Can a Person Be Sure of His or Her Salvation?

If you've been exposed to Christianity for very long, you have likely heard that the Bible teaches that all have sinned and as a result been distanced from God. This distance extends into eternity unless one places his or her trust in Christ as the only means of salvation. As Jesus himself said, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:17-18). But even if you understand this, you might ask the question, "Can people lose their salvation after they have it?" That's a very good question, and it gets right to heart of the Christian message.

Let's suppose you were given a gift by your parents of a trip to Europe. Of course, that would be a wonderful gesture on their part. But let's also suppose that soon thereafter, it was made clear they would take away the gift if you did not keep up doing all the things they thought were good for you to do. At that point, the gift would not feel very much like a gift anymore, but something you must earn day in and day out. The message of the Bible is that we cannot earn our salvation. We don't have what it takes to earn it, so Christ offers it to us as a gift. If we were told at that point that the only way we can keep the gift is if we keep up God's standard from here on out, it would not be a gift, would it? But the Bible is emphatic, salvation is not something we can earn by works, either before or after our first step of faith. Consider the words of the Apostle Paul, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith— and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9). Paul writes something similar in Titus 3:4-7:

> But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Some might say, "So you're telling me that if I stop believing or if I start doing terrible things, I am still saved?" That's a bit more complicated question. When someone "stops believing" or consistently participates in openly sinful behavior, the question arises as to whether the person ever really believed in the first place. Christians in the Bible are found to have doubts and even to sin in grievous ways, but when they do we see that God meets them at their place of doubt or convicts them of their sin. The end result is often reassurance and repentance. So should be the case of the true believer today. If one turns her back on God in word and deed, after an initial profession, it may be that she never possessed true belief in the first place.

I have met many Christians who show every mark of looking faithfully to Christ, but still they doubt their salvation. In addition to sharing with them the thoughts above, I try to help them understand that our psychological assurance (or lack thereof) regarding any belief is not necessarily connected to its true trustworthiness. Let's imagine there is a suspension bridge that is touted to be the most secure in the world. You have an engineering background and have a chance to see the plans and then follow the bridge's construction. You agree that the bridge is very secure. At the same time, you have a personal fear of heights and are scared it will not hold you up when you try to cross it. Will your fear affect the structural soundness of the bridge? Not at all. Likewise, even if we do have doubts about the security of our salvation from time to time, we can know that our doubts in no way impact the ability of Christ to take us home to be with him.

One final thought on this matter. In the Bible, you are likely to come across verses that seem to suggest you can lose your salvation. When you compare those with verses that suggest you can't, you might become confused. In instances like this, it is important to look beyond individual verses and look at the larger picture to know that you are interpreting Scripture rightly. In regards to the security of our salvation, I think the larger picture is powerfully illustrated throughout the whole first letter to the Corinthians. In that letter, Paul outlines all the ways the Corinthian believers had fallen short. They had become boastful, allowed sexual sin, grossly misused the Lord's Supper, doubted the bodily resurrection of Christ, and much more. If it is possible to lose your salvation, the Corinthians would have done so. But despite all these sins and faltering belief Paul still writes in 1 Corinthians 1:4-9:

> *I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge—because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.*

If Paul says this about the Corinthians, God can say the same about you.