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Introduction

Hebrews 3:12-14 (NASB)

¹² Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart *that falls away from the living God*.

¹³ But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

¹⁴ For we have become partakers of Christ, *if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end*,

Many Christians read and understand the above passage in the following way: "Brethren, reduce the sins in your life as much as possible, and keep them at a minimum level until the end, so that you will not lose your salvation from hell by any chance." In a nutshell, this interpretation implies that born-again believers are in danger of being cut-off from salvation by God, without notice, at any time, if they exaggerate in doing sinful deeds and do not watch out. The purpose of this article is to prove that this passage and the "falling away" (departing) depicted here does not talk about the possibility of born-again believers ever losing their salvation because of sinning. Instead, it deals with another kind of separation from the living God.



Problems with the General Interpretation

Let's suppose for a moment that it is possible for believers in Christ to lose their salvation through sin. This presupposition introduces a number of problems:

How many sins are necessary to make us lose our salvation?

When we think of sin, we mostly think about big immoral sinful deeds. But what about other day-to-day sins that we are not even aware of (i.e. gluttony, not loving God or our spouse as much as God loves, etc.) or sins of omission? Are not these capable of making us lose our salvation anytime?

If our salvation depends on our level of holiness, does not this mean we are adding our works to the sacrifice of Jesus as a condition for maintaining our salvation? What do we do then with Hebrews 10:11-14 that shows clearly that believers' past, present, and future sins are all remitted at the moment of salvation?

Once we lost our salvation, can we get it back? If yes, that would entail getting baptized in water and with the Holy Spirit again, and that cannot be found anywhere in the Bible.

In case we cannot get salvation back, how do we know when we crossed the point of no return? Is there such a deciding and specific point? If indeed we can lose our salvation, how come this process is not described in detail nowhere in the Bible? How can we know when we lost it? Since this is not a trivial issue, but a matter of life and death, most Christians would like to know about this and the Bible should have definitely covered it. But it does not. The gospels and the epistles mention very clearly how we can be saved and when is the exact moment when we can know for sure that we are saved (Romans 10:9-10). However, it does not mention anywhere clearly when we can know that we are fallen away from salvation.

What Does Hebrews 3:12 Actually Mean?

In light of the above presupposition, the falling away depicted in our initial passage must mean something else than losing our eternal salvation. Prior verses quoted from Psalm 95 warn Israel not to repeat their mistakes in the wilderness. There, Israel lost faith in God. They gave in to fear, and that led to disobedience and stubbornness. They did not "hold fast," and as a result, that generation was not allowed to enter into the Promised Land. However, God DID NOT SEND Israel back into slavery in Egypt. Here, the application of the Psalm is made explicit. The Israelites' lack of trust caused them to fall away from God, and this resulted in them not enjoying the benefits of the Promised Land. The author of Hebrews is warning the Jewish Christians who read these words not to make the same mistake. The context makes it clear that salvation is not at stake.

The Promised Land is not a metaphor for heaven. Israel's rescue from Egypt is the symbol of salvation. God's wrath against the Jewish people in the wilderness was not to send them back to Egypt (symbolizing a return to an un-saved state). Rather, it was to deny them the blessings of the promised inheritance. Parts of chapter 4 will further support the idea that the author is speaking of sin in the life of a saved believer, not the potential loss of salvation.

The Promised Land for the new creation in Christ is not the future new heaven and new earth, but it is rather all the benefits of the extraordinary inheritance won at the cross by Jesus, applied, lived and enjoyed here on earth. They are: freedom from condemnation of sin, the gift of righteousness, physical healing, prosperity, holiness, love, joy, wisdom and peace. In the new heaven and the new earth, there will not be any giants to slay by faith. The giants of sickness, poverty, failure, depression, condemnation, hate, anger are here on earth.

The gospel of salvation has 2 parts: a lesser negative part (forgiveness of sins and escape from hell for eternity) and a greater and positive part (spiritual life from the eternal realm into the everyday life here in earth). The lesser part is just a means to an end. The lesser is included in the greater.

Any sin has some natural pleasure in it, that is why is tempting. However, it is a deceitful pleasure, because it brings with it spiritual death. When we sin, immediately in our minds a gap and a separation is created between us and our loving God. That is not the reality in the spirit, but it is just in our minds. All of a sudden we see God upset with us and we cannot expect Him to do anything for us since we wronged Him. As a result, we do not even dare to ask for anything in faith anymore. We are slowly dragged into condemnation, and into a mentality of the Law and works because of our conscience, which needs to be washed and adjusted to the reality that is in the Spirit. When we sin, it is not the Holy Spirit trying to convince us that we sinned, but our conscience, which condemns us. If we look at the bigger context of the whole book of Hebrews, we can notice that the entire book is one of contrasts and comparisons. It compares the new things in Christ to the old ones. It shows how Jesus Christ is superior to the fathers and prophets of the old (chapter 1), superior to the angels (chapter 2), superior to

Moses (chapter 3), superior to Joshua (chapter 4), and superior to the Levitical Priesthood (chapter 5), in which the priests offered sacrifices day in and day out in the temple. From a historical standpoint, the early church was made up of mainly Christian Jewish believers. These Jewish believers, believed in Jesus the Christ, as the Messiah, but they had come out of centuries of their families being steeped in the traditions of going to the Jewish temple to get their sins covered again and again on the holy day of atonement, and offering other ongoing sacrifices. As a consequence, they had a tendency of falling away from the simple salvation by faith to salvation through the Law and works.

So when we sin, a falling away and a separation happens in our minds between us and the living God and His great love. That separation affects our practical lives and kills our faith in all areas of life. As a result, the access to the inheritance of spiritual life (healing, prosperity, peace) that lays in us in Christ in the spiritual realm is cut off and we can no longer enjoy its benefits in the material world. It is not because God cut the access, but we cut ourselves off through unbelief caused by sin. Sin does not make God angry anymore in the New Testament because of Christ's sacrifice, but it blocks the spiritual life inside of us to manifest (it blocks faith, love, power, joy, peace, etc) and results ultimately in emotional and physical death to us. It's like a vicious cycle: the more we sin, the less we accept, feel, and experience the unconditional love of God in our lives; the less faith we have, and the more we try to measure up to the standard of God through our holy works, failing miserably.

When we hold fast and firm to the initial assurance of faith, we begin to reign now in life from the spiritual realm into the material world, and we begin to actualize here on earth what it means to be "partakers of Christ" (v. 14) or partakers of a divine nature.

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