

Falling from grace by Ron Cappelli

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 29 April 2010 17:38 - Last Updated Monday, 17 May 2010 08:47

There is a long running controversy within the Christian community over whether, once we've been saved by the grace of God, are we saved forever or can we fall from His grace? Put a different way, is there anything we can do that will keep us from being saved once we've found favor with God? One group of Christians say "no", the other group answers "yes", yet, both groups use the writings of the apostle Paul to prove their point.

Those who say that once saved, we are always saved, use as the basis for their argument Paul's words to the Ephesians, "For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is a gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast" (2:8,9). They further quote Paul's explanation to the Romans concerning salvation through grace when he said, "And if [salvation comes] by grace, then it is no more of works, otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works then it is no more grace, otherwise work is no more work" (11:6). "Therefore, by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight" (3:20). "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness" (4:5). "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confessions is made unto salvation" (10:9,10).

These scriptures are used to make the case that salvation comes to us as a gift from God, not because we have performed any works, or done any deeds that makes us worthy of salvation, but because of God's own desire, He has graciously decided to save us. And the way we gain this favor from God is to confess with our mouth and believe in our heart that Jesus is our Savior. It is this act of faith on our part that makes us righteous.

But what about those who accept Christ and then return to their former ways and no longer live as a Christian should? What happens to them? Are they still saved? According to those who believe that once you've become saved you are saved forever, they again quote the words of Paul, this time to the Corinthians, when he said, "If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss, but he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15).

To some people, this means that if a saved person doesn't live as he should, he will have to burn in hell to suffer for his evil deeds, but, in the end, he himself will be saved.

Another explanation I've heard is based on Paul's words to the Corinthians when he said,

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"Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold all things are become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). In other words, if someone has truly and sincerely accepted Christ into their life, they've become a new person and no longer desire to do the things they used to. Therefore, if someone returns to their old ways, this would seem to indicate that perhaps they never really accepted Christ into their life to begin with. If that is the case, then their conversion to Christ was not genuine and they never actually received God's grace of salvation. Since they weren't saved to begin with, then it's not possible for them to fall away from something they never had in the first place.

A further argument of logic is that if Satan can cause someone to be taken away from God's good favor, then Satan's powers must be greater than God's. But if God is more powerful than Satan, then what God has decided to save, no man, no power, or no thing can take away that which God has given to us.

But is this what Paul meant by his words?

It's safe to assume that Paul didn't preach one type of message to one group of people and a different message to another group. Therefore, the gospel he taught the Romans and Corinthians must be the same gospel he taught to all the churches throughout the region of Galatia.

In his opening remarks to the Galatians, Paul said to them, "I marvel that you are so soon removed from Him [God] who has called you into the grace of Christ to another gospel, which is not another, but there be some that trouble you and would pervert the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:6,7).

The first thing we learn from this verse is that Paul was amazed and concerned that those who had become converted to Christ as a result of his preachings, were beginning to stray from the doctrine he had taught them and were now following the teaching of those who were trying to pervert, distort and change Paul's original message to them.

The second thing we learn from this passage of scripture is that the people to whom Paul was addressing his remarks were those who had been "called...into the grace of Christ." That is, they had received the promise of salvation through grace. As far as Paul was concerned, they

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were saved Christians.

Later in this epistle, he remarked, "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that you should not obey the truth?...This only would I learn of you: Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect in the flesh" (Galatians 3:1-3)?

Again we learn two things. First, the Christians in the region of Galatia were no longer obeying the truth as Paul had taught them, and, secondly, they had received the Holy Spirit. In other words, after their conversion to Christ, they began living their life according to the ways of truth according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but now they were no longer doing that.

It should be noted that Paul doesn't state that such wayward people never had Christ in their life to begin with. In fact, he clearly indicates that they had received salvation. In further remarks he makes this point several times when he stated, "For ye are all the children of God, by faith in Christ Jesus, for as many of you as have been baptized unto Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:26,27). "And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, father. Wherefore, thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ" (Galatians 4:6,7). "But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?... Where is the blessedness ye spake of" (Galatians 4:9,15)?

Paul refers to these wayward Christians as "children of God", "sons" of God and "an heir of God". They know God and God knows them. There can be no doubt that Paul considers these people as being saved. He even refers to the blessed condition they once enjoyed. Yet, despite all of this, they desired to return and to be in bondage to their old habits and their old ways of doing things.

What is it they were doing wrong? What old ways were they going back to?

It seems that some of these Christians were teaching that in order for the Gentiles, who had accepted Christ into their life, to become saved, they must be circumcised according to the law of Moses. So adamant were these teachers that they went about zealously trying to persuade other members of the church of Christ to accept this doctrine as part of the gospel. Paul

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explained it this way, "These teachers are zealously trying to persuade you, but their purpose is not honorable. What they want to do is to isolate you from us so that they might win you over to their side... My little children, I am again suffering birth pains until Christ is completely formed within you. Would that I were with you now and could coax you vocally, for I am fearful about you" (Galatians 4:17,19,20, Amplified version).

We can gain several important facts from this. First, there were some Christians who were deliberately seeking to change Paul's message and were trying to undercut his authority for the purpose of gathering followers to themselves. Secondly, there were many innocent and naive members of the church who were accepting what these deceivers were saying, and were indeed obeying their teachings rather than the message of Paul. In other words, they were straying away from the truth and going back to their old ways of observing the laws of Moses.

Thirdly, Paul was struggling, as a mother in labor would, to keep these people, whom he had brought into the gospel and into a new life, from slipping away from the ways of Christ. Fourthly, he was fearful for them. He had grave doubts about them. He was extremely concerned about what they were doing.

Why would he feel that way if they were in no danger of losing their salvation?

And what great sin were the Galatian Christians committing? If works don't matter, what difference does it make if someone is required to be circumcised? If we are saved simply on the grounds of our belief in Jesus Christ, if salvation is a matter of God's grace and not because of anything we do or don't do, then what's all the concern over a difference of opinion regarding circumcision?

Paul gave the answer to the Galatians this way: "If you seek to become justified through the law [of Moses] you are severed from Christ. You have ***fallen away*** from [His] grace... You were running the race nobly. Who has stopped you from following the truth" (Galatians 5:4,7 Amplified version, italics added).

According to Paul's own words, these people were in danger of severing themselves from Christ and ***falling away from His grace***. In other words, they could lose their salvation over this matter! That's why he was so concerned. That's why he had such fears about them. And, again,

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notice who he is talking to. There are people who once "were running the race nobly." These are people who once had a firm belief in Christ. It must be kept in mind that a person can't fall away from something they never had.

Paul acknowledges that these Christians had been doing very well in the faith, but now wonders why that is no longer the case. The reason Paul was laboring so hard with them was that he felt it was possible for them to lose their salvation, and he was working hard to keep that from happening. Paul felt so deeply about this that he said to them, "I fear for you. I am afraid that all my hard work for you was worth nothing" (Galatians 4:11 The Paraphrased New Testament).

He also expressed this same concern for the Thessalonians when he said, "When I could bear the suspense no longer, I sent [Timothy to you] that I might learn how you were standing the strain and the endurance of your faith, for I was fearful lest somehow the tempter had tempted you and our toil among you should prove to be fruitless and to no purpose" (1 Thessalonians, 3:5, Amplified version).

Obviously Paul had a fear that, after all of his work in bringing people to Christ, the tempter could lead these believers away, thereby undoing all that Paul had done. So concerned was he about the saints in Thessalonica that he dispatched Timothy to make sure their faith remained strong (1 Thessalonians 3:2). Again, why would he fear for these believers if they were in no danger of losing their salvation?

Paul gave the answer when he warned the Galatians, "Let us not be weary in well doing; for in due season we shall reap if we faint not" (Galatians 6:9). If salvation doesn't come because of anything we do; if our salvation is assured once we have accepted Christ and can never be taken away from us regardless of what we do, then why does Paul counsel us to not become weary in doing good works and how come we will reap our reward **only** if we don't faint, or give up? The implication of this scripture is that if we become weary in doing good works, or if we give up ahead of time, there will be nothing for us to reap when the time comes to receive God's promise.

But what kind of "works" was Paul referring to? He clarified this when He told the Galatians, "Now the works of the flesh are these: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things **shall not inherit the kingdom of God**"

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" (Galatians 5:19-21, Revised Standard Version). As far as Paul was concerned, there were clearly certain "works" that, if performed, even by a believing Christian, would disqualify them from inheriting the kingdom of God. This hardly sounds like the doctrine of "saved by grace alone and not of works." And neither do these words seem to indicate that "once saved, [we are] always saved." In fact, they specifically state just the opposite. Yet this message wasn't something new. Paul taught this same doctrine to the Hebrews. He said, "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance, seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh and put him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:4-6).

Peter made a very similar statement when he wrote, "For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that were clean escaped from them who live in error.... For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them" (2 Peter 2:18,20-21).

The people to whom Peter was writing were not unbelievers but those who had come to have "the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." These were those who once had lived "in error" but had "escaped" from the "lusts of the flesh" and were now "clean." In other words, they were **saved** Christians. Yet Peter tells these very people that if they don't keep the "holy commandments" and go back to living the way they use to, it would have been "better for them not to have know the way of righteousness" because in the end it will be "worse with them" than it would have been had they not accepted Christ at all.

Paul spoke about "those who were once enlightened", those who "have tasted of the heavenly gift", those who have received "the Holy Ghost", those who have understood and partook of "the good word of God", those who have had a taste of "the powers of the world to come." These are not people who had just a casual or momentary or insincere belief in Christ. These are people who had a firm knowledge and faith in Jesus to the point that they had been able to experience all these gifts from God. Surely, if anyone can be called saved, it's these people of whom Paul is speaking.

Yet, Paul says that if these people fall away from the gospel, it is "**impossible**... to renew them again unto repentance". And without repentance we can't be saved (Matt. 9:13, Mark 6:12, Luke 15:7, 24:27, Acts 2:38, 26:20, 2 Peter 3:9).

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But why is it so impossible to be saved if we fall away? Paul explained it this way: "[It is not necessary that Christ] should offer Himself often, as the high priest [does when he] entereth into the holy place every year with blood for others, for then must He [Christ] often have suffered since the foundation of the world, but now once in the end of the world... As it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment, so also Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many" (Hebrews 9:25-28). "But this man [Jesus], after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God... For by one offering He hath perfected forever them that are sanctified... Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin" (Hebrews 10:12,14,18). "For ***if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins*** , but a certain fearful looking for of judgement and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries" (Hebrews 10:26,27, italics added).

"...Esau, who for one morsel of meat, sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears" (Hebrews 12:16,17). "Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward, for ye have need of patience that, ***after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise***" (Hebrews 10: 35,36, italics added). "Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering" (Hebrews 10:23). "Follow peace with all men and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. Looking diligently ***lest any man fail of the grace of God***" (Hebrews 12:14,15, italics added).

Paul clearly taught that it is possible to fall from grace and to fail to keep the grace of God. Paul clearly stated that this can happen even to those who accept Christ. Paul explicitly explained that there was only ***one*** sacrifice made for our sins, and that if we willfully sin after accepting Christ, there is no more sacrifice left to atone for those additional sins. Paul showed us by way of example that, just as Esau lost his birthright because of what he did and was rejected, we too can lose the promise of salvation by the things we do, (i.e., following false doctrines, not enduring to the end, letting our faith waver, not following peace with all men, etc.) and be rejected by God.

Yes, Paul taught that salvation comes as a result of God's grace. Yes, he stressed many times that we are saved because of our faith and not because of our works. However, what Paul meant by these statements and what some people ***think*** he meant are not always the same.

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