

The Christian and Apostasy

As used here, apostasy refers to a departure from or denial of the Christian faith by someone who once held to it. There are several views about what happens to someone who leaves the faith. Some say a true Christian will never apostasize. Some say a true Christian can leave the faith, but he or she loses salvation. Others say a true Christian can depart from the faith, perhaps never return, yet never lose his or her salvation, but suffers other consequences.

Apostasy is clearly seen in the Bible.

It is easy to demonstrate that apostasy is taught or seen in the Bible. Consider these passages:

- Peter denied the Lord. Luke 22:34, 54-62
- God's chosen nation, Israel, stopped believing. Rom. 3:1-3; 10:16-21.
- The apostle Paul predicts apostasy in later times. 1 Tim. 4:1-3
- The warning of First Timothy 4:16 implies a Christian can depart from the faith.
- There were widows in the church who "turned aside to follow Satan." 1 Tim. 5:14-15
- The apostle Paul describes false teachers who strayed from the faith. 1 Tim. 6:20-21
- Those who deserted the apostle Paul and opposed him (2 Tim. 1:15; 4:9-10, 14-16) are to be gently instructed so that they can escape the snares of Satan. 2 Tim. 2:24-26.
- Hymenaeus and Philetus strayed from the truth. 2 Tim. 2:17-18
- Those in error can overthrow the faith of others. 2 Tim. 2:18
- The book of Hebrews addresses those who were in danger of leaving the faith. Heb. 2:1-3; 3:12; 6:4-6; 10:26-39; 12:25

True Christians can leave the faith.

It is clear from the passages listed above that those who apostasize are true Christians, otherwise the descriptions, warnings, and exhortations are empty and meaningless. The very idea that someone strays *from* something implies they once adhered to it. A person cannot desert something or some place that he or she has never experienced.

True Christians cannot lose salvation.

None of the examples listed above names hell or the loss of salvation as the result of leaving the faith. That conclusion can only be theologically driven. The punishments facing those who would depart from the faith in Hebrews are severe, but do not refer to hell (See GraceNotes no. 34, "Hebrews on Fire"). There are too many Bible passages that teach salvation can never be lost (See GraceNotes no. 24, "Eternally Secure").

While some think that any continual or serious sin causes a Christian to lose salvation, others say salvation is only lost if the person ceases to believe the gospel and the Christian faith. They say that the present tense of the verb "believe" in salvation passages like John 3:16 and John 20:31 implies that eternal life is conditioned on continual belief. But this is not an accurate understanding of the present tense. The present tense can be used of a singular act (e.g. John 6:33, 50; Acts 9:34). Besides, belief as the condition for eternal life is sometimes stated in the aorist tense, which implies completed action (Acts 2:44; 4:32; 8:13; 16:31). The present tense in John 20:31 may also emphasize the ongoing experience of God's eternal life that Jesus referred to as abundant life (John 10:10) or knowing God (John 17:3). Initial faith in the gospel brings eternal salvation. Continual faith is not a condition for salvation, but for enjoying God's life in us (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 2:20).

True Christians can leave the faith and suffer severe consequences.

This view is well supported in the Bible. Many passages speak of God's discipline of the believer who departs from the faith (such as the warnings in Hebrews). One of the most helpful passages is 2 Timothy 2:11-13.

This is a faithful saying:

¹¹ For if we died with Him,
We shall also live with Him.

¹² If we endure,
We shall also reign with Him.

If we deny Him,
He also will deny us.

¹³ If we are faithless,
He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.

Verse 11 obviously speaks of our union with Christ that is a consequence of our salvation (Rom. 6:3-5; Gal. 2:20). Those who are saved will live forever with Christ. This speaks sufficiently to the impossibility of losing salvation. Verse 12, however, speaks of a different condition and a different consequence. The condition is endurance, which is often exhorted of Christians (e.g., 2 Tim. 2:3; Heb. 10:23, 36; 12:1; James 1:2-4, 12) and refers to perseverance in trials and suffering. The consequence of reigning does not refer to salvation, but to the reward for faithfulness—reigning with Christ in His kingdom. This reward is clearly taught in many other passages (Luke 19:11-19; Rev. 2:26-27; 3:21; Rev. 22:3-5). If we deny Christ by not enduring faithfully in trials, then He denies us His approval and reward (cf. Matt. 10:33; Luke 19:20-27). Verse 13 then speaks of another circumstance altogether. If we are “faithless” (*apisteuō*, without faith, unbelieving; cf. Rom. 3:3), God remains “faithful” (*pistos*). What is God faithful to? He is faithful to His promise that we will live with Him forever, as stated in verse 11 (cf. John 3:16; 5:24; 11:24-26). This does not refer to verse 12 because it is intended as a comfort. It would be incongruous to appeal to the positive attribute of God's faithfulness to affirm God's negative discipline.

Second Timothy 2:11-13 is a serious affirmation of our eternal salvation which cannot be lost (unlike the reward of reigning with Christ). Even if we were to stop believing or become unfaithful, God will always be faithful to His promise to save us eternally. A good example of this is Israel, who now rejects Christ and is under God's discipline, but will one day be restored because God is faithful to the promises He made to Israel's patriarchs (Rom. 3:3-4; 11:25-32) and His gifts are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29).

Conclusion

As Christians we can depart from the faith, deny the faith, or stop believing in Christ as our Savior. But since the security of our salvation depends on God's faithfulness, not our own, we can never lose eternal life. A Christian may leave the faith, but God never leaves the Christian. Apostasy from the faith does not forfeit salvation, though it will forfeit future rewards.