

Eternal Security (Once Saved, Always Saved)

For those who are familiar with the doctrine of conditional security, the idea that your salvation can never be lost once you are saved is disquieting. It seems to be almost a license to sin, since if you slip away from the truth into sin, you will still make it into the kingdom. Since the common view of the kingdom is one where everyone will be equal, this sets up a scenario where someone who was saved but is now irretrievably wicked shares equally with the greatest saint. The inequity of this offends us, so the doctrine of Unconditional Eternal Security (UES) is seen as repulsive.

Answering this objection, UES advocates rightly point out texts which indicate differing levels of reward within the kingdom. But this leaves them with a problem of explaining how an irretrievably depraved person who was formerly a believer could be admitted into the kingdom without repentance. There is no logical or scriptural answer without greatly differing rewards, so "outer darkness" is interpreted to be a place of lesser reward appropriate to these persons.

It is necessary to insert a caveat at this point. It is simply not possible within the framework of a study of this length to do justice to all of the arguments on either side of this issue. There is enough scriptural material to supply a complete seminary level course in systematic theology. Large volumes have been written on both sides of the argument. This study will therefore only cover a few key texts on each of the major points of discussion. Those who wish to learn more will have to explore more comprehensive references.

As we examine UES in detail, it is important for us to understand that it has its foundations in the same truths accepted by advocates of conditional security. The only essential for salvation (Q1) is belief in Jesus Christ. Works of the law (Q2) have no part in our justification. Jesus saves us as a gift (Q3) to us, with no works of any kind required. At this point, we begin to move to the logical errors of the UES position. Since salvation is a gift, it is alleged that Jesus will not accept a return of the gift (Q4). In their thinking, that means that we are stuck with salvation, whether we like it or not. UES advocates do not recognize any other option. But logically, there is another possibility. When we receive a gift, we can set it aside. Throwing salvation away may seem to be offensive, but it exactly what happens when someone who has accepted Christ chooses to turn away from Him.

John 10:28 (Q5) is used to say that when we are saved (in God's hand) there is no way to be removed from that security. One UES proponent states that "the phrase 'no one' is all inclusive which would mean we cannot jump out of God's hand even if we wanted to for some strange reason." A careful examination of the text shows that this is not what is being said. The Greek is *harpazo*, to take by force. Jesus is saying that no third party can reach into His hand and remove those who He is protecting. He is not saying anything at all about the actions of the individual. We are free to reject the gift of security. This text brings us to our next brush with the Greek. Jesus introduces this promise by saying that

27 "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me;

28 and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand.

John 10:27-28

The verbs "hear," "know," and "follow" are in the present indicative active tense, which describes actions occurring at the moment of the statement (Q6). Therefore, this passage states that our security is being guaranteed while we follow Jesus, and says nothing about our status at any other time. UES advocates tend to cry "Foul" at this interpretation, saying that too much is being read into the text. But we must read what the text says. To read into the text that anyone who at one time followed Christ will be guaranteed salvation is to place something there which the inspiration of the Holy Spirit did not tell John to include. We must read what the text does say, not what we would like it to say.

Our next visit with Greek grammar is to examine John 3:16 (Q7). Here, when Jesus promises salvation to all those who believe in him, he is recorded using the present participle. This indicates that the action of belief is not a one time event (aorist tense), but is a continuing action. Thus, there is no support here for the idea of a one-time belief yielding eternal security. When we look at other scriptural passages (Q8), we find that there is a consistent statement that those who continue to be faithful are the ones who will be in the kingdom. The saints are described as abiding in the word, holding fast, and so on. In Revelation, the statements get stronger. To the church at Ephesus, Jesus tells them to repent and return

to their former good deeds or He will remove their lamp stand. To the church at Sardis he says that overcomers will be clothed in white, and God will not remove their name from the book of life. This becomes the strongest statement so far that UES is incorrect. If it is possible to remove your name from the book of life, none of the UES interpretations are correct.

This brings us back to a fundamental principle of interpretation. If there are explicit statements which, taken in context clearly state a particular position on an issue, then those statements should be used to interpret other statements which are less clear. Scripture should never be taken in contradiction to other scripture. There is no competition between scriptural statements to see how many stack up on one side of an issue. Since the Bible is all true, all statements on any give subject will agree. If a contradiction seems to be present, then it is necessary to prayerfully examine questionable texts in the light of clear ones. Our preconceived ideas must never be allowed to rule our understanding. Only the word of God is infallible.

A consistent objection raised by UES supporters is that a requirement to stay faithful constitutes salvation by works (Q9). This, of course, is flatly contradicted by scripture in many places. James tells us that faith without works isn't faith at all, and this seems to support the UES position. But when James' discussion (James 2) is examined carefully, we find that if you claim to have faith, and then do nothing (works) to act on that faith, you are demonstrating that while you have knowledge, you do not have faith. Your works serve as evidence of your faith. They do not save you, your faith allows Jesus to save you. But living faith will be shown to the world by your works.

The logical question which must now be asked is, "If continuing faith is works, is not your first step of faith also works?" As we have seen, while works are associated with continuing faith, they are not the same as faith. Similarly, if continuing faith IS works, then the first act of faith is also works, and is therefore not capable of allowing Christ to impute His righteousness to us to save us. Since no Biblical author even suggests the possibility of that first act of faith being the same as works, then the continuing faith of the saved is not works, either. The argument against the requirement to be steadfast in the faith vanishes when examined properly.

It is important to examine the works argument further. There are two types of works. The first are works which are done in order to become saved. These are worthless, and do not come after one is saved. These are the works which are condemned. The other type are the good works which are done by the action of the Holy Spirit in the saved person. These are truly good works, and are so not because of the individual, but because of Holy Spirit. They serve as a testimony to the Lord and his goodness in saving the sinner. The key difference between the two types of works is the purpose for which they are done. Salvation by works is always condemned, because it is doomed to fail. Works as a result of salvation are always lauded, because they bring glory to God.

UES proponents state that there are no sins after salvation which will exclude the sinner from the kingdom. Paul strongly contradicts (Q10) this view. But the language in which he makes his objection is often misunderstood. He lists a set of sins which would appear to exclude one from the kingdom, in seeming contradiction to the statement that there is one "sin leading to death" (1 John 5:16). UES proponents argue that since all sins can be forgiven, this list refers to sins before conversion. But on closer examination, Paul is saying that one who *practices* such sins will not enter the kingdom. That is, the person in question is sinning in a repetitive, habitual manner. Put simply, this person is not saved! Paul is not concerned with this person's prior status. Only his current status is important. Someone who habitually sins is living in a sinful state. Someone who sins as a result of momentary weakness while otherwise relying on Christ is not in view. That person will confess his sin and be forgiven (1 John 1:9). The person who makes sin his lifestyle will not enter the kingdom.

UES proponents suggest that the fact that no power can separate us from Jesus' love (Q11) implies that there is no possibility of being lost after being saved. Again, when scripture is examined, this argument vanishes. Several statements point out that Jesus loved us before we were converted. He died for us while we were slaves to sin. Thus, he loves all mankind, not just the saved. If being separated from his love meant the same as being lost, then no one would be lost, and this is clearly not the case.

The common argument presented by UES believers is that if a person falls away from the gospel, he was never actually saved. His conversion was merely an appearance, and was not truly of the heart. Once again, when we examine the issue carefully, this is not true (Q12). Paul tells us that we are saved *if* we hold fast, implying the possibility of falling away from salvation. He further tells of some who have turned away from Christ to follow Satan. Some who have returned to a doctrine of salvation by works through circumcision have actually been *severed from Christ!* This denies the possibility that the other

statements were merely bad things that did not hinder eternal security. Christ himself, in the parable of the sower and the seed, tells of some who believe for a while, then under temptation, fall away and are lost. We should also look to Ezek 18:24-31 (and Ezek 33:12-20) where we are explicitly told that it is possible for a righteous man to turn away from righteousness with the result being his death. These statements are so direct that there is no possibility of them being misconstrued.

This raises the question of whether there are any documented examples of persons who were clearly saved, then fell away and became lost (Q13). Three examples are readily apparent. Jesus clearly identifies Judas as one who had believed, then was lost. Saul was lost after having been a servant of God. And Simon, a convert, clearly is identified as a believer. He shortly fell back to his old ways and asked to buy gifts of the spirit. Finally, after rebuke, he re-converted. This last example brings us face to face with an apparent contradiction in scripture (Q14). Heb 6:14-16 says that once someone has been converted and falls back into sin, it is "impossible" to bring them back. Yet Simon fell away and came back. Paul tells us in Rom 11:9-13 that it is possible for Christians to be pruned off for unbelief, then grafted back in. Most of us are aware of similar modern examples. How is this possible?

The answer comes from context. Paul is a Jew writing to Jews in the book of Hebrews. Therefore he uses Jewish style and thought patterns. T. E. Lawrence gives us a good view of this.

"At the very outset, at the first meeting with them, was found a universal clearness or hardness of belief, almost mathematical in its limitation, and repellent in its unsympathetic form. Semites had no half-tones in their register of vision. They were a people of primary colours, or rather of black and white, who saw the world always in contour. They were a dogmatic people, despising doubt, our modern crown of thorns. They did not understand our metaphysical difficulties, our introspective questionings. They knew only truth and untruth, belief and unbelief, without our hesitating retinue of finer shades.

"This people was black and white, not only in vision, but by inmost furnishing: black and white not merely in clarity, but in apposition. Their thoughts were at ease only in extremes. The inhabited superlatives by choice." T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, p. 38

When Paul is saying "impossible," he is using typical Jewish overstatement to make his point. It is similar to Jesus saying that no one can love Him unless they hate their family (Luke 14:26). Just as Jesus did not mean that you should hate your family, but rather love them less than Him; Paul is saying that there is no human power to bring back the apostate. Leave that to God. It is not impossible for a formerly saved person to return to Christ. But the difficulty of winning him is great, and our efforts may be more wisely employed elsewhere.

If Paul believed in UES, he hid it well, because we find him describing salvation in athletic metaphors (Q15), where it is potentially possible for even him to lose out! Just before his death, he says that he has finished the race victoriously, and therefore will have a crown of life in the kingdom. If he thought that there was no chance of losing the crown, his statement there is meaningless. Only when it is possible to fall away from Christ does perseverance to the end have meaning.

Another argument raised by the UES supporters is the idea that God will never forsake us (Q16). To allow someone to be lost after having once been saved seems to contradict God's faithfulness. However, like the other UES arguments, this does not stand up to close examination. God will not be unfaithful to us, but we can be unfaithful to Him. After this, He will respect our choice and will allow us to be lost. He will not impose His salvation on those who do not wish to have it.

While the kingdom of heaven clearly has different levels of reward (Q17), the UES proponents stretch this concept beyond its breaking point. They consider "outer darkness" to be a level of reward in the kingdom. To say the least, this seems strange. When we examine "outer darkness," we find that it is a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Every passage which uses the term includes these modifiers. Gnashing of teeth (Q19) is an expression of anger. No Biblical passage indicates that there will be any anger in the kingdom. God will execute his wrath (anger) on the wicked in judgment, but that is the end of anger. And there will be no more tears (Q20) in the kingdom.

It is impossible to say that a place with anger and crying is part of the kingdom. Therefore, when UES supporters claim that outer darkness is a place in the kingdom, they are ignoring the clear statements of scripture. Further, they are ignoring the clear teachings of Christ in the parables. Those who reject Jesus, whether before or after having once accepted Him, will be lost. The fact that you once believed is irrelevant. Jesus will not force you into the kingdom (Q21). At the end of time we will see a final

polarization into those who love God and those who have declared God wanting. God's people will be saved, and God will respect the choice made by the wicked. They will not be forced to live in a place they have rejected.

UES perverts the gospel (Q22). It does it in several ways. First, it allows license. Salvation is supposed to bring liberty, but UES allows the convert to go back to his old ways without fear of penalty. Consequently, it denies all of the scriptural commendations to be faithful to the end. The life for Christ which changes us into His image is discarded. Preparation for eternity is ignored.

I say this because some godless teachers have wormed their way in among you, saying that after we become Christians we can do just as we like without fear of God's punishment. The fate of such people was written long ago, for they have turned against our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. Jude 4 TLB

If UES were true, the kingdom would be full of people who did not make an irrevocable choice for good. These people would prefer sin, and the only way that God could eliminate sin would be to force them to be robots. This is so contrary to God's way as to be unimaginable. God wishes us to choose His way. At the judgment, He will keep those who have made that choice. We will have all seen the results of sin, and choose to forever avoid it. We will retain the ability to choose, but, because of our choices, we will never again fall back into sin. We will want to sing the song of Moses and the Lamb. But the "saved/wicked" would not be so inclined, and if choice continued in the kingdom, sin would arise again.

God has given us all an inestimable gift. We need only to accept it. Our initial act of belief is not works, nor is any continuing belief. UES states that the continuing belief constitutes works, and is thus salvation by works. We must be wise enough to show the truth of the proposition. When all scripture is examined, continuing faith is not only commended, it is the only way to remain saved. It is not critical that we fall, since all sinful humans fall. What is critical is that when we look up, our eyes are directed toward our Savior. God has no pleasure in the death of any person. He asks that all repent and live.

And now-all glory to him who alone is God, who saves us through Jesus Christ our Lord; yes, splendor and majesty, all power and authority are his from the beginning; his they are and his they evermore shall be. And he is able to keep you from slipping and falling away, and to bring you, sinless and perfect, into his glorious presence with mighty shouts of everlasting joy. Amen. Jude 24 TLB