

THE ETERNAL SECURITY OF THE BELIEVER

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A DIFFICULT DOCTRINE

The doctrine of eternal security has spawned endless debate within the Christian community - extending back to the 1st Century. The debate is driven not only by exegetical concerns, but just as much by deep-seated emotional concerns as well - especially how a believer's "take" on the matter is apt to influence how he pursues his walk of faith. Millard Erickson puts it well:

- On one hand, a theology that does not affirm eternal security leads to anxiety about one's spiritual condition.
- On the other, a view of eternal security that does not point to genuine conversion leads to "indifference to the moral and spiritual demand of the gospel."¹

While Erickson's point is well taken, neither of the concerns he lists should influence how the whole matter is resolved. Only the text itself should be our focus.

Salvation is rooted in the doctrine of forgiveness. And it's there that we first turn our attention. We will then take up the doctrine of rewards, another doctrine that sheds light on how the matter is best resolved.

FORGIVENESS IS CONDITIONAL

IN MATTHEW 6:9

Let's turn to Matthew 6:9. Here we have the Lord's prayer.

*After this manner therefore pray: Our Father who is in heaven,
hallowed be your name.*

*May your kingdom come. May your will be done in earth, as it is in
heaven.*

Give us this day our daily bread.

*And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned
against us.*

Matthew 6:9-12

Please note carefully verse 12.

Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us.

Matthew 6:12

For its explanation, drop down to verses 14 and 15.

*For if you forgive men their sins against you, your heavenly Father
will also forgive your sins.*

*But **if** you do not forgive those who have sinned against you, then*

¹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 997.

your Father will not forgive your sins.

Matthew 6:14-15

What's this? It appears to be a **condition** linked to the doctrine of forgiveness. God will forgive us *only* if we forgive others; otherwise, God won't forgive us.

FORGIVENESS ALSO

CONDITIONAL IN 1 JOHN 1:9

But is that the only condition linked to the doctrine of forgiveness? Turn with me to 1 John 1:9.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness

1 John 1:9

Here's a second **condition**: *we are required to confess our sins*. Forgiveness is apparently conditioned upon confession also - and, by implication, repentance as well - because true confession always implies repentance.

What we have, then, are two conditions which are evidently attached to God's forgiveness:

1. our forgiveness of others; and
2. confession of our own personal sins.

Does that mean that my salvation is conditional? Can I lose it? After all, salvation is founded upon the doctrine of forgiveness; and if forgiveness itself is conditional, my salvation must be conditional as well. Right? Which is it? Is my salvation sealed? Is it guaranteed? Or can I lose it?

FORGIVENESS IS UNCONDITIONAL

Ephesians 2:8-9, on the other hand, seems to suggest that my salvation is unconditional and forever sealed - meaning it cannot be overturned:

*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the **gift** of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.*

Ephesians 2:8-9

Salvation is a free gift - clearly implying, by definition, that it's not subject to revocation. When I tender a gift, I surrender its ownership - and give up my right to retrieve it. I cannot reclaim it.

Now, let's examine Ephesians 1:12-14.

That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ.

*In whom you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after you believed, you were **sealed** with the holy Spirit of promise,*

*Which is the **earnest** of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.*

Ephesians 1:12-14

The word “*sealed*” in verse 13 conveys the sense of a “*fixed destiny*” - a destiny not subject to change. And it’s the Holy Spirit himself who both *affixes* the seal and who himself *is* the seal. The word “*earnest*” in verse 14 means “*pledge*;” technically, it’s a “*down-payment*” which *obligates* the person tendering it to complete the transaction. Verse 14 teaches us that God has *obligated* himself to finish our salvation - that having undertaken that task, he will faithfully complete it - *utterly*.

Now, let’s examine Hebrews 6:17-18 and then Hebrews 7:25

Wherein God, willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath:

That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us ...

Hebrews 6:17-18

*Wherefore he is able also to save them to the **uttermost** who come unto God by him (Christ), seeing he ever lives to make intercession for them.*

Hebrews 7:25

But, then, once again, what about Matthew 6:9-15 and 1 John 1:9? Both passages, as we’ve already noted, clearly attach two conditions to the doctrine of forgiveness - thereby suggesting that it’s possible to forfeit my salvation if, following my conversion ...

1. I don’t forgive others, or
2. I refuse to confess and repent of my own personal sins.

THE TWO-FOLD MEANING OF FORGIVENESS

Let’s think for a moment. What does forgiveness mean? Actually, we find that forgiveness possesses a very technical meaning in the Scriptures - especially in the New Testament. What does it mean to forgive?

1. God forgives me. What exactly does that mean?
2. I forgive someone who has sinned against me. What exactly does that mean? What does it look like? How does it feel?

The word most often translated “*forgive*” in English is the Greek word “*aphiemi*” (*αφιημι*). And it means *to release; to send away; to let go*. When God forgives, *he releases*. Likewise, when we forgive, we release. And when others forgive us, they release us. That’s the meaning of forgiveness: It means “*Release*.”

But what exactly is it that the act of forgiveness releases me from? God has forgiven me - meaning he’s released me. But from what?

RELEASE FROM WRATH

Turn with me to 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9. Here in this passage of scripture the topic is the judgment of God.

In flaming fire taking vengeance on them who know not God, and who obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ:

Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.

2 Thess. 1:8-9

“Vengeance” here in verse 8 is linked to the word “punished” (implying “penalty”) in verse 9. The penalty the unsaved will bear is “*everlasting destruction.*” Death. But Christ has *released* me from bearing that penalty - from being subjected to the *wrath* of God. And that’s confirmed, of course, in Romans 5:9 ...

*Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from **wrath** through him.*

Romans 5:9

Christ bore God’s wrath for me - in my place. That’s what it means to be forgiven. I’ve been released from bearing the penalty for my sin, death, meaning God’s wrath. I’ve passed from death to life.

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment (unto wrath), but has passed out of death into life.

John 5:24

RELEASE FROM ALIENATION

But is that all? Is that the only release God’s forgiveness secures for me? No. There is a second kind of release as well - and it too is mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 - *alienation from God* - implied in the phrase “*away from the presence of the Lord...*”

Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.

2 Thess. 1:9

I’m released from alienation - meaning that I’m restored to fellowship with God.

*Now all these things are from God, who **reconciled** us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of **reconciliation**...*

2 Cor. 5:18

The word “*reconciliation*” always implies *restoration to fellowship*. Hence, when I’m told in 2 Corinthians 5:18 that I’ve been reconciled to God, the meaning is that I’ve been restored to his presence - my relationship with God has been restored; my alienation from God has been terminated.

So God’s forgiveness has released me in a *twofold* sense:

1. in the first sense: from bearing the penalty of my sin, death, God’s wrath; and, in the second sense,
2. it has released me from alienation. I’m restored to fellowship with God.

Let’s not confuse the two. Let me put it this way to you: many years ago, I

owned a beautiful, brand new, Datsun pickup. I lent it to a friend of mine. He took it up into the foothills to cut down some trees, split them into logs - and then bring them back in my pickup. In the process, he dented up my truck pretty badly. I was very angry when he got home. But he didn't have the money to get it repaired. So, after I calmed down, I forgave him his debt. But I never let him borrow my pick-up again.

1. I released him from paying for the repairs - *that's forgiveness from the penalty of sin*. He owed me close to a thousand dollars due to the dents he made in my truck. And I released him from that debt.
2. *But I didn't release him from alienation - meaning I didn't restore him to my trust*. I kept him away from my pickup from that point on. I never again trusted him with my possessions - implying that I never again restored him to the same level of fellowship with me that he once enjoyed.

Can you imagine the possibility of God releasing us from the penalty of our sins - death; but never again permitting us to enjoy fellowship with Him - at least not on the same level he was willing to extend to Adam in the Garden before Adam sinned? In other words, can you imagine God doing to us what I did to my friend after he damaged my pickup? That would be awful, wouldn't it?

However, God has not only forgiven us the penalty of our sins, death, but, in addition, he has restored us to fellowship - and at a level which actually surpasses the fellowship Adam enjoyed with God. Can you imagine that? In fact, in one sense, God has forgiven us *for the purpose of restoring his fellowship with us*. Ultimately, fellowship is why God has forgiven us.

Once again, it's not just that God has released you from the penalty your sins have so justly incurred; it's that you have been granted the privilege of being brought back again into God's presence. And that's really the purpose of salvation.

Nevertheless, it's critically important to keep these two kinds of forgiveness completely distinct in your mind. Because that distinction provides the solution to the problem we posed just minutes ago. *Can I lose my salvation?* If I don't forgive others, is my salvation put in jeopardy? If I don't confess and repent of all my sins, is my salvation threatened?

1. Wherever in scripture forgiveness is made contingent upon either ...
 - ✓ forgiving others or
 - ✓ confession,... that forgiveness pertains to fellowship.
2. But wherever in the scriptures God makes forgiveness unconditional, that forgiveness pertains to penalty.

Let me give you an example. Let's examine again 1 John 1:9 ...

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our

sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:9

In this case, forgiveness is clearly conditional - it's conditioned upon confession - and, by implication, repentance. God extends His forgiveness only after we've confessed our sins.

But look closely at the context. What's at issue here? Let's read from verse 3 ...

*... what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have **fellowship** with us; and indeed our **fellowship** is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.*

And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all;

*but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have **fellowship** with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

*If we say that we have **fellowship** with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth;*

1 John 1:3-7

What's at issue here is fellowship. To be forgiven here implies restoration to fellowship. The issue here is fellowship, not penalty.

Is it possible, then, for God, following my conversion, to release me unconditionally from the penalty of any sins I may commit, but to only conditionally release me from his alienation? The answer is "yes." When I'm first saved - when I ask Jesus into my heart - I'm instantaneously forgiven in two senses:

- ✓ I'm released from the penalty of sin, death; and
- ✓ I'm released from alienation - and restored to fellowship with God.

But, following my conversion, though my release from the penalty of sin continues to be unconditional, my fellowship with God is conditioned upon forgiving others their sins and confessing and repenting of my own.

In other words, it's possible for a Christian to be in either one of two states:

1. *State #1*

- ✓ released from the penalty of sins, death; and, in addition,
- ✓ in fellowship with God; or

2. *State #2*

- ✓ released from the penalty of sins, death, but
- ✓ alienated from fellowship with God.

The one is a *spiritual* Christian; and the other is a *carnal* Christian; both

are saved, but one is in fellowship with God and the other is estranged from God. He has forfeited his fellowship with God - either because he has not forgiven others of the sins they've committed against him or because he has failed to confess his own sins. It's the very same distinction Paul makes in his First Epistle to the Corinthians.

*And I, brethren, could not speak to you as unto **spiritual**, but as to **carnal**, even as unto babes in Christ.*

I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto you were not able to bear it, neither yet now are you able.

*For you are yet **carnal**: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are you not **carnal**, and walk as men?*

1 Cor. 3:1-3

Notice carefully that Paul addresses those to whom he's speaking as "brethren;" but he tells them that they're carnal, not spiritual. Clearly, then, it's possible to be saved, but not truly spiritual.

Greek Words

ONCE AND FOR ALL

Let's turn to Hebrews 9:12.

... and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption for us

Hebrews 9:12

The phrase "once for all" is a single Greek word, "ephapax" (εφάπαξ). It's used only five times in the New Testament - four of which pertain to atonement - and each time it's so used it conveys the sense of being ...

1. unrepeatable;
2. irreversible, and
3. immutable or unchanging.

#1 Rom. 6:10 *For the death He died, He died to sin, **once for all**; but the life that He lives, He lives to God.*

#2 Heb. 7:26-27 *For such a high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens;*

*who does not need daily, like those high priests (the levitical priests), to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did **once for all** when He offered up Himself.*

#3 Heb. 9:12 *By this will we have been sanctified through the*

*offering of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**.*

Salvation, therefore, is unrepeatable, irreversible, and not subject to change.

EVERLASTING

Now, let's examine a second word that's used in Hebrews 9:12, the word "eternal" in the phrase "eternal redemption."

*... and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained **eternal** redemption for us*

Hebrews 9:12

It translates the Greek word "aionios" (αιωνιος) - which conveys the sense of ...

- ✓ everlasting,
- ✓ never ceasing, and
- ✓ always in full force and effect.

Its use is uniformly consistent throughout the entire Book of Hebrews. The following three verses are examples:

*... how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the **eternal** Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?*

Heb. 9:14

*And for this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, in order that since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the **eternal** inheritance.*

Heb. 9:15

*Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the **eternal** covenant, even Jesus our Lord,*

Heb. 13:20

In each case, the item described possesses the quality of being (1) everlasting, (2) never ceasing, and (3) always in full force and effect.

- ✓ In verse 9:14, it's the Spirit of God;
- ✓ in verse 9:15, it's the inheritance of the saints; and
- ✓ in verse 13:20, it's the covenant of salvation

The following are additional examples; but in each instance the adjective "aionios" modifies a noun that clearly pertains to salvation:

*And being made perfect, he became the author of **eternal** (aionios) salvation unto all them who obey him ...*

Hebrews 5:9

*He who believes on the Son has **everlasting** (aionios) life ...*

John 3:36

*Truly, truly, I say unto you, he who hears my word, and believes on him who sent me, has **everlasting** (aionios) life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.*

John 5:24

Salvation, therefore, is everlasting, never ceasing, and always in full force and effect.

INCORRUPTIBLE

Now, turn with me to 1 Peter 1:23 - and let's examine another adjective that's often used to describe the nature of our redemption:

*Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of **incorruptible**, by the word of God, which lives and abides forever.*

1 Peter 1:23

The word translated "*incorruptible*"² is "*aphthartos*" (αφθαρτος). It means "*undecaying*" - but it actually means more; it means "*not subject to decay.*" The following are a few verses that convey that meaning unambiguously:

*... and exchanged the glory of the **incorruptible** God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.*

Rom. 1:23

Here, "*aphthartos*" is translated "*incorruptible*" - and it's used to indicate that God is not subject to change; He is not subject to decay or degradation. God is "*aphthartos.*"

*... in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised **imperishable**, and we shall be changed.*

² In 1 Peter 1:23, it's important to note that Peter, unlike Jesus in Luke 8:11, does not make "*seed*" a metaphor for "*the word of God.*" Instead, he makes it a metaphor for "*salvation.*" If "*seed*" were merely a metaphor for "*the word of God,*" then, essentially, the verse would read: "You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, which is the living and enduring word of God." No one, whether Calvinist or Arminian, would deny that the "Word of God" is "*aphthartos.*" The original Greek, however, is unambiguous: "ἀναγεννημένοι οὐκ ἐκ σπορᾶς φθαρτῆς ἀλλὰ ἀφθάρτου διὰ λόγου ..." The word "ἀναγεννημένοι" means "having been regenerated." "ἐκ" is the Greek preposition meaning "out of." The question, then, is "*regenerated from what?*" Clearly, "σπορᾶς" the Greek word for "seed." Regeneration, therefore, arises from "out of the seed" - ἀναγεννημένοι ἐκ σπορᾶς - proving, therefore, that "seed" is a metaphor for salvation; and carefully note that the adjective modifying σπορᾶς is φθαρτῆς - "imperishable." Moreover, we should take note that Peter goes to extra lengths to stress the imperishable quality of our salvation by using the contrast οὐκ ἐκ σπορᾶς φθαρτῆς - "*not from out of perishable seed.*" Clearly, then, salvation originates from a seed implanted within the heart of man the moment he's born again - and that seed is "aphthartos" - not subject to decay - imperishable. "διὰ λόγου" is properly translated "*by means of the word.*" "διὰ" is often used to convey the sense of "agency." The agency by means of which it's effected is the word of God. Clearly, salvation is aphthartos. It's not that the word of God is aphthartos - which, of course it is; it's that salvation is also aphthartos.

1 Cor. 15:52

Here, “*aphthartos*” is translated “*imperishable*,” and it’s used to point out that when the dead in Christ are raised in resurrection, their state will not be subject to decay or degradation - sharing the very same quality of holiness possessed by God Himself. 1 Corinthians 15:52 teaches us that “*aphthartos*” is meant to encompass not only our spirit and soul, but our physical bodies as well.

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

1 Tim. 1:17

Here we have “*aphthartos*” translated “*immortal*.” Like Romans 1:23, it’s used here to point out the immutability of God; that God is not subject to change; not subject to decay or degradation. God is “*aphthartos*.”

Now, let’s return to 1 Peter 1:23. And note carefully that the “*seed*” - which clearly symbolizes our redemption - is “*aphthartos*” - not subject to degradation. It may not always germinate to the point of “*bearing fruit*,” but it can’t be destroyed; its potential remains untainted and always intact. It’s “*aphthartos*.”

But there’s more. Salvation is a free gift. Nothing could be clearer in scripture. It’s neither earned nor maintained on the basis of “*works*.” And its only condition is “*belief*.”

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ...

Romans 3:24

He that believes on the Son has everlasting life ...

John 3:36

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that hears my word, and believeth on him that sent me, has everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.

John 5:24