

You are Saved, if you Hold Fast — 1 Corinthians 15:1-2

¹Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, ²by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

To many people this passage seems to give salvation, then take it away. It implies that the gospel saved us, but does not continue to save us unless we “hold fast” to it. Some use this passage to say that believers can lose their salvation. Others say that it shows that some who are considered believers prove to be false believers because they did not stick with the gospel. Neither of these views satisfies the details of the passage in its context.

What Happened, Is Happening, Could Happen

Though some in the Corinthian church were beginning to deny the resurrection of Christ, it is very clear from the passage that the Apostle Paul is sure about their position: They had “received” and “believed” the gospel that he had preached to them (the past tenses denote completed action) and they now “stand” in that gospel (the perfect tense denotes past action with continuing results). Their stand refers to their positional justification, which is unquestioned and was affirmed earlier: “you were justified” (1 Cor. 6:11). There is no question that Paul’s letter addresses the Corinthians as genuine believers (See 1:2, 4, 9; 3:16; 4:14; 6:11, 15, 19-20; 11:1; 12:13). However, the present tense “you are saved” clearly depends on the condition “if you hold fast that word” referring to the gospel. Does this mean that the readers can lose their salvation or prove they were never truly saved if they *do not* “hold fast”?

You Are Being Saved

The view that Paul is telling the readers that they can lose or disprove their salvation comes from rigidly defining “are saved” as salvation from hell. The basic definition of “saved” is *delivered* or *preserved*, and is used in the Bible for deliverance from a number of things (illness, death, enemies, danger, sin). This requires us to ask “Delivered from what?” As the letter to the Corinthians shows, these believers had a lot of sin issues from which they needed deliverance.

The sequence of thought is important: Paul preached the gospel, the Corinthians received it, and they now stand in it. What’s left is to experience that salvation in an on-going sense, thus Paul uses the present tense “you are [being] saved.” If Paul were speaking of hell, he would have spoken more naturally of their final salvation: “you will be saved.”

If You Hold Fast

The experience of on-going deliverance from sin in the believer’s life has a condition: One must “hold fast” to the gospel. This is not an assumed accomplishment or a hypothetical condition, but a real one (The Greek first class condition does not justify the translation of “if” as “since.”). The verb for “hold fast” (*katechō*) is used in the New Testament in relation to the Christian’s sanctification experience (See Luke 8:15; 1 Thes. 5:21; Heb. 10:23). Paul is saying that the Corinthians must continue to follow the truth that they learned from the gospel in order to experience its sanctifying effects. This is not a condition of eternal salvation, but a very real condition of sanctification. It is therefore possible for believers *not* to hold fast. The New Testament shows that

believers may not persevere or hold fast to the truth (1 Tim. 5:14-15; 6:20-21; 2 Tim. 1:5; 2:17-18, 24-26; 4:9-10, 14-16).

The Gospel and Its Results

Based on the gospel he preached and they received (believed), Paul can say that the Corinthians “stand” in its salvation. Their position is secure, however their experience of being delivered (saved) by the provision of the same gospel is dependent on their steadfastness to its truth. That is why Paul reminds them of the gospel he preached to them in verses 3-4: “*Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.*” It is the same gospel he had “received” early in his ministry (Gal. 1:11-12; 2:16), “preached” to them on his first visit (Acts 18:1-8), and explained to them earlier in the epistle (1 Cor. 1:17-21; 2:5).

The word *saved* then, is being used to describe the experience of living out the truths of the gospel which center on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The death and resurrection of Christ is not only the basis of one’s salvation from hell, it is also the basis of one’s identity and experience as a Christian. In Romans 6:2-5 Paul teaches that the believer’s union with Christ is the basis for a life of victory over sin. As Christ died and arose, so also those who are in Him have died to sin and have been raised with Him to walk in a new life.

No one can be delivered from sin unless they continue to identify with the death and resurrection of Christ taught in the gospel. This is what Paul means by “if you hold fast that word which I preached to you.” Any defect in the gospel or our identification with Christ in His death and resurrection will result in a defective Christian experience. In other words, if the Corinthians do not continue to hold to the gospel Paul preached, they would have “believed in vain” because their initial faith in the gospel would not produce a sanctifying experience in them, which is one of its intended results. The term “in vain” means *to no avail*. It is used in the New Testament to describe something that does not reach its intended goal; it is never used to question the reality of the action associated with it (For example, see 1 Cor. 15:10, 58). If the Corinthians deny the resurrection of Christ, they cannot be delivered from sinful living, which makes their initial faith in the gospel fall short of its intended result of their sanctification.

Conclusion

No wonder Paul makes the gospel his priority: “I delivered to you first of all” (1 Cor. 15:3; Some Bibles translate it “of first importance”). We have to get the gospel right to be saved (from hell), but we must also get the gospel right to keep on getting saved (from sin). The deliverance God wants for us is not only from the penalty of sin (our justification), but also from the power of sin (our sanctification) and the presence of sin (our glorification). As Christians, it is crucial we understand what it means to be united with Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection. If we keep the gospel straight, our walk will be also. The gospel that initially saves us is the same gospel that keeps saving us and the gospel that ultimately saves us—and it’s all by God’s grace!