

Once Saved, Always Saved?

A question frequently asked is, “Can a person fall from faith?” What about the phrase heard in some circles, “Once saved, always saved”?

The “once saved, always saved” idea stems from the false notion that God’s grace is irresistible and that therefore a real believer can never fall away. But God’s grace is not irresistible. Just as it can be and is resisted by those who hear the gospel but never believe, so also those who once believed may turn back again to unbelief and perish. It is exactly for that reason that the Bible urges us constantly to be on guard, to stay close to the Word of God, to arm ourselves with it, to struggle against the enemies of faith outside and inside of ourselves (Romans 13:8-14; 1 Corinthians 15:58; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Ephesians 5,6). If it were true that one cannot fall from faith, then all of these pleas from the Bible would be pointless.

Indeed, the “once saved, always saved” error pushes people in the direction of what is called carnal security, that is, the evil notion that it makes no difference what they do - they are still saved. That is a self-righteousness of a particularly vile sort. Another person, plagued by temptations that require constant struggle, may be driven to despair; he concludes that if he were *really saved, really believed*, he wouldn’t have all these difficulties, and so he gives up. Many Scriptural passages make it clear that Jesus does not want us to use His grace and forgiveness as a license to sin. Nor does He want us to despair because of the struggle that He promised we would have as part of the Christian life (Mark 8:34-38). Rather, He calls us to faith by the gospel, and through the gospel gives us the strength to remain in saving faith, faith which will be lost if we depart from the gospel. It is like the man who wants to stay healthy and live; if the man refuses to use the means at hand for staying healthy, he will get sick and die. So too the Christian; the gospel brought him to faith and only the gospel can keep him in faith. If he spurns the gospel, the faith that he once had will die. Jesus says as much in the great parable of the Sower and the seed. Many receive the Word with joy but then allow the plant of faith to shrivel, wither, be choked, and die (Mark 4:3-20). Only the renewed message of the gospel can bring such a person back to faith again, that is, convert him again with a renewed sowing of the seed of the Word.

Thus, all three happen: Some never believe the gospel because of their own rejection of it; some believe it for a time and then fall from faith; some fall from faith and then are converted again. Indeed, many will attest that this last, this reconversion, has happened to them many times as they struggled and fell, rose again to the struggle, fell again and were again revived by the gospel. We want neither the false security that leads to lazy Christianity nor the despair that gives up in the struggle.

So while faith is altogether the gift of God in the gospel and remains always and alone His gift, the Christian with that gift applies himself to the spiritual food God gives in Word and Sacrament. By that food the Christian received spiritual life in the first place. And by the continual use of that same food God preserves the spiritual life, the faith that He created. We see then how the organs of the soul in the Christian function: The emotions are as the psalmist says, glad to go into the house of the Lord to hear His Word (Psalm 122:1). Reason grasps from that Word that it is by the nourishment of the gospel that faith is preserved. The will responds with the choice of hearing God’s Word faithfully. Consequently, there is this constant interplay between the old will, reason, and emotions and the new, as the old frustrates and hinders the new and as the new does battle against the old. In heaven that battle will end with the permanent death and defeat of the old and the gift of eternal victory from Christ for the new.

Outwardly then, with the continued hearing of the Word, the Christian cooperates with God; inwardly God does all the work of preserving with His Word and Sacraments what He created in the first place with that same Word. So the Christian delights in this, that he can eat and drink the goodness and grace of God; however, all glory he gives to God for what God continuously and miraculously accomplishes through such eating and drinking, namely, the preservation of his faith.