

Apostasy

Can Salvation Be Lost Once It Has Been Given?

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⚓ 1 Consequences of the Teaching “Once Saved, Always Saved”

“Once saved, always saved”—a teaching that is increasingly common these days despite many clear passages in **the New Testament which teach to the contrary that it is possible for a Christian to 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 a clear answer to this question.**

Moreover, it is our aim to show that **apostasy does not only occur when a person openly and consciously renounces faith in God, but is also a result of persistent, long-term sinning.** We hope that this article will strengthen people in the truth and warn them of this deceptive false teaching.

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*)

⚓ 2 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.

⚓ 3 What Does the New Testament Say?

⚓ 3.1 The Image of the Vine

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine dresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that 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. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. (*John 15:1-6*)

Every branch that bears 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....**

⚓ 3.2 The Letter to the Hebrews

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop 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, and its end is to be burned. (*Hebrews 6:4-8*)

When people who once repented, had been enlightened and shared in the Holy Spirit fall back into a life of sin, they nail the Son of God—in figurative sense—to the cross all over again and expose him to mockery. Such people deny the power of salvation in Jesus because salvation leads believers to freedom from sins.

Such people can no longer repent from the hardening and blindness they chose of their own accord.

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

The same is meant by “crucifying once again [1] the Son of God”, since it implies that the person in question had already received the benefits of Jesus’ act of salvation.

“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 go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgement, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has 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 also considering himself to be one of them. In the New Testament, receiving the knowledge of the truth is a way of saying that a person becomes a Christian. An “expectation of judgement, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” can only refer to people who are eternally separated from God. The expression: “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” hints at the fact that the sacrifice of Jesus had already been accepted by that person, which is also expressed by their having been sanctified by the blood of the covenant.

According to this passage, a person can lose their salvation through wilful, i.e. conscious and continual sinning. It is not necessarily the conscious renunciation of his faith in Jesus as his Saviour that causes a Christian to fall away. Even backsliding gradually into sin can lead to apostasy. The final state of that person is worse than the state of someone who had never become a Christian.

⚓ 3.3 Hebrews 3:12

The verse quoted in the beginning of this article urges the readers to be watchful over their brothers and sisters in their community so that nobody has the heart leading them 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.

From time to time people raise the objection that the above-mentioned passages do not refer to Christians. However, the letter on the whole, and the passages we have examined in particular, speak to and about brothers in faith.

And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have 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 people this letter is addressed to are not standing before the decision to turn from being mere lip-worshippers to becoming Christians, but they are encouraged to endure till the end, being watchful not to become lazy on the good way which they had already begun.

The writer of this 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 the title of the letter “Hebrews”), they felt strongly attracted by the temple cult which they had formerly been involved in. They had forgotten the purification they experienced because of their lukewarmness and fear of suffering (Hebrews 10:23-29)

That is why it is not at all possible to derive from the very specific situation described in this letter that the addressees were not Christians.

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

✚ 3.4 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). It is visible from the context of the letter who the deceivers were: Jews who insisted that those from among 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-led life towards formalistic rituals 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 the Galatians, whether he had not laboured on them in vain. If apostasy were at any rate impossible, such anxiety would be completely out of place.

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings 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) had already led 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 the faith, too (1 Timothy 6:6–10, 5:14–15).

⚓ 3.5 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 become 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. One could have the impression that John wanted to express certain regularity, as if trying to say that through faithfulness alone it 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 give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. (1 John 5:16)

John assumes the possibility among brothers that one might commit a “sin leading to death”, which means that spiritual death is the result of this sin. Some consistent opponents of apostasy suppose that John did not mean spiritual death but 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 do not want to repent, even suffering physical death will not change anything as far as their stubbornness goes.

⚓ 4 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 brother over 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 the one who endures to the end will be saved. (*Matthew 10:21-22*)

Other passages that express the same thing 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 persevering 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! Educators would agree that this approach to education is unacceptable.

The Old Testament also clearly shows that God does not count someone's previous sins against them if they repent from their godlessness. On the other hand, someone's righteousness cannot help them if they once again turn away from the truth.

But when a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice and does the same abominations that the wicked person does, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds that he has done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, for them he shall die. (*Ezekiel 18:24*)

Why were there such severe punishments in the Old Testament?

Are they not meant to educate us to shun sin and to abstain from it in order to avoid its devastating spiritual consequences, namely the hardening of one's heart and separation from God.

5 Verses Which Are Often Used As Counter-Arguments Against Apostasy

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? ...For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, 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 God's faithfulness to his children. When a Christian remains faithful 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 he gives each of us the necessary strength to do this.

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

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 on the last day. (*John 6:39*)

It is clear that God does not want any Christian to be lost. Despite this, he does not encroach upon decisions made of our own will, since he gave us our free will because he loves us. 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 recognize the truth and are saved through it. If this is God's will, why does it not happen? The answer is that most people do not want to change their lives. In the same way Christians can lose their faith if they do 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 had 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. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. (*John 10:27-28*)

This verse also speaks about God's faithfulness. The expression "snatch them out of my hand" shows that Jesus speaks about external influences. 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 expression of our will which is manifested in the way we live.

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

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by 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 a person would be forced to remain God's possession. Breaking the seal has an effect. It is true that God's intention is to grant Christians not only the deposit but also the full volume of the reward—eternal salvation. Paul emphasizes God's intention in saving us time and time again in order to strengthen the disciples.

Thus, the aim of this passage is not to say something about whether or not a person can fall away from God, but to encourage those who want to live as Christians.

✠ 5.1 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.

⚓ 6 Common Reasons for Rejecting the Teaching of Apostasy

⚓ 6.1 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 overcome, 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. What the true proverb says has happened to them: “The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.” (2 Peter 2:20-22)

⚓ 6.2 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: “And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.” (Matthew 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.

⚓ 7 False Teachings

⚓ 7.1 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 (see James 2:17).

📌 7.2 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 attain salvation (Luther), and who will not (Calvin!).

This way of thinking disregards man's free will and declares his capacity for making 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 consistency, has 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 who shows awe and respect for God and regrets, confesses, and abandons his sin need not have any fear of apostasy at all.

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

Your Email*

Your Message*

Send

Footnotes

1. The Greek text uses the verb "anastarein", where "ana" means again, and "starein" to crucify.

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