

PROBLEM PASSAGES FOR SECURITY

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AN IMPORTANT PRINCIPLE

Do some passages in Scripture teach that those who are truly saved can lose their salvation? In considering this or any other controversial issue, it is essential to observe an important hermeneutical principle: we must always interpret unclear passages in the light of clear ones. This is a crucial and central principle of Protestant biblical interpretation which was revived during the Reformation by Luther and Calvin. It is based upon the non-contradiction of Scripture. If the Bible is inspired by a rational, consistent God, then we can expect Him not to contradict Himself. For example, if He has clearly and undeniably said in one place that all humans are sinful, but then some other passage (which is ambiguous and open to various interpretations) seems to be saying some humans may be born sinlessly perfect, we are justified in favoring the interpretation of the second, unclear passage which would best harmonize it with the first, clear passage.

The alternative, trying to make a disputed passage the basis for interpreting other Scripture, would lead to chaos. This is the dangerous practice, interpreting—or twisting—clear passages based on odd interpretations of unclear ones, which is often employed by cultists with a resulting denial of many of the plain, central teachings of the Bible.

With the proper interpretive principle as our guide, let's look at some of the most difficult passages some see as teaching a genuine believer can lose his or her salvation.

HEBREWS 6:4-8

One of the passages most frequently cited by those who deny the Calvinist doctrine of security is Hebrews 6:4-8

- 4 For in the Case of those who have once been enlightened and have
tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit,
5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to
come,
6 and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to
repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him
to open shame.
7 For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings
forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a
blessing from God;
8 but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being
cursed, and it ends up being burned.

Those who believe you can lose your salvation insist these verses are talking about believers who have been enlightened and regenerated by the Holy Spirit and who then have turned their backs on salvation (fallen away) and therefore do not bring forth the fruit of good works. As a result, these fallen believers will end up being cursed and burned in Hell, unless they repent.

Is there any other reasonable interpretation of these verses? I think there is. To understand the passage, we must keep in mind the audience. Hebrews, as the name implies,

was addressed to Jewish people who had embraced Jesus as their Messiah. One of the major problems in the first-century church was legalism—particularly on the part of Jewish converts to Christianity. As we can see in the confrontation between Paul and Peter in Galatians 2:11-21, there was a perennial problem of Hebrew Christians slipping back into dependence upon the ceremonial practices of the Old Testament. To understand the Hebrews passage we must consider the broader context of 5:11-6:12. The problem here was undoubtedly some form of legalism—probably some of the Jewish converts were returning to the practice of animal sacrifices.

This interpretation helps make sense out of a phrase in verse 6 otherwise difficult to understand: "They again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame." Clearly when Jesus was dying on the cross, He was being put to open shame, but how could some of these Hebrew believers, about 30 years after Jesus death, be *again* crucifying Him and putting Him to shame? This enigmatic phrase becomes clearer when we remember that the animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were symbols or "types" which pointed to a future final offering of the "precious blood, as of a Lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:13).

But while it was appropriate for OT believers to look forward to the final sacrifice through the symbolic crucifixion of animals, the Jewish believers being addressed in Hebrews had already been told that now that the final, once-for-all, sacrifice had been made, they no longer needed to depend on the ritual animal sacrifices. (See 6:1-2.) But apparently some of them had "fallen away" from this understanding and were now, once again, depending upon the animal sacrifices to cover their sins and make them right with God. This was a symbolic, re-crucifixion of Christ and was saying, "one death is not enough to atone for sin—we must add to Christ's work by having figurative crucifixions, over and over again!"

A word crucial to understanding this passage is found in verse six. The implied conjunction which connects the two clauses in that verse can just as properly be translated "since" or "while." (See the textual note in the New International Version.) If we take this legitimate alternate meaning, the verse might read, "It is impossible to renew them again to repentance, *while* they again crucify...." Read this way, the verse would mean that it is impossible to restore these Jewish believers to a full New Testament grace relationship *while*, or *as long as*, they continue to practice animal sacrifice. In other words, repentance and animal sacrifice are mutually exclusive; they must give up their legalistic dependence on this OT ritual before they can repent and be restored.

Understood in this fashion, the following two verses could be simply emphasizing the seriousness of sin. Taken this way, the "Burning" (v. 8) could refer to the judgement seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:13—see following discussion). While "fire" and "burning" do sometimes speak of eternal separation in Hell, these terms are also used to refer to the testing of a believer's works that results in loss of reward but not of salvation.

This passage actually contains a greater problem for those who hold the "backsliding" view. If 6:6 refers to losing salvation, it proves too much; it would mean if you ever lost your salvation, you could never get it back!

JOHN 15:6

Another passage often quoted by non-securantists is John 15:6: "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned." To a non-securantist, this is a clear statement that real believers who stop bearing fruit, or cease to obey God, are thrown into the fire of Hell.

The problem with this view is that it involves inconsistency in interpretation. Few, if any, non-securantists would try to take verses 1-5 literally. Jesus is not a literal vine—he is not green and leafy. The fruit referred to in verses two and four is not literal grapes. When the Father prunes us (v. 2) he does not lop off arms and legs. It is obvious that all of these statements would become ridiculous if we try to take them literally. But when non-securantists come to verse six and read about being burned, suddenly they want to take it as a literal reference to the flames of Hell. If the vine is not literal plant material, why should the fire be taken as literal hell-fire?

"But what else could it mean?" someone might ask. The answer, as in the Hebrews passage we discussed before, is that burning and fire in the Bible are not always references to damnation.

In 1 Corinthians, chapter three, Paul discusses what will happen to a believer whose works are not acceptable to God, because they are done in the flesh (vs. 1,3). What will happen is that "each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work." Now exactly what kind of fire is this? Are these the flames of Hell? Will someone whose works are all in the flesh end up burning in Hell? Paul's answer to these questions is crystal clear. He says (in verse 15), "If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss, but he himself shall be saved, yet so *as through fire*." So this fire is one which tests the quality of a believer's works. The fire results in the purification or destruction of *works*; *not* destruction of the individual person. The believer will suffer loss but be saved.

2 PETER 2:20-21

Perhaps the most perplexing and challenging passage for those who hold the Calvinist view of security is 2 Peter 2:20-21.

20 For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.

21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them.

It will come as no surprise that those who deny eternal security see this passage as a discussion of Christians who become damned. Now I want to readily admit that this is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the entire Bible.

There are a number of ways these verses might be, and have been, interpreted. Some of the logical possibilities are:

1. These could be believers who end up damned (the non-securantist view).
2. These could be heretics who will be judged but saved.
3. These might not be Christians at all (apostates).

In fact, this passage is so perplexing that it might be that none of these popular interpretations is correct! But having said this, I would argue that option #3 above is preferable because it best fits the context of the rest of the chapter.

Notice that the verses which precede 20-21 are an extended discussion of false teachers. The critical question is, were these false teachers Christian heretics (believers teaching dangerous false doctrine) or apostates (non-believers posing as Christians to lead younger believers astray)?

In my opinion the revolting description Peter gives of these teachers (see especially, vs. 2, 3, 10, 13, 14, & 17-19) precludes the interpretation that these were just temporarily misguided or carnal Christians. But the clincher for me is found in Peter's summary of the discussion; verse 22.

The apostle says that the fate of these false teachers is like the two proverbs: "A dog returns to its own vomit" and "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire." The central truth to which both of these proverbs point is that animals, and by analogy, people, eventually show their true nature. You can clean up a pig and bring it inside for a house pet, but as soon as you leave the door open on a hot day, you'll find it outside, rolling in the mud! That is the pig's nature and no amount of external clean-up changes what's inside.

Now, which of our three proposed interpretations is best illustrated by these proverbs? Would these proverbs fit one who is genuinely born again, has a new nature inside, and is filled with the Holy Spirit, but eventually turns away and loses salvation (#1)? I don't think so. Someone who is a genuine Christian would possess a new nature and desire to please and obey God (see 2 Cor. 5:17 and 1 John 3:9). So, unlike the pig, it should be an *unnatural* thing for a true believer to wallow in gross sin.

This objection also applies to interpretation #2. If these are simply saved heretics, why would Peter compare them to animals returning to natural behavior? And I have another problem with interpretation #2. If these false teachers are ultimately to be saved how could Peter possibly say that it would have been "better for them not to have known the way of righteousness...." Surely no judgement of works, no matter how severe, could be a worse eventual state than that of the most religious inhabitant of Hell. The lowest place in Heaven is infinitely better than even the highest position among the damned!

No, I must conclude that the entire context, and particularly the proverbs in verse 22, favor interpretation #3: these are apostates who have masqueraded as believers but are now showing their true natures by their damnable teachings and licentious behavior.

CONCLUSION

I wish to be as clear as possible about what I have tried to show in this brief treatment of some problem passages. I am *not* saying that I have given the right interpretation to each of these verses. I am also not suggesting the views I favor are without difficulties. Nor am I claiming that these three passages are the only ones raised by non-securantists. (However, in my experience, these *are* three of the most controversial and difficult to answer.) And, finally, I am not even asserting that I have proven my interpretation is better than the views of those who maintain these verses teach a believer can lose salvation.

All I have tried to demonstrate in these three passages is that there is at least one possible, exegetically-sound interpretation which would not involve genuine believers being damned. And that is all I need to show. Remember the principle; “interpret unclear passages by clear ones.” If there *are* clear passages which unambiguously teach that true believers can never lose their salvation (and I think there are--Heb. 7:24-25; John 6:37-40; etc.), and *if* the texts put forth by non-securantists are capable of multiple reasonable interpretations (and therefore are unclear, which I think I have shown), then the non-contradiction principle would insist we see disputed passages like these in light of the clear teaching of eternal security in the rest of Scripture.

Let me put the issue another way. Is God hiding the way we keep our salvation in a few disputed, controversial passages, or has He stated our security clearly again and again? I believe God would make Himself clear on such an issue and I am convinced that is exactly what He has done. The burden of proof rests with the one who denies security to show why God would hide the key to eternal life in passages which have been so controversial down through the ages and continue to be hotly disputed in our own day.