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### **Why We Can't Know Who's Saved**

The topic of whether or not Christians can lose their salvation seems to have come up a lot recently. It's a good question. Salvation is a complicated thing. I'm inclined to say though that such phrases as, "he was saved yesterday" are a bit of a misnomer.

There is not a singular moment when, all of sudden, we are saved. Yes, sins are cleansed in baptism, but we're not set for life after that. Most of us (nearly all) will sin again and soon. Pelagius, a monk and teacher in the late 300s AD did think that baptism was pinnacle of salvation. Once we were dunked, we were pure, and we had better not mess it up again.

St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, understood human nature very clearly and responded with the reality that salvation and conversion is a constant struggle. If everyone who felt unrighteous anger at any point after baptism lost their salvation, there probably wouldn't be very many people in Heaven (except maybe deathbed converts).

But Pelagius is pretty extreme. Most people asking this question aren't questioning what little sins mean, but wonder what happens when a former Christian totally repudiates his/her faith.

Augustine's answer would be that we just don't know anyone's "saved" status. If someone died in the act of cursing the Holy Spirit, that might be one thing. But for the most part, just because someone rejects faith now doesn't mean they always will. We can never know what will happen later in someone's life nor the inner movements of their hearts. Who knows what we will go through and experience before our deaths? For this reason, we can never know or judge whether a person will be saved or not at a certain point in their lives.

It may seem like "Christian O'Connell" is a model Christian, attending church, loving his family, doing prison ministry, but one day he may fall away. Or "Agatha Snarky" who is addicted to heroin, steals for pleasure, and taunts young children as they walk by might see the error of her ways. She could repent and live the rest of her life with a changed heart. After all, the prodigal son returns and is welcomed back as the picture shows.

Salvation is about our whole lives, not just an instant of "being saved." It's possible to accept Jesus into our hearts, be baptized then throw it all away only to pick up the pieces again later. Growing in faith and learning to lead a joyful life in Christ is a lifelong process. We stumble, we fail, we start over. Perfection does not happen over night or even in most of our lifetimes.

It's like the woman whom Jesus forgives of adultery. He does not condemn her, but he says, "go and sin no more." After the singular moment of forgiveness, she is called to turn away from sin and lead a new life. Now, when we continue to mess up, we need to repent again. But the point is that Christ calls her to change her life; it's not just a "You're forgiven. The end."

Grace is not an object that God bestows at a single time, and then we're on our own to keep it or not. Grace is a continual process of God reaching out to us and offering to heal us. We have to use our free will to cooperate. We can freely reject grace (God loves us enough respect our choices even though they might make him sad). But we can turn to grace at anytime.

How people will choose and what affects them is beyond our knowledge.

Do you agree that salvation is lifelong process? Or have you ever been "saved" in a single episode? What did that experience mean to you? What happens when people backslide?

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