

What Does God's Word Say About Eternal Security And Falling Away

Three Questions – Three Answers

October 10, 2010

I. Worthy Questions And Not So Worthy Questions

A. There are those who raise challenging questions about eternal security and about falling away from the faith. Some of these questions are well intended, worthy of being asked, and deserving of an honest answer. Some of the questions are rather difficult – even to the point of having no definite answer. Some of the questions, however, are not so well intended – serving only to create a win/lose type of debate or to make the other side look foolish by asking a question that can only be given a ridiculous, indefensible answer.

B. Prayer

C. One of the questions raised by those who hold to eternal security has to do with those who, after being taught they can fall away, are filled with a consuming or paralyzing fear of falling away.

1. The primary implication of the question is that such a fear is irrational and therefore harmful to one's spiritual well-being.
2. Regardless of what we may think of the question, it deserves to be addressed – seriously and thoroughly. After all, to live with an ongoing fear of falling away that consumes your thinking or paralyzes your Christian life is not only spiritually unhealthy, it is intellectually and emotionally unhealthy. **Why?**
 - a. Because such a fear could easily feed a sense of hopelessness and despair that would discourage one's faith in the goodness of God and sap one's zeal for persevering in the pursuit of godliness.
 - b. Besides, it ought to be obvious that discouraged faith and an ongoing sense of despair are to the devil's advantage, not God's. Therefore, this kind of irrational fear regarding the possibility of losing one's salvation should be addressed and hopefully done away with.
3. Most Christians recognize that the scriptures teach we are to fear God, and we are to fear Him in a manner that produces reverence and awe, devotion and obedience. Beginning in the Old Testament:
 - a. **Proverbs 1:7** affirms this truth when it says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."

- b. **Proverbs 2:5**, says the same thing in reverse – “Then [*if you pursue and cling to wisdom*] you will discern the fear of the Lord and discover the knowledge of God.” This word from God points out that true wisdom brings about a fear of the Lord that opens us up to a greater understanding of the knowledge of God.
 - c. The point being made in these two scriptures is a two sided truth.
 - (1) **Side One**: A proper fear of God produces wisdom for living as God calls us to live,
 - (2) **Side Two**: Wisdom in living as God wants us to live produces a proper fear of God leading to a fuller knowledge of God.
- 4. Turning to the New Testament, both Matthew and Luke record the words of Christ to his disciples concerning the fear of God.
 - a. In speaking to his disciples, Jesus said: “My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him (**Luke 12:4-5; Matthew 10:28**).
 - b. Luke, in writing about the early days of church life says: “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase (**Acts 9:31**).
 - c. Paul, in urging the Corinthians to separate themselves from unholy alliances and improper relationships with unbelievers – along with all the ungodliness that goes with such alliances, said: “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (**II Corinthians 7:1**).
- 5. What is the point here? A search of the scriptures reveals that from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the fear of God is a natural component in the lives of God’s people – be they OT saints or NT Christians.
- 6. So what are we to do with those who, in believing they can fall away from the faith are crippled spiritually by an irrational, all-consuming fear that at any moment they might lose their salvation?
 - a. It seems to me there are several answers to this question.
 - (1) First, we ought to teach them that God intends us to mingle godly fear with a confident faith in God and His goodness – which in turn produces a life that is pleasing to God.
 - (2) Second, we ought to teach them about irrational, unholy fear and how it serves the devil’s purposes rather than God’s.

(3) Third, we ought to encourage them to focus on living a holy life. The best any of us can do is to seriously make it our daily aim to walk in the light as He Himself is in the light (**I John 1:7**) so that we no longer live for ourselves but rather for him who died and rose again on our behalf (**II Corinthians 5:14-15**). And along the way, we will fail and give way to sin. Yet those who are focused on holy living quickly confess their sin, receive forgiveness, and get back to walking in the light in the way that pleases God (**I John 1:9**). May we say with Paul: “forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

b. To sum up this point in the simplest of terms: to fear falling away within the boundaries of a sane and sensible fear of God leads to great spiritual gain. To fear falling away within the boundaries of an irrational fear of God gives the devil the advantage.

D. A second question that is often raised implies that the current teaching on eternal security opens the door to lazy, fleshly, immature, worldly Christianity by allowing Christians to feel secure in their salvation no matter how they live after being born again. To me, this is a worthy question if we are honest about the answer.

1. To begin our answer, I want us to consider the current condition of the Church in general. It is my opinion that **something** is allowing Christians to feel safe and secure in living so much like the world that it is hard to tell the difference between them and the average unbeliever. For example: 4 divorces in a 6 month period by couples who consider themselves Christians; financial irresponsibility like that in the world (spending and debt); failure to discriminate between good and best.
2. Suppose we blame this sad condition on the current teaching about eternal security? Is our assessment fair? No, and here is why.
3. Beginning with the Old Testament and working our way through the New Testament, we see that there has been and continues to be many who are selfish, fleshly, and worldly among God’s people.
 - a. Let’s start with Adam and Eve, the world’s population at the time of Noah, Lot, Jacob in his early years, eleven of the twelve sons of Jacob, the generation of Israelites that Moses led out of Egypt, and numerous kings of Israel and Judah – just to name a few from the Old Testament.

- b. And what about the twelve disciples while Jesus was with them – and especially Judas, Peter, James and John, whose weaknesses were exposed for all to read about? And what about many of the Christians in the church at Corinth, at least four of the seven churches represented in the book of Revelation, and numerous others from the days of the Apostles to the Reformation?
 - c. None of these ever heard the current teaching on eternal security. Yet all of them – at least for a time – found a way to live a low level, worldly, fleshly form of the Christian religion.
4. The point here is that, with or without the current teaching on eternal security, many of those who profess faith in God and allegiance to His rule have lived unholy lives.
- a. Therefore, whatever outward influences might encourage and motivate such ungodliness – and there are many – the real problem is not the outward, but the inward – that which is in our heart.
 - (1) God said: “The **heart** is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it” (**Jeremiah 17:9**)?
 - (2) Both God, in the Old Testament, and Jesus, in the New Testament, said: “This people honors Me with their lips, but their **heart** is far away from Me” (**Matthew 15:8**).
 - b. And so we see that it is not the current teaching of the day that bears the bigger burden of responsibility for ungodliness among God’s people, but rather what we treasure – because that is where our heart is.

E. A third, often asked question has to do with how many sins it takes to fall away. The question is often asked in one of two ways. The first way sounds something like this: “Can a single sin cause us to fall away from the faith?” The second way usually asks: “How many sins does it take to fall away from the faith?”

- 1. Can one sin doom us?
 - a. From Genesis through Ezekiel, there are sixteen passages in which God is quoted as identifying a number of sins or failures for which an Israelite would be cut off from his people (*see Cut Off By God From God’s People*). The offending Israelite was to be cut off from his people for committing just one of these listed offenses one time. Therefore, in sixteen portions of the Old Testament we have the quoted words of God identifying the fact that you would be cut off from God’s people for committing certain specified sins one time.

- b. The New Testament teaches that blaspheming the Holy Spirit is a single sin that will not be forgiven by God. We read in **Mark 3:28-29**, “Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; [29] but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin.” This truth is repeated in **Luke 12:10**, where we read: “And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him.”
 - (1) **Assuming** that being guilty of an eternal sin results in eternal separation from God, it then follows that for anyone committing this sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit – be they Christian or non-Christian – the consequence is eternal damnation.
 - c. Beyond the sixteen statements from the Old Testament about being cut off from God’s people and the statement about blaspheming the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, there are no other references to single sins being the cause of falling away from the faith. Therefore, for the New Testament believer, blaspheming the Holy Spirit is the only sin, committed just once, that can result in falling away.
2. But what about the question that asks how many sins it takes to be in a fallen away condition? If, with the exception of blaspheming the Holy Spirit, there is no indication in the scriptures that one sin will put us in a fallen away condition, how many will?
- a. The clearest and most direct answer is – no one knows. Why? Because God has not given us a numerical answer to this question.
 - b. However, if there is an answer in the scriptures as to when a believer reaches a fallen away state, it is an answer that points to ones settled or consistent way of life.
3. We make this same kind of distinction every day with the children and adults in our lives. (1) Children and school – those who try and those who don’t. (2) Adults who borrow our things – those who are responsible and return them in good condition and those who don’t. (3) Co-workers – those who do their job, plus, and those who are lazy and try to get out of all they can. (4) Adults who ask for money – those who you will loan to because they always and promptly repay and those who you would not loan to again because you cannot trust them to repay.
- a. Each of these examples shows a settled or consistent way of life.
 - b. Let me give you two examples from the scripture.

- c. The church at Corinth had a gentleman among them who had moved in with his step-mother and was living with her as though married to her. This was not only against God's law as given to Moses (**Leviticus 18:8**), Paul says that even unbelievers saw such an arrangement as reprehensible. And in spite of any appeals for repentance, this member of the Corinth Church continued in his sin to the point of making this life style his settled way of life. And it was for this reason he was put out of the church (I Corinthians 5). Though one sin – it manifested a settled way of life!
 - d. In the Gospels, we read that Jesus – during His last supper with His disciples – told them they would all abandon Him that very night. Upon hearing this, Peter protested and proclaimed that even if all the others abandoned Jesus, he never would. Jesus responded by telling Peter that on that very night he would deny knowing Jesus three times (**Matthew 26:31-35**). And indeed, Peter did deny knowing Jesus. But notice that in God's eyes, Peter's denial was not the end of his faith or the loss of salvation, for Jesus said: "I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers" (**Luke 22:32**). And so we see that though Peter's denial was a grievous sin, it was not the result of – nor did it lead to – a settled way of life. Rather, it was the result of foolishness, carelessness, and fear of the moment. As we read in the four Gospels and the book of Acts, Peter was generally intent on serving his master, Jesus Christ, and he went on from that night of failure to godly living and humble service that all of us would be wise to emulate.
4. What is the point here? The godly sin, but they don't practice any single sin or group of sins as a settled way of life. The one in a fallen away condition is the Christian who returns to the practice of a single, or even several sins as a settled way of life. Should such a person refuse to repent and therefore die in this unrighteous way of life, he will die in his sin having lost his salvation.
- a. The writer of Ecclesiastes supports this distinction when he says: "There is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins" (**Ecclesiastes 7:20**).
 - (1) When he speaks of "a righteous man," he is talking about the child of God whose settled way of life is to do what is righteous.
 - (2) Though a righteous person will sin on occasion, he does not allow the practice of some sin to go unchecked in his life. He does not cling to or defend or justify any known sin. He does not continue

to hide or deceive himself or live in denial about the sin he knows he is committing. And he does not turn a deaf ear to those who bring some sin of his to his attention.

- (3) Rather, when a righteous person becomes aware of sin in his life, he confesses it and throws it off in order to quickly return to doing what is right and pleasing in the sight of God.
- b. On the other hand, God says in **Ezekiel 18:24** . . . But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die.
 - (1) When God says, “turns away from,” He is not just speaking of turning away from righteousness to nothing – as if we could do that. No, God is speaking of turning away from righteousness and returning to unrighteousness.
 - (2) When God says, “and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does,” He is not speaking of committing a single sin or committing a single sin several times or even committing a number of different sins in a short span of time. Rather, He is speaking of having turned away from a consistently righteous way of life – that is, a life of faith lived unto God – and turning toward a consistently unrighteous way of life.
5. The point being made here is that falling away from the faith is never talked about, in the Holy Scriptures, as a result of committing a specific number of sins. Rather – with the exception of blaspheming the Holy Spirit – falling away is talked about as being the result of turning from the practice of righteousness to the practice of sin.

II. Conclusion