

Eternally Secure

Can a person once saved ever lose or forfeit that salvation? The Bible answers “No,” that a person who is once saved remains saved throughout eternity. This is usually called the doctrine of eternal security, and is often referred to (sometimes derogatorily) as “once saved always saved.”

If we asked the question differently, it is easier to see how eternal security makes sense. For example, what if we asked, Can a person eternally saved lose that eternal salvation? Or, Can a person who is justified be unjustified? Or, Can a person who is born spiritually be unborn? Or, Can a person who is freely given the gift of eternal life lose it based on some condition?

Those who believe in eternal security are generally labeled Calvinists. Those who believe that salvation can be lost are generally labeled Arminians.

What the Bible says

The Bible teaches eternal security in many different ways.

1. The Bible speaks with certainty about the possession of a new life based solely upon faith in Christ as Savior. John 3:1-16; 5:24; 10:28; 20:31
2. The Bible refers to this life as “eternal” which means forever and implies no interruption. John 10:28; 11:25-26
3. Since salvation by grace essentially means that it is a gift, then it is an unconditional gift which does not depend on a person’s works, conduct, or condition after salvation. Rom. 3:24; 4:5; Eph. 2:8-9
4. The Bible teaches that God’s predestining purpose and initial justification result in eventual glorification without exception for every believer. Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 1:4-5
5. The Bible presents eternal salvation as a legal and binding relationship with God that cannot be separated by anyone (including ourselves) or anything. Rom. 8:1, 31-39
6. The Bible presents eternal salvation as an irrevocable filial relationship to the Father by adoption which results in eternal blessings. John 17:3; Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 3:26
7. We are sealed with the Holy Spirit, Who guarantees our glorification. 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30
8. We are kept secure by the power of both the Father and the Son. John 10:28-30; 17:9-12; Jude 24
9. Since all of our sins (past, present, future) are forgiven by Jesus Christ and His eternally sufficient sacrifice, there is no sin that can cause us to lose our relationship to Him. Col. 2:13-14; Heb. 10:12-14
10. The intercessory prayers of Jesus Christ and His advocacy when we sin guarantee that our salvation will be completed eternally. John 17:9-12, 24; Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1
11. The Bible speaks of salvation in the passive voice, which indicates that the causality is not with us, but with God; therefore it is based upon His work not ours. Eph. 2:5, 8; 2 Thes. 2:10; 1 Tim. 2:4
12. The Bible demonstrates by example (Abraham, David, Israel) and by precept that God is faithful to His eternal promises even when we are not. Ps. 89:30-37; Rom. 3:3-4; 4:16; 2 Tim. 2:13

Some problems with denying eternal security

Denying eternal security presents many problems, such as: How much sin or which sins forfeit salvation? How many times can a person be born again? Is there no degree of intimacy with God beyond mere acceptance or rejection by Him? Is there no consequence for a believer's sin other than Hell? If a person believes in Christ and is saved, but sins and loses that salvation, then what is left to believe that he has not already believed? A condition other than faith alone becomes necessary. It is easy to see that without eternal security assurance becomes impossible and there is no solid foundation for Christian growth.

What about those other passages?

There are a number of Bible passages commonly cited by those who do not believe in eternal security. It would be impossible to address them all here individually. When interpreted consistently and correctly, each of these passages can be understood in a way that harmonizes with eternal security. First, they must be interpreted faithful to the context which considers the eternal state of the readers and the purpose of the author. Second, they must be consistent with the over-arching plan of God to bless us eternally by His grace. Third, they must harmonize with the consistent teaching of justification by grace through faith alone apart from works or any other merit. Fourth, some of these passages are referring to the loss of reward, not eternal life. Fifth, some of these passages are conditions for discipleship, not eternal life.

What about providing a license to sin?

The most common objection to eternal security is that it is a convenient excuse to sin. After all, the objector would say, if a person is guaranteed eternal life, then he can do whatever he wants without fear of consequence. But this argument is weak for a number of reasons. First, an argument from a hypothetical or real (though rare) experience, does not determine the truthfulness of a doctrine. Second, while some who hold to eternal security may sin and excuse it, the same is true for those who reject eternal security. Third, the nature of salvation by grace is that it teaches the believer to deny ungodliness and to live for God (Titus 2:11-12). Fourth, new birth results in a new person with a new capacity for spiritual things. There is a new relationship with God (Rom. 6:1-5), a new freedom not to sin (Rom. 6:6-14), a new life (Rom. 6:11; Eph. 2:1), and a new perspective and orientation (2 Cor. 5:17). Fifth, the Bible teaches that there are severe consequences and loss of rewards for believers who live sinfully (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 5:5; 9:27; 2 Cor. 5:10), which is one motivation to live a godly life.

Some Implications

The eternal security of the believer (the objective reality that one possesses eternal life) is a separate issue from the assurance of the believer (the subjective realization that one possesses eternal life). However, if one does not believe in eternal security, then inevitably there will be occasions when that person loses his assurance. There are also those who may profess to know Christ as Savior, but they do not possess eternal life and therefore have no eternal security and only a false assurance. The doctrine of the eternal security of the believer in Christ ultimately rests in the character of God who is faithful to His Word, and also in the freeness of His grace.