

§ 11. Doctrine of Salvation
Lecture 20
Warnings Against Apostasy

Today we want to continue our discussion of an Arminian perspective on perseverance of the saints. We want to ask how the Arminian understands the warnings of Scripture against apostasy. The Arminian takes these warnings at face value and hence to involve a very real danger. It really is possible for a regenerate Christian to fall away from Christ and to lose his salvation.

First, these warnings, the Arminian will point out, are written to Christian believers. The persons to whom the warnings are addressed are not merely nominal Christians. These are not people who are in fact unsaved. Consider the book of Hebrews, for example. The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who, under the threat of persecution, were tempted to renounce Christ and go back to Judaism. This leads the author of the book of Hebrews to issue very stern warnings about their doing such a thing.

Hebrews 3:1 describes his readers as “holy brethren who share in a heavenly call,” and he invites them to consider Jesus “the apostle and high priest of our confession.” So he refers to his readers as holy brethren; he says they share in this heavenly call.

Look at verse 6 of chapter 3. He says, “Christ was faithful over God’s house as a son. And we are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope.” Here he says that we are indwelt by Christ. We are the temple of Christ. He lives in us. We are his house. But he says this is the case only if we hold fast to our confidence and pride in our hope.

Look then at verses 12-14. He says,

Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.

There it seems again clear that he is writing to fellow Christians – brethren he calls them – and says that they share in Christ. But he warns them that we share in Christ only if we hold fast to the end.

Finally, turn over to Hebrews 10:32-36. Here he says,

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on the prisoners, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an

abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.

Clearly this is a passage written to fellow Christians. He says that “you were enlightened” and then you endured affliction. He says “you knew that you had a better possession and an abiding possession” in heaven. So don’t throw this away; you need to endure.

So when we look at these warnings, the Arminian would say, these are warnings to us. These are warnings that are clearly written to regenerate Christians, not to people who are in fact unregenerate. When we read them in that light, then it seems clear that they entail the real possibility of falling away from Christ and so losing salvation. Look again at Hebrews 3:12-19. The author says,

Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end, while it is said,

“Today, when you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

Who were they that heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? And with whom was he provoked forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they should never enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Because of the danger of unbelief he wants them to be sure that there is not an unbelieving heart within them, an evil, unbelieving heart that will lead them to fall away from God.

Turn over now to Hebrews 6:1-8. He says,

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, with instruction about ablutions, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. For land which has drunk the rain that

often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.

The Arminian will point out that this description is surely a description of a regenerate Christian. Notice what it says about this person who falls away. It says this person was once enlightened. This is the same word that is used in Hebrews 10:32 to describe the recipients of the book of Hebrews where he says, “But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings.” He is describing how they became Christians. So to say that they were enlightened or that this person has been enlightened is to say that this person has become a regenerate Christian.

It says that this person has “tasted” the heavenly gift and has “tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.” When you think of this idiom of tasting, it doesn’t mean just sort of having a little sample but not really imbibing it. Look how the author uses the same word in Hebrews 2:9 to describe Christ’s death on our behalf. He says, “But we see Jesus . . . crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one.” Now clearly it means that Christ, in tasting death for everyone, died. He experienced death, not just have a little sampling of it. He was dead. While “tasting death” may be a peculiar idiom for dying, nevertheless to say that these people had tasted the goodness of the word of God, the powers of the age to come, and the heavenly gift, I think, is to say they have found salvation.

Notice also that it says they have become partakers of the Holy Spirit. Now, again, this same word is used in Hebrews 3:14. There he says, “For we share in Christ, [in the Greek, this is the same word – we are partakers in Christ] if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.” So to be a partaker in the Holy Spirit is like being a partaker in Christ – one shares in Christ, one shares in the Holy Spirit. This is a description of a regenerate believer. So the description here of an apostate person, I think, is clearly intended to be a description of a regenerate believer who then apostatizes and rejects Christ out of his life.

I think it has been rightly said that if the Reformed theologian is correct in saying that this can be a description of someone who is not a regenerate Christian, then none of us can have assurance of salvation. For how could you have any more potent a description of a Christian than this? If a person can be like this and not be saved, how can any of us have assurance that we are in fact saved? So paradoxically enough, interpreting the passage to be not about regenerate Christians robs us of the assurance of our salvation that is rightly ours.

Finally, look at Hebrews 10:26-31:

For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Notice here the person that is being described is someone who spurns Christ and thereby profanes Christ’s blood by which he was sanctified. This is a person who was sanctified by the blood of Christ. It says he has “outraged the Spirit of grace.” Remember we saw in Hebrews 6 that this is a person who was a partaker of the Holy Spirit. Now by rejecting Christ out of his life he outrages the Holy Spirit. This calls to mind the unpardonable sin – doesn’t it? – of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that all sins will be forgiven except for one, namely, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Could it be that apostasy is a form of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? That is why to outrage the Spirit of grace by which we are sanctified by casting Christ out of one’s life leaves one with no more sacrifice for the person who has done that. He’s lost. There is no more hope for him. That would make sense of why blasphemy against the Holy Spirit would be unpardonable – because there remains no more sacrifice for such a sin.

If this is right, then you suddenly find when you read the New Testament that it is filled with warnings like this. Maybe you never noticed them because you never read them in this light. Look for example at 2 Peter 2:20-22. He writes,

For 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 overpowered, 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. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, The dog turns back to his own vomit, and the sow is washed only to wallow in the mire.

What an incredible image here of the apostate person! Peter says it would be better for this person never, ever to have known the way of salvation than having known it, having come to a knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to turn back from it. He compares the apostate to a dog that eats its own vomit and to a pig that is washed from the slop only to then jump back into it again and to wallow in the mire. This is certainly a powerful image of apostasy!

Look at John 15, which is the words of Jesus. John 15:1-6. This is the famous parable of the vine and the branches. Jesus says,

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.

Here you have this same corporate image of the vine which is Christ's people and then the individual branches. The branches that do not abide in the vine wither up and die and they are thrown away. They are burned; they are good for nothing. It is the branches that remain in the vine, attached to it, that bear fruit.

From what I've said, on an Arminian perspective it isn't a matter of slipping in and out of salvation by sinning. Rather, we are talking here about the very, very serious sin of apostasy. That is to say, someone who renounces Christ and rejects him out of his life and walks away from Christ in a very deliberate and conscious way. There are examples in Scripture of people who do this, and I'm sure we all know examples of Christians that we've known or even ministers or worship leaders that we've known who have done this. So we are not talking here about slipping in and out of salvation in your daily living. We are talking here about whether or not it is possible to commit this very serious sin of apostasy.

That would represent an Arminian perspective on this problem. Next time, we'll come to some assessment of these competing views of Calvinism and Arminianism with respect to the perseverance of the saints. Until then I wish you God's riches blessings.¹

¹ Total Running Time: 21:07 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)