

Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

Day 31

Can Christians Lose Their Salvation?

Another theological issue to consider regarding salvation, and another significant divide between Arminianism and Calvinism, concerns *eternal security*, sometimes called *perseverance of the saints*: Can a true believer lose their salvation? Or is that person eternally secure in salvation?

There is such a thing as a “professing Christian”—someone who professes Christianity but does not truly believe in Christ (**Matthew 7:22–23; Titus 1:16**). There is certainly no security in salvation for that person, since they are not actually saved in the first place. Only God can know with certainty who is a true Christian, but for the sake of our discussion, we will assume that this individual is a true Christian.

Generally, one’s answer to the question of whether salvation can be lost will go along with one’s view of election. If election is *conditional*, then there can be no eternal security because a true Christian may cease to believe in the gospel and thus lose their salvation. So Arminians generally reject eternal security, because saints *may or may not* persevere in their faith. Some Arminians also say a true Christian can sin so significantly (**e.g., the “unforgiveable sin” [see Matthew 12:31]**) that they lose their salvation. This side says true Christians can lose their salvation by ceasing to believe or through significant, ongoing, unconfessed sin.

If election is *unconditional*, then eternal security makes sense, since God chose the elect according to his plans and purposes, and once they believe in the gospel, God will faithfully work to preserve them in belief and salvation. Thus Calvinists affirm eternal security; saints *will* persevere in their faith because God will enable them to do so.

Could We Be Lost?

Some biblical texts seem to argue *against* eternal security. In **John 15:1–6**, Jesus said any branch that does not bear fruit is removed from the vine (Jesus himself) and burned. If the “branches” are true Christians, then this sounds like the loss of salvation.

Paul says God will present us *“holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if [we] continue in [our] faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel” (Colossians 1:22–23)*. The conditional *if* seems to suggest that we may not continue in faith and therefore would cease to be saved.

Hebrews contains a number of “warning passages” that could be understood as arguing against eternal security. Probably the most difficult (for those who believe in eternal security) is **6:4–6**:

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 and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance.

If those referred to in **verses 5 and 6** are true Christians, then it is possible for them to “fall away.”

Finally, **1 Timothy 1:19–20** and **2 Timothy 2:17–18** may refer to examples of Christians who did indeed fall away.

How Could We Be Lost?

But many texts seem to argue for eternal security. Jesus said,

I shall lose none of all those [my Father] 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 them up at the last day.

John 6:39–40

The reference to “eternal life” also argues for eternal security. If true Christians have eternal life (they do—**1 John 5:13**), how can it be lost? If it could, then it wasn’t eternal in the first place, only temporary. Jesus also said,

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will 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.

John 10:28–29

In addition to Christians being *firmly* held in the hands of God, note that the phrase *never perish* is the strongest possible way in the Greek language to deny this possibility: “They will never, never, NEVER perish!”

Paul wrote, “[I am] confident of this, that [God] who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (**Philippians 1:6**). The “good work” is salvation, and “the day of Christ Jesus” is his return, so it seems Paul was convinced of eternal security. Other texts also seem to say that God is committed to securing believers in Jesus in their salvation (**Hebrews 7:25; Jude 24**).

Paul likewise says, “God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable” (**Romans 11:29**). Salvation is both a gift and calling of God, and therefore salvation would be irrevocable. Also, if salvation is truly a gift and therefore free (no strings attached), how might it possibly be withdrawn? If it could, it wouldn’t have been a *free*, no-strings gift in the first place.

There are also theological arguments to consider. As we saw in chapter 29, the sealing of the Spirit (**Ephesians 4:30**) seems to indicate eternal security. Also, the possibility of losing salvation due to any sin at all seems contrary to the clear biblical teaching regarding salvation by grace *apart from works*. If works have nothing to do with our salvation in the first place, how can works (in this case, sin) have anything to do with losing it? Further, the possibility of losing salvation due to sin seems to call into question the sufficiency of Christ’s death for *all* sin. If he died for *all* sin, then believers are forgiven of *all* sin, and no sin can ever jeopardize our salvation.

Again, those who reject eternal security believe a true Christian can cease to believe in the gospel and thus lose their salvation. But if saving faith is a gift of God (**Ephesians 2:8–9**; most Arminians agree), it seems this gift would be sufficient for the purpose given (salvation) and would never fail. In other words, God would enable Christians to persevere in their faith. He would not give a gift that in the end would not achieve its intended result.

HEARTFELT ATTEMPT TO PERSUADE

Even though I have tried to mute my own theological convictions as I write, I would wish to convince you of the truth of eternal security. I wish this not only because I do think it is true and biblical but also because I think it is God’s desire for us. It would break my heart if my daughter, Kimberly, lived in fear of doing something so bad that I would

disown her. In the same way, I believe, God's heart is broken if any of his children live in such fear. His desire is for his children to live securely and confidently in their relationship with him—not because of *their* ability to maintain it but because of his.