

Can I Be Sure of My Salvation?

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A couple of weeks ago, I was poking around on the Internet, doing research on Primitive Baptist hymns, when I stumbled across a website that purported to be a support group for people who were leaving or were thinking about leaving the churches of Christ. As part of this, the site presented a bunch of arguments against many of our most distinctive doctrines. It claimed to make the case for things like instrumental music and baptism not being necessary. Some of the arguments were interesting, others were the same standard claims we've all heard before, but none of it was terribly valid. I guess it might provide people who want to leave with an excuse, but there's not much more there.

I enjoyed poking through all of this and arguing with the author in my head, but then I came to a charge against our teaching that I didn't really recognize. The author claimed that the churches of Christ taught that we can't really be sure about our salvation, that Christians have to live in dread of the final day, never really certain whether they're right with God or not. To be honest, I thought that was the dumbest thing I'd ever heard. It's certainly not what I believe or preach. I asked Lauren if she'd ever heard anything like that, but to my surprise, she said she had.

As soon as I heard that, I knew I had to preach on it. On the one hand, we certainly have to be careful to avoid Calvinism and its pitfalls. Simply because we were once saved does not mean that we are always saved, no matter how hard we try to fall away. The Bible teaches in numerous places that it is possible for any Christian to turn away from God. On the other hand, though, neither should we believe that God is some psychopath who watches all of us with His finger poised above the "Smite" button, just waiting for us to give Him an excuse, and once we see that, it will at least help us to sleep more easily at night. Let's see how God's word answers the question, "Can I be sure of my salvation?"

Paul's Two Viewpoints

In some ways, this is not a question that we can reduce down to a simple yes-or-no answer. We see this in the way that the Scripture presents the apostle Paul's two viewpoints on the subject. The first way he looked at the question appears in Romans 8:38-39. This is one of the strongest quotations in the Bible, but it's even stronger in context. In context, Paul has just addressed the formidable forces arrayed against the early church. He's discussed how Christians have had to endure terrible persecution and suffering for Jesus' sake. His point, though, is that all of those enemies, all of those sorrows don't matter. None of them can touch what's important, because none of them can pull us away from God. In fact, Paul says, there is nothing imaginable that can separate us from our Savior. In this context, Paul seems to be answering the question "Can I be sure of my salvation" with a resounding, triumphant "Yes!"

However, not every word from Paul's pen lines up with this reading, which is in fact an oversimplification of what Paul actually thought. Consider Paul's second viewpoint, presented in Philippians 3:12-14. This comes smack in the middle of another one of the most beloved passages of the entire Bible. Paul has just finished describing everything he had in his life before he became a Christian, and how once he came to the Lord, he saw all of those things that used to be so meaningful as nothing more than rubbish. He gladly surrendered them all for the prize of the resurrection from the dead. And yet, Paul says here that he doesn't think he has attained that resurrection yet. He thinks he has to keep on after the prize, or else he might fall away and become like those whom he describes later in the chapter as "enemies of the cross of Christ". That sure makes it sound like Paul didn't think he could be sure of his salvation, at least not yet.

Of course, this apparent contradiction really isn't one. Paul sounds like he's talking out of both sides of his mouth because he's discussing two different aspects of salvation. The first has to do with Jesus and our relationship with Him. Paul's point is that if we have that relationship, Jesus is completely reliable. Nothing's going to mess with Him or turn Him away from us. The second aspect, though, has to do with us and our continued commitment to that fellowship. No matter how highly we might think of ourselves, we are not reliable. Any one of us can fall away, and just as soon as we think we're invulnerable, that's when the devil will strike. Paul wasn't even willing to endorse himself as devil-proof. That's where the uncertainty comes in—when we consider what we will do in an unknowable future.

Sources of Eternal Life

This leads us on to consider what I'm calling, for lack of a better term, sources of eternal life. These are the things that have to be present in order for us to enter heaven. The first of these spiritual essentials is the word of God itself. Jesus tells us so in John 12:49-50. If we doubt that the commandment is eternal life, we need to ask ourselves where we would be without the word. The word is the standard. It sets the bar. It tells us what God's expectations are for us if we wish to inherit eternal life. That is critically important. Back when I was applying to various law schools, one of my study books had a chart for every law school in the country. For each possible grouping of GPA and LSAT score, it listed the percentage of applicants with those credentials who were admitted to the school. It said, "OK, if you've got a

175 LSAT, you can go ahead and send an application to Harvard, but if you got a 155, don't even bother." It told you what you could expect based on your performance. The Scripture fulfills the same function on a spiritual level. It holds a mirror up to our lives and tells us what we can expect from God based on our performance in keeping his word.

Second, if we want to inherit eternal life, we also have to know our own conduct and evaluate it against the standard. Paul explains in Romans 2:6-8. His basic point is that people who live up to the Lord's will are blessed with eternal life, but people who don't are destined to eternal condemnation, and we can know which group we're in by comparing ourselves to the word. In my law-school application process, I knew what my GPA and my test scores were, so I knew what my chances were for any school in the country. Some of them, I knew I could send in an application in crayon and get admitted. Some of them, I wasn't getting into, no matter how stunning my entrance essay was. I knew that, because I could compare myself to the standard and see how I measured up. We have to go through that same comparison process in our spiritual lives, to see how we've been living and whether God is pleased with us.

Third, and most importantly, our hope of eternal life is based on the perfecting power of Jesus. The Hebrews writer describes it in Hebrews 10:12-14. When we compare ourselves to the standard of the word, we all come to a depressing realization. We all fall short because of our sin. However, even though we are unjust, Christ justifies us. Even though we don't pass inspection on our own, His blood cleanses us so that we are spotless in the eyes of God. It's like this: Let's say that back in the day, I was a horrible student. I slept in till noon every day, and I thought that handing in essays and taking tests was for other people. In short, let's say that I was not law-school material. However, let's also say that I had an uncle who was an Illinois state senator, and I said to him, "Hey, Uncle, how about you get me into the University of Illinois School of Law?" He says, "Sure thing, Nephew," puts me on the clout list, and lo and behold, my application written in crayon gets accepted. I'm admitted to UI Law! Did I deserve to be there? Absolutely not! However, because I had the right relationship with the right person, I was admitted anyway. Ultimately, that's what our eternal destination boils down to too: having the right relationship with the right person, our Savior Jesus Christ.

What Must I Do?

That takes us to the all-important question of what we must do to establish and maintain that right relationship with Jesus. As long as we have that relationship, we can be certain as certain can be of our salvation. If we have never had that relationship or we abandon it, we're doomed. Along these lines, the first thing that we must do is to call upon the name of the Lord. Peter, quoting Joel, highlights this element in Acts 2:21. Of course, calling on the name of the Lord doesn't simply mean crying out, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!" As we've discussed many times, "name" in Scripture commonly means "authority", which is what it means here. If we want to be saved by Jesus, we have to appeal to His authority to save us, and we have to make that appeal in the way that He has prescribed. Acts 22 tells us explicitly that baptism for the forgiveness of sins is part of calling on the name of the Lord. Likewise, the Scripture tells us in other places that we must believe in Jesus, repent of our sins, and confess Him as Lord to be saved. That's all part of the appeal process. Once we do that, though, we can take comfort that we have certainly established the relationship we need.

We maintain that relationship by walking in the light. John explores this concept in 1 John 1:6-7. John here divides Christians into two main groups: those who walk in darkness and those who walk in the light. Those who walk in darkness may think that they have fellowship with Christ. In other words, they may think that there's a relationship there, but there really isn't. On the other hand, those who walk in the light have that relationship and all of its benefits, including forgiveness of sins. This is extremely important, because it tells us that we do not have to have sinless lives to be walking in the light. It's not like we stutter in and out of light and darkness every time we sin or repent. Instead, we learn whether we are walking in the light by considering the general course of our existence. Do we do our best to live for Jesus and strive to reach heaven, even though we still struggle with sin? If so, we're walking in the light. We have that soul-saving relationship with Him. Or, conversely, do we live for ourselves and practice sin that we don't struggle against anymore? That's what walking in the darkness looks like, and that's when we lose our relationship with God.

Of course, within that relationship, we still have to take advantage of the benefits it offers. We still have to seek forgiveness of our sins from God. We see Jesus model this for us in His prayer in Matthew 6:11-13. In this context, when Jesus refers to "debts", He's not discussing some financial concept. Instead, He's referring to the debt of sin, that we ask God to forgive us as we forgive others who have sinned against us. What's interesting about this model prayer for forgiveness is that it is extremely generic. Jesus doesn't tell us that we have to specifically seek forgiveness for every sin we commit, otherwise we're toast. Instead, we can seek general forgiveness in the expectation that God will grant it. Of course, if we are conscious of some particular sin, we should ask God's pardon for it, but we don't have to lie awake at night worrying about some sin that we committed in ignorance, forgot about, and never specifically repented of. God may well show us our error later, but He will certainly forgive us of all of our sins in accordance with His word. This, then, is the answer to the question. As long as we have and maintain a right relationship with Jesus, and as long as we take advantage of that relationship, we can be certain of our salvation, and only we can be responsible for losing it.