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ONCE SAVED, ONE SIN

A couple of months ago I published an article that prompted an article last month about how we sometimes overreact to certain doctrines. I guess that makes this part 3, because I want to continue the thought first presented last month in "A Swing of the Pendulum."

One other doctrine where some of us have been tempted to go too far in our reaction is that of "once saved, always saved." Because of teachings about the possibility of losing one's salvation many Christians are now afraid that they will be punished eternally in hell if they have committed some sin that they are unaware of, and therefore can't repent.

It is possible to lose salvation. That is one point about which the scriptures are abundantly clear. There are many passages that support the idea that Christians may "fall from grace." One is the passage that uses that phrase, Galatians 5:4. Paul is talking to Christians. To these people who had received salvation, he says that if they rely on legalistic practices they are "fallen from grace." If you can't fall, how could Paul say they had?

Other passages warn of the possibility. "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall." (2 Pet. 1:10) "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." (1 Cor 9:27) "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." (1 Cor. 10:12)

Perhaps the most notable passage on the subject is the entire book of Jude. He warns of those who are Christians who are leading other Christians into all manner of evil. If it was not possible for them to fall from their saved state, why would he find it necessary to change from what he originally intended to write and instead warn them against something they could not do? "Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, To execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him." (Jude 14-15) These four repeated instances of "ungodly" are spoken about people who had once been followers of Christ, who had been once saved. They had been ungodly, become

godly, and are again ungodly. That seems to be a description of losing one's salvation. How could an ungodly person be a saved person?

The problem with arguing that you can lose your salvation is that people begin to think that you can *easily* lose your salvation. That just is not so. Just as Paul told the Galatians that relying on legalistic keeping of the Law of Moses was falling from grace, so also expecting to fall from grace with one sin is believing in legalism. It is believing that God's grace is unable to save, and that one can save himself by being perfect or lose his salvation by being less than perfect. The only time one sin can cause a person to lose his salvation is his first sin.

Jude may have been writing to warn Christians about those who had turned back from God, but he also said that not all who did so need be lost. "And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh." (Jude 22-23) Even those who have lost, or are in the process of losing, their salvation can be restored.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul tells of a man who engaged in incest. It is generally believed that this is the same man he talks about in 2 Corinthians 2:7, "So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow." One who has not turned away from God so much that he will not respond, even an incestuous adulterer, is still a brother. As long as one returns to God, no matter what he has done, he has not lost his salvation.

It is possible to lose one's salvation. Fortunately, it is not easy. Let us stop giving the impression to others that it is as simple as one sin.

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SOME OF YOU

Warning! Some of the topics in the following article may be offensive to some people. I have tried to be as sensitive as possible in my treatment of these matters. However, for the effect I desired I felt I couldn't dance around some of these matters as we often do. You may choose to stop reading at any time. If you do, please at least read the final paragraph.

Every year hundreds of biographies are published. Some are for family reading only. Others, like President Clinton's My Life, become best sellers. People like to read about other people's lives. Sometimes they want to be inspired. Sometimes they just want all the dirt that's not fit to print, but gets printed anyway. Here are some short biographies of members of the church in Corinth around the latter part of the first century. While these are fictional accounts, some are based on real people. All could be people we know. Some could even be the person we know better than anyone else.

Jimmy

My name is Jacobus, but you can call me Jimmy. I was raised on the island of Cyprus. It was there I became a

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sailor. I've been on ships that plied all parts of the Mediterranean Sea. Like most sailors, I have had my favorite ports of call. A few people have always liked to sail into the eastern Med. Caesarea is nice, if you like shopping and water sports. Syria was OK, although you could only enjoy Damascus if you had money. Most of us preferred the western ports, like Rome and Athens. But the port that most sailors, myself included, looked forward to was here in Corinth. Here you can get most everything you want, cheaply. Cheap clothes, cheap booze, and especially cheap women. Corinth is the world capital of cheap temple prostitutes. (And with most of them, the temple was just a legal excuse.) Sure, some of us had wives back home. That didn't matter. What good is a wife several weeks across the sea when you have a woman close at hand? Sure, there's always the danger of

disease, but that's what ship's doctors are for. Corinth was the favorite port for a ship full of lonely men.

One day I had had enough of the women and the alcohol, and wanted to see some of the town. Besides, I needed to buy souvenirs for my wife. As I wandered through the marketplace I saw a crowd gathered around a speaker. The way they were jeering him I figured he was a local politician, but I was up for a good laugh so I joined the crowd. Instead it was a guy named Paul. He was talking about how his life had changed. He said he had stood around and watched a mob murder a man. He said he later had a vision that changed him. Now he was going around teaching about the man whose follower he had seen murdered. This was a man who could forgive people of anything they had done wrong—he used the word “sin.” Somehow he seemed to be speaking to me. I realized I was tired of the prostitutes, the disease, the cheating on my wife. Until now I had just figured there was nothing I could do about it. Now I was hearing a different story. Not only could I stop, I could be forgiven those things I had already done. This was good news indeed!

Shortly after I started following this man, Jesus, I quit the sailing life. I brought my wife here to Corinth. Now I live as a sailmaker and tell sailors about Jesus. It's kind of interesting, what I'm doing. You see, they guy I heard in the market that day, he's a canvas worker, too.

Maximus

Maximus seems an ordinary guy. He has an ordinary job in an ordinary part of Corinth. He has a bit of talent with a sketchpad, but otherwise his is just like you and me. Except with one significant difference. Maximus likes men. I mean, Maximus will probably never have children, because men can't have children. He used to live a different “lifestyle” than most of us. There are more and more people in the Empire who are saying that this is just a natural, though different, set of desires. Others of us think that it will be one of the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire. Maximus used to be part of that scene. I even heard one of his friends say once that everybody had a right to try it once just to see if it was right for them.

You may have noticed that I talk as if Maximus isn't one of those people any more. That may be only partly true. I know he doesn't spend time with his boyfriends like he used to. I can't guarantee that he no longer has the desire. I just know that he no longer does those things.

You see, Maximus has changed. Maximus is now a Christian. It had nothing to do with how he was living.

He heard a preacher one day, and investigated further what he had heard. The more he studied, the more he realized that this was the way he wanted to follow. This was the hope he was missing, and dearly wanted. It was only after he had been studying Christianity for a while that he realized he could not keep doing what he was doing and still be what he wanted to be. More importantly, he could not keep doing what he was doing and still be who Jesus wanted him to be. In the beginning God had made man and a woman, and said that their desires should be toward each other. (Read the early part of Genesis to learn about that.) So Maximus changed what he was doing, and became a Christian.

I don't know if Maximus will ever marry. It doesn't really matter. He struggles sometimes with temptation, especially if he has to go in the vicinity of certain temples. But I also know that he overcomes those temptations. We talk about it sometimes. He knows where he has been. He knows where he is going. The latter is better than the former.

Solomon

My name is Shlomo, or Solomon. It means peace, but that is something that has been missing through most of my life. I haven't been the most peaceful of men. In fact, I am spending time in a Roman prison because I killed some people. Maybe I had better tell the whole truth. I killed several people over several years, and even ate parts of some of them. Now, how could I have been at peace and have done that? Needless to say, I got caught. While I was here in prison I got letters. Some of them were from women who just wanted to be associated with a mass murderer. One of them, though, was from a woman who said she was interested in who I could be, not who I had been. She told me about a Jew named Yeshua, who died and was seen alive later. She said he was the Messiah my people have been looking for, and that he offered forgiveness. She said that his death was a final sacrifice for sin, and that the priests no longer needed to offer bulls and goats. After we wrote back and forth she arranged for a man to come into the prison and immerse me in a mikva. Our old way of purification still applied.

Now I live up to my name. I am at peace. I know I did wrong. I know I could never have paid for that evil, no matter how long I stayed in this prison. But thanks be to God, I don't have to worry about that any more. I also know that there are people in here who would like to see me dead. It wouldn't be hard to kill me. A broomstick, a piece of metal, anything can be made into a weapon. But I am at peace. I know that if they kill me, I just get to leave this prison. I will get to go home, and that is real peace.

Micah

You may have heard about Micah. He used to be the chief steward in the regional governor's house.

Everybody thought he had it made. Good position. Good income. It wouldn't be long until he moved up to Caesar's house, they all said. But Micah didn't have it made. He didn't think he had enough. That is why he started taking money out of the household treasury. Not just any money. He took what the other servants were counting on to keep them going when they could no longer work. He thought of himself, not others. He probably would have gotten caught, eventually. Instead he surprised everybody by announcing that he was an embezzler. Even though he doesn't make as much as he did then, he is paying it all back. He says he plans on paying it back fourfold.

Why did Micah admit to his crime? Why is he paying it back? It is because Micah knows of a different treasure. Jesus talked about laying up treasures in heaven. Micah heard, and realized that there was more to life than life. He had to prepare for eternal life. As a Christian, Micah is happier than he was as an embezzler. He now has enough, and more than enough.

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what he was doing and
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him to be.

Time and space don't allow me to tell all the stories I would like. There is the woman who made a living as a professional witness. (She would say anything for the right amount of money.) There are a couple of former temple prostitutes and the man who used to beat his wife. There is even the wife who used to beat her husband. And everybody knows about the man who used to sleep with his stepmother. Paul wrote about him once. The list could go on and on. That is because the congregation in Corinth, and indeed in any place, is made up of people who have less than favorable backgrounds. Call them what you like, but the right word is sinners. If they (we) weren't sinners, we wouldn't need Jesus. But we do. That is why Paul could tell the church in Corinth, "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Cor 6:9-11) Yes, such were some of us. If God can forgive us, surely we can forgive others, no matter what they were.

WE HAVE FELLOWSHIP

This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. (1 Jn 1:5-7)

I particularly want to look at the last verse of this passage. It ranks high on the list of passages I have heard frequently misinterpreted. To see what the verse does not say we need first to see what it does say.

John first mentions walking in the light. It is possible, perhaps, for different people to have varied ideas about what is involved in walking in the light. All must agree, however, that walking in the light means walking in God's way. In verse five John has already said that God is light. In verse six he has contrasted fellowship with God and walking in darkness. Now he proposes that we can walk in the light, which is God. To the Gnostic minds John is addressing, walking in the light is the same as being enlightened or in the know. They thought that only a special few could reach this state. Because we have the revealed word of God we can all live as enlightened ones. None of us need to walk in darkness of ignorance.

John closes with the thought that the blood of Jesus continues to cleanse us from sin. That cleansing continues only as we continue to walk in the light. If we begin to walk again in darkness we may not be able to claim the continual cleansing. (But see the article on page 1 for more about that.) Nevertheless, as we continue our walk in the light we continue to have

hope of continuing in our walk. The idea of continuing is implied in the word walk. We walk in the light as opposed to merely stopping under a street lamp and then walking back into the darkness.

The part of the verse I have often heard misapplied is the middle phrase, "we have fellowship one with another." I don't know how many times I have heard this used to refer to the fellowship in the church between believers. The "one another" here is not you and me!

Go back to the top and reread the entire passage. Who is mentioned? Just we and God. The we is the collective body of believers but considered each, individually. It is like saying, "we must eat or die." Each of us must eat, but it is a requirement common to everyone. So it is in this passage. The "we" can be substituted with a "me." The other person in this walk is God. Only two. In verse six it is "we have fellowship with him." So the fellowship in verse seven is the same as proposed in verse six.

John is not talking about believers having fellowship with each other if they all walk in the light. While we will have such fellowship, John is writing about a greater fellowship. "If we walk in the light as he [God] is in the light, we have fellowship one with another [us and God], and the blood of Jesus Christ his [God's] son cleanseth us from all sin."

I love the fellowship I have with believers in Christ. That is one of the joys of the church assembling together. But that fellowship, important as it is, is minor compared with the fellowship I can have with God. After all, fellowship with you may help me avoid sin, but fellowship with God brings forgiveness of sin.

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