

Can I Lose My Salvation?

Crucial Questions

R. C. SPROUL

Can I Lose My Salvation?

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Published by Reformation Trust Publishing

a division of Ligonier Ministries

421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771

Ligonier.org ReformationTrust.com

Printed in China

RR Donnelley

0001018

First edition, fourth printing

ISBN 978-1-64289-057-0 (Paperback)

ISBN 978-1-64289-085-3 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-64289-113-3 (Kindle)

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Cover design: Ligonier Creative

Interior typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sproul, R.C. (Robert Charles), 1939-2017

Can I lose my salvation? / by R.C. Sproul. -- First edition.

pages cm. -- (Crucial questions series ; No. 22)

ISBN 978-1-56769-499-4

1. Assurance (Theology) 2. Salvation--Christianity. I. Title.

BT785.S675 2015

234--dc23

2015018384

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Chapter One

Stones of Remembrance

Soon after I became a Christian in college, a friend of mine took me to meet an elderly lady who lived alone in a small trailer. This woman was one of the most radiant Christian women I have ever met. She was an authentic prayer warrior; she would pray eight hours every day for all kinds of concerns. My friend explained to this lady that I had just recently become a Christian. Delighted, she looked at me and said, “Young man, what you need to do is drive a spiritual stake in the ground right now.” I had no

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idea what she was talking about, but she explained to me that I needed to make sure that my conversion was forever. I was to remember this time in my life, the moment of my conversion, so that when I would come to struggles in the future, I would look back to that moment.

Her advice was reminiscent of an event in the book of Joshua, which tells the story of the Israelites' entering the Promised Land. The Israelites had gone through the exodus, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Now, finally, they were preparing to enter Canaan. But this final leg of the journey wouldn't be easy, either.

Between them and the Promised Land was the Jordan River. It was at flood stage; it had overflowed its banks and was about a mile wide. And of course, on the other side were the Canaanites, who had heard of Israel's approach and were preparing to meet them.

As the people of Israel stood by the river, God gave Joshua their marching orders: the priests were to advance to the water carrying the ark of the covenant. As they stepped into the water, the river rolled back twenty miles and the riverbed was dry. And so this whole body of people crossed over the Jordan into the Promised Land.

Then Joshua gave the people an assignment:

When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, “Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe a man, and command them, saying, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priests’ feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodge tonight.’” Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. And Joshua said to them, “Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever.” (Josh. 4:1–7)

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The people were to put a pillar of twelve stones in the middle of this riverbed as a memorial to this event. Then, representatives from each tribe were each to take a stone from the riverbed and set up a memorial at Gilgal, where they were staying that night.

There are examples of this kind of memorial-making throughout the Old Testament. Noah built an altar upon being rescued from the ravages of the flood (Gen. 8:20–22). Jacob set up a memorial after his vision of the ladder reaching to heaven (Gen. 28:10–22). David built an altar at the spot where a plague from the Lord stopped (1 Sam. 24). These monuments marked decisive moments in history for all future generations so that when the people of Israel were afraid and needed consolation, they could look and see this reminder that God was with them. He had brought them thus far and He had promised to take them the rest of the way. In other words, these memorials were to be visible reminders for the people in the midst of their struggle, in the midst of their doubts, in the midst of their fears, to look to the God who had delivered them in the first place.

As my friend impressed upon me, we need this kind of reminder in an uncertain world. As we struggle through

the Christian life, we sometimes wrestle with our security in Christ. We want to be safe, to feel secure, and we need assurance that our security will last. The key question here is, “Can a person who is truly and soundly converted to Christ lose his or her salvation?” Or, more personally, “Can *I* lose my salvation?” This gets at the issue of the doctrine of eternal security, also known as the perseverance of the saints, which is the *P* in the famous Calvinist acronym *TULIP*.

This being such a crucial issue for believers, it has sparked great controversy through the history of the church, leading to a variety of answers to the question. During the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church disputed with the Reformers because the Reformers said that a person can be justified by faith alone, and upon their justification, they can have an assurance of their present state of salvation. But the Reformers made a distinction between *assurance of salvation*—that is, certainty that one is currently saved, with no comment on whether one will remain saved—and *perseverance of the saints*—certainty that one will continue to be saved into the eternal future. Rome denies the doctrine of eternal security and even denies the doctrine of the assurance of salvation except for a special, elite group of saints such as the Virgin Mary or

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Francis of Assisi. Because Rome has always taught that one can commit a mortal sin and thus lose salvific grace, they opposed the Reformation concept of perseverance or eternal security.

Within the Reformation itself, there was a dispute between the Lutherans and the Reformed because many Lutheran theologians took the position that a person can have a present assurance of salvation, but that saving faith can be lost, and with it, one's justification. In the later development of the Reformed churches, there was a fierce debate in the Netherlands. A group called the Remonstrants modified Dutch Calvinism and argued against the perseverance of the saints, taking the position that salvation can be lost.

In the Bible itself, there are many passages that strongly suggest that people can indeed lose their salvation (e.g., Heb. 6:4–6; 2 Peter 2:20–22). And yet, on the other side, there are also many passages that seem to be promises that God will preserve His people to the end. In the latter category, for instance, there is Paul's statement that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). Scripture has a unified message, but it's difficult at times to reconcile these two

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Can Christians commit the unforgivable sin?

Painfully aware of their sin and confronted by the Bible's warnings about falling away, people can sometimes be tempted to think that they are no longer Christians.

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul looks at the Scriptures to see if a true Christian can ever fall away from the faith. He addresses topics such as the unforgivable sin, false converts, and the presence of sin in the lives of believers in this world. When Christians rely on God's promise to preserve them to the end, they gain assurance of their salvation.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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ISBN 978-1-64289-057-0



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