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Do These Verses Contradict “Once Saved, Always Saved”?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether Revelation 2:1-7 and Colossians 1:21-23 can be reconciled with a belief in “once saved, always saved.”

* I’ve always believed “once saved, always saved,” but passages like Revelation 2:1-7 seem to say otherwise. What am I missing?

* How does one reconcile Colossians 1:21-23a with the teaching of “once saved, always saved”?

Transcript

[Music] This is Stand to Reason’s #STRask podcast with Amy Hall and Greg Koukl. Welcome, wonderful listeners, and welcome Greg. Good morning, Amy.

Okay, let us start. I have a couple questions that are related, so we'll start with the first one. This one comes from Mark.

I've always believed, once saved, always saved. However, passages like Revelation 2, 1-7, particularly verse 5 seem to say otherwise. What am I missing? I'm looking at the passage now, and this is a passage in the book of Revelation in which there are series of letters that are recorded by John to be sent to churches that are existing at that time in the Mediterranean region.

Okay, this particular one is to the church at Ephesus, alright. Verse 5 says this, "Therefore remember from where you have fallen." Incidentally, in each of these letters, you have an exhortation. There is only one church that is not, in a sense, exhorted negatively.

What's the word I'm looking for? It's not chastised. Can't remember which one that is. Most of these churches are doing pretty well, but they also need some correction.

Some one at least is doing very poorly. Alright, so this is the nature of these letters.

Alright, and so this to the Church of Ephesus.

Verse 5 says, "Therefore, after He's given the affirmation and the correction, He says, "Remember from where you have fallen and repent and do the deeds you did at first, or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place." Unless you repent. Okay, now it is, I think it's understandable to read this as an example of someone losing his salvation. But remember, we are not talking about someone here.

This letter is written to a church. And the thing that is lost is the lampstand. So you have to read this as applying to individuals, and you have to read lampstand as one's individual salvation in order to conclude that this is a verse that may be suggesting we could lose our salvation.

Alright, but that's not what's going on here. This is a church, and the church, as Jesus said, is a light to the world. You put a bushel over the light.

The light goes out, it's not lighting the darkness. Alright, this is serving on the monstah. Alright, so here you have different local churches that are lights to the world.

They're a lampstand. If they do not continue faithfully, the church is going to die. The lampstand, the light will go out, the lampstand will be removed.

And this is, I think, what Jesus is saying here in these letters. Again, verse 5, "Therefore remember from where you, church and Ephesus have fallen, repent and do the deeds you, churches, Ephesus did it first, or else I am coming to you and remove your life." So there are behaviors, even in good churches, that result in, in a certain sense, the light going out. They no longer represent the truth adequately enough to oppose the darkness.

I mean, this is a very straightforward way of understanding this passage. Reading these terms, the you being spoken of here as the church enefices, this is obvious in the context. And then the lampstand as a metaphor for the light that the church casts, which will be removed.

Alright, classically, characteristically, this is understood to me that the church will lose its influence and will no longer have a significant place in the work of God in that area, which is exactly what happened to most of these churches. Trying to remember which one was the worst, so which one was the best, but there you have it. I mean, I think this is, this is a sound explanation that is completely consistent with the context that does not in any way suggest that an individual person's salvation is lost.

So as a follow-up, here's a question from Angie. How does one reconcile Colossians 1, 21 through 23A with the teaching of once saved, always saved? Alright, so same issue here. Let's go to another text.

And before I read this text, I want to say something about this. I think that I am convinced that real regeneration is irreversible. Alright, I'm qualifying my statements here very carefully.

If a person is genuinely born again, that person cannot get unborn again. Again. Okay, because it is a miracle of a transformed nature that has all kinds of ramifications.

We are a new creature, old things have passed away, new things have come. Paul says to the Corinthians, if you read Ephesians chapter 1, the first half of that chapter. It's just unbelievable what God has done by the kind of intention of his will to us who are now regenerated.

Okay? So notice how I answer this challenge. I start theologically. I am asking, well, I did make reference to different verses, but notice how I'm making a theological point that the nature of regeneration seems to be a little bit more difficult.

So I am looking at the work of the cross and its application to individual believers. And I am seeing what the Scripture teaches about that theology. And I come to the conclusion that genuine regeneration is irreversible.

I'm going to go through that whole thing here, but I'm just telling you my approach. So when I come to passages, frankly, you're going to get individual passages that can take you in either direction. Some individual passages seem to suggest you could lose your salvation and some seem to suggest you can't.

And that's why I try to use the theological tool rather than a proof texting approach because you have this competition. If the theological thing establishes the doctrine well, then I think it's fair to look at these verses that seem to teach otherwise and ask yourself the question in light of what seems to be well established theological point here, what could be going on in this passage. The first passage we looked at wasn't even talking about individual salvation book of Revelation.

In Colossians, it seems to be. So let's look closely at it. Although the passage is just starting verse 21, Amy.

Let's see here. 21 through 23. Okay.

And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind engaged in evil deeds, yet he has now reconciled you in his fleshly body through death in order to present you before him holy and blameless and beyond reproach. If indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard. Now, there it seems, and there are actually two ways to approach this, the possibility of losing salvation.

One is that you can sin your way out of salvation. All right. And to that, I have a question.

If the blood of Christ is meant to cancel sin, how does sin cancel the blood of Christ? Okay. That's a very fair question. I don't think that's ever a genuine option.

The other way, Avenue, is that the faith that brings you into relationship with Christ can be abandoned so that you lose that relationship with Christ. Now, like I said, I think this creates a problem of reversing the supernatural act of regeneration that was part of becoming a Christian to begin with. But oftentimes what you're going to see in warnings like this, and there are a number of them, especially in the Book of Hebrews, have to do with the individual Christian's experience.

What I think, what I'm going to say this is true. If you continue, then these things apply. If you don't continue, then they don't apply.

So there's a conditional that Paul is talking about there to the Colossians. Now, the question though is whether the conditional reflects an obligation that requires us to continue to keep our salvation. Pardon me.

Or whether the conditional is a functional indicative that is, it is a state of affairs that indicates that you are actually a saved person. And I think even first Peter talks about this. Let make your election more sure that is psychologically sure to yourself by producing works consistent with repentance and regeneration.

All right. So how is it that we know that we are saved? There's a couple of things I've talked about in the past. There's a promise.

There's a new internal perspective that we have. We cry out, "Abba, father." There's a subjective element. The Holy Spirit bears witness to our spirit Romans 8. But there's also this practical outworking of developing godliness in our lives that is also an evidence.

And so if that is not there, this becomes a serious problem. And Jesus talked about people who received the gospel quickly and then die out. No root or they're choked out by the cares of the world, etc.

They're not producing fruit. So we know that there are people who respond but are not, seem to have no genuine spiritual life for a couple of different reasons. All right.

And so visually we see people involved in Christianity making confession, but then fall away. Jesus talked about this. Or I should say John in Gospel of John, I think it's the end of chapter two.

Jesus was not entrusting himself to any man because he knew what was in man. Even though the text itself said many people were believing in him. Okay.

So we know that there can be a belief and a belief. There are two different kinds of belief. One is durable and reflects a change in behavior, James 2, and one doesn't reflect

a change in behavior and is not durable.

The second reflects a genuine born again experience. The first reflects some religious activity, belief of some sort, but not the kind that grounds genuine regeneration. And by the way, you see this contrast time and time again.

In fact, I noticed recently in John chapter eight, there's a big battle. I think that's the text. There's a big battle Jesus is having with the Jews bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, back and forth.

But initially the text says Jesus is talking to those who have believed in him. So even though there is a way you could believe in Jesus, let me put it this way. Even though belief in Jesus is necessary for salvation and is the core of what initiates our relationship with God of forgiveness and regeneration, and regeneration, all that.

There is a belief that is not adequate to that task. And we see that even today. A belief in versus a belief that belief in is regeneration.

Regeneration belief that is just religious conviction of some sort. I think that's what's going on here in Colossians, Paul is saying all of these things that happen or have happened to people who are truly regenerate, and they will continue to do these kind of things. But if they don't and they fall away, well, then this doesn't apply to them.

That's the way I read this. I see it as an indicative. In other words, a description that identifies genuine regeneration.

And if that's not durable, that's an indication that they were not genuinely regenerated. And just to clarify so nobody misunderstands what you're saying, Greg. When you say you're taking a theological approach rather than a proof text approach, you're not saying, what you're saying is that your theology is determined by the text, by the overall text, by the different ideas involved in the text.

You're not just going off and deciding on your own theology. No, that's right. But there's a cohesiveness of all of the texts involved with speaking to the issue.

And so I'm not just picking here and picking there and how some people do. And I don't mind that people pick a diverse and say this verse seems to disagree with your view. What I'm saying is if you just pick it versus in isolation, largely in isolation from the theological question of what's going on, what the Bible teaches about regeneration and salvation, et cetera.

Then you're going to be lost in a in a morass of apparent contradictions because there's all kinds of these verses here there and wherever. You know, you mentioned Ephesians 1. I think that's a great place to go. It talks about our being sealed by the Holy Spirit when we believe, which again, how do you reverse that? If you're sealed by the Holy

Spirit, how do you reverse something like that? And by the way, it also says sealed until the day of redemption.

That's in chapter four of Ephesians, but that's, I think, but that's, it's not just sealed and a seal can be broken. It's sealed for a duration until redemption. I've been focusing on 1 Peter recently and I have, he actually talks about this a great deal.

He talks about how our salvation is secured by God. And then he goes back and forth explaining, then how do our works go with that? So he goes back and forth between these, but I just want to read a couple of them. He starts off by saying, you're chosen according to the foreknowledge of God, the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit to obey Jesus Christ to be sprinkled with his blood.

So it's the sanctifying work of the Spirit that is working in your salvation. And then he goes on and he says, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. And now he comes to a theme that he hits over and over in the first couple chapters to obtain an inheritance, which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away.

And so what he, he goes through here and he keeps talking about how we're born of seed that is imperishable versus perishable. And when I think he's really talking about here, I think these people were being maligned because they were trusting in faith in the Lord. And so he says this is a very important thing.

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And so he says, this is a very important thing. And so he says this again. And at the end of chapter one, he says once again that you were, you've been born again, not of seed, which is perishable, but imperishable.

That is through the living and enduring Word of God for all flashes like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls off, but the Word of the Lord endures forever. And this is the Word which has preached to you.

In other words, what he keeps saying over and over is that our salvation was brought about by something imperishable, the work of God. The work of God in raising Christ from the dead and sanctifying us by his Spirit. And that will not fade away.

So I do not know how you would, you know, put that together with any idea that you can lose your salvation. You know, it's interesting there you have an imperishable Word

creating an imperishable effect. Imperishable cause, the Word creating an imperishable effect.

Well said there, Amy, I want to make one other point. It may seem a little bit tangential. And if anyone disagrees with the point I'm about to make, it does not in any way affect the reasoning you've just offered here for 1 Peter.

But if they agree with me, it strengthens it. And I want to go back to chapter 1 verse 2, this word for knowledge that you were chosen according to the foreknowledge of God. Here is a mistake I hear Christians making all the time.

And that is they take foreknowledge to be a synonym for omniscience. All right. Now, in other words, God foreknew, this is the way the Word is being used, those who say that think.

God foreknew you would choose Him and therefore He chose you. Now I think that by itself just creates a very odd borderline incoherent circumstance. What does it mean to say that God chose us in light of the fact that we chose Him? Either we choose Him or He chooses us.

But it doesn't make any sense to say, "I choose you because you choose me." That to me is like somebody saying, "You're fired. No, I'm not. I quit." You know, kind of thing.

They're trying to make it sound like their willful action cancels out the employer's action. And if the person decides to, actually the illustration is just a mess, it's more like this saying, "I quit." And then the employer is saying, "No, you didn't quit. You're fired." You know, so the employer's action is dependent on the person's action.

And of course it makes sense. If the employer, if the person quits, then the employer can't fire Him. It's the person's choice to quit.

And if foreknowledge means our choice, then how does it make sense that God chooses us in virtue of our choice? To me, I think there's an incoherence there. But that's not the biggest problem. That ought to signal a concern.

Okay? The bigger problem is foreknowledge never means omniscience. Regardless of what we make of the words, we know it doesn't inductively. Foreknowledge is a synonym not for omniscience, but for election.

In other words, God's prior purpose. God knew us beforehand. Remember the concept of knowledge in that sense.

Knowledge of persons is intimate. Adam knew Eve and she conceived. There's an intimate relational element that's involved there.

Now why can I say this with such conviction? Because the same word is used later in the

same chapter. In a way that makes it impossible to read it as omniscience, but rather as God's purposeful planning in advance to make it happen. And that verse is... Twenty? Yeah, verse twenty.

I have my pencil lines drawn between these and my eyesight is failing me a bit here. Okay, here's what... Let's start in verse nineteen where Paul has been talking, as you had mentioned, that we have not been redeemed with something like silver and gold. But with verse nineteen, precious blood of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ, for he was foreknown before the foundation of the world.

But has appeared in these last times for the sake of you. Oh, what... is this God? Peter saying, "Oh, that God just knew in advance what Jesus was going to do?" No, foreknowledge is always of persons and not of actions. Whom he foreknew.

And the same language is used, I think, in Ephesians one, but other places where this shows up. It is those whom he foreknew, not the choices of those he foreknew. He foreknows the person, and in the case of Christ he foreknows in the sense of determines, establishes, chooses, makes happen the plan that was established early on.

It's the same word used in the same way in both cases here. Now, this, of course, is a defense I'm making biblically for sovereign grace for election in the classical reformed sense. Now, people could disagree with that.

They're welcome to for other reasons. But that doesn't change your points, Amy. However, I do think that my exegetical work here is sound.

Foreknowledge, the way it's used here, foreknown, foreknowledge, etc., whether it's a verb or a noun, is not simply describing omniscience. Because God is not foreknowing actions. He is foreknowing people or plans, which means he's making these things happen.

And these then turn out to be synonyms for election, for sovereign grace. And to make it even stronger, Greg, and again, I want to reiterate as you did, I'm sure there are many people who disagree with us on this topic, and that's fine. That's great.

It's always good to understand the view you disagree with. So hopefully you're still listening. But I just want to say, I think this also makes it stronger because after it says at the beginning of chapter one that they are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, it says how they are chosen.

They are chosen by the sanctifying work of the Spirit. That's how they're chosen. They're not chosen according to their decision, according to what they've done, according to anything.

They're chosen by the sanctifying work of the Spirit. So it puts salvation in the work of

God. It brings in all three persons of the Trinity.

And so anyway, I think that makes it stronger as well. But incidentally, the word sanctified self principally means to be set apart. All right.

Now it entails the notion of progressive holiness, but it's grounded in the idea that we are set apart for holiness. Okay. When we sanctify certain utensils for use, they are set apart for a holy use.

So notice that even in the sense of the meaning of that word, you have the setting apart by the Holy Spirit for a purpose. So that strengthens the point that you're making. And then later on at the end of the chapter, he talks about you, since you have an obedience to the truth, purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren.

In other words, you've put your faith in Christ. You've been purified. He talks about that in the past.

So I think all of this is talking about our regeneration, the work that God has done in us, and that work is irreversible. So that's the bottom line. And I invite you all to read through that book and see what you think.

If you have questions about once saved, always saved. One thing Greg always recommends is that you go through the New Testament, read through the New Testament, look for things that indicate the permanence of our salvation versus things that seem to indicate otherwise. And then you can put all that together and figure out what the Bible is saying.

It's always good to get a whole overview rather than focus on a couple of verses. The whole council of God, right? Yes. Well, thank you for listening.

Thank you, Mark and Angie, for your questions. If you have a question, send it on Twitter with the hashtag #SDRAsk. This is Amy Hall and Greg Kockel for Stand to Reason.

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