

614 What Must I Do to Stay Saved?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

Starting out is good, but finishing well is even better. We asking the question today, "What must I do to stay saved?" Stay with us while we examine this important question. Some people believe that once you are saved, you are always saved, but the Scriptures clearly speak of "falling from grace" in Gal. 5:4. Hebrews 3:12-13 says, "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Our question "what must I do to stay saved?" is a way of asking how can I avoid the pitfalls of sin and doubt. I want to go to heaven, and I believe you do too. So let's look at the Word of God to see what God says.

Anyone can make a good start, the real test is in finishing well. It's not how well you start; what matters is how well you finish. James said in James 1:12, "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which *the Lord* has promised to those who love Him." The blessing comes after the trial not before. Jesus spoke of believers who quit in Luke 8:13, "Those on the rocky *soil are* those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no *firm* root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away." It is staying with the Lord that matters, not merely starting out. It is loving the Lord for a lifetime, not just for a time.

All of us will find that we sometimes stumble and fall; it is when we are at our lowest that we make the most important decisions—whether to get back up and go at it again. It is never too late to get back on course, to start again, to continue your Christianity with a whole heart. Paul reminds us in Rom. 15:4, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Many of those lives recorded in Scripture contain some surprises and many disappointments. The Corinthians who once had many moral problems overcame them and lived faithful Christian lives. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." These brothers and sisters in Christ overcame some difficult sin problems with the help of God.

I think of David, who at mid-life was tempted by Bathsheba and killed her husband Uriah. This was certainly the low point in his life, but he repented and was restored to God. I think of Joseph, who found himself stuck in a bitter life, not of his own making. He was sold into slavery by his brothers and ended up in prison on a false charge. Yet Joseph did not give up on God, and God was with him. He finished strong. I think of Paul who looked back on his life of persecuting the church with deep regret and considered himself the chief of sinners. But Paul grew strong and stayed faithful all the way to the end. He finished the course and kept the faith (2 Tim. 4:6). He didn't quit because life was rough or because people were unkind. He didn't quit because God didn't answer every prayer the way he liked. He didn't quit over the immaturities of others. He stayed faithful through good times and bad, because He loved the Lord.

If you are having a hard time in your Christianity—don't quit. Don't even think about it! Perhaps you're discouraged or disappointed or unhappy with your faith, don't give up on it—that

would be a serious mistake. Many people criticize their faith, when what they should really do is look at themselves. It is not "faith" that is broken, it is often our unwillingness to take our faith seriously. The devil would like to make us think the easy way is the best way, but it never is. The Lord said in Matthew 7:13-14 "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." This passage eludes a lot of people. Most people think that nearly everyone is saved and there is no challenge to Christianity. The easy path to destruction demands nothing from us. But the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life. That way will demand something of you. Not everyone is willing to take that path. More than anything—I want to go to heaven and I want you to go to heaven. But I must tell you that if you depend only on your own strength, you could fall. We all need the strength of God to help us. We must tap into God's strength if we wish to finish the course. We must listen to Him and walk with Him to finish strong.

The Hebrew writer gives us a perspective about Jesus that helps in Hebrews 12:1-2, "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." These are not so much witnesses of us as they are witnesses to us that we must remain faithful and stay close to God. They are saying it is worth it to follow Jesus and His way all through our lives.

If we fix our eyes on Jesus, we will not lose sight of our goal of living with Him in heaven forever. We'll be able to run with endurance the whole race. Christianity is not a 100-yard dash; it is more like a marathon. It is a race lasting all of our lives. We must set aside every hindrance and every sin that entangles us if we are to finish the course. We can't let anything or anyone or any sin separate us from our God. It is God's heaven, and we cannot enter His heaven while keeping God at arm's length and by having nothing to do with Him. We cannot continue to live in rebellion or apathy and expect that at the end all will be okay anyway. No, we must stay with God as God, Savior and Lord.

If we hope to stay saved, we must remain faithful. The apostle John said in 1 John 1:6-10, "If we say that we have fellowship with Him and *yet* walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us." Walking in the light means walking with the Lord according to His teaching.

There are those who fool themselves into thinking they can live according to the world's standards and still be close to God. John said they are lying to themselves. Walking in the light means living according to God's will. Now none of us will be perfect; we all still need the blood of Jesus to cleanse us; but there is a difference between a Christian who occasionally sins and a person who doesn't intend to follow Christ. John promised, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." We can keep finding forgiveness as we keep the

Lord close and confess to Him our sins. It is when we abandon God, that we abandon His grace.

The Hebrew writer said in Heb. 10:23-25, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near." God knew that we would need other Christians and time for worship to keep us strong. That's why we have a church. Those who quit church are like those who quit eating. They rob themselves of the things that keep them spiritually alive and strong. We need the church, we need to worship with others. We need their love and encouragement.

The way to stay spiritually strong in faith is to stay close to God and His people. We assemble to stimulate one another to love and good works, to encourage each other, to learn from each other, to bless each other, and to grow with each other. When tough times come, there is no better place than the church to find strength and courage. There will always be someone there who understands and can help us through every struggle and heartache. Staying faithful to God means staying close to His people, to prayer, to hymns, to communion, to the Word of God, and to the hope each one shares. You don't need to face life alone without the help of brothers and sisters who will stand beside you.

Jesus said to the troubled church in Smyrna, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). The promise of Jesus is for those who won't give up, give out, or give in. The promise is the "crown of life," which is eternal life in heaven. It's worth it. Quitters have regret, but the faithful won't have any. They will rejoice forever that they stayed close to God, that they loved God more than their own lives. They would suffer again if they had to do it over, because they know they made the right choice.

If I want to remain saved, I must stay free from sin. No one can love the world and love the Father at the same time. James said in James 4:4, "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." Many people are enemies of God and do not know it. They call themselves Christians but are always flirting with sin. You can't hold to God and hold to sin at the same time, my friend. If you choose to serve sin, you will walk in darkness and lose the hope of life that Jesus died to give you. A Christian who loves sin more than God can so sin as to lose his salvation.

Peter said in 2 Peter 2:20-22, "For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, 'A dog returns to its own vomit,' and, 'A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.'" Don't let the world overcome you. Stay

close to God and do not be overcome by the lusts of this world.

If I want to stay saved, I must remain willing to obey the Lord. People go to heaven because they want to. They go to heaven because they know that they need God and are willing to be obedient. Paul said in Phil. 2:12-13, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." Many people will lose their souls because they have hardened their hearts against God, saying what they will and will not obey. They end up rebelling against God, because they disagree with Him over a matter.

Whatever we might think, God is still God. He still made us and gave His Son for us. We can for a time rebel against Him; but if we do, we must pay the price for our sins. We cannot remain in His grace and favor, while we rebel against His will. Jesus will only be our Savior if He is also our Lord. If we reject Him as Lord, He will also cease to be our Savior. It is all or nothing. It is foolish to think we can have all the blessings of God and life while we serve ourselves or our sins. Jesus is the author of eternal life to those who obey Him (Heb. 5:8-9). There is no promise of life in the Bible to those who are rebellious and to those who unwilling to obey His teaching. Have you humbled yourself before God?

To become a Christian, one must believe with all his heart that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, that He is Lord. In faith and love, one must repent of his sins, turning away from sin and to the Lord. He must confess the name of Jesus before others; and he must be baptized (immersed) in water as a penitent believer for the remission of his sins. When he is baptized, the Lord washes away his sins and adds him to His church. I pray you'll think about obeying the Lord today in love and faith.

If one is to stay saved, he must also keep himself in the love of God (Jude 20-21). Oh, I know that God loves us and that nothing can separate us from that love. But I also know that we can leave the love of God on our own, by our own choice. I never want to grow out of my love for God, for my family, or for the church. That means forgiving others if I wish to be forgiven, going the second mile, and loving others the way Jesus loved me. I know that without love in my heart all the good I can do is like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 1 Corinthians 13 reminds me that without love "I am nothing." My friend, keep yourself in the love of God. Keep your spiritual fire warm and strong. Don't ever give up.

It's not how you start that matters; it is how you finish. I hope that each of you will make in your heart right now the decision that you will never give up on God, give up your faith, or give up your conviction. Jesus the Lord and Savior said, "the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:13). That's always been true. The devil has a lot of ways that he will try to trip you up and cause you to lose your soul and the souls of people you love. Stay with the Lord, don't quit. Never, never, never give up. Keep studying your Bible, keep praying, keep going to church, and keep staying free from sin. Stay with the Lord who loved you enough to die on the cross for your sins.

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