

MATTHEW 7:13-23

WILL THERE BE CHRISTIANS IN HELL?

“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”¹

My dad and I were seated at the kitchen table. I was enjoying one of his infrequent visits; he didn’t often leave home, even to visit his sons. The believer’s security in Christ was the subject of our somewhat animated discussion. At one point, as if to cut off further discussion, Dad said, “Son, if I believed like you, I’d go and take my fill of sin.”

“Dad,” I responded, “that is the point precisely. I’ve had my fill of sin.”

“But if you don’t hold on, you can be lost again,” he insisted.

I gently probed, “How were you saved?”

“Why, by believing Jesus,” was his immediate response.

“Then, what makes you think that you must now depend upon your own effort to remain saved. If Christ saved you when you believed His promise, what makes you think you must now *do* something in order to remain saved?” was my rejoinder.

Further exploration demonstrated that my dad was convinced that it was theoretically possible that a believer might cease believing. Should that happen, he was convinced that a Christian could be forever lost and condemned to hell.

Tragically, my dad was not alone in his assessment that “Christians” could theoretically be in hell. Numerous “evangelical” denominations teach that one who believes can be lost and condemned to spend eternity separated from the love of God. Great numbers of believers live in fear that they may have committed a sin so heinous that they can no longer be loved by God. What is actually at stake is nothing less than the comforting doctrine of security in Christ Jesus. Of necessity, anything I may say in this message will be abbreviated due to time constraints. I would, however, encourage you to examine this issue more carefully in your own studies.

THE QUESTION — Can a Christian be condemned? Can a believer in Christ the Master be lost? Having trusted Christ, having been born from above and into the Family of God, can a child of God be disowned by the Father? Can salvation be rescinded?

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Numerous passages seem to indicate that a saved person can be lost. However, careful reading should clarify the issue for sincere seekers of truth. For instance, the parable of the wedding feast [see **MATTHEW 22:1-14**] concludes with a man without wedding garments being cast into outer darkness. However, the fact that he had no wedding garments indicated that he sought to enter through his own inherent “right” to be present rather than by invitation.

As He initiated the Olivet Discourse, Jesus spoke of the conditions for those who believe during the Tribulation period [see **MATTHEW 24:3-14**]. He made one statement that isolated from the context could possibly indicate that one who is saved could be lost. Jesus said, “The one who endures to the end will be saved” [**MATTHEW 24:13**]. Bear in mind, however, that the Master is pointing out the conditions during the Tribulation. Moreover, He will draw that discussion to a conclusion by explaining that conduct will reveal the heart—especially during those trying times. Those who do not believe will attempt to avoid living as those expecting the return of the King; those who do believe will not consider their lives precious as they honour their divine heritage through living righteous and holy lives in the midst of rampant wickedness.

Those who hold to the possibility that a believer may be unsaved appeal to other passages which appear problematic. For instance, **HEBREWS 6:4-6** reads as follows. “It is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.”

In the whole of the New Testament, this would be an exceptional use of the term “enlightened” if it referred to salvation. “Enlightened,” however, cannot be taken to mean “saved.” It does clearly say that those who have heard the message of life, who have witnessed the grace of God and witnessed His power to save, cannot presume to find another way to receive the grace offered; to do so would mean the necessity of the Master being crucified again.

A similar passage is that found in **HEBREWS 10:26-29**. “If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?”

The intent of this passage is to caution against seeking another way to be saved. God has provided salvation through the death of His Son. To seek to do some meritorious work to either secure or to enhance what God has freely given is tantamount to despising God and His gift. Such action invites divine condemnation, exposing the one making such an attempt to exposure as a pretender to grace.

Consider one final passage. Peter wrote in his second letter, “If, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them” [**2 PETER 2:20, 21**].

A careful examination to determine the context reveals that Peter is speaking of “false teachers” [see **2 PETER 2:2 ff.**]. Clearly, he has in view people who despite giving every appearance of righteousness have no evidence of salvation to mark their lives. They will return to their roots since that is all they know [see **2 PETER 2:22**].

The Bible is replete with promises of life in the Son. Jesus promised, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” [JOHN 5:24]. Judgement is avoided for the one who hears the Master’s Word and believes.

Before Jewish leaders who sought opportunity to accuse Him, Jesus made a comforting statement concerning the gift of life. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” [JOHN 10:27-30]. Because Jesus is God, the believer is held firmly in God’s grasp.

When I quoted this verse to him, my dad protested, “But, I could remove myself if I wanted to!”

“Do you want to remove yourself from God,” I inquired?

“No,” he admitted.

“Dad,” I gently remonstrated, “if you were able to remove yourself from His hand, you would be greater than He.” Were one able to remove himself from God’s hand, God’s promise through Moses would be obviated. God said, “There is none that can deliver out of My hand” [DEUTERONOMY 32:39].

Were it possible that one who has been redeemed could again be lost, it would mean that the Master’s prayer was not answered. Jesus prayed to the Father, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one” [JOHN 17:15]. Note that His request was not merely for the Eleven then walking with Him, but also for all who would follow. “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” [JOHN 17:20, 21].

Indulge me by considering one further promise from John’s Gospel. The Word famously promises, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” [JOHN 3:16]. The Word follows with these promises. “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” [JOHN 3:18]. Again, we read, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” [JOHN 3:36]. The gift that is offered is “eternal,” it cannot cease. However, failure to accept this gift through receiving as Master the One who offers it ensures continuing wrath.

THE UNSPOKEN ASSUMPTION — Unspoken in the assumption that one who is saved can be lost is the idea that man is responsible for his own salvation. Salvation is reduced to a transaction in which one is redeemed through their own efforts to maintain what God has freely given. Paul’s implied rebuke of Galatian Christians assuredly applies at this point. “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh” [GALATIANS 3:3]? How were you saved? What was done to effect your transfer from death to life? Whatever you did in order to be redeemed, you had better continue doing. However, if your new life is all of grace, then you cannot now “do” anything in order to ensure that you continued saved.

This is the promise of God that has comforted His people since the days of the Apostles. “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” [EPHESIANS 2:8, 9].

That leads to my final point. Paul testifies that “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” [EPHESIANS 2:10]. Many people confuse profession with possession. Jesus cautioned, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” [MATTHEW 7:21]. He clarified His meaning when He said, “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” [MATTHEW 7:22, 23].

Salvation leads to a transformed life. Understand that the child of God does the good works that God prepared beforehand, and His child performs these works—not in order to be saved, but because he is saved. With a heart of love, I warn that many who profess they are Christians are unsaved. They are church members, but they are lost. They participate in the ordinances of the Faith, but they are lost. They may even preach a good sermon, but they are lost. They are lost because they have not believed in the Name of God’s Only Son.

The most important truth you can know is that you must be born from above and into the Family of God. This is not through your own effort, but through faith in the Son of God. When you are born from above, you will be transferred from the darkness of condemnation into the glorious light of God’s perfect freedom. If you are religious, though you are not redeemed, you shall be condemned to eternity from God. If you have faith in the Son of God, you shall never be condemned, for He has given you “eternal life.” Amen.