

Chain Reference: Once Saved, Always Saved

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Introduction.

- A. One of the big problems with false doctrine is that it tends to spread to every area of the way we read the Bible like ripples spread in a pond. The initial departure from the truth has bigger and bigger consequences, until finally the proponent of the false doctrine finds himself arguing something that is obviously not true.
- B. This is particularly obvious with respect to the false doctrine of Calvinism. For those of you who aren't too familiar with such things, Calvinism teaches that before the foundation of the world, God decided whether each individual human being was predestined to go to heaven or hell, and that there is nothing we can do to change our eternal destiny. I can see where Calvin got started going down that path, but it leads to some conclusions that are plainly false. Among the most prominent of these conclusions is what Calvin called perseverance of the saints. In our modern-day speech, we might call it "Once saved, always saved." This doctrine claims that once God calls a sinner to himself, it is impossible for that new Christian to lapse back into an unsaved state.
- C. That doesn't line up either with even a quick reading of the Bible, or with our own personal experiences, but it's a doctrine that has proven very popular down through the centuries. Even some denominations that are not Calvinistic have adopted it, and we may well run into people who believe it. That makes this a good subject for yet another chain reference study. As always, let me lay the ground rules for this. On a page in the back of your Bible, write the words "Once saved, always saved," and next to them, write Galatians 5:4, which will be our first Scripture this evening. Then, once we've gone to Galatians 5:4 and finished discussing it, write 2 Peter 2:20-22. That's going to be the second Scripture in our chain of passages. If you continue this process, by the time we're through, you'll be able to rebut the teaching of "Once saved, always saved."

I. Arguments Outside of Hebrews and James.

- A. Basically, this study is going to focus on two particular claims that the once-saved-always-saved folks have to make. First, they have to claim that anyone who becomes a Christian cannot fall away. Second, they have to claim that anyone who does fall away was not actually a Christian in the first place. He just played one on TV. If we can find multiple passages in the Bible that talk about genuine Christians who fall away and become lost after having been truly saved, then the doctrine of once saved, always saved must be false.
- B. The first passage that we're going to look at tonight that presents genuine Christians who fall away is **GALATIANS 5:4**. This means that in the back of your Bible next to the words "Once saved, always saved," you need to write Galatians 5:4, then turn to the passage with me. This passage warns the Galatians that because they have sought to be justified by the Law of Moses, they have fallen from the grace of Christ. Let's think about this logically. None of us can fall out of something we were never in. If some of you parents of younger children are talking to me and you tell me about how your little one fell out of bed last night, from that, I know that your kid was IN bed before he fell out. That means, friends, that in order for these Galatians to fall from grace, they had to have been in a state of grace in the first place. In context, this clearly refers to the grace of God that saves us from our sins. The Galatians were saved people. However, because they pursued righteousness through the law, not through faith, they fell from grace and were severed from Christ. They used to be saved, but they became lost again. Once saved, always saved was not true for them.
- C. Similarly, the Scripture also teaches that it is possible for Christians to end up worse than a sinner. This is revealed in **2 PETER 2:20-22**. This is the next Scripture in our chain, so write it down in the margin next to Galatians 5:4, then turn to it with me. As we look at this passage, pay special attention to what Peter says about the way these people used to be. According to Peter, through the knowledge of Jesus, they escaped the defilement of the world. They knew the way of righteousness. I think we know what we call people who escape the world through Christ and know righteousness. We call them Christians. This verse is definitely talking about people who were Christians at one point in time. However, Peter tells us that these Christians have become entangled again in sin and overcome. They have returned to sin like a dog to its own vomit.
- D. Now, one of the ways that some denominational folks try to deal with people who look like they've fallen away is by saying that Christians who start doing wicked things don't lose their salvation, but they do lose some of the reward waiting for them in heaven. Instead of being in a mansion on Hallelujah Square, they're in a trailer park on the outskirts. Friends, that's obviously not what this passage is teaching. It quite clearly says that the Christian who falls away actually ends up worse off than he was before he became a Christian. He would have been better off never to have known righteousness at all than to have known it and turned away from it. A Christian like that isn't living in the bad sections of heaven. He's in the worst sections of hell—lost.
- E. It is also possible for Christians to suffer shipwreck of their faith. Paul tells us this in **1 TIMOTHY 1:18-20**. This is going to be our third Scripture, so write it down in the margin next to 2 Peter 2:20-22, and turn with me to 1 Timothy 1:18-20 so that we can read it together. Paul here is describing the situation of some people like Hymenaeus and Alexander, who have suffered the shipwreck of the faith. That's a pretty clear statement.

Let me explain why. There are a lot of things that interest me recreationally, but owning a boat has never been one of them. They're expensive, and I just don't care that much. That means, friends, that my boat will never suffer shipwreck, because I will never have a boat. Likewise, it would be impossible for these people mentioned here to suffer shipwreck in regard to their faith unless they had faith in the first place. Once again, these folks are Christians, except that they're wrecked Christians. Paul by this point in his life had firsthand experience with shipwreck. He knew what a catastrophic experience it was. He would not have used the word "shipwreck" to describe anything less than a spiritual catastrophe. This passage once again describes genuine Christians who are now genuinely lost, not always saved because they once were.

- F. Indeed, it is possible not just for Christians to fall away themselves, but to attack other Christians. This appears in Luke's account of Paul's words in **ACTS 20:28-30**. This is our fourth Scripture, so write it down in the margin next to 1 Timothy 1:18-20, then turn to it with me. Notice first of all whom Paul is addressing here. He's talking to the elders of the church in Ephesus, men whom the Holy Spirit has selected as overseers. Let's be logical about this. If the Holy Spirit chose these men to be elders, is there any chance that they weren't really Christians? However, despite their position in the church, some of them are going to attack the church like wolves, leading the disciples away by speaking perverse things. In other words, some of them are going to become active false teachers, active ministers of Satan. Folks, if an active, knowing false teacher, a man who leads others astray from Christ, isn't going to be lost, I don't know who is. The point is clear. These Ephesian elders had been saved, but some of them certainly weren't going to remain saved.

II. Arguments in Hebrews and James.

- A. More explicitly, the Bible tells us that Christians can drift away from salvation. We know this from **HEBREWS 2:1-3**. As always, be sure to write this one down in the margin of your Bibles next to Acts 20:28-30, then turn to it with me. Perhaps more than any other book of the Bible, Hebrews stands opposed to the concept of once saved, always saved, and this is a typical Hebrews argument. The Hebrews writer begins by urging us not to drift away, and then he explains the consequences if we do. If Jews who disobeyed the Law of Moses were punished harshly by God, what do we think will happen if we reject the law given by Christ? The implications of this are clear. It's just common sense that the writer would never have warned us not to drift away, if drifting away were impossible. For all of you parents, how many of you warn your children, "Now, when you go outside to play, be careful not to fly up to the moon"? We don't worry about it because we know it can never happen. So, then, why would God warn us not to drift away if we can't actually do it?
- B. The writer makes the same argument in even clearer terms in his warning in **HEBREWS 3:12-14**. Write that one down next to Hebrews 2:1-3, then turn to it with me, although you don't have to turn very far. Here, we see another warning. This time, the warning is not to fall away, and not to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Once again, this is clearly addressed to Christians, and just as clearly, these Christians are capable of falling away. Then, notice what the writer says in vs. 14. He tells us that we become partakers of Christ if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance fast until the end. The first part of the statement is a result, the second part is the condition that leads to that result. It's telling us that if and only if we hold fast until the end, we will be partakers of Christ. If we don't satisfy that condition, we won't see the result either. We can't just trust that just because we were saved once, we're still saved. Instead, we have to continue to press on.
- C. Perhaps the strongest warning in Hebrews against falling away appears in **HEBREWS 10:28-30**. As always, scribe Hebrews 10:28-30 down in the margin next to Hebrews 3:12-14, then turn to the Scripture with me so that we can read it together. Once again, note that the wretched people under discussion in this text are Christians. Only a Christian can count as unclean the blood by which he was sanctified. Christians who make the decision to trample Jesus underfoot and insult the Holy Spirit in this way have a very definite punishment to which they can look forward. Notice that the Hebrews writer begins this section by describing how violators of the Law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. This passage describes the witnesses against the violator of the Law of Christ. It isn't just human beings who testify against us when we sin willfully. Instead, it is the Lord whom we trample, the blood we count as unclean, and the Spirit we insult that will condemn us. Now, if human witnesses can cause someone to be condemned to death, what punishment will we face if our guilt is attested by God? We see the answer up in Hebrews 10:27. We will face the fury of a consuming fire. Christians who are once saved but sin willfully do not continue to be saved. Instead, because they have drifted away from their salvation and face the torments of hell if they continue.
- D. Our final passage this evening is going to be **JAMES 5:19-20**. To complete your chain reference now, all you have to do is write it down next to Hebrews 10:28-30, then turn to the Scripture with me. This passage is considerably more optimistic in tone than some of the others we've looked at. It describes the good that we do when one of our brethren strays from the truth and we turn him back. As this text says, we save his soul from death. Think about how this interacts with once saved, always saved. First, notice that this is once again describing Christians, "those among you." Folks, if my erring brother is still saved because he was once saved, I cannot save his soul from death by turning him back to righteousness, and this passage wouldn't be true.

Conclusion. If you know you're headed toward death and you want to turn aside, come back to God now.