

Falling From Grace

By Greg Witherow

It is Catholic doctrine that a Christian, who is truly saved and filled with the Holy Spirit, can turn away from God and fall from grace. This fall does not take place in the scene of a courtroom, with a fickle God *casting out* his sons and daughters from the kingdom in the name of Justice. Rather such a fall takes place in the context of a family, with a Prodigal Child *leaving*, choosing grave sins over his Father's companionship. But not just any sin can bring about spiritual death. The Church recognizes two categories of sin. The first are venial sins (lesser sins), which harm a Christian and are an affront to God, but they do not in and of themselves result in spiritual death. The second are mortal sins (grave sins), which lead to spiritual death¹. A person who dies **unrepentant** of mortal sin spends eternity in Hell.

Many Protestant traditions have long held that a Christian can fall from grace. The Mennonite², Nazarene³, Brethren⁴, Methodist⁵, Anglican⁶, historical Lutheranism⁷, many Pentecostal traditions⁸ and others⁹ concur. While rejecting the *term* mortal sin, these traditions concur with the Catholic Church¹⁰; a Christian can fall from grace. However, many Protestants of Baptist and Calvinistic creeds differ. These traditions hold a Christian cannot lose his or her salvation. In essence, once a Christian is saved, he is always saved. In this essay we will contrast these traditions with Catholic teaching.

Once Saved Always Saved

The following are sample passages used to "prove" Christians cannot lose their salvation.

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and **they shall never perish**, and **no one shall snatch them** out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and **no one is able to snatch them** out of the Father's hand."¹¹

"And I am sure that he who began a good work in you **will bring it to completion** at the day of Jesus Christ."¹²

¹ For a sin to be mortal it must meet three requirements. First, it must be a grave matter. Second, a person must know it is grave (mortal) sin. Third, the person must do it willingly, not under duress or compulsion.

² See the Dordrecht Confession of Faith (1632), Article XVI. This is a foundational Mennonite confession.

³ See the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, Article VII.

⁴ See the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, Article IX.

⁵ See the Articles of Religion (doctrinal statement of American Methodism adopted in 1784), Article XII.

⁶ See the Thirty-Nine Articles (1563), Article XVI. This is the foundational Anglican confession.

⁷ See the Augsburg Confession (1530), Article XII. This is the foundational Lutheran confession.

⁸ The United Pentecostal Church International Statement of Faith (section: Grace of God) is one example.

⁹ I was raised in the Christian Missionary Alliance denomination. While in my local church I was told I could not lose my salvation, my mother told me years later that the denomination taught that I could.

¹⁰ For Protestants, all sins are mortal – yet forgiven. Instead Christians fall from grace via unrepentance. For slightly different reasons these Protestants agree with Catholics, Christians can fall from grace.

¹¹ John 10:27-29. Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotes are from the Revised Standard Version.

¹² Philippians 1:6

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance, which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who **by God’s power are guarded through faith for a salvation** ready to be revealed in the last time.”¹³

“Truly, truly I say to you he who hears my word and believes him who sent me **has eternal life**; he does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life.”¹⁴

Such texts state salvation is authored and guarded by God and once obtained is eternal. But these passages do not explicitly address whether a person can walk away from God.

Falling From Grace

The following texts warn Christians (who have spiritual life) not to stray into sin that is spiritually lethal. They illustrate falling from grace by committing mortal sin is possible.

“If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin **which does not lead to death**, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. **There is sin leading to death**. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death¹⁵.

“But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, **brings forth death**.”¹⁶

“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become **partakers of the Holy Spirit**, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, **if they fall away**, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.”¹⁷

“Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, **if you hold it fast--unless you believed in vain**.”¹⁸

“You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; **you have fallen away from grace**.”¹⁹

¹³ 1 Peter 1:3-5

¹⁴ John 5:24

¹⁵ 1 John 5:16, 17 We explicitly see sins not leading to death (venial) and sins leading to death (mortal)

¹⁶ James 1:13-15

¹⁷ Hebrews 6:3-6 While this raises questions about repentance, it clearly speaks of Christians falling away

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:1,2

¹⁹ Galatians 5:4

“But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty **and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die.**”²⁰

“**Not that I have already obtained this** [salvation²¹] or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”²²

The Holy Spirit is a **deposit** guaranteeing a future reward, our salvation. But as the verses below depict, the deposit must be guarded lest we are disqualified from the race.

“[The Holy Spirit] is a deposit guaranteeing²³ our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession--to the praise of his glory.”²⁴

“**Guard the good deposit** that was entrusted to you--**guard it** with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.”²⁵

“But I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others **I myself should be disqualified.**”²⁶

While our salvation is initiated, protected and completed via the merits of Christ applied to our souls by God's grace, each Christian has the capacity to reject God and choose sin.

Mortal Sins In The Old Testament

Violating the moral code in the Old Testament rarely brought the death penalty, but sometimes it did. Sins requiring the death penalty included murder, idolatry, severely dishonoring parents, adultery and violating the Sabbath²⁷. Therefore **by definition** these sins were mortal. As the Old Testament is meant to foreshadow the New, such sins foreshadow *spiritually* mortal sins in the New Testament era.

Both Martin Luther and Saint Augustine concur that a Christian, who is truly saved and filled with the Holy Spirit, can reject God and fall from grace. See the following quotes.

²⁰ Ezekiel 18:21-32 Ezekiel is speaking of a spiritual death

²¹ Salvation is a past (baptism), present (ongoing sanctification) and future (glorification) *process, secured after we finish the race*. Many Protestants view salvation as an *event* (not a race) secured at conversion.

²² Philippians 3:12-14

²³ Greek:arrabon. Most literally translated as “pledge” for a future purchase – not as “deposit guaranteeing”

²⁴ Ephesians 1:14 – New International Version (NIV)

²⁵ 2 Timothy 1:14 – New International Version (NIV)

²⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:27 – Paul is not speaking about a hypothetical impossibility.

²⁷ Exodus 31:14. See the story in Numbers 15:32-36 where a man was collecting sticks on the Sabbath. As violating the Sabbath was a mortal sin in the OT, so is not worshipping in the Sunday Mass in the NT.

Martin Luther and Saint Augustine

(**Martin Luther**, Commentary on Galatians, 5:4)

“Verse 4, ‘Ye are fallen from grace.’ That means you are no longer in the kingdom or condition of grace. When a person on board ship falls into the sea and is drowned it makes no difference from which end or side of the ship he falls into the water. Those **who fall from grace** perish no matter how they go about it. ... The words, ‘Ye are fallen from grace,’ must not be taken lightly. They are important. To fall from grace means to lose the atonement, the forgiveness of sins, **the righteousness**, liberty, and life, which Jesus has merited for us by His death and resurrection. To lose the grace of God means to gain the wrath and judgment of God, death, the bondage of the devil, and everlasting condemnation.”

(**Saint Augustine**, The Gift of Perseverance 9:21 [A.D. 428])

“Of two pious men, why to the one should be given perseverance unto the end, and to the other it should not be given, God’s judgments are even more unsearchable. . . . had not both been called and followed him that called them? And had not both become, from wicked men, **justified men**, and **both been renewed by the laver of regeneration**?”

One Last Objection

Calvinists claim a person who is **truly** saved will persevere to the end. This doctrine (the Perseverance of the Saints) is the fifth point of Calvinism. The Apostle John writes,

“They went out from us, **but they were not of us**; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us.”²⁸

Augustine believed the Elect would not fall away *finally* (mortal sin, if committed will be repented of), but the non-Elect could. In essence, there is a way to understand Calvin (on this point) that is orthodox if the understanding of perseverance **is refined** with all of scripture (i.e. *non-Elect Christians* can fall from grace and ultimately lose their salvation). While veering into the mystery of predestination (off our topic!), Augustine’s views are within the bounds of Catholic dogma and make sense to this author.

Summary

King Saul received the Holy Spirit and had his heart changed²⁹. But he unrepentantly committed grave sins and the Holy Spirit left him. King David, upon committing adultery and murder feared the same fate. He pleaded “do not take your Holy Spirit from me” (not a hypothetical impossibility) in the 51st Psalm. And David was forgiven. While free to be prodigal sons, our Father is quick to forgive repentant souls. He desires our salvation, providing all the grace needed. “Have mercy on me!” is a prayer He answers.

²⁸ 1 John 2:19 Augustine’s view would also provide one explanation for Christ’s words in Matt. 7:23

²⁹ 1 Samuel 10:6-9. The Holy Spirit later left Saul and God would chose David, who had a heart for God.