

# **ANSWERING THE *PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS* ERROR**

**By Lavonne J. McClish**

Recently I attempted to help a friend and fellow-Christian who was involved in a discussion with a co-worker concerning the question, "Can a child of God fall from grace?" or "Can a child of God sin so as to be lost eternally?" We are often presented with an opportunity to teach someone privately and find ourselves lacking the knowledge we need. May I suggest some ways we can prepare ourselves so that, when opportunity knocks, we will be ready with the answer (1 Pet. 3:15)?

My first impulse when I began studying this question was to start thumbing through the book of Acts. Before I had gone very far, the account of Ananias and Sapphira caught my attention. I had never really thought of it in this connection, but this account (beginning with the background in Acts 4:32, telling of some Jerusalem Christians who had all things in common—no one claimed any of his possessions as his own) is an excellent illustration. Some had sold their property and brought the proceeds to the apostles, who made distribution to those who needed help. No one was forced to do this; it was entirely voluntary.

This record of benevolence continues into chapter 5 (an unfortunate chapter division because it breaks the thought). Ananias and Sapphira (saints at Jerusalem, remember), sold a possession, as they saw other Christians doing. However, they did not want to give **all** of the proceeds, but they did want **all** of the attention that the others were getting for their generosity; so they lied, and said they had given the entire

proceeds from their sale. Peter told them they had lied to the Holy Spirit, not to the apostles, and they were struck dead right there in front of him and numerous witnesses.

When one reads the entire account (through verse 11) he will see that their sin was **not** keeping back a part of the money. (No, the money was theirs to do with as they wished.) It was **lying** about it. Should we not conclude that, if a Christian cannot sin so as to be lost, the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira was a bit severe? Why were they called “liars” by an inspired apostle and punished so severely if they could not and did not sin?

In Acts 8 we have the account of Simon the Sorcerer of Samaria. Philip preached Christ to the Samaritans and performed miracles among them (vv. 5–6; he was one of the seven selected to take care of the needs of the widows in the church [6:5–6]), but he could not confer miracle-working power upon anyone else. Only the apostles could do that (vv. 6, 8; 8:14–17; cf. 19:6). Enter Simon, beginning in Acts 8: 9. He had deceived the people with tricks and had enjoyed the admiration of the people, but he knew he could not do what Philip was doing. Simon believed and was baptized, thereby becoming a Christian (v. 13). There is no indication that he was insincere in his faith and obedience. When he saw Peter and John laying their hands on people and thus bestowing spiritual gifts upon them, he offered them money and said to Peter: "Give me also this power that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost." Peter's rebuke was quick and sharp.

Thy money perish with thee, because thou has thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God,

if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity (vv. 20–23).

Then Simon answered, "Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me" (V. 24). Simon was saved, and yet he sinned so as to be "in the bond of iniquity" and to have the awful prospect of "perishing" had he continued therein. When a Christian sins, he must repent and ask for forgiveness, just as Simon did.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul shamed the church because there was sin—and an awful sinner—among them: one guilty of incest (the entire chapter is devoted to dealing with this sinful brother). Paul told them they must "deliver such a one unto Satan" so that "his spirit might be saved" (v. 5). Paul clearly forbade the Corinthian Christians to keep company with a **brother** (including eating with him) who was guilty of impenitent sin (v. 11). They were to remove him from their fellowship (v. 13). The conclusion to this matter is recorded in 2 Corinthians. Paul tells us that the inflicted punishment had brought the sinner to repentance, and that they should now forgive him, accept him back into their fellowship, and confirm their love for this brother, now penitent (2:5–8). If a child of God cannot sin, why did Paul tell the church to go through all that?

In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul warned the Corinthian saints about becoming enslaved to fleshly lusts, particularly fornication (vv. 12–13). Obviously, Christians are capable of committing this sin, about which Paul wrote: "Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body" (v. 18).

In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul answered questions from the Corinthians concerning marriage. He teaches that a husband or wife is capable of being tempted by Satan (v. 5). Would not that suggest that they **could** sin? Later he teaches that one who married (even though Paul advised those unmarried not to marry under the circumstances) had not sinned (vv. 28, 36). Is there the possibility that they **could** have sinned? If not, why would Paul say such a thing?

Paul warned the Corinthian saints not to allow their liberty to become a “stumbling block” (something causing one to sin) to a weak Christian (1 Cor. 8:9–13). One must take care not to thereby cause the weak brother to perish (v. 11). To do so is to sin not only against him, but against Christ (v. 12). How could Paul write such if it were impossible for a Christian to sin?

Paul wrote the following strong words about himself: "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, emph. LJM). Even the great apostle had to be watchful so that he would not fall to temptation and be lost!

Paul's clarion statement in 1 Corinthians 10 must come as a shocker to one who reads it for the first time, believing that a Christian cannot fall from grace. "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (v. 12). Verse 13 promises that God will help us in our temptations, but does not promise that we cannot fall.

Paul corrected the Corinthian Church's abuse of the Lord's supper in 1 Corinthians 11. The following words and their implications are too plain to misunderstand:

Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be **guilty of the body and blood of the Lord**.... For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh **damnation** to himself, not discerning the Lord's body (vv. 27–28, emph. LJM).

Why would Paul write to saved people the following exhortation if they were incapable of sinning? "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners. Awake to righteousness, and **sin not**" (1 Cor. 15:33–34, emph. LJM).

Paul told these same brethren—saved people—that the “godly sorrow” he had provoked in them had had its intended effect:

I now rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye were made sorry unto repentance; for ye were made sorry after a godly sort, that ye might suffer loss by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation, a repentance which bringeth no regret: but the sorrow of the world worketh death. 2 Cor. 7:9-10. (2 Cor. 7:9–10).

What would have been their need for repentance if there had been no sin?

The Corinthian saints were also capable of being “beguiled” and “corrupted”: "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (11:3).

The apostle later issued a strong warning to them about their sinful conduct:

For I fear, lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I would, and that I shall be found unto you such as ye would not: lest there be debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults: And lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and that I shall bewail many **which have sinned already and have not repented of the uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness which they have committed** (2 Cor. 12:20–21, emph. LJM).

That list looks an awful lot like sins to me; and not only to me, but to Paul, who not only thus labeled them, but indicated his great fear that his brethren were doing such things.

To the churches of Galatia, Paul wrote: "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel" (1:6). Again, this was written to the **churches** of Galatia: saved people. Paul's reaction to Peter's behavior is also instructive: "But when Peter [not just a Christian, but an **apostle!**] was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed" (2:11). (Incidental note: Roman Catholicism teaches "perseverance of the **saint**" [the pope], rather than the "saints" in their infallibility-of-the-pope dogma. Yet, here is their claimed "first pope," Peter, being rebuked for his sinful behavior). Succeeding verses reveal that even the faithful Barnabas was carried away by Peter's sin (vv. 12–14).

Can one possibly explain the meaning of the following statements if a Christian cannot so sin as to be lost? "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth...?" (3:1). "I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain" (4:11). What is the worry, if their souls are secure no matter what they do?

Galatians 5:4 is so plain: "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified [as they sought to be] by the law; ye are **fallen from grace**" (emph. LJM). If one ceases to obey the Truth, is this not sin? "Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?" (v. 7).

One cannot misunderstand the following statement without some "expert" help and the desire to do so: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are

spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; **considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted**" (6:1, emph. LJM). Our salvation, even after becoming Christians, is still conditional: "And let us not be weary in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap, **if we faint not**" (v. 9, emph. LJM). Will we still reap the spiritual harvest of eternal life if we cease well-doing?

The apostle John wrote three letters to Christians. Those who advocate the impossibility of apostasy cannot easily (and certainly not satisfactorily) explain away some of his statements:

**If we say that we have no sin**, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.... If we say that we **have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us** (1 John 1:8–10, emph. LJM).

John also wrote:

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words; and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church (3 John 9–10).

Only one desperate to uphold a human dogma would deny that Diotrephes sinned.

When the Lord wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus, He first praised their good works. Then He said:

Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because **thou hast left thy first love**. Remember therefore from whence thou are fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and **will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent** (Rev. 2:4–7; emph. LJM).

These Christians, despite all of their good works, had "left their first love." They had sinned; they had fallen. All their good works could not wipe out that one sin. Here we see depicted an entire congregation that would be lost if it did not repent.

### **Conclusion**

Sometimes, in trying to find ways to reach someone, we learn more ourselves than we teach. As we gain confidence, we become more willing to teach. The next time an opportunity to study the Bible with another presents itself, or when we are asked a specific question, we would do well just to sit down with our Bibles and begin going through them, looking for passages that will shed light on the question asked, or that will help guide the student into a better understanding of the Truth. We might be amazed at the number of plain and simple passages we will find. In fact, when I began doing this, it quickly became apparent that I could not possibly use all of the references that I found in just a few minutes.

**[Note:** This article was written for and published in the August 2004 edition of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, ed. Dub McClish.]