



SCRIPTURE:

Colossians 1:21-23

RECAP:

Have you ever known someone who bore all the marks of being a Christian, and professed they were a Christian, only to see them eventually go in a very unChristian direction, even deny the faith later? I imagine we all have. Unfortunately, in my position as a pastor for the last 16 years, I've been on the front row of watching this happen.

I remember a married couple who started attending TJC years ago. They jumped into Bible studies and small groups. They made a profession of faith and were baptized. Everything on the outside looked like they were born-again Christians trying to follow Christ. Then they started getting sporadic in their attendance and involvement, and within a few years they were completely detached from the body (despite efforts to reach out, connect, and bring them back into the fold). Then they started getting into witchcraft and all sorts of other errors. I have no reason or evidence at this point to say they are Christians.

How could we miss this? Should we have known or saw in advance what trajectory they would be on? No. There is no way we can know if their profession is genuine and sincere. We don't know that for anybody. All we have is the fruit in their lives. We take them on their profession and on their life. It should concern us when those things don't align but at the end of the day we don't know what is actually in the hearts of people. Only God knows the heart.

1 Samuel 16:7 -- *But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."*

What our text today is going to raise for us is the issue of salvation, and whether believers can lose their salvation. What do we make of passages that seem to imply we can? The name of my message today: **If You Continue.**

Colossians 1:21-23 Exegesis:

VS 21 -- "you" is the church, the believers he is addressing in this letter. They were "**once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.**" They were alienated from the covenant and the promises of God. They were alienated from God, and estranged from Him. They were hostile in mind against the truth of God, and against His law. They were doing evil deeds. Wickedness and evil pervaded their lives. Notice this, they were "once" like that. The implication of the passage is that they are no longer this way at all.

There has been a change. A transformation has occurred. They were once like that, but something has happened. What happened?

VS 22 -- "He," Jesus, "**has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death.**" We were alienated and estranged, but Christ has reconciled us and brought us into fellowship and intimacy with God. How? Through his body of flesh by his death. The cross of Christ reconciles sinners to God. There was something very real taking place on that cross. In the body of Christ, sin's punishment was being meted out. The sin that alienated us, was now poured out on him. He suffered the punishment so that it could be lifted from us. And if it is lifted from us, then we are reconciled. The death of Christ reconciles alienated sinners to God.

The goal of Christ's death? Why did he do it? "**In order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.**" Jesus' death presents us as holy and blameless and above reproach before God. How? It washes away our sins. It makes us white as snow. The work of Christ on our behalf justifies us before God. We receive his death on our behalf as payment for our sins, which cleanses us of all unrighteousness. We receive his life and obedience on our behalf, which credits us with his righteousness as if we had perfectly obeyed all the law of God ourselves. This is how we can be presented holy, blameless, and above reproach.

Listen, you may not feel holy, blameless, and above reproach on most days. And rightfully so, from a practical standpoint we still sin and fall short of the glory of God but we are not people who bank our hopes on what we feel, or determine truth by what we feel. We cling to, and ground our lives on, what God has said. And because He says that Christ's sacrificial death in our place makes us holy, blameless, and above reproach, then that's how we 1. understand our identity, 2. approach God, and 3. fight sin.

VS 23 -- "if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard." We're going to spend some significant time on this one. This is a conditional language passage. We see these all over the Bible. Conditional language passages say things like "if you do _____, then _____." "If you don't do _____, then _____." We see this throughout the Old and New Testaments. This passage is one such example. If you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel you heard, then you'll be presented holy, blameless, and above reproach before Him. The implication is that if you don't continue in the faith, then you won't be presented holy, blameless, and above reproach.

A few other examples of passages:

1 Corinthians 15:1-2 -- *1 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.*

2 Timothy 2:11-13 -- *11 The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; 12 if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; 13 if we are faithless, he remains faithful—*

Mark 13:13 -- *And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*

Does this passage, and the one's above, teach that you can lose your salvation? No. I don't think so at all. These conditions are real. If we don't continue in the faith, we won't be saved. I believe that at face value because it says that. There's no getting around it. But I believe that these texts are warning passages that are actually used by God to help us stay the course. In other words, in the same way God uses prayers as a means to bring about His purposes, and preaching as a means of bringing about His purposes, these passages are the means for bringing about His purposes, namely, the continued faith and obedience of His people.

2 Chronicles 30:6-12 -- *6 "O people of Israel, return to the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, that he may turn again to the remnant of you who have escaped from the hand of the kings of Assyria. 8 Do not now be stiff-necked as your fathers were, but yield yourselves to the Lord and come to his sanctuary, which he has consecrated forever, and serve the Lord your God, that his fierce anger may turn away from you. 9 For if you return to the Lord, your brothers and your children will find compassion with*

their captors and return to this land. For the Lord your God is gracious and merciful and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him.”

Notice the very clear conditional language in these verses. Do this, that He may do that. If you do this, He will do that. This is clear. Your actions matter. Your actions very much determine God's response to you. But watch how the rest of this unfolds.

10 So the couriers went from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, and as far as Zebulun, but they laughed at them to scorn and mocked them. 11 However, some men of Asher, of Manasseh, and of Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem. 12 The hand of God was also on Judah to give them one heart to do what the king and the princes commanded by the word of the Lord.”

Notice the conditional language in the first several verses, but then notice how God supplies the calls and warnings (conditional language) as a means for drawing some to Himself in obedience. In other words, the call to obey, the conditional language, was a means of grace for some to believe. And notice, it was the hand of God also on Judah (as it was with some of the men of Asher, Manasseh, and Zebulun) that gave them one heart to do what the king and princes commanded in the word of the Lord that came to them by the couriers.

I believe that God's born-again people WILL persevere to the end. I do not think those who are truly saved (born-again) can lose their salvation. There are passages that inform this view:

1 Peter 1:3-5 -- *3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*

1 Peter 5:8-10 -- *5 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. 10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.*

Jude 1:24-25 -- 24 Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, 25 to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time[a] and now and forever. Amen.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 -- Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

1 Corinthians 1:8-9 -- 8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jeremiah 32:40 -- I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.

Philippians 1:6 -- And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

I could keep going. I hope these help ground what I'm saying in Scripture for you. So the conditional language passages we read earlier, and that we find in Colossians today, don't teach that Christians can lose salvation, it stipulates what must happen in order to have it.

Now let me caveat that by saying, you will never hear me use the language, "once saved always saved". The reason for that is because it has become a mantra for an entire generation of people (especially here in the Bible-belt) who want to claim they are Christians while bearing no fruit or evidence of it at all. "Once saved always saved" usually refers to someone who walked an aisle, prayed a prayer, filled out a card, attended VBS, got baptized, or whatever other thing they point to. And they say "yep, I'm saved." And that is supposed to be their assurance of salvation. Meanwhile they do not live to obey Christ, they don't love Christ, and there is nothing in their lives that shows they belong to Christ.

This is why those warning passages are in there. I believe those who are truly saved will persevere to the end, but the key is whether they are truly saved. Those who are truly saved demonstrate that by the fruits in their life. Jesus says, "A tree is known by its fruit."

What about those people then who fall away? Who gave evidence at one time that they were believers, but now are not continuing steadfast in the faith? Do they lose their salvation? No. I would argue that they were never of the faith. As John says:

1 John 2:19 -- *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*

They fall away ultimately because they never belonged. The warning passages tell the truth. Those who do not stay the course are not of the fold. Those who are of the fold WILL stay the course and the warning passages help them do so. As a child of God, I read a text like ours today and say, "I'm going to continue in the faith because I want to be holy, blameless, and above reproach." I want those things. I desire those things. For the person who has no interest in holiness, blamelessness, and being above reproach, that text doesn't direct them to faithfulness, it spells out their doom.

They fall away because they never truly belonged to Him. Believers stay the course because He holds us fast. That is what is happening underneath it all. These are the primary means. But these things usually play out through secondary means. So I want to give you a few applications on this.

3 Reasons People Fall Away:

1. Suffering and Trials -- when people suffer and endure hardships they often fall away because they think God has abandoned them. They conclude God doesn't love them or that God isn't real. This is rooted in false expectations that God is supposed to prevent all troubles from their lives.

2. People Pleasing and Acceptance -- many people fall away because they want to be liked and accepted by others. Holding Christian beliefs is not only out of fashion in our culture, but unacceptable in many circles. The desire and allure for acceptance leads many away.

3. Isolation and Lack of Community -- when professing believers are not anchored to a church, and more specifically, to community with other believers, it makes them incredibly prone to being snared. Your adversary the devil prowls around seeking someone to devour. He likes to pick off the isolated.

3 Helps For Staying the Course:

1. Personal Communion with the Lord -- it is hard to fall away when you are committed to abiding each day in Christ. It is hard to fall away from one you love and spend time with and know. This is why we need to stay in the Word and prayer. We need to cultivate that daily fellowship with the Lord.

2. Know the Scriptures and Stand On Them -- when we know what God's Word says, and we are committed to obeying them despite what the culture says, we are equipped with staying the course. It keeps us from being allured into myths and errors that can destroy our souls.

3. Walk in Close Community with Others -- we stand strong when we do not stand alone. This is why we need to be in Life Groups or D-Groups. We need fellowship with other believers, the kind that helps us hold the line. We need some Shadrachs, Meshachs, and Abednegos around us to help us not bow the knee.

If you are in Christ this morning, remember that you were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds. But Christ reconciled us through his finished work at the cross, and by the blood shed on our behalf. He did this to present us holy and blameless and above reproach before God. These promises are ours...if we continue. If we continue in the faith.

So can I ask you? What confidence are you relying on that you WILL continue in the faith? Are you going to hope it is your strength? Are you hoping it is your consistency that will see you through? What is your confidence that you'll wake up a Christian tomorrow? The only answer I can give is this, He will hold me fast. He will keep me. He will sustain me.

QUESTIONS:

- 1) Have you known anyone who fell away from the faith?
- 2) Why were we once alienated from God?
- 3) How were we reconciled to God?
- 4) Why was it necessary that someone else reconcile us to God?
- 5) Why will God's born-again people persevere till the end?
- 6) What is the danger of a "once saved, always saved" mentality?
- 7) Which of the three options for staying the course do you struggle with the most?
What can you do to strengthen that option?