

Can a Christian lose their salvation?

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[0 : 0 0] Yes, so there's two readings today. The first is John chapter 6, verses 35 to 40. This is just after Jesus has fed the 5,000 and has crossed over the sea and the crowd has followed him and he's speaking to them again.

John 6, 35. Jesus said to them, I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet you do not believe.

All that the Father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up on the last day.

For this is the will of my Father that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day. The next reading is John chapter 15.

Starting from verse 1. And this is Jesus speaking to his disciples on the night before his death and he's teaching them to prepare them for his departure. I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser.

[1 : 2 7] Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that 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.

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.

If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

[2 : 3 3] These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you. And that your joy may be full. Well, good morning, everyone. Let's come to God's word.

Let's pray. Lord, I ask for humility for each one of us to interpret reality according to what you say is true.

And I pray that you would reassure each one of us of your steadfast love. And I pray that you would warn us to turn away from the sin that we love, if we're honest.

Warn us to turn away from that because it robs us of just the sweet delight of having peace with you. So, Lord, please speak to us through your word this morning.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, yeah, we come to our second common question that arises in response to the doctrines of grace. The question is, can a Christian lose their salvation?

[3 : 42] So having been saved, can you then lose it? Theologically, this is a pretty easy one to answer.

The bulletin cover is where I want to go. Well, not the bulletin cover, but Romans 8, God's word. Romans 8.30. For those whom the Lord foreknew, he predestined.

Those whom he predestined, he also called. Those whom he called, he also justified. Those whom he justified, he also glorified. Glorified. This is called the golden chain of salvation.

There's no weak link. Salvation is a package deal, a totally free gift from beginning to end. It's all God's doing. It's all God's mercy. We can get ourselves in trouble when we take one of these chains and analyse it disconnected from the rest.

It comes together. So can someone who, having been predestined by the Father to receive his mercy, who received the irresistible inward call of the Holy Spirit through the gospel message, trusting in the redeeming death of Jesus to declare them in the right relationship with God, can that person then trip up and not make it to glory?

[5 : 05] No. It is a very easy question to answer. No. This golden chain has no weak link because each step relies on his grace.

He guarantees it. Not even our faith is the linchpin that holds it all together. It's all him from beginning to end. If God is for us, who can be against us?

But then our experience tells a different story, doesn't it? I imagine that we all know people who we were sure had a solid faith, who professed to be Christians.

We might have admired them for their knowledge of the Bible, their sacrificial service of others, their devotion, and then somewhere along the line they've stopped professing to be Christians.

Yeah, that's right, isn't it? They've abandoned Jesus. Perhaps it was someone who was instrumental in discipling you. Perhaps it's a pastor who ruined their faith in ministry by pursuing an adulterous relationship.

[6 : 20] Or the high-profile Christian celebrities. The latest revelations of Ravi Zacharias is just, it's troubling, isn't it? What do you do with that?

I remember when I was at youth group, I was taught a book by Joshua Harris, I Kissed Dating Goodbye. I'm not necessarily supporting that book, but I was taught it.

This is great stuff. And I got another book on my bookshelf by him. It's about theology called Dug Down Deep. And the subheading is unearthing what I believe and why I believe it.

And yet, in 2019, Joshua Harris on Instagram declares, I've had a massive shift in my life. By all the measurements I can use, I'm no longer a Christian.

What do you do with that? This is someone you go to to learn theology is now saying, I don't believe it. All these people, they rock our confidence in the security of salvation, that once a Christian, always a Christian.

[7 : 32] Our confidence in the doctrines of grace and the peace and joy of being secure has this lingering question over it. Can that really be true? So much experience says something else.

So, how experience seems to contradict Scripture, at least those parts of Scripture that teach God sovereignty and salvation.

So how do we bridge this gap? How do we reconcile this? It's too big a gap to just leave hanging in our heads. How do we reconcile it? Well, I want to suggest four perspectives that help to do that this morning.

We're going to use John 6 and John 15 to help us. So the first one, which we've already started to think about, is our experience and God's word.

Which one is going to interpret which? Now, both of them speak to one another and inform the other. Our experience opens us up to what the Bible is actually saying.

[8 : 42] But which one interprets which? Which one has the final say? Each time we come to God's word, it teaches us what is real, what is true.

And so we're confronted with a choice we may not even realise is going on. We're not just studying what the Bible says, but what the Bible says is true. This is reality. And so we're confronted with, do we believe it?

Our experiences, or more to the point, the conclusions we come to from our experiences, do we trust in that, our own conclusions, based on our own experiences, or do we trust in what Scripture says is real and true?

Which interprets which? Now, I'm sure that there's way more to the story in Joshua Harris' case than what he said on Instagram.

But he at least said publicly one of the main reasons he let Christianity go is that he came to conclusions about homosexuality, and he was so sure on those conclusions that on this one aspect of life, in his own conclusions, that he's got rid of the rest of what Scripture says about reality.

[10 : 02] He made one issue so big in his mind, he was willing to throw in the rest. So when we come to Scripture, we always are faced with the question, which one are we going to let interpret which?

Our experience, our own conclusions, or what God says is true? So when we come to the question, can a Christian lose their salvation, our experience says, yes, it happens.

We hear about it all the time. But like everything else, we need to decide who we're going to listen to. So we need to come to God's word for the authority on this matter.

So let's do that. Let's go to John 15. As we submit ourselves to God's word on the authority, we need to work out what we do with passages like this.

This is John 15, 1 to 11, this picture of the vine and the branches. At first, it's a troubling image, isn't it?

[11 : 15] It's not the only passage that seems to speak of a Christian falling away or being cut off, but we don't have time to deal with them all.

I think this is one of the major ones that rock us. So let's spend our time in John 15. So as we heard in our two readings this morning, both in John's gospel, it sounds like we're hearing a mixed message.

John 6, 37. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me, I will never cast out. Never. And then John 15. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away.

Like a branch and withers, and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. So which is it? Are we never cast out? Never?

Or can we be thrown away? We've got to ask a really important question at this point. Does the Lord speak with a forked tongue?

[12 : 22] Does he say two different things? Is he saying, I'll never cast you out, and I will cast you out? Is that the case?

Like even at a human literature level, taking God out of it for the moment, at a human literature level, if we think someone is contradicting themselves, to respect the person in what they're saying, we should at least assume that they know that there seems to be an apparent contradiction.

And so we go back and go, is that really what they meant? Maybe they meant something else. Surely we should respect even more God's word, that he's not contradicting himself.

This is Jesus' own words that John is reporting. Has Jesus forgotten what he said only a couple of months, years ago? Did Jesus change his doctrine?

Did Jesus change his doctrine? So let's pause and go back and make sure we've understood what Jesus is saying. Instead of assuming that the Lord is speaking with a forked tongue, and therefore we can't fully trust what he says, how about we assume the problem is with us, and make sure we understand what God is saying?

[13 : 42] How do we do that? Well, it's really simple. We apply the normal rules of listening to God's word. I think in a topic like this, the emotions are high.

Like, can I lose my salvation? The emotions are high, and I think we can let go of the tools of interpreting God's word. We need to slow down and listen more carefully.

I'm going to suggest three rules for understanding the Bible, so let's work through these with John 15. So the first one is reading it in context within the book, within the book you're reading, so John's Gospel in this case.

Someone's words can only be understood in context. Don't you hate it when someone takes your words out of context? It does violence to what you meant.

It's like, I wasn't saying that. Please, put it in context. Let's do the same with God's word. So this vine and branch is a metaphor. We quickly get the picture.

[14 : 45] Jesus is the vine, an individual Christian is a branch, and it's up to the branch to produce fruit, which it can only do by remaining in the vine. If it does, it is safe and secure.

It's fruitful. But if it doesn't produce fruit, it's cut off, thrown away and burned. We think we understand the picture. I'm going to suggest we don't.

We need to take a closer look. If this teaching was placed within a context of a gospel challenge, what are you going to do with Jesus?

Then we might have more ground to stand on, to understand it this way, that you've got a choice. Are you going to produce fruit or not? But that's not the context here. We're in John 15.

In chapter 13, verse 1, Jesus has finished his public ministry, and he's now in the upper room the night before he's about to die, and he's with his apostles.

[15 : 44] He's with the inner circle. Judas has already gone to betray him. This is the 11 apostles, maybe a few others. These are the ones Jesus chose.

So this isn't a public gospel context. This is a very private teaching his disciples context. So what also in context, chapters 14 to 16 is one speech, one lot of teaching.

And so the teaching has to be taken together. And it's all about preparing his apostles for his death, which is going to happen the next day, and then his ascension into heaven so that when he's gone, the apostles can carry on his mission as the Messiah in the world.

They've got this huge task ahead of them. It's going to be a painful task, and the Lord is going to leave. That's what Jesus is speaking into here.

What do they need to hear? They need to hear reassurance. They need to have confidence in Jesus. So we hear that in the start of the speech and the end of the teaching.

[16 : 59] 14 verse 1, And at the end of the teaching, 1633, I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace.

In the world you have tribulation, but take heart. I have overcome the world. The point of this teaching is to give his disciples peace and confidence, reassurance.

Because Jesus is the vine, his life is pulsating through them, and so it's connection with him that guarantees success.

Yes, he's leaving, but he's giving his spirit. In another sense, he's not leaving. But it's in him that their mission will be successful. He's reassuring them that they will not be alone.

It's not ultimately down to them to produce the fruit. It's down to the vine. The picture here of the vine and branches is not primarily a threat, but an encouragement.

[18 : 26] I will bring about the fruit. You just depend on me. Okay, so that's the context within the book.

Then we've got to apply another rule, as we do with every part of God's word, and think of the context within salvation history across the whole Bible. Jesus didn't pluck this vine picture out of nowhere.

It comes from the Old Testament. God uses it frequently to talk about Israel, God's people. So listen to a little bit of Isaiah 5.

Isaiah says this, My loved one, talking about the Lord, had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines.

He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. He did it all. He planted his people. He did everything for them. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.

[19 : 36] The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And he looked for justice, but it saw bloodshed.

For righteousness, but heard cries of distress. So Israel is the vine. But when God looked at Israel, all he got was bad fruit.

Or other sections talk about no fruit. Then we've got Psalm 80. And the hope of a better vine comes into view.

And the vine is connected with God's king, the son of man. So I'll just read a few verses from Psalm 80. It's 14 to 15, if you want to look it up later.

Here's the prayer. Watch over this vine. Now, who is this vine? The root your right hand has planted, the sun you have raised up for yourself.

[20 : 37] Then we will not turn away from you. Revive us, and we will call on your name. Restore us, Lord God Almighty. Make your face shine on us that we may be saved. This vine is connected to the sun.

The son of man. God's king. So let's, with that in mind, let's come back to the picture in John 15, the vine and the branches.

I think we focus so much on the branches when we should, our main focus should actually be on the vine. Jesus is saying, I'm the true vine. I am the true obedient son of God.

But I am the Israel that Israel failed to be. Where Israel only produced bad fruit or no fruit, Jesus is now taking the place of God's obedient son.

He will be fruitful. He will be. He is. And all who are connected to him will be fruitful.

[21 : 42] It would call into question his identity as the vine. If the branches connected to him didn't produce fruit. So on first reading, I think we had set up in our mind that this is about two groups.

Those with a very high level of obedience to God. And those who kind of don't produce much fruit. That's not the two groups. This isn't saying a genuine believer can fall away if they're not producing enough fruit.

It's either no fruit or you're connected to Jesus the vine and the vine produces the fruit. It's saying that in Jesus, his life, his life-giving words pulsating through you, he will produce the fruit.

It doesn't say how much fruit. Notice as well. If anything, it implies not enough fruit because we're going to need pruning and that's going to hurt.

But the father does it out of love. He's going to produce more fruit. So don't have in your minds, I'm not producing enough fruit. It's not saying that. It's saying if you're connected to him, you will produce fruit.

[23 : 01] He will guarantee it. And he'll prune us to produce even more. Jesus is the fruitful vine. He's the obedient son. All right, let's quickly apply one last rule.

Some portions of scripture, some phrases here and there are just not clear and we're not sure what it means. But other parts of scripture are clear, either because it comes up in scripture so often that the meaning is clear or a section just says it so clearly that the meaning is obvious.

Which one do we start with to build a doctrine off? Do we start with the little phrase that we're not quite sure what it means or a chunk that meaning is very clear?

Obviously we start with the clear to interpret the unclear. I reckon in this metaphor of the vine and the branches, there's a little phrase in here that I don't find clear.

It says there's this group of people who seem to be in me and yet not produce any fruit whatsoever. Now what's that talking about?

[24 : 15] We could just focus on that and go, well, that obviously means Christians can fall away. But that's just taking one little phrase and building a doctrine off it.

Let's go to somewhere clearer to interpret that little phrase. And that's why we've read this morning John 6 as well. So let's listen carefully to John 6.

If you want to turn there, that would be great. John 6. Verse 37. I hope you hear in this very similar golden chain like in Romans 8.

Listen to this in John 6. All that the Father gives to me will come to me. All.

All. All. Not most. All. The people whom the Father gives to Jesus will come to Jesus. The gospel will take effect in their hearts.

[25 : 23] Every single one. And whoever comes to me, I will never cast out. Why is that? For I have not come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

All the Father gives to Jesus will come to Jesus. All who come to Jesus will never be cast out. He will raise them up on the last day. There's no gaps in there.

It's a beautiful promise. Not one is lost out of his hand. That's the clear part in John's gospel.

[26 : 28] Let's use that as our starting point to work out what is this group of branches that don't produce fruit. It can't. I think we can only be clear here on what it can't be.

It can't be genuine Christians. It just can't be. Because if you're connected to the vine, the vine's life will produce fruit.

All who come to Jesus will be raised up on the last day. It can't be a Christian that this group is talking about.

That's what we can be sure of. I think we can also make a stab. Maybe this is people who are in the church, the visible church, and who receive God's word all the time, surrounded by the ministry of God's people, but it never really changes their deepest desires.

You may want to change your moral behavior. You enjoy the community. But your deepest desire to know God, to want to please God, it never moves you fully.

[27 : 43] Maybe it's talking about that, that the church is always mixed. Maybe it's saying that. But what we can be sure of is that those who are in Christ, in the vine, will produce fruit.

How much fruit is not the question. But they will change your attitudes. Okay, having said all that, having used the rules, I think we're ready to ask the question, what is the point of all the warnings in the Bible about not being saved?

There are quite a few warnings. I'll use the metaphor that I found helpful. I found helpful and convincing. So when you're going on a bushwalk, picture, I can't even remember the name of it, Blue Mountains, that's what it's called.

When you're going on a bushwalk and you come near to the edge of a cliff and there's this bright yellow sign warning you, stay away.

If you fall off, you will die. What's the point of that sign? Don't come near there. You will die. Don't fall off.

[28 : 59] Does there need to be a single person to fall off to make that sign a legitimate warning? No, that's the point of the sign.

The sign is saying, don't go here. It's a legitimate warning. Don't come here. No one has to fall off for that warning to be true.

The purpose of the sign is to keep every single one safe. I think that's the point of the warning passages in the Bible. Every believer that listens to God's word, and that is every genuine believer, will heed the warning.

If you give up on Christ, you will die. Hearing that, a believer will go, I don't want to give up on Christ then. That's a very scary prospect.

It's much better for us to obey Christ out of delight in him, but like we're saying, our hearts are prone to wander. Sometimes God loves us by warning us.

[30 : 08] You want to go down there? You think the grass is greener? No, it is not greener. It is a cliff edge. Just think about that for a moment. He loves us by warning us to stay with Christ.

Not a single one has to fall off for that warning to be true, and that warning is actually a very loving thing. It's one way the Lord keeps us safe to make sure we make it home to heaven.

Okay, so that's the warning passages, and feel free to talk to me more afterwards if I haven't quite answered your questions. Moving sideways a little bit.

Another reason I think we can doubt whether we will make it to the end is that when we are purposefully pursuing sin and clinging on to sin, consciously aware that we are turning our backs on God, we feel distant from God, don't we?

We feel like he's so far away. We can lose the enjoyment of being saved. We can lose that in those moments because we're turning our back on God.

[31 : 25] Of course we're going to feel distant from him. But losing the enjoyment of our peace with God is not the same thing as losing the reality of being at peace with God.

It's not the same thing. So, again, a picture I found helpful. Picture the family. A child has a choice whether to embrace or go against the rules of the parents.

If they embrace the parents' instructions, which are given for the sake of the child to flourish, the child will feel the warmth of the parents. They'll be at ease together, able to laugh together and hug and able to know their father's smile.

It will be a very warm environment. But if a child goes against the parents' instructions, the experience of peace is forfeited. The parents out of love will need to discipline them.

Has the child stopped being a child? No. But the loss of peace, there is a loss of peace and enjoyment. They are still and always a child.

[32 : 32] So, when we're pursuing sin, it can rob us of the enjoyment of peace. But it doesn't take away our state of being a child of God.

And as we saw in the vine metaphor, the character of God is that he pursues us. He prunes us. Or we hear in Hebrews 12, he disciplines us.

A father out of his love disciplines us. It can be painful, but we should receive that as from the hand of a loving dad and turn back to him.

Now, I think when it comes to interpreting others and where they stand with the Lord, I think we need to be careful not to ride them off.

So, think of Joshua Harris. We do not know his heart. We don't. The Lord may bring him back. That's not ours for the side.

[33 : 39] That's the Lord's doing. That's the Lord. So, let's not ride people off too quickly. What we can do is focus on our own hearts. And whether we are pursuing a delight in being at peace with God or whether we're consciously turning away from him.

So, let's not confuse the loss of enjoyment with the actual loss of salvation. They're two different things.

And let's respond to discipline, knowing that we're secure in God's family and he disciplines us because he loves us. So, as we finish, we've got one last perspective.

Can a Christian lose their salvation? The answer is still no. No. If we have a healthy understanding of God's sovereignty and our responsibility, Scripture always presents both as absolutely true.

One doesn't rule out the other. I know we can't get our heads around how it works, but both are true. It's never either or, but both end. Then, like last week's question, we should be careful to assign to God's role in salvation what is God's and assign to us what is us.

[35 : 05] And let's not mix up the two. It's the Lord's business to promise unconditionally, whoever comes to me, I'll never cast out. I should lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up on the last day.

That's his business. That's his promise. And it's great that he shares that promise with us. So, what's the question for us personally?

What's our responsibility? What's our business to focus on? The question is still, what will you do with Jesus? Or to use the language of the metaphor we've looked at this morning, are you abiding in the vine?

The question of the gospel is, are you abiding in the vine? That's our responsibility each day. We can do nothing by ourselves. We need his life pulsating through us.

So, what does that look like? I think it looks like we keep listening and depending on his life-giving words. And we see that in the text.

[36 : 15] Verse 3, already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me and I in you. Verse 7, if you abide in me and my words abide in you.

Verse 9 and 10, as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. To keep having a vital connection with Jesus is to have his life-giving words flowing through us.

Wanting him to pulsate through us. Each day, every single area of our lives. I know we don't always pursue it, but this is our responsibility.

To abide in him. Abide in his word. Let God worry about whether a Christian can lose their salvation or not. That's his business. And he says, no.

A Christian cannot. All that the Father gives me will come to me. I will raise them up on the last day. Safe in his promises, knowing he will get us home.

[37 : 22] We're to focus on abiding in his love. He's divine. He will produce the fruit. He'll prune us. Our responsibility is to abide. Will you pray with me?

Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, I especially pray for those who are worried about their own salvation, whether they're secure or not.

I pray that your words will form just such a bedrock in their heart that they will rest on your promises, that all who come to me I will never cast out and I will raise up on the last day.

Please reassure each one of us so that safe in you, we will continue to pursue you, knowing you deeper and wanting to please you with the way that we live.

So please reassure our hearts. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.