

Another High-Profile Christian Walks Away—What's Going On?

A headline this week has many people scratching their head: "Former Desiring God writer Paul Maxwell announces he's no longer Christian." How can this happen? Did he lose his salvation?

Below is my response about salvation that I've shared before. I also just released this short clip that goes into more detail on why Paul Maxwell may have fallen away.

A common question for many is, "Can I lose my salvation?" I've heard both sides of the argument, and only God truly knows a person's heart—but I can share a few thoughts. The reason there is a debate is because the Scriptures teach that salvation is a gift from God that cannot be earned, but they also offer warnings about falling away.

There should be a healthy tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. This issue should not create a spirit of division, elitism or theological superiority.

One school of thought suggests that salvation cannot be lost, as in losing your car keys, but that it can be left, as in walking away from it. This may be why Jesus spoke of the man who said in his heart "my master delays His coming; therefore, I will turn from living a godly life." When the master returned unexpectedly, the servant was banished because he chose to turn from what he knew to be right (see Luke 12:45).

In another passage, Jesus said, "You have left your first love," when speaking to the church in Ephesus (Rev. 2:4b, NASB). James 5:19-20 adds that if anyone wanders from the truth and someone turns him back, a soul is saved from death.

If anything, these Scriptures, and many more, reinforce the fact that we have certain responsibilities.

Three Key Points to Consider

1. We must look at the context of such verses. For example, in James 5, the context is a believer who is sick because he or she wandered from God (a pattern of sin)—from alcohol and drugs to lying and slander, and from sexual sin to the sin of pride—the warnings, convictions and rebukes were all ignored. The elders become involved in hope that confession and repentance take place and that faith-filled prayer releases the person from God's chastisement (see Heb. 12:5-7). The believer is heading toward physical death as the result of wandering from God, but if repentance takes place, they will be restored—the soul is saved and his ongoing pattern of sin (multitude) is covered, concealed and dealt with. This verse is not about salvation but disobedience.

We should never turn from what we know to be right. Jesus encouraged His followers to be watchful, prepared and ready for His return. Are we watchful? Are we prepared? Are we ready? (Read Matt. 24:45-51 and Luke 21:34.) The Scriptures offer a healthy tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

The other school of thought suggests that some passages are dealing with people who never fully surrendered to Christ. As a result, they fell away. They heard the gospel but never fully embraced it and turned from their sins; they only had "intellectual" knowledge of salvation. According to this view, the real question isn't, "Can a person lose their salvation?" but, "Was the person really saved to begin with?"

Titus 1:16 and James 2:14 both conclude that many people "say" that they know God but deny Him by their lifestyle. First John 2:19 (MEV) suggests that those who acknowledge Christ initially, but deny Him later, are not saved to begin with:

“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have remained with us.”

2. Who holds us together? If we must maintain our salvation, what happens if Alzheimer’s or some other mind-debilitating disease sets in and begins to twist, corrupt and pollute our thinking? Is all lost, or are we held together because we are a child of God? I am convinced, like Paul, “that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities nor powers, neither things present nor things to come, neither height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). Nothing can separate us from God, but we should never ignore the strong warnings about turning from Him.

When it comes to salvation, we all agree that God gets all the glory and all the credit. Salvation is His work. We are never outside of His sovereignty and control: “It is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ” (2 Cor. 1:21a, NIV).

Our salvation is guaranteed based on the assurances found in Scripture, but we also must “work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12b, MEV). My goal is to be faithful to the command to preach, witness and proclaim while understanding that God does the drawing, saving and sealing.

3. At the heart of the division is Calvinism versus Arminianism. Sadly, brother is shooting brother, and sister is wounding sister. Have we forgotten how to show grace to those in the body with whom we disagree? Those who believe you can lose your salvation should not chide those who believe in eternal security—“once saved always saved” is by no means a license to sin—it’s a belief in God’s guarantee. But on the flip side, those who embrace eternal security should not mock those who disagree.

But What About Hebrews 6?

I can hear it now, "But what about Hebrews 6:4-6." It says, "It is impossible for those who were once enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to be renewed once more to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and subject Him to public shame."

Based on my understanding of terms such as "enlightened," "shared," and "tasted," they are not necessarily words linked to salvation. Judas Iscariot was enlightened—he knew a great deal. He also tasted and shared in the ministry of Christ, but we all know his fate. When he fell away, repentance was elusive. His fate was sealed. However, this verse should force all Christians to take inventory.

The Most Important Question

We all sin and fall short, but the important question to ask is what is the condition of your heart—have you truly repented and believed in Christ as your Lord and Savior, or are you trusting in false assurance? This may be why Paul said in 2 Corinthians 13:5a, "Examine yourselves, seeing whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not know that Jesus Christ is in you?"

Our actions reveal a great deal about our relationship with Christ. A.W. Tozer said: "When people find that after being in the church for years they are not making much progress, they ought to examine themselves and wonder whether they have been truly converted."

Has your heart become so hard as to reject Jesus Christ? If so, you can change that today. I'm aware that I'm driving this point home, but I'd rather err on the side of speaking too much about a committed relationship with Jesus than too little.

It's never too late to get back on track: "Return to me, and I

will return to you," says the Lord (Mal. 3:7b). God is sovereign, but man has a responsibility to repent and return.
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