

“Apostasy”
2 Peter 2:17-22
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It happened over 20 years ago.

- He was a leader in our church, an elder and chairman of the church.
- He was very disciplined in his reading of Scripture and in memorizing it.
- He led a small group that studied the Bible.
I saw him as a good example of one who took his relationship with God very seriously and lived it out in his work, home and church.

- He and his wife began to have difficulty in their marriage.
I met with him many times and prayed with him as he struggled with what to do.

Without conjecture as to what caused his actions, I only report that eventually he left his family, divorced his wife and left the church.

When I spoke to him later he had changed significantly.

He still considered himself a Christian but he was very open about no longer believing as he once did.

- He said he was no longer as dogmatic as he had been before.
- He was less judgmental and more open to other ideas.
- Native American spirituality had become very attractive to him and the eclectic ideas of the New Age Movement were more to his liking than Evangelicalism.
- Though I don't recall discussion on these specifics, it seemed quite clear that he no longer believed in Jesus as THE way, truth and life as he once did.
- He no longer believed in heaven and hell as the Bible teaches it.
- He no longer submitted to the Scriptures as the final authority for faith and life.

The *Miriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary* defines “apostasy” as the “renunciation of a religious faith” or the “abandonment of a previous loyalty.”

Had this man become apostate? Had he left the faith? Was he no longer a true Christian? Had he ever been a true Christian?

Several months ago a person, then of our church, responded to an invitation to be baptized.

In a written statement she gave strong testimony of trust in Jesus and desire to follow him as Lord of her life.

During the baptism orientation class, a week before the baptism, she mentioned to me privately that she was engaged to be married.

I congratulated her and commented that I assumed her fiancé was a believer.

She responded that no he was not but that made no difference because she loved him and they were going to be married.

I gently challenged her with what the Scripture says about a Christian marrying only a Christian and she said she’d seen that in the Bible didn’t believe it.

I then asked if it could be shown to her that that is precisely what God says, would she be willing to obey him?

Without a pause she said no; even if she knew God said it was wrong for her to marry an unbeliever, she was going to get married.

Then she paused before asking me, “Can I still get baptized?”

I didn’t directly answer her question.

Instead I asked her a question: Do you think it is a contradiction to stand in the baptism water telling all who will listen that you are committing your loyalty to Jesus knowing that your next major action in life is in willful disobedience to him?

Like the rich young ruler in response to Jesus’ command for obedience, she went away.

Is obedience subject to convenience?

Can we ignore the commands of the Lord and still call ourselves Christians?

Last week in our continuing study of 2 Peter, we came to chapter 2. There the Apostle Peter issues a scathing denunciation of the false teachers who had begun to lead immature Christians away from the truth of what it means to follow Jesus.

Whether these false teachers were formal teachers in the church or were just people who had influence on others we don't know but they called themselves Christians and others were tempted to follow them.

Last week I attempted to explain Peter's warning to his first readers and us to beware of false teaching that appeals to our sinful resistance to self-discipline and obedience.

We naturally love a cheap grace that makes no demands.

But Peter's warning is that God takes sin very seriously and so must we.

In the earliest part of the 2nd chapter Peter writes,

2 Peter 2:1-3 "But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves. ² Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. ³ In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping."

In verses 4-9 he describes God's judgment on the unrighteous.

In verse 10-16 he continues his description of the false teachers and how they appeal to our own sinful natures to lead us away from obedience to Jesus.

Today we come to the last part of the chapter where Peter continues his description of these false teachers.

But the strong and pointed language ought to raise some frightening questions for any who do not take following Christ seriously.

Please stand for the reading of God's word in 2 Peter 2:17-22
 "These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. ¹⁸ For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. ¹⁹ They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity--for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him. ²⁰ If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. ²¹ It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. ²² Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud."

This takes me back to the two illustrations with which I began.

What about the Christ-professing, scripture-memorizing, elder in our church?

Is it true as verse 21 says, "It would have been better for (him) not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn (his) back on the sacred command that was passed on to (him)?"

Of the woman I mentioned earlier, is she in danger of verse 20?

"If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning."

If I claim I'm a Christian but I willfully persist in disobedience to God's Word, what's my relationship with God?

Can someone actually lose his or her salvation?

Most thinking Christians will acknowledge that a person may **call** him or herself a Christian (claim to be one) but not actually be one.

When we look at 2 Peter 2, one way of understanding the situation is to say that these false teachers were never truly believers.

They might have even **thought they were** Christians but it became evident they were not.

And so some commentaries on this passage will say that these false teachers had only a head-knowledge of Jesus and the gospel but they had never truly trusted Jesus.

So one author writes, “This verse asserts only that false teachers who have for a time escaped from world corruption through knowing Christ and then turn away from the light of the Christian faith are worse off than they were before knowing (about) Christ. It uses no terminology affirming that they were Christians in reality...The NT makes a distinction between those who are (merely) in the churches and those who are (actually) regenerate (saved)...So when Peter says, ‘They are worse off at the end that they were at the beginning,’ the reference is to a (never-saved false teacher).” (Edwin Blum, *2 Peter*, 12:282 in Moo, 151)

Is that it? Is Peter describing those who have never truly come to saving faith and been converted?

But there is another way of understanding this passage.

Others will say these false teachers were once truly Christians and have turned their backs on the faith and are now apostate – lost.

And so we read from one author, “One must still face the fact that these men are said to have known...the way of righteousness and to have escaped (at one time) from the world’s defilements...(but then things changed). Apostasy would seem to be a real and awful possibility.” (Green, 120)

Which is it?

Were these false teachers never truly Christians or were they Christians who have abandoned the faith and are now under God’s severest judgment?

I have been schooled and have schooled others in the perseverance of the saints.

I believe the Bible teaches those whom God saves by his grace are truly saved, eternally saved and by God's grace they will persevere in the faith, growing in their knowledge of and obedience to Jesus Christ.

Their allegiance and obedience will not be perfect but it will be evident.

Where there is spiritual birth there is spiritual life.

I've conducted many funerals over the years and some times it has been the funeral of someone who has **not** lived as a Christian but is from a Christian family.

Their friends and co-workers would never have guessed they had ever made a commitment to trust and follow Jesus.

And yet some grieving Christian relative will say they know the deceased is in heaven because at least she asked Jesus into her heart when she was younger.

I believe that kind of thinking is unbiblical as Jesus makes clear in Matthew 7:17-20 "Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."

So I believe that the grace of God is so real and so powerful that it is able to do what he promises – forgive us, change us and take us to be with himself in the end.

So many passages of Scripture make this doctrine of God's gracious ability and thus our assurance of salvation abundantly clear:

Jesus said in John 6:37-39 "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.

John 10:28-29 “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.” (See also John 17:6-12 and others)

Romans 8:29-31 “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. ³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?”

Even at the beginning of this letter from Peter we saw the same assurance proclaimed:

2 Peter 1:3-4 “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴ Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

But what is very interesting to me is that such assurance doesn't stop Peter from giving clear instruction about our responsibility to respond to this grace of God:

2 Peter 1:10-11 “Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, ¹¹ and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

He ends his letter with this instruction: 2 Peter 3:17-18
 “Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

And what are we to make of other passages in the Bible where a warning seems so clear?

2 Corinthians 13:5 “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.”

Romans 11:22 “Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.”

Hebrews 6:4-6 “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, ⁶ if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”

Hebrews 10:26-27 “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, ²⁷ but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.”

Even in the text before us in 2 Peter 2:20-21 there seems to be an implicit warning to all.

“If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. ²¹ It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them.”

As I said earlier, my temptation is to join those who say Peter is describing people who pretended to be Christians but were not truly Christians.

The difficulty I have with that interpretation of this passage and other passages is the language Peter or other authors use.

When Peter says they “**escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ**” he is using the very same language he did in 1:3-4 where he describes the very real Christianity of the people to whom Peter is writing:

“Through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and **escape the corruption in the world.**”

The problem is compounded by the way Peter refers to the false teachers back in 2 Peter 2:1-22 “But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who **bought them**--bringing swift destruction on themselves.

That language describe those who belong to God:

2 Corinthians 6:19-20 “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were **bought at a price.**

So on the one hand I find passages of Scripture that seem to teach “once saved, always saved” but on the other hand I find other passages that seem to add a caveat to that security.

Believing that God does not contradict himself, how do I reconcile such passages?

Proponents of both sides of the issue attempt to present a logically consistent theology.

They emphasize some verses and minimize others or attempt to explain them differently.

But it seems to me that proponents of either side to the exclusion of the other are in danger of slipping into thinking that is dangerous for the Christian.

Those who say you can lose your salvation not only have to overcome all the passages of Scripture that teach we are saved and kept by God’s grace, but they also run the risk of at least implying that while we might be saved by grace we are kept by our obedience.

And that easily becomes righteousness by works – I must be good enough to remain in God’s grace.

And that leaves Christians doubtful or fearful or worse yet, discouraged and quitting.

Then there are those who propose, “once saved, always saved.”

Listen to one author:

‘I state categorically that the person who is saved will go to Heaven when he dies no matter what work (or lack of work) may accompany such faith.’ “What if a person who is saved falls into sin, stays in sin, and is found in that very condition when he dies? Will he still go to heaven? The answer is yes.”

(Kendall, 49-50 in the 1985 Moody Press edition or p 41, in the 1983 Hodder and Stoughton edition; italics Kendall's).

Listen to the Grace Evangelical Society whose most well known member is Zane Hodges, for years with Dallas Theological Seminary.

In their “affirmations of belief” the Society writes regarding salvation:

“The sole condition for receiving everlasting life is faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ, who died a substitutionary death on the cross for man’s sin and rose bodily from the dead. Faith is the conviction that something is true. To believe in Jesus is to be convinced that He guarantees everlasting life to all who simply believe in Him for it. No act of obedience, preceding or following faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, such as commitment to obey, sorrow for sin, turning from one’s sin, baptism or submission to the Lordship of Christ, may be added to, or considered part of, faith as a condition for receiving everlasting life. This saving transaction between God and the sinner is simply the giving and receiving of a free gift.”

There is much in that statement with which I would agree but on the whole it proclaims a doctrine that I think contradicts the Scripture including the warnings of the passage in front of us this morning.

I fear that Hodges and others reduce saving faith in unscriptural ways.

- They have a faith that embraces Jesus without turning away from sin.
- They have faith without repentance.
- They have a faith and grace that are sufficient to take us to heaven but are not evidently sufficient to give us new life, a new heart, a new loyalty and obedience.

And one of the dangers is evidenced in the lives of countless American Evangelicals – they have been convinced that they are Christians because one day in the past they asked Jesus into their hearts and now no matter what they do they are secure – after all, “once saved, always saved” right?

And the result is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described 60 years ago when he referred to “cheap grace.”

It is the millions who claim to be Christians but who live totally unconcerned and unmoved to obey the Lord Jesus.

And that idea has been reinforced by the unscriptural doctrine of the “carnal Christian” which is a misinterpretation of I Corinthians 3.

That is the claim that I’m just a “carnal Christian,” living like an unbeliever even though I’m really a Christian.

The problem is that the Scripture knows nothing of such a person.

Jesus said, “Depart from me for I never knew you!”

So if we reject that we are constantly in danger of losing our salvation and we reject “once saved, always saved, no matter what,” what do we have left?

I believe we have the doctrine of the “perseverance of the saints.”

This doctrine teaches that those whom God saves he truly saves; he truly changes and truly takes to heaven.

As the Bible says in Ephesians 2:8-10 “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

The Apostle James said it negatively, James 2:20 “faith without deeds is useless.”

- One, who is being saved by God, evidences that grace in a changed and changing life.
- It is not grace plus works but it is grace that works, grace that produces.

- **Spiritual life is all of grace but where grace operates there will be change.**

But even believing that does not answer our question about these verses in 2 Peter 2:20-21 and ones like them.

Can we completely reconcile the full assurance of our salvation with verses that seem to say we can fall away?

I believe that when Jesus paid for my sin, he truly paid for it and I will never, ever, be called on to pay what he already paid.

Either my sins are forgiven or they are not.

And I believe the Bible says they are all covered by the sacrificial death of Jesus, sins past, present and future.

- Romans 5:1 “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have **peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ,
- Romans 8:1 “Therefore, there is now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

At the same time I believe Colossians 1:22-23

“But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation-- **if you continue in your faith**, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.”

So do I sound like Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof” when he said, I agree with him and I agree with him?

What I will say next I do not claim to support conclusively from any one or even many texts of the Bible.

I am simply going to assert my own conviction on these matters.

As much as I would like to reconcile the apparently contradictory passages of Scripture on this issue of the possibility of apostasy, I cannot do so fully.

Like the apparently contradictory truths of the sovereignty of God and human responsibility, so here I hold these passages all to be true even though they seem to contradict each other.

New Testament scholar Don Carson has written, “Do the promises of God serve to engender lethargy? Of course not, they are designed to promote zeal, gratitude, and appreciation of God’s fidelity.”

“Do warnings against apostasy function to annul the promises of God? Of course not, they are designed to promote perseverance. . . . (Carson, “Reflections on Assurance” in *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will*, 409)

- The promises of God are certain and I can stake my life and eternity on them.
- And the warnings of God are real and I must be very careful.

If you are **not** a Christian, I believe this passage warns you clearly – you have too much knowledge of God and his grace to claim ignorance.

As Pastor John Piper put it, “the more you know of Christ and his way, the more severe will be your judgment for not trusting and obeying Christ.” (sermon May 30, 1982).

If you **are** a Christian, I believe this passage also warns you clearly – don’t mess around with sin.

2 Peter 2:20 “If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning.”

Notice it says, “again entangled in it.”

Sin is seductive, powerful and addictive – allow it a foothold and it will enslave you.

And turning our backs on Jesus having once known his grace brings a special condemnation 2 Peter 2:21 “It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them.”

No I can't fully reconcile these warnings with the security of the believer so all I can say is don't go there.

- Flee immorality 1 Corinthians 6:18.
- Flee from the love of money 1 Timothy 6:11
- Flee from the evil desires of your youth 2 Timothy 2:22

Hebrews 3:12-14 "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. ¹⁴ We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.

Resources:

Must read: D.A. Carson, "Reflections on Assurance" in *The Grace of God; The Bondage of the Will* ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware.

Douglas Moo, *2 Peter, Jude The NIV Application Commentary*, 147-155.

Other sources:

Iain Murray, "Will the Unholy Be Saved" A review article on R. T. Kendall's *Once Saved, Always Saved*.

Found at http://the-highway.com/oncesaved_Murray.html

R.T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1983 (An alternative view much like the Grace Evangelical Society's Zane Hodges, et al. <http://www.faithalone.org/about/4.html>).

Zane Hodges is the most prominent current proponent of once saved always saved writing in several books: *The Gospel Under Siege* and *Absolutely Free* among others.

John MacArthur answers Hodges in *The Gospel According to Jesus*. (but for a critique of MacArthur see Darrell Bock's review of MacArthur's book in *BibSac* 141 (1989): 21-41)

I.H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*, Bethany Fellowship. An Arminian perspective).

Robert Lewis Dabney, "The Five Points of Calvinism, Perseverance of the Saints"

<http://www.dabney.com/docs/5ptsofcalvinism/section6.htm>

Reisinger, Ernest, "The Lordship Controversy and The Carnal Christian Teaching (Part 1)

<http://wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ16/article2.html>

130 essays on "assurance" at:

http://www.monergism.com/directory/link_category/Preservation-of-the-Saints/Essays/