

If You Continue: How God Keeps Us Saved

Romans 11:19-24

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This week my 6-year-old daughter told me about a conversation she had with a friend at school. Her friend asked her, "How old is your dad?" "51," my daughter replied. Her friend said, "Wow, he must be in heaven!"

At least one little girl is confident of my eternal state. Many people are not confident of where they will spend eternity. I can't tell you how many times as a pastor I have been asked about whether Christians can lose their salvation or not. The vast majority of people who ask me are hoping I say, *No! Christians cannot lose their salvation*. But there are some denominations and the Roman Catholic church who teach that you can. A good debate among thoughtful Christians would likely include both sides lining up their verses that seem to endorse and substantiate their position. Who wins? The one who has the most verses? The loudest voice? The most likes on social media?

Here is certainly one point of agreement—we should all sorrow at the person who once professed Christ but now does not. As an example, this year a prominent pastor and author did just that. Joshua Harris said he no longer believes in Christianity. Who was Joshua Harris? Did any of you read this book in the '90s, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*? It was a New York Times bestseller. He was like 20 when he wrote it. By the time he was 30 he was a megachurch pastor in Washington DC with a huge following.

This summer, Josh announced he was divorcing his wife and leaving Christianity altogether. He seems to not believe in God anymore, much less the gospel. In light of this and if nothing changes, how would you answer the question, *Will Joshua Harris go to heaven when he dies?*

We will leave that final determination to God. But this is hardly an unimportant issue in Christian churches and families where you have many nominal Christians who enthusiastically professed Christ at some point in their life but are either not actively following Jesus or blasé about the importance of the gospel in their lives. Is that saving faith?

I get asked often, *do you believe in eternal security?* I generally cringe because I'm sure most of the time what they mean by eternal security is not what I mean or what I think the Bible teaches about the security of the believer. My official answer is yes, I do believe in eternal security, but perhaps not in the way some people do. There is a way to believe in eternal security that is wonderful and assuring and there is a way to wrongly apply it that can mislead and eternally secure you in hell.

We are talking about this because our series in Romans has us in chapter 11 and an illustration Paul uses that could seem to say that a Christian can lose their salvation. Is that what it means? Here is the text,

"If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not

you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you." (Romans 11:16–21, ESV)

Paul illustrates the Gentiles' place in God's salvation like an olive tree. It's a very common tree to this day in the Middle East. The roots of this tree are the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and promises God made to them. The tree is the true people of God, which through the Old Testament was dominated by Jewish branches—Moses, David, Daniel, and thousands of other faithful Jews. These are like those described in Hebrews 11. They didn't know Jesus, but they looked ahead and trusted the promise of God about a Messiah. But when Jesus came, the Jews by and large rejected him. *"They were broken off because of unbelief."* (Romans 11:20) They had patriarch DNA but not patriarch faith. They didn't believe, and God broke their branches off.

Gentiles are like a wild olive tree whose branches God grafts into the patriarchal people-of-God tree. He implants us in this tree of eternal life. The point? Gentiles, don't be arrogant about your place. Don't become comfy or entitled. That's what the Jews did, and God broke off their branches. God's grace gives us a place in the people of God.

"So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree." (Romans 11:20–24)

Let's look at the last two verses as they are easy to understand. *"And even they [the Jews who have been broken off because of unbelief], if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again."* (Romans 11:23-24)

You know what that is saying? These branches that have been broken off because of unbelief, we think, they're done for; no hope for them. But wait, we are talking about God here. He has the power to graft them in again. What is required? The same thing required no matter who you are—you must put your trust fully in the gospel of Jesus Christ. God can take the most broken off branch, apparently dead branch, and graft it in, give it eternal life. Particularly for the Jews, this whole tree is compatible with their legacy. They fit well. They fit naturally. We are the wild olive branches, but they are grafted back into the tree of their forefathers. God has the power to do that.

God not only has power to graft back in the prodigal Jew. God's power can graft in the most wayward of Gentiles too. Such is the grace, power, and forgiveness of God.

But what about verse 20? *"So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you."*

Who are the natural branches God didn't spare? Ethnic Jews who did not trust in Jesus. That is not to say they didn't have faith. They most certainly did. But what was their faith in? Their DNA connection to the patriarchs. Their attempts at righteousness by obeying the Old Testament law. What did such faith breed in them? Pride. Entitlement. That is why verse 20

says, *"Do not become proud, but fear."* Essentially the failure was their sin of presumption. *I deserve this.*

Why is that a problem? Because it is the exact opposite of salvation by grace. Grace says, *I don't deserve it, but God blessed me anyway.* Presumption looks to self for status before God. Grace looks to Jesus for status before God. Presumption is self-salvation and God will break off any branch, even a Jewish branch, that approaches him based on self-righteousness.

Spiritual presumption comes in many forms. I'm in with God because I'm _____. I'm Protestant. I'm Catholic. I'm Baptist. I'm whatever. God breaks off the branch of presumption. To this Paul gives three admonitions to Gentile believers who want to avoid being broken off and stay in the tree.

Three Admonitions to Gentile Believers

Fear

"So do not become proud, but fear." (Romans 11:20)

Fear seems un-Christian, but then what sort of fear is he urging? Not terror fear but reverent fear. Holy Fear. This is the kind of reverent wonder all Christians should have that God would save someone like us.

"Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." (1 Corinthians 10:12)

Think soberly about the kindness and severity of God

"Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness." (Romans 11:22)

The kindness of God and the severity of God, these are like two divine counterbalances. Both are true in God. The kindness of God is the grace, love, and mercy of God.

But we must also consider the severity of God. The NIV translates it, *sternness*. The lexicon includes *harshness*. This side of God flows from holiness and justice. God was severe in his judgment on those branches that were broken off.

One of the great failures in evangelical Christianity is that we have distorted God by emphasizing only those qualities we like about God. We pick and choose the God we want and end up with a theology that looks like a Picasso painting; a weird, distorted deity. For example, we like his love, which is amazing and wonderful. But when you only think of the love of God void of his wrath at sin you don't believe in the penal substitution of Jesus on the cross and end up with universalism. Everyone's saved in the end. God is love, right?

There are some people who focus on God's sternness apart from love and grace. Their churches are sad places where no one is allowed to smile. There is no grace in the church, no grace in their homes, because there is no grace in their God. He is all severity, which is also a distortion.

Here we see the amazing beauty of God in apparent opposite qualities in harmony within the true God. He is both love and wrath. Grace and severity. Mercy and judgment.

Why are both so critical? Perhaps you are here today and you are all about the love and grace of God. So much so that you quietly excuse sin in your life. So much so that you don't really worry about your status before God or your eternity. *Who cares? God loves me no matter what.* My dear friend, that's what the Jews thought and look at their broken off branches. You need to soberly consider the glory of the holiness of God.

But maybe you are here, and your conscience is constantly plaguing you. You have trusted in Christ; you have confessed, you have sought forgiveness from God and man, yet you still feel condemned. What character of God do you need? His kindness. His anger should make us serious and his love should make us joyous.

Continue

"Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness." (Romans 11:22)

This is where the grafting illustration is very helpful in understanding God's promise to keep us saved. If we go back to the illustration of the tree, how do we know which branches are saved in the end and which are not? Easy, those branches broken off? Not saved. Those branches still in the wild olive tree? Not grafted and not saved. The only branches that are saved are those who remain in the tree. Agreed? Staying in the tree is what Paul calls here *continuing in his kindness* (Romans 11:22). The broader doctrine of continuing in grace is called the perseverance of the saints.

*"The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God's power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again."*¹ (Grudem)

You see in this definition the two key biblical concepts of perseverance. God does the preserving and saints do the persevering.

Two Biblical Concepts of Perseverance

The preserving work of God

Is this not the grand point of Romans 8? *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"* (Romans 8:35) He lists every possible threat and summarizes, *"nothing else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:39) This verse and many, many others emphasize that God's saving work in us began before the world was created in election and is guaranteed all the way to heaven. Remember this, *"And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."* (Romans 8:30)

This is the golden chain of salvation in which every key aspect is something God does. He. He. He. There's no me, only he. There is enough just in Romans, much less the rest of the Bible, to assure us that when God saves us, he guarantees that we will be saved to the end.

God preserves us by his power. And we should be forever glad. If our salvation depended on us keeping ourselves saved, we wouldn't last the day. Our power is weak. Our sinful flesh is

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 788.

strong. We can't preserve ourselves. Only God can do it and he promises that he always will.

What does God's preservation look like in the life of the believer? How do you know if someone is being kept in salvation by the power of God? They *continue in God's kindness*. (verse 22) or what theologians call...

The perseverance of the saints

Perseverance means that we will continue in the faith until we die. We will not leave, forsake, apostatize because God's spirit is continuing to give us life. We are remaining in the tree nourished by the power of God. We continue. We persevere. The Greek word means "remain."

See how these fit together? Our perseverance is dependent on God's preservation and power. God preserves. We persevere. Does this mean we don't sin? No. Does this mean we don't doubt? No. Does this mean we don't wander? No. It means that because of God's work in us we will continue to believe, trust, and follow Jesus until we die.

So, what happens if we don't? What if we walk away from the faith and never return? There are some who say that person lost their salvation. OK. Some good people take that position and many churches in our area believe that. But what about all the promises God has made to preserve his people? What about Jesus saying that he would not lose one of his sheep and many other passages that are difficult to explain if a true regenerate Christian can lose their salvation?

This is why it is far better and more biblical to see the person who walks away from the faith as someone who never was truly regenerate or saved in the first place.

Many years ago, I ran the Indy mini marathon. It's a huge event with many thousands of runners. Most like me were just hoping to finish, but there are professional runners who are running for records and prize money—mostly from Kenya it seems. They were placed at the front of the starting line.

Every year at his race, there is a group of guys who drink beer all night and then somehow weasel their way to the front of the starting line, along with the Kenyans. Their goal? To get on TV. So, the gun goes off and these guys sprint as fast as they can and for maybe 50 meters or so, they are leading the marathon and on TV! Very quickly, guess what happens? Around 50 meters, here come the Kenyans, accelerating at precisely the time the beer-drinking dudes are very much decelerating. Once the Kenyans are past them, they quit the race and go find a pub to brag about how they were in the lead of the largest mini marathon in the country.

Here's my question, at the starting line how do you know who are marathon runners? Among the thousands, who are the real deal? Answer: you don't know. You also don't know in the earliest parts of the race because many people can appear to be marathon runners for a while. It's hard to say. How do you know who are real marathon runners and who are pretending to be marathon runners? Real marathon runners finish the race. Real marathon runners persevere.

How do we know if someone who professes Christ is actually a Christian? In the ultimate sense, we don't know. Do we know for sure in the early laps of their walk? No. How do we know? How can I know? The longer I live grafted in. The longer I am faithful to Christ. The

more spiritual miles I have behind me in my race, the more I discern God's power active in my life. God's transformation at work in my life. God's grace keeping me in the race. The actually saved will finish their race in faith. "*He who began the good work in you will bring it to completion*" (Philippians 1:6). Always.

Is that eternal security? Yes, but do you see how that phrase is so reductionistic as to be perhaps unhelpful? Paul doesn't say, *don't worry*. He says, *fear*. Paul doesn't say, *just think about the love of God*. He says, *consider the kindness and the severity of God*. He doesn't say, *you prayed the prayer, you're good. No worries*. He says, *IF you continue in his kindness*.

All this should bring a seriousness to our running of the race. The warnings are intended to keep us in the race. The Word of God is water and refreshment when we are weary. The church is our running club and companions urging each other on. When we think about quitting, we should consider the eternal consequence of the wrath of God. When we think we are unworthy, we dwell on the kindness of God. Both are needed to make it to the finish line.

So, where are you? If you haven't even started the race, the gospel is for you. Trust in Jesus as your Savior and begin a lifelong journey with Jesus. If you are a pretender—perhaps for a long time—going through the motions without too much concern, time and God's judgment will unmask your charade. Why not confess and believe today no matter who would be surprised? Shock your family by getting baptized. Let them know you are thinking about God, not them. If you are weary and wondering if you will make it to the end, take heart. You are kept in the race by power of God who guarantees all who begin in faith will continue in faith and will finally step across the finish line into eternal life. I hope very much to see you all of you there.

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