sense of getting into heaven. Well, this might well be because they cannot bring themselves to see the full measure of the grace of God that would do that. They have a demand for justice and judgement, but they cannot bring themselves to allow that mercy can triumph over judgement (Jas.2:14).

Equally, the innate sense of justice and the need for judgement is a God-given one. God is a totally just God. But we must recognise that although all Christians ultimately get to heaven, God still judges them. (see Heb.10:30) We will all be judged - Christians as well as non-Christians:

*For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

(2 Cor.5:10)

This truth of the judgement of Christians is a far too neglected one. So let's look closely at it.

### ***God's Discipline***

The Bible is quite clear that God disciplines his sons (see Heb.12:5-11). The purpose of this discipline is not for God to 'get even' but to keep us on the path of holiness. It is '*for our good.*' It is redemptive rather than retributive. If through sin, stubbornness or unbelief we do not progress in holiness then God will chasten us, often through circumstances. We must not make light of the Lord's discipline.

When there is a continuing in sin and rebellion, this discipline can get serious. Paul was quite clear that some people in the church at Corinth were '*weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep*' (1 Cor.11:30) because of the way they were treating the Lord's supper and all that it represented. Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead because they tried to deceive God and his people (Acts 5:1-11). The man who continued in sexual immorality at the church in Corinth was to be removed from the church so that his body might be destroyed and his spirit saved (1 Cor.5:1-5). So we cannot treat sin lightly! To believe in OSAS is not to allow us to feel better when we are wallowing in sin!

But what about forgiveness? We should look at God' forgiveness as having two aspects. When we first repent and believe, he removes all our transgressions. The Bible says he remembers them no more. But from then on we must walk in the light and keep short accounts with God. As soon as we confess and repent, then he wipes them out (1 John 1:7-9). If we continue in unconfessed sin we will be judged.

### ***Saved As Through Fire***

So what happens to those so judged? If they are still in sin when they die and are therefore under judgement will they not lose their salvation? Let us go back to the man in Corinth. The purpose of the judgement and discipline exercised by the church before God was that even though his body might be destroyed i.e. by death, his spirit might be saved. The suggestion is that even though he was in sin he would ultimately be saved. He is an example of what Paul had earlier described as saved '*as one escaping through the flames.*' (1 Cor.3:15) That is he would suffer some kind of loss but would actually be saved.

I believe here is where we get an explanation for the Hebrews passage we looked at earlier. The word used about the people in Hebrews 6 & 10 make it unlikely that we are talking about the unregenerate. They were saved but they did not accompany their salvation with the good works and spiritual fruit that comes from continuing in faith and obedience. They were in such a state they were incapable of repenting and had only a fearful expectation of judgement. The images of fire are similar to those used in 1 Cor.3.

*For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

(1 Cor.3:11-15)

Although in the context here, Paul is talking about building churches, the language he goes on to use shows that it can equally be applied to our personal lives. I believe this is the fire that burns up the thorns and thistles of Heb. 6 and which is referred to as the 'raging fire' in Heb.10. It is also the fire that the fruitless branches of John 15 are thrown into.

### ***Reward and Loss***

The one saved as through fire himself suffered loss. Paul wanted to run hard in the Christian race so that he didn't suffer loss (1 Cor.9:24-27). The word used there – 'disqualified (*adokimos*)' – means actually 'to be tested and to fail the test.' In 1 Cor.3:13, it says that the fire shall 'test (*dokimasei*) the quality of each man's work.' This is the test that Paul is anxious not to fail. He was also clear that being faithful to the end was met with a great reward:

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day--and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

(2 Tim.4:7-8)

Not only do the faithful and zealous enjoy their inheritance in this life they receive a greater reward in the life to come. (Rev.22:12)

We don't know exactly what the loss referred to in 1 Corinthians 3 will be though it must surely include a piercing sense of how they have grieved the Father and how they have squandered their inheritance.

### ***Judge Yourself***

It is clear then that Christians will be judged as well as non-Christians. To avoid suffering loss at this judgement and to avoid the chastening of God we must judge ourselves (1Cor.11:31) We should discipline ourselves unto godliness so that we can enjoy salvation here and now and gain reward in heaven (1 Tim.4:8). Let judgement begin in the house of God:

*For it is time for judgement to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?*

(1 Pet.4:17)

### **Practical Conclusions**

It will be obvious by now that the position I have taken is in favour of the belief, OSAS. And yet I am clear that this is not an excuse for going soft on sin. It balances my convictions on the richness and awesome grace of God with the justice of God in exercising holy judgement. We will be judged. We rejoice in the grace of God in securing an eternal salvation, but let that be the prime motivation in living so as not to waste our inheritance here and now and lose our reward in the age to come.

By way of summary, let me make some practical observations:

1. Be assured of your salvation and start from a place of peace of mind and soul about that.
2. Rejoice in the grace of God and let that be the primary motivation in your life.
3. Be clear on the reality of regeneration. Not every one who confesses is truly born again. In leading people to Christ lay out to them the full gospel and the cost of discipleship.
4. I could be wrong!! I am convinced of my position at this time but I am not so foolish to think that I am infallible. The ultimate guarantee is therefore to continue to walk with God faithfully!
5. But let us continue, anyway, in such a way as to win the prize of a glorious entry into the kingdom of God as well as enjoying its riches here and now.

***Trevor Lloyd 1999***

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<sup>i</sup> Grudem, p.789

<sup>ii</sup> John 17:3

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<sup>iii</sup> ‘The predominant meaning of *aionios*, that in which it is used everywhere in the NT...[apart from a very few places]...may be seen in 2Cor. 4:18 where it is set in contrast with *proskairos*, lit., ‘for a season,’ (Vine, p207)

<sup>iv</sup> Grudem, p.791

<sup>v</sup> *ibid.*,p.791

<sup>vi</sup> Once saved Always Saved?, 1996, p.120

<sup>vii</sup> Once Saved, Always Saved (Ambassador 1983)

<sup>viii</sup> *ibid.*, p.55

<sup>ix</sup> Grudem points to a number of passages where ‘false brethren’ are referred to, including Gal.2:4, 2 Cor.11:15, 2 Cor.11:26

<sup>x</sup> 1996, p106

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