

Is It Possible for Christians to Lose Salvation? A Few Miscellaneous Thoughts

Written by admin

Saturday, 22 September 2012 11:43 - Last Updated Saturday, 22 September 2012 12:01

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by Max Aplin



Those who believe that it is not possible for Christians to lose salvation often draw attention to the fact that the Bible uses the metaphor of new birth/begetting to symbolize becoming a Christian ([John 1:13](#) ; [3:3-8](#) ; [1 Pet 1:3](#) , [23](#) ; [1 John 2:29](#) ; [3:9](#) ; [4:7](#) ; [5:1](#) , [4](#) , [18](#)). It is not possible for someone who has literally been born to become unborn, they claim, so the use of this metaphor for becoming a Christian likewise shows that it is not possible to become spiritually unborn and lose salvation.

At first sight this argument might seem to carry considerable weight, but it is actually weak. Although the metaphor of being born/begotten again for becoming a Christian is an excellent one, there is no reason to believe that it corresponds to reality in every respect. To suppose that everything about being born naturally corresponds to everything about being born spiritually is to demand too much from the metaphor.

There are other Biblical metaphors that will help to illustrate this point. In [Matthew 20:28](#) ; [Mark 10:45](#)

and

[1 Tim 2:6](#)

Jesus' death is described as a ransom for people. Again, this is an excellent metaphor for illustrating what Jesus accomplished by His death on the cross, but it does not correspond to reality in every respect. A ransom has to be paid to someone, but if we ask to whom Jesus' metaphorical ransom was paid, we are demanding too much of the metaphor. There is no one to whom Jesus' ransom was paid.

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Some Christians in the early centuries of the church (e.g., Gregory of Nyssa) made the mistake of demanding too much of this ransom metaphor and concluded that the ransom must have been paid to the devil. This interpretation, however, not only failed to recognize the limits that must be placed on what we can expect to gain from metaphorical language, but also ended up with bad theology that afforded to Satan more power than he really had.

The metaphor in [Hebrews 12:1-2](#) describing the Christian life as a race is also a case in point. Once again, this is a very apt metaphor, but we must not demand too much from it. In a literal race we run against competitors, yet in the metaphorical race being described in this passage there are no competitors against whom we race. The metaphor, therefore, has its limitations.

Those who argue that the metaphor of new birth/begetting shows that we cannot lose salvation are therefore on very shaky ground. They are failing to take account of the limitations of metaphorical language. That it is not possible to be literally unborn does not therefore necessarily mean that it is not possible to be spiritually unborn.

It is true that in [1 Pet 1:23](#) the metaphor, more detailed than elsewhere, speaks of being born again not of perishable seed but of imperishable seed, and we might wonder whether the imperishability of this seed means that it is not possible to lose salvation. However, although this passage is probably, by implication, telling us that Christians have been granted imperishable life (similar to the way that John's gospel tells us that we have been granted eternal life), that still does not have to mean that salvation cannot be lost. It could just mean that under normal circumstances i.e., unless, exceptionally salvation is lost this type of life will last forever, unlike natural life which will not.

There is no doubt that many passages in the Bible seem most naturally to suggest that it is possible to lose salvation and that many other passages seem most naturally to suggest that it is not possible. Anyone who claims otherwise is certainly not being honest with the text. In situations like this, where there seems to be a contradiction, we need to take account of two things: (1) how clearly passages teach one thing or the other, and (2) how many passages point in each direction. If we are able to make a decision about what the bulk of the evidence is suggesting, we then need to go back to those passages that seem to teach the opposing point of view and try to interpret them in a different way. (If we do all this regarding the issue of whether it is possible to lose salvation, in my view, the clearest passages on this topic seem to indicate that it is possible to lose it [e.g., [Heb 6:4-8](#) ; [10:26-31](#) ; [1 John 5:16](#)], and I also think that there are more passages which suggest it is possible to lose salvation than those which suggest the opposite. Furthermore, I think the passages which most naturally seem to suggest that we cannot lose salvation can be interpreted in a different light, although I admit that it is sometimes not easy to do this. All things considered, therefore, I prefer the view that it is possible to lose salvation, although I am not certain about this.)

If it is possible to lose salvation, we must not allow this to conflict with the doctrine of salvation by faith alone (faith, that is, in the sense in which it is understood in, e.g., Rom 3-5, not in the sense in which it is understood in [Jas 2:14-26](#)). When we are first saved, it is not something that happens through our own merit but simply because we have received the gift of salvation by faith. Similarly, continuing in salvation is not something that happens meritoriously but is

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simply because we continue to have saving faith. Losing salvation, therefore, would come about through losing saving faith, not through a failure to perform good deeds (although a failure to perform good deeds would follow on very closely from losing faith, just as performance of good deeds follows on closely from having faith).

Finally, if it is possible to lose salvation, it is surely not something that happens easily. Believers should not feel that the danger of losing salvation is constantly lurking over them menacingly. We are surely much more secure than that.

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