

Apostasy

Can salvation be lost once it has been given? Can a Christian apostatise or does he have "eternal security"?

"Once saved, always saved" - a teaching that is increasingly common these days despite many clear passages in **the New Testament to the contrary which teach that a Christian can fall away from God.**

This matter has far-reaching implications for many questions of Christian life, for the teaching about God, about man, and about salvation. It is our intention to examine this topic and to explain why denying the possibility of apostasy is not in line with sound doctrine. Denial of apostasy fundamentally challenges God's love and the freedom and nature of man who is created in God's likeness. It makes people disregard the gravity of sin and the importance of fighting against sin and lose respect for God's grace and holiness, which lead us to repentance and sanctification. So it is vital for every **Christian to make the effort to find an unambiguous, clear answer to this question.**

Moreover, it is our aim to show that **apostasy does not only occur upon somebody's open and conscious refusal of a relationship with God, but also as a result of persistent, long-term sinning.** We do hope that this article will strengthen people in the truth and be a warning against the deceptive false teaching.

All the biblical quotes follow the RSV (Revised Standard Version).

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. (Hebrews 3:12)

Our relationship with God

The living God wants a living relationship with us. **He created us in his image** : as free persons and real reflection of his own being. Acting always in accordance with love, which is the essence of his nature, God does not treat us as if we were puppets but **he respects our decisions**, he accepts that they have an impact on us and bring about consequences.

A living relationship can develop only on the basis of a free decision. Yet, just as we can freely decide for a life with God, we can also decide to turn away from him. The New Testament clearly speaks of the danger of falling short of the great grace of salvation through the trickery of sin and of ending up in blindness and darkness - being lost.

So, we understand apostasy as the loss, or rejection, of relationship with God.

What does the New Testament say?

The image of the vine

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. (John 15:1-6)

Each branch that brings no fruit will be cut off and burnt in the fire. A branch can bear fruit only if it **remains**, in the vine, which means when it is **one** with it. A branch has a living connection to the vine. Jesus spoke about people who have a relationship to him. Whoever does not remain in the relationship with him becomes fruitless and – figuratively speaking – will be cut off and burned.

The words of Jesus here make clear that **it is possible to lose one's relationship with him..**

The Letter to the Hebrews

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned. (Hebrews 6:4-8)

When people who once repented, had been enlightened and become partakers of the Holy Spirit fall back into the life of sin, they nail the Son of God – in figurative sense – to the cross again and expose him to mockery. Such people deny the power of salvation in Jesus because it leads believers to freedom from sins. Such people cannot repent anymore from the hardening and blindness chosen of their own accord.

It is only of somebody who repented that you may say they “have become partakers of the Holy Spirit”. Moreover, the expression “to restore again to repentance” unambiguously presupposes that that person had already once repented, and in that way become a Christian.

The same is meant by “crucifying the Son of God” again,¹ since it implies that the person in question had already drawn on the salvation act of Jesus.

“To taste the heavenly gift” does not mean to only get a taste of it, or to try it out as something new and generally alien, as it is sometimes interpreted. Nobody would claim that because in Hebrews 2:9 it says that Jesus tasted death it means he did not really die.

For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgement, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay”. And again, “The Lord will judge his people”. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:26-31)

These verses speak again about people who “received the knowledge of the truth”, the author himself believing to be one of them. In the New Testament, receiving the knowledge of the truth is an element of becoming a Christian. Awaiting judgement and the fury of fire consuming the adversaries can only refer to people who are eternally separated from God. That there is no more sacrifice hints to the fact that the sacrifice of Jesus had already been accepted by that person, as he or she had been sanctified by the blood of the covenant.

According to that passage, one can lose salvation through wilful, i.e. conscious and continual sinning. It needn't be a conscious refusal of a Christian towards his Saviour that causes him to fall away. Even a gradual backslide into sin, often imperceptible in superficial acquaintances,

can cause it. The final state of that person is worse than the state of one who had never become a Christian.

Hebrews 3:12

The verse quoted in the beginning was to urge the readers to be watchful over their brothers and sisters in their community so that nobody has the heart leading one to “fall away from the living God”. Here, as well as in other passages, we can see that there is a close connection between apostasy and lack of the biblical commitment and accountability of believers to each other and to God in community.

We encountered some objections that the above-mentioned passages do not refer to Christians. However, the letter on the whole, and specifically in the passages examined, speaks to and about brothers in faith.

And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. (Hebrews 6:11-12)

This shows that the addressees of this letter do not only stand before the step of turning to Christ from being a mere lip-worshippers, but they should endure till the end, watchful not to become lazy on the good way which they had already begun.

The writer of that letter addresses his readers as brothers when he is admonishing them. He saw some of them were quite weak in faith but yet he assessed them as Christians. From the admonitions we see that they were in danger of neglecting fellowship and of being entangled and hardened by sin again. As former Jews (hence “Hebrews”), they felt strongly attracted by the temple cult they had in the past taken part in. They had forgotten the purification they experienced because of their lukewarmness and fear of suffering (Hebrews 10:23-29)

That is why we can in no way derive from the very specific situation described in this letter that the addressees weren't Christians.

Besides this, the often exaggerated distinction between “mere lip-worshippers” and Christians cannot be found here, nor in the rest of the New Testament.

Apostasy and false teachings

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. (Galatians 5:4)

In the New Testament, the warning against apostasy is strongly connected with the appeal to preserve the right teaching, of which the letter to the Galatians is a good example. At the beginning of his letter, Paul expresses that he is utterly alarmed about the Galatians because they allowed themselves to be drawn away to “another gospel” so easily (Galatians 1:6-9). One can see from the context of the letter who the deceivers were: the Jews who insisted that those from the Gentiles who turned to Christianity must keep the law of Moses in order to please God.

It was obvious for Paul that turning away from Christ, from a living, spirit-lead life towards formalistic cultic acts means “falling away from grace”. Inasmuch as salvation is given by God's grace, falling from grace **means the loss of salvation - apostasy...**

In Galatians 4:11 Paul expresses concern and apprehension about Galatians, whether he had not laboured on them in vain. Were apostasy impossible anyway, such anxiety would be completely out of place.

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons... (1 Timothy 4:1)

As is visible from the letter to Timothy, young Christians were confronted with one more dangerous heresy. An early form of Gnosis (1 Timothy 6:20)² had already lead some of them to stray from their faith, and made them shipwreck their belief – as was the case with Hymenaeus and Philetus (1 Timothy 1:18-20, 2 Timothy 2:17).

Greed and all sorts of desires led some believers away from faith too (1 Timothy 6:6-10, 5:14-15).

The letters of John

In some cases it might have happened that some who turned away from the faith hadn't been Christians before.

John writes in his letter concerning similar Gnostic heresies:

Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:18-19)

The conclusion of John that the false teachers had never had the Holy Spirit and as such had never belonged to the community is backed up with the thought that otherwise they would have remained in it. One could have the impression that John wanted to express certain regularity, as if trying to say that through faithfulness alone is visible who has been a Christian and who has not. Yet even the expression "antichrist" shows that the persons in question spread heresies themselves and were not merely unfaithful believers. Because John (as shown in passages such as the next one) clearly assumes that the possibility of falling away from God exists one can see the above situation as an exceptional case. Generally, Gnostics in a misleading way used terms and expressions similar to Christian ones, which, however, they filled with entirely different content. By this it could have been difficult for the young Christians, who were not yet firm enough in the right teaching, to see through them. That is a highly probable reason why John wanted to emphasise: these people had never really repented.

So, the circumstances here are entirely different from those in the following passage:

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. (1 John 5:16)³

Writing that, John assumes that there may be a brother who sins "towards death", which means that the sinning will result in spiritual death. Some consistent opponents of apostasy suppose that John did not mean spiritual but bodily, physical death in this verse. But it is virtually impossible that John should have introduced Christians to the truth that one cannot pray for the dead! If this passage does not speak about apostasy, what sense would it make otherwise?

God will grant forgiveness to anyone who repents from their sin, as grave as it might be. If they don't want to repent even suffering bodily death will not change anything as far as their stubbornness goes.

But he who endures to the end will be saved

In addition to the verses which directly speak of the danger of falling away from God,

many other passages in the New Testament urge Christians to continue in obedience to God.

Brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10:21-22)

Other passages that express the same are: 1 Corinthians 15:1-2; Colossians 1:21-23; Hebrews 10:35-39.

Some people think that the passages about apostasy express only a serious warning, which, if ignored, will not have consequences, because after all God would not punish those who fell back into sin anyway.

If apostasy really has no final consequences, or is not possible at all, why then do so many Biblical texts stress the importance of enduring to the end? God, who is always firm and true in what he says, would not resort to empty threats in order to lead his children to obedience! Even our human pedagogy will discredit such a style of upbringing as inconsistent.

All the biblical reminders of the need for endurance prove that Christians should "work out their salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12) through fight for holiness and obedience, if they want that it remains effective on them. Each of these passages expresses that it is not enough to make a good start with God, but we should complete the race: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? **So run that you may obtain it**" (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Even the Old Testament reveals clearly that God does not remember our previous sins if we repent from our godlessness, but in turn, our former justice cannot help us once we have turned away from the truth.

But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity and does the same abominable things that the wicked man does, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds which he has done shall be remembered; for the treachery oh which he is guilty and for the sin he has committed, he shall die. (Ezekiel 8:24)

Why were there such severe punishments in the Old Testament?

Do they not educate us to shun sin and to abstain from it in order to avoid its devastating spiritual followings? These are: hardening of ones' heart and alienation from God.

Verses which are often used as counter arguments against the idea of apostasy

What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (...) For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-35; 38-39)

This passage is about the faithfulness of God towards his children. When a Christian remains true to God no third party, no alien power, nor even death itself, can isolate them from God.

It is God's plan that each Christian remains firm to the end, and for which each of us receives the necessary power from Him.

But this passage does not aim at explaining what happens when this person is no longer ready to fight against sin and isolates him- or herself from God. We cannot expect that each promise of God is accompanied by a complete list of terms and conditions or conditions of liability.

In addition to the verses which directly speak about the danger of falling away from God, many other passages in the New Testament urge Christians to continue in obedience to God.

and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. (John 6:39)

It is clear that God does not want any Christian to be lost. Despite this, he doesn't encroach upon decisions made of our own will, since he gave our free will to us out of love. His sovereignty is not compromised by this in any way.

According to 1 Timothy 2:4 it is God's will that all people come to recognise the truth and are saved through it. If this then is God's will, why doesn't it happen? The answer is because most people do not want to change their lives. In the same way a Christian can lose their faith if he or she does not want to live with God anymore, that is, when they love sin more than the one who can protect them from it. Why should there be a different standard for Christians? God shows no partiality - even towards those who once repented but are now no longer ready to live a life of repentance.

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. (John 10:27-28)

This verse also speaks about God's faithfulness. The expression "snatch out of my hands" shows that Jesus speaks about external influence. God will enable us to remain faithful if we ask HIM for help. Jesus will not, however, keep us in his hand by force against a clear statement of our will which is manifested in the way we live.

In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. (Ephesians 4:30)

The Holy Spirit as deposit or guarantee is compared with a seal. The image of a seal was used to express validation, the putting into force or reaffirmation of something, and was perhaps also a sign of identification. However, a seal is not something you cannot break - as if one would have to remain God's possession. Breaking the seal has an effect. It's true that God's intention is to grant Christians not only the deposit but also the full volume of the reward - eternal salvation. That is why Paul places emphasis on God's intention of salvation time and time again in order to strengthen the disciples.

So the point in Ephesians is to encourage those who want to live the life of The Way rather than to answer the question whether or not one can fall away from God.

A child of God

Some people use the comparison of relationship to God with a 'parent - child' relationship in order to reason that also the relationship 'God - believer' cannot be made invalid either. The expression to "be God's child" is a picture, and not every aspect of this picture (relationship of a human father with his child) can be referred to the relationship with God. For instance, nobody can choose to become the child of a human father, although this is the case with becoming a child of God.

In fact, even a person who falls away from Him will always remain his creation, as much as he or she remains a child of their parents even if there is no relationship between them anymore. However, just as only those who accept and welcome Jesus can become children of God, only those who remain true to Him can be saved.

Common reasons for rejecting the teaching of apostasy

A lack of interest in others

We can only make others aware of the things that we ourselves are ready to live out. When newcomers join the faith, are they really given satisfactory and clear examples of what the full extent of discipleship means and what it looks like in everyday life?

Many neglect fellowship. Private matters are more important than spiritual ones, and the responsibility for others is shifted onto a narrow circle of leaders - if at all. As a result, many show very little self-assessment and recognition of sin, others are not challenged to give up sins, and still others fall back into past sins.

Understandably, under such conditions it is difficult - and sometimes also wrong - to see someone who lives in sin as having fallen away from God. There are also cases in which someone that went away turns back and starts anew. In this case the question arises as to whether such a person repented before at all. These and other cases often give rise to the wish that it is impossible to fall away from God.

It is wrong though, to assess the situation in the New Testament through the perspective of this kind of experience and to arrive at the conclusion that ALL who turned away from faith were never Christians. The following passage is not the only one that clearly contradicts this idea:

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, The dog turns back to his own vomit, and the sow is washed only to wallow in the mire. (2 Peter 2:20-22)

Giving up the fight against sin

If God is not the most important thing in a person's life, they will not have enough love to fight against sin with the determination Jesus taught either: "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out (...)" Mt 18:9. If that consistence in fight is too much for them, it will be even nearer to them to wish for the certainty that they can never abandon God.

False teachings

The understanding of grace

God works in us 'to will and to act' so no one can boast to him about what they have done. What is there that we could give, that we did not receive? Yet no one can grasp that grace fully unless they

endeavour with all their strength to put their whole life at the disposal of the Creator.

Whoever thinks that God – without our own acting – does everything at the right time to grant us eternal life; whoever, consequently, builds up a comfortable life on that idea and dismisses as legalistic or self-righteous those who strive to live up to the commandment of Christ; such a person has not really understood what God’s grace means. (James 2:17)

Predestination

Predestination in the form that Augustine, Luther, or Calvin believed it says that:

God does not simply know each person’s future in advance, but that he himself determines who will reach salvation (Luther), and who will not (Calvin!).

This way of thinking disregards man’s free will and his hold his capacity for decisions as non-existent. Falling away from God is however, just the expression of free will. That’s why everyone who teaches that the free will of man does not exist will, for the sake of consistence, have to deny any possibility of apostasy – and vice versa.

See our article: [Predestination](#).

For each of these reasons, and many more, which would go beyond the scope of this article, we are convinced that Christians must take an unambiguous position on this question.

However, anyone that shows awe and respect for God and regrets, confesses, and abandons sin need not have any fear of apostasy at all.

We are glad to answer any questions you might have about this.

Footnotes:

1. Though RSV does not have the word “again”, the Greek text uses the verb “anastourein”, where ana- means again, and stourein – to crucify.
2. A play on words: “of what is falsely called knowledge” in Greek: tes pseudonymou gnoseos, where gnosis (knowledge) is at the same time the name of the religious movement in question.
3. Quoted from New American Standard Bible. The Greek text has three times in this verse: sin towards death.

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