

Can a Christian Lose Salvation?

By Anand Peter

"All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37).

Read as plain text, the passage above might seem to grant the Christian a kind of immunity from ever losing the grace and promise of Salvation secured through the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the Cross. God the Father, on this reading, chooses those whom He wills to receive the benefit of Salvation, and hands them over to God the Son for safekeeping; understood in this way, a Christian could never lose Salvation.

Such an assumption is flawed, chiefly because it misreads the passage, and because it risks leaving Christians complacent enough to live a wanton life while still supposing themselves beneficiaries of Salvation. Some argue, too, mistakenly, that a Christian is chosen by God the Father "before the foundation of the world," and predestined to receive Salvation's benefit. If that were so, Christ would have suffered and died a needless death on that cruel Friday.

If God the Father does the choosing, and God the Son merely receives those chosen, we run into difficulty reconciling this with the doctrine of the Trinity, in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are "one in three," of one substance. The giving, therefore, must be parallel with, and simultaneous to, the receiving; it is an ongoing process, not a thing done once and settled forever, and ought to be read in the present tense. In other words, "the giving" points to a present activity of Grace, not a foregone conclusion.

Accepting this, we must look next at the conditions under which the giving takes place. In what sense did God "give" people to His Son? The terms "gift" and "given" are used, throughout Scripture, in an idiomatic sense, to denote the divine favour expressed in Christ's redemptive work on man's behalf, without carrying any suggestion of an "unconditional election." Salvation is not the consequence of an eternal decree independent of human obedience; what matters is the confession and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, coupled with obedience to the Gospel.

"Once a Christian, always a Christian" is a lopsided argument. Before we examine it, we ought first to ask who, exactly, is a Christian. A Christian is not simply a person who has said a prayer, attended church regularly, given generously, or been raised in a Christian family; nor is a Christian merely someone who claims to have been "born again." A Christian is a person who has, by faith, received and placed full trust in Jesus Christ as the only Saviour, and who continues to live according to the values Jesus taught. Anyone may falter on any of these points, and fall from the Grace of Jesus Christ; the Christian's task is to return to the path, and pass again through this parallel process of giving and receiving, for His Grace knows no limit. This is why Jesus gives so many warnings to watch: the thief who comes unannounced, the master who returns, the foolish virgins caught unready — all calling us to remain watchful throughout the whole of the Christian life.

In the passage under study, Jesus affirms, "I will in no wise cast out." Some take this to suggest the impossibility of apostasy — that no one once "given" to Christ, in the eternal scheme of things, could ever be lost. But the passage suggests nothing of the kind. It speaks not to any doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, but to the plain fact that Jesus will never reject or refuse a sinner who comes to Him — not once only, but as often as they come.

This raises a further question: if a Christian should die in a fallen state, would such a person ever have the opportunity to be restored to the Grace of Jesus? And if not, does this mean the blessing of Salvation is lost forever? Yet a Christian is promised eternal life. We read, in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Eternal life is the promise of an eternity, forever, in heaven with Jesus. For a Christian to lose Salvation, that eternal life would have to be taken away. If a Christian is promised to live forever, would Jesus break that promise by taking eternal life from him?

The most frequent objections raised against the belief that a Christian cannot lose Salvation are these: first, what of those who are Christians yet persist in an immoral life? Second, what of those who are Christians but later reject the faith and deny Christ? The difficulty with both objections lies in the word "Christians." Scripture declares that a true Christian will not persist in an immoral life. We read, in 1 John 3:6, "Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him." Scripture likewise declares that anyone who departs from the faith thereby shows that he or she never truly was a Christian at all. Neither objection, then, is valid. True Christians do not persist in immoral living, nor do they reject the faith and deny Christ; where such things occur, they prove only that the person in question was never truly redeemed.

Amen.