

Once Saved, Always Saved?

Allen Webster

Can a sheep wander away? Can a Christian fall from grace?

How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray (Matthew 18:12-13).

SOME FALSELY TEACH THAT A CHILD OF GOD, ONCE SAVED, CANNOT SIN.

The inspired James said he could. How could a brother have sins to confess if he cannot sin (James 5:15-16)? How can he err and wander from the truth (James 1:18) if he cannot sin?

Peter said to Simon the ex-sorcerer/new Christian, "Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:22-23). Here is a Christian who had committed "wickedness" and was in "the bond of iniquity."

When John wrote, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8), he was writing to Christians—those who had

"fellowship with the Father" (1:6-7), and he included himself ("we").

OTHERS FALSELY TEACH THAT ONCE A PERSON IS SAVED THEY CANNOT SIN TO THE POINT OF LOSING HIS SALVATION.

Many more believe that a Christian can and does sin, but that God will not impute that sin to him. He could never be lost eternally because of anything he did.

This doctrine was popularized by John Calvin. The five points of Calvinism are often summed up by the acrostic "T-U-L-I-P" where "P" stands for "perseverance of the Saints." This is also called "The Security of the Believer," "Once Saved, Always Saved," and the "Impossibility of Apostasy." Most protestant groups adhere to this doctrine. Consider these examples:

- ▶ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Presbyterian) says: "They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace: but shall certainly persevere therein in the end, and be eternally saved."
- ▶ The Baptist Faith and Message has: "All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end...they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation."
- ▶ One denominational preacher said he was "hell-proof"; he could not go to hell if he wanted to!
- ▶ Another boldly proclaimed, "We take the position that a Christian's sins do not damn his soul. The way a Christian lives, what he says, his character, his conduct, or his attitude toward other people have nothing whatever to do with the salvation of his soul . . . All the prayers a man may pray, all the Bibles he may read, all the churches he may

belong to, all the services he may attend, all the sermons he may practice, all the debts he may pay, all the ordinances he may observe, all the laws he may keep, all the benevolent acts he may perform will not make his soul one whit safer; and all the sins he may commit from idolatry to murder will not make his soul in any more danger . . . The way a man lives has nothing whatever to do with the salvation of his soul."

Obviously, James 5:19-20 gives such teachers problems. One once-saved-always-saved theologian commented on the phrase "converteth the sinner from the error of his way" by saying: "Some expositors believe that this refers to a child of God who has gone astray. However, I believe it refers to an unsaved person who has not yet come to the truth."

He forgot to look at the first word, "Brethren." One cannot be a brother unless he is in the family of God; God only adds saved people to His family, the church (Acts 2:47). To make sure that no one missed the point, James added the phrase "anyone among you." James' words imply the possibility of a truth-poseessor becoming a truth-loser.

This verse shows clearly that apostasy is possible—the faithful can fall, the saint can slip, the believer can backslide. In fact, some debaters believe that James 5:19-20 is the strongest passage in the New Testament on the possibility of apostasy.

Guy N. Woods, who is reputed to have had more debates than any Gospel preacher in the Twentieth Century, summarizes three great truths implied in this passage:

This passage proves that there is a death which the soul may die; that there is a condition which may properly be called 'death' as a consequence of sin; and that the soul will suffer that unless it is converted.³

**OTHERS OBJECT THAT BELIEVERS CAN
“NEVER PERISH.”**

Someone say that John 10:27-28 says believers “shall never perish.” This is true, but consider the entire passage: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.”

This passage bases its assurance on the contingency of “following Christ.” What if a sheep quits following? What if he leaves Christ? One not only can quit following, some did (John 6:66). The Scriptures not only assert the possibility of apostasy, they also give up numerous instances of it. One example is Hymenaeus and Philetus:

But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some (2 Timothy 2:16-18).

Jesus said, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed” (John 8:31). Someone will argue that the elect are kept by the power of God (1 Peter 1:5). This is true, but they are kept “through faith.”

What about a person who loses his faith? It is possible. Paul wrote, “Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some have put away concerning faith have made shipwreck” (1 Timothy 1:19). He later wrote of others “having damnation, because they have cast off their first faith” (1 Timothy 5:12).

It is sad to contemplate the loss of even one person whose value is greater than all Solomon’s uncountable treasures adjusted for inflation (Matthew 16:26; cf. 1 Kings 10:21-29). It is indescribably tragic to think that thousands have fallen away since Pentecost.

James addressed the need to restore erring sheep in what is thought to be the first New Testament book ever written (about A.D. 50). The devil has never been a procrastinator when there was “a soul to steal” (1 Peter 5:8). He never gets a late start, nor does he clock out early. He has never taken a vacation; nor has he sought an early retirement. The only thing that matches his relentless pursuit of our souls is God’s boundless love for them.

The need to restore erring sheep still exists today. A man with no experience as a shepherd applied for and was given a job guarding sheep. A few days later, he went back to his employer and asked, “Do you still want me to be your shepherd?”

The owner replied, “Of course.”

He said, “Well, then you are going to have to get me another bunch of sheep, because all them you gave me have done lit out.” In many places the sheep that God has entrusted in our care have “done lit out.”

Some have “lit out,” but let’s catch up to them before the Judgment Day so we can all be the sheep of God’s pasture as eternal ages roll on (Psalm 100:3).

Endnotes:

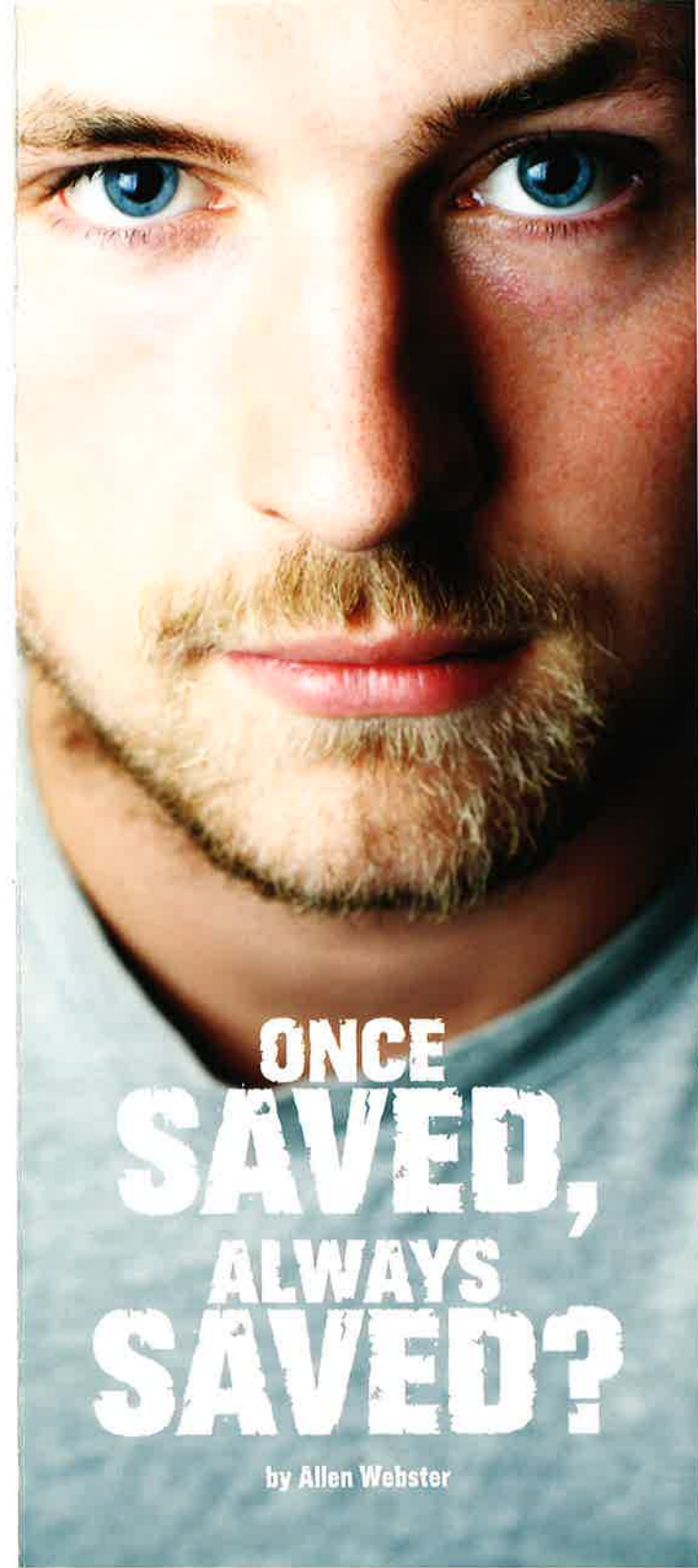
¹ Sam Morris, an uncopyrighted tract, titled “Do a Christian’s Sins Damn His Soul.”

² J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible With J. Vernon McGee*, 1983. Comments on James 5. Page 670.

³ *Commentary on James*, Gospel Advocate Company, Nashville, TN.

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by Allen Webster