10. Assurance and "once saved, always saved"

Often heard: "Do you know for sure you're going to heaven? I do." / "If you can lose it, Jesus didn't really save you."
Also heard: "If those who fall away were never really saved, how can you be sure your own faith is the genuine kind?"

The truly born again are eternally secure

HELD BY Reformed perseverance of the saints · Baptist

Those truly born again are eternally secure. They may sin, but God will keep them and they cannot lose salvation. Assurance of salvation is available now through God's promises.

VERSES CITED

John 6:37–40; 10:27–29; Rom 8:1, 29–39; Eph 1:13–14; 4:30; Phil 1:6; 1 Pet 1:5; 1 John 5:11–13; Heb 7:25; 13:5; Jude 24.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Augustine taught that the elect will persevere (*On the Gift of Perseverance*, 428–29), but also that no one can know he is elect and that some who are regenerated fall away. Calvin (*Institutes* 3.24); the Synod of Dort (1619), "perseverance of the saints"; Second London Confession ch. 17. The popular form "once saved, always saved" (security even if faith is later abandoned) spread in 19th- and 20th-century Baptist life, and the "Free Grace" form was defended by Zane Hodges and Charles Stanley (1980s–90s).

Confident hope, persevering to the end

HELD BY Catholic · Orthodox lifelong synergy

God's promises are utterly reliable, but a Christian remains free to reject Him. Grace is lost by mortal sin (grave matter, full knowledge, deliberate consent) and restored by repentance and confession. A Christian can have confident hope and moral assurance, but not infallible certainty of final perseverance apart from a special revelation. Salvation is received now and must be persevered in to the end.

VERSES CITED

Matt 10:22; 24:13; John 15:1–6; Rom 11:20–22; 1 Cor 4:4; 9:27; 10:12; Gal 5:4; Phil 2:12; Col 1:22–23; Heb 3:12–14; 6:4–6; 10:26–29; 2 Pet 2:20–22; 1 John 5:16–17 (sin that is and isn't "unto death"); Rev 2:5; 3:5.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

The *Didache* (16.2) warns that a lifetime of faith won't help unless one is found perfect at the end. Hermas and Cyprian deal with Christians who fell away under persecution and how they could be restored. Augustine, *On Rebuke and Grace* (c. 427).

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 1033, 1035, 1446, 1817–1821 (hope), 1854–1864 (mortal and venial sin), 2005, 2016; Trent,

Session 6, chs. 9, 12–13, 15 and canons 15–16, 23.

Assurance now, though grace can be lost

HELD BY Lutheran · Anglican many; Calvinists differ · Methodist

A believer can be sure now that he is forgiven and a child of God, because God's promise is spoken to him in the Gospel, sealed in the sacraments and absolution, and witnessed by the Spirit with his own spirit. Yet a justified person can fall from grace: when believers fall into open sin and persist in it, faith and the Holy Spirit depart, and some who receive the Word with joy later fall away. The fallen may rise again by repentance, and God will finish the good work He has begun in those who do not turn from Him. Assurance therefore rests on Christ and His promise, not on a past decision or on the security of the elect.

VERSES CITED

Rom 8:16; Phil 1:6; Luke 8:13; Heb 10:26; 2 Pet 2:20; John 10:28

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

The Augsburg Confession (1530) condemned those who deny that the justified can lose the Holy Spirit, and the Formula of Concord (1577) taught that election is a comfort to be sought in Christ, the Word and the sacraments. The Church of England's Article XVI said that believers "may depart from grace given," and Wesley kept it as Methodist Article XII while teaching that the Spirit witnesses directly to the believer's adoption.

CONFESSIONS AND DOCUMENTS

Augsburg Confession XII.1, 7; Smalcald Articles III.3.43; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration XI.32, 37-38, 42; Thirty-Nine Articles XVI; Methodist Articles of Religion (1784) XII; Wesley, Sermon 10, The Witness of the Spirit I, I.7

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

God's promises are utterly reliable, but a Christian remains free to reject Him: grace is lost by mortal sin and restored by repentance and confession, so believers may have confident hope and moral assurance but not infallible certainty of final perseverance apart from a special revelation. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Catechism of the Catholic Church 1033, 1035, 1446, 1817–1821, 1854–1864, 2005, 2016; Council of Trent, Session VI, chs. 9, 12–13, 15 and canons 15–16, 23.

Orthodox

The Orthodox Church also rejects "once saved, always saved." Salvation is a lifelong path of cooperation with grace, which "co-operates with us" and enables us to persevere (Confession of Dositheus). The same Confession teaches that a baptized person who falls, even into apostasy, regains through repentance the adoption he had lost. Philaret's catechism names penitence as the way back for those who sin after baptism. A popular saying, of no fixed origin and used by Catholics as well as Orthodox, puts it: "I have been saved, I am being saved, I hope to be saved"; Metropolitan Kallistos Ware prefers "I trust that by God's mercy and grace I am being saved."

Sources: Confession of Dositheus (1672), decrees 3, 16; Longer Catechism of St. Philaret, qq. 305–306, 351–353; Kallistos Ware, *How Are We Saved?* (1996).

Lutheran

Lutherans teach that a true believer can fall from grace. The Augsburg Confession condemns those "who deny that those once justified can lose the Holy Ghost," and the Smalcald Articles say that when saints fall into open sin, as David did, faith and the Spirit depart. Luther rejects the claim that such a person never truly had

Reformed

Reformed churches teach the perseverance of the saints: those God has effectually called and sanctified "can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace," though they may fall into grievous sins for a time. This rests on God's unchangeable election, not the believer's will. Believers may attain an infallible assurance

faith. Assurance rests not on feelings but on Christ, the Word and the sacraments; the Formula of Concord presents election in Christ as comfort for troubled consciences.

Sources: Augsburg Confession XII.1, 7; Smalcald Articles III.3.42–45; Formula of Concord, Epitome IV.19; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration XI.12, 37–38, 70, 74, 90.

from God's promises, the evidences of grace and the Spirit's witness, though it is not of the essence of faith and can be shaken. Dort settled the question the Remonstrants (1610) had left open.

Sources: Westminster Confession 17.1–3, 18.1–4; Canons of Dort (1619), Fifth Head, arts. 3, 6, 8–10, 12; Remonstrance (1610), art. 5.

Anglican

Article XVI teaches that after receiving the Holy Ghost "we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin," and by God's grace rise again; it condemns those who say believers can no longer sin or who deny forgiveness to the penitent. Article XVII calls election a comfort to the godly but a danger to the curious and carnal. The Articles do not settle whether the elect can finally fall away: Calvinist Anglicans affirm final perseverance, while others hold that grace can be finally lost.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles (1571), arts. XVI, XVII.

Methodist

Methodists teach that a justified believer can fall from grace. Article XII says that after receiving the Holy Ghost "we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin," and by grace rise again. Wesley argued at length that a saint "may fall away" and perish (*Serious Thoughts upon the Perseverance of the Saints*, 1751). Present assurance is still expected: the Spirit witnesses directly that one is a child of God (Rom 8:16), and that witness is confirmed by the fruit of the Spirit.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion (1784), art. XII; Wesley, Serious Thoughts upon the Perseverance of the Saints (1751), §§2–5, 30; Wesley, Sermon 10, The Witness of the Spirit I, I.7; Sermon 11, The Witness of the Spirit II, IV.6, V.3–4.

Baptist

Those truly born again are eternally secure, and believers can know now that they are saved. Calvinist Baptists hold that the truly regenerate will persevere, while the Free Grace view holds that the saved remain saved even if faith is later abandoned. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. V; Second London Baptist Confession (1689), ch. 17.

Where it gets contested: Those who hold eternal security or perseverance (Reformed and Baptists, Calvinist or not) answer that those who fall away were never truly saved (1 John 2:19). Catholics respond that on that view no one can be sure today that his own faith is the genuine kind, so the promised assurance is no stronger than the Catholic's confident hope. Baptists also disagree among themselves here (Calvinist perseverance vs Free Grace).

See also: Chapter 11: the state of grace

Deeper study: three doctrines behind one slogan, how they developed, and the texts cited on each side

Three Protestant doctrines often grouped under one slogan, how they developed, the texts cited for security and for falling away, and how each reading treats the other's. It does not decide between them.

View	Basic claim
Classical Reformed perseverance	All whom God truly regenerates will ultimately persevere because God preserves them.
Modern Baptist eternal security	A genuinely saved believer cannot become unsaved, even in non-Calvinist systems.
Strong Free Grace form	A genuinely saved person may later cease believing or live in grave sin yet remain eternally saved; perseverance is not necessary evidence of salvation.

Against all three, Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican and Methodist teaching holds that a justified person can fall from grace. The Augsburg Confession condemns those "who deny that those once justified can lose the Holy Ghost" (art. 12), and the Methodist Articles, following the Anglican, teach that "we may depart from grace given, and fall into sin, and, by the grace of God, rise again" (Methodist Articles of Religion XII; Thirty-Nine Articles XVI).

Historical development

Augustine, c. AD 429: in *On the Gift of Perseverance*, Augustine developed a strong doctrine that final perseverance is a special divine gift. But this was not identical to modern OSAS because Augustine could distinguish people who had real grace for a time from those given the further gift of final perseverance.

John Calvin, sixteenth century, especially 1559: the mature *Institutes* (3.24.6–7) set out what became the classical Protestant doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, explaining those who seem to fall away by 1 John 2:19.

Synod of Dort, 1618–1619: perseverance was formally codified in Reformed theology as the fifth of the later "five points."

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Baptists: "security of the believer" increasingly became a stand-alone doctrine even among Baptists who rejected several other Calvinist doctrines. J. R. Graves used "security of believers" language in the nineteenth century.

Late twentieth-century Free Grace theology: developed an even stronger distinction between eternal life as irrevocable and perseverance as non-essential evidence.

> **Important distinction:** classical Calvinism does not normally teach, "I prayed a prayer once, therefore I am guaranteed heaven regardless of permanent apostasy." It teaches that the truly regenerate will ultimately persevere. If someone permanently abandons the faith, the classical Reformed explanation is generally that the earlier profession was not evidence of true regeneration.

The key texts

Texts cited for security

- **John 6:37–40; 10:27–29** — "they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand."
- **Rom 8:29–39** — nothing "shall be able to separate us from the love of God."
- **Eph 1:13–14; 4:30** — sealed with the Holy Spirit.
- **Phil 1:6** — "he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."
- **1 Pet 1:5; Jude 24** — "kept by the power of God through faith"; "able to keep you from falling."
- **1 John 5:11–13** — "that ye may know that ye have eternal life."

Texts cited for the possibility of falling away

- **Matt 24:13** — "he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved."
- **John 15:1–6** — "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch."
- **Rom 11:20–22** — "if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off."
- **1 Cor 9:27; 10:12** — "let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall."

- **Gal 5:4; Col 1:23** — "fallen from grace"; "If ye continue in the faith."
- **Heb 6:4–6; 10:26–29; 2 Pet 2:20–22** — those once enlightened who "fall away"; no more sacrifice for those who "sin wilfully."

How each reading treats the other's texts

How defenders of perseverance and eternal security read the warnings

- **Warnings as God's means.** God preserves his work in believers "by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments" (Canons of Dort V.14); the warnings are how he keeps them, not evidence that they may finally be lost.
- **Those who fall away were not regenerate.** "They went out from us, but they were not of us" (1 John 2:19); such persons "never adhered to Christ with that heartfelt confidence" which marks the elect (Calvin, *Institutes* 3.24.7). On Rom 11:20, Paul forbids "careless, carnal security," not assurance (same).
- **Grievous falls, not final ones.** Believers may "fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein," yet "can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace" (Westminster Confession 17.1, 17.3; Second London Confession 17.1); "All true believers endure to the end" (Baptist Faith and Message art. V).
- **Free Grace reading.** The warnings in Hebrews describe real believers who may defect, but the penalty is temporal judgment and loss of rewards at the judgment seat of Christ, not loss of eternal life (Zane Hodges, "Hebrews," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, as summarized by the Grace Evangelical Society).

How Catholics, Methodists and others who hold that grace can be lost read the security texts

- **John 10:27–29:** no one else can pluck Christ's sheep from his hand, but the sheep are those who hear his voice and follow him; Wesley holds that here the condition is "plainly expressed" (*Serious Thoughts upon the Perseverance of the Saints*, 1751).
- **Phil 1:6:** Paul's confidence about the Philippians "is not a promise for all Christians," but a judgment based on their conduct so far (Catholic Answers, "Assurance of Salvation").
- **God's power and human freedom:** God "is able to establish him who standeth that he stand perseveringly, and to restore him who falleth," yet "let no one herein promise himself any thing as certain with an absolute certainty" (Trent, Session 6, ch. 13). Trent condemns the claim that a justified person "can sin no more, nor lose grace, and that therefore he that falls and sins was never truly justified" (canon 23).
- **1 John 5:13 and assurance:** Catholics hold that a believer may have confident hope and moral assurance, but not "an absolute and infallible certainty" of final perseverance without special revelation (Trent, canon 16). Paul himself wrote, "I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified" (1 Cor 4:4).

What is actually in dispute

Whether God's promise to keep his people guarantees that every truly regenerate person will persevere to the end, so that the warnings are a means of that keeping or concern rewards, or whether a truly justified person can lose the grace received by grave sin or unbelief, so that the promises are certain on God's side but conditional on continuing in faith. Among those who hold eternal security, a further question is whether perseverance in faith and holiness is the necessary evidence of salvation (Reformed) or not (Free Grace).

Last reviewed November 10, 2026