



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

Lesson 16.1 – The Doctrine of the Election of Grace (Predestination)

The Possibility of Losing Our Faith and Falling from Grace

Before we study what God's Word says about God's election of grace, it is important that we look at another truth that God reveals to us in His Word. That is the truth that it is possible for Christians to fall from grace and lose their faith. It is important that we teach this truth together with our teaching of God's election of grace, even though these teachings seem to contradict one another according to our human reason.

Jesus never told His disciples that trusting in Him and following Him would be easy. He said to them: **"You will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved"** (Matthew 10:22). It is not sufficient for a person to believe in Christ at some point in their life in order to be saved. It is necessary for them to persevere in that faith to the end of their life or to the day of Christ's return, whichever comes first. Just a few days before His own death Jesus told His disciples: **"You will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved"** (Matthew 24:9-13). The message of the Lord to Sardis contained this encouragement: **"Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life"** (Revelation 2:10).

Because of these many dangers and temptations, Jesus and His apostles often warned believers in Christ to be on guard against the possibility of falling away from Christ. Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed, in particular, presented this danger. Jesus spoke of the seeds that **"fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them"** (Matthew 13:5-7). Jesus then explained what He meant. He said: **"He who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles. Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful"** (Matthew 13:20-22).

Some might say that these persons who dropped out only gave the impression of being believers in Christ without ever really believing in Jesus at all. But in His explanation of this same parable Jesus Himself said: **"They ... believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away"** (Luke 8:13). Then also there were those disciples who were repelled by what they called Jesus' hard sayings. Of them the evangelist John wrote: **"From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more"** (John 6:66).

When Jesus was arrested, **"all the disciples forsook Him and fled"** (Matthew 26:56). In the case of the twelve, this showed their weakness of faith, except for Judas Iscariot, who had lost his faith. This disciple who betrayed Jesus was chosen by Jesus Himself to be an apostle after a whole night of prayer. Was he not a true believer at one time in his life? And yet, as Peter said, Judas **"became a guide to those who arrested Jesus"** but still **"he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry"** (Acts 1:16-17). The fact is that **"Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place"** (Acts 1:25). Jesus warned Peter that the same thing could happen to him: **"I say to you that this night,**

before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times” (Matthew 26:34). And that is exactly what did happen. Peter repented and turned to Christ for forgiveness, but Judas did not. Judas’ fall from grace was permanent.

The apostle Paul earnestly warned the Christians of his time against the possibility of falling. He wrote to the Corinthians: **“Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall”** (1 Corinthians 10:12). The Galatians were troubled by false teachers who told them that faith in Christ is not enough for salvation; they must also be circumcised and keep the laws of Moses if they wanted to be saved. Paul wrote these strong words to them: **“I say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace”** (Galatians 5:2-4).

Paul warned the Gentile Christians in Rome that they could fall away just as many of the Jewish Christians had fallen away. He wrote: **“You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in.’ Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off”** (Romans 11:19-22).

As the apostle Paul awaited his death at the hands of the Roman authorities, he wrote to Timothy: **“All those in Asia have turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes”** (2 Timothy 1:15). **“Hymenaeus and Philetus ... have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some”** (2 Timothy 2:17-18). **“Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world”** (2 Timothy 4:10).

In the Old Testament there is the sad example of King Saul. He began his rule as a loyal servant of the Lord who had made him king, but in later days it is clear he fell away in spite of repeated warnings from the Lord through His prophet Samuel and through David, who replaced him as king. Surely Saul’s life story, as recounted in 1 Samuel 10-31, is presented to us in Scripture as a warning to believers today.

Despite these clear warnings against the dangers of falling away, John Calvin and the Calvinists have taught and still teach the doctrine that is summarized with the words: **“Once saved, always saved! Once a believer, always a believer!”** The Calvinistic Synod of Dort decreed: **“God, who is rich in mercy, does not entirely take His Holy Spirit away from His own in such deplorable instances, nor does He permit them to lapse to a point where they would fall from the grace of the adoption to sonship and from the state of being justified”** (*Decrees of the Synod of Dort*, chapter 5, #5).

Martin Luther did not agree with this teaching. He wrote: **“Some ... maintain that all who once have received the Spirit or the forgiveness of sin or have become believers, should they sin after that, would still remain in the faith, and such sin would not harm them. ... They say, in addition, that if someone sins after receiving faith and the Spirit, then that person never really had the Spirit and faith. I have encountered many such foolish people, and I am concerned that such a devil is still present in some”** (*Smalcald Articles*, Part III, Article III, *Book of Concord*, Kolb-Wengert Edition, pp. 318-319).

Dangers and temptations that lead to falling away come from many different directions. When we think we are safe from one temptation from Satan, he comes at us in a different way, with the opposite temptation. That is why it is necessary for us to be on guard at all times. It may be persecution, false teaching, pride, the temptations of the flesh, laziness, lack of prayer, the love of money, or worldliness.

The warnings in Scripture against all these sins are many; we must take these warnings seriously. After listing the many sins of the Israelites during their days of wilderness wandering, Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **“Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition”** (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Satan may use persecution to wear down believers and destroy their faith. Jesus said: “**When tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles**” (Matthew 13:21). “**Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold**” (Matthew 24:12). Therefore Peter says: “**Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world**” (1 Peter 5:8-9).

Think of the dangers presented by false teachers. The prophet Jeremiah describes them as those who cause God’s people to stray from God’s ways. “**Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams ... and tell them, and cause My people to err by their lies and by their recklessness. Yet I did not send them or command them**” (Jeremiah 23:32). Jesus Himself warned: “**Many false prophets will rise up and deceive many**” (Matthew 24:11). Paul warned against two such false teachers, Hymenaeus and Philetus, saying: “**Their message will spread like cancer. ... They overthrow the faith of some**” (2 Timothy 2:17-18).

False self-confidence and pride in one’s own strength of faith may cause faith to weaken and be threatened, as was the case with Peter, who bragged: “**Even if all are made to stumble because of you, I will never be made to stumble**” (Matthew 26:33). Sometimes Christians fall asleep spiritually in their complacency, and before they realize it, their faith is starved for lack of nourishment, and they slip back into unbelief. “**Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober**” (1 Thessalonians 5:6).

Jealousy and envy led Jesus’ enemies to reject Him, and He was “**grieved by the hardness of their hearts**” (Mark 3:5). Their envy led them to hate Jesus, and finally to persecute and torture Him and finally call for His crucifixion. Do some people turn away from Jesus today because of their religious pride and self-righteousness? Even one-time believers in the Lord may turn away from Him because He in His holiness exposes their sinful hearts. Psalm 95 is directed to “**the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand**”. And what does God say to them? “**Today, if you will hear His voice: do not harden your hearts**” (Psalm 95:7-8). That is what the Israelites did in the wilderness, and so the Lord had to describe them as “**a people who go astray in their hearts**” (Psalm 95:10).

One of the greatest dangers is the believer’s own sinful flesh. Think how King David, who was so highly blessed by God, fell a victim to his own lust for a beautiful woman and ended up committing adultery, deception, murder, and a cover-up that continued for many months. Paul said: “**Sin ... dwells in me**” (Romans 7:20). “**The flesh lusts against the Spirit**” and produces “**the works of the flesh**” that are listed in the fifth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Galatians (Galatians 5:17-21). Paul is writing to believing Christians when he warns: “**Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God**” (Galatians 5:21). Why would the apostle warn them against these sins if there was no possibility that they could fall into such sins and being led away from their Savior? The Christian is involved in a war with all the forces of evil, and for this war he needs to “**take up the whole armor of God**” (Ephesians 6:13), which includes prayer. “**Continue earnestly in prayer, becoming vigilant in it with thanksgiving**” (Colossians 4:2).

Questions

1. Why is it so important that we endure to the end?
2. How does Jesus' parable teach us that faith in Christ can be lost?
3. Relate the tragic account of Judas Iscariot and his final destiny.
4. How could the Galatians fall from grace?
5. What do Calvinists teach about the possibility of losing faith?
6. Why did Martin Luther oppose the teaching of "once saved, always saved"?
7. What are some of the ways Satan uses to lead Christians astray?
8. Which of these ways poses the greatest danger to your own faith?
9. Which works of the flesh are especially prevalent in your locale?
10. What weapons has our Lord given us to use against Satan and his crowd?