

## **Can a Christian Walk Away From Their Faith?**

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**Integration Question:** *Can one forfeit their salvation by walking away from their faith? How would you deal with the Christian who has walked away from faith?*

### Theological Statement

The Biblical understanding of salvation is clear: All who put their hope and faith in the atoning work of Jesus are eternally secure. That is, they will have an unending union and relationship with God (John 6:37; 10:27-29). Even though salvation is the work of God, a human's ability to live it is conditional and dependent on that person's faith in Jesus. If someone rejects Jesus and forsakes God's forgiveness, leaving them to the destruction of their own merits, they will forfeit their salvation. In Paul's letter to Timothy, he warns that through the pressures and false teachings of this world, some will fall away from the faith (1 Tim. 4:1). You cannot fall away from something you never had. In other words, they had faith, but for one reason or another, they gave up their faith by rejecting Jesus' completed work on the cross. Just verses later, Paul tells Timothy to encourage his flock because some have already rejected Jesus and "shipwrecked" their faith, specifically two people, Hymenaeus and Alexander, who seemed to be leading others astray through their false teachings (1 Tim. 1:19-20). The author of Hebrews writes likewise. In the middle of admonishing Israel's repetitive rejection of God, he warns his readers from following into the same unbelief, saying, "watch out, brothers and sisters, so that there won't be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (Heb. 3:12). Just a couple chapters later, as the author is trying to explain a theologically rich comparison of Jesus and Melchizedek, he pauses and states that if they were not so lazy, they would be able to understand this deep theology. Instead, they are stuck on elementary teachings. This leads him to warn his audience against completely losing all desire to follow Jesus. His warning comes from real experiences with members in their community, saying "For in the case

of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance” (Heb. 6:4-6). There is no doubt that his warnings serve as a signpost that he truly believes Christians can, and did, turn away from their faith, losing their salvation they once held to.

Peter also warns the church of the false prophets and teachers, saying that they “introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves” (2 Pet. 2:1). Here, Peter declares that these false prophets explicitly rejected the Master who bought them. Said differently, these people were once covered by the blood of Jesus, but later rejected Jesus, and consequently, will one day bring destruction upon themselves. Talking about the same people just a few verses later, Peter again described them as those who once “escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” but have become “entangled” and “overcome” by the enemy (2 Pet. 2:20). He recognized that these people had once found life in Jesus, but eventually, they came to let the world destroy their faith. Peter concludes that “it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, and to turn away” it (2 Pet. 2:21). The most powerful example of Christ followers rejecting Jesus and walking away from their faith is in Revelation. In chapter three, Jesus warns the church of Laodicea, a community of Christians who were once on fire for Him but eventually become lukewarm, that if they continued in their lukewarmness God would spit them out His mouth (Rev. 3:16). In the same section, Jesus declares that those who once walked in relationship with Him, but later abandoned their faith and rejected Him, would have their names blotted out of the Book of Life (Rev. 3:5). Throughout Scripture, the Book of Life refers to the register of all citizens in God’s kingdom, all who believe (Ex.

32:32-33; Ps. 69:28; Rev. 22:19). To have your name erased from the Book of Life means that it was once in there and is then no longer. God spitting people out and erasing people from the Book of Life is a very graphic concept. Even amidst the fact that people walk away from their faith, we can confidently take solitude and comfort that everyone who continues to put their hope and in belief Jesus will live in an eternally secure relationship with the Creator and King.

### Ministry Application

When I was an infantry officer in the army, I had a soldier, Tom, who was a natural leader and inspired a lot of the younger soldiers. The only downside was that Tom was spiritually dead. He was extremely vulgar, crass, and harsh, which meant that all the soldiers that looked up to Tom imitated these same characteristics. After about one year, I was able to lead Tom into a relationship with Jesus. I baptized him and spent the next year discipling him. Tom's life radically changed. He became a man who loved and feared God. He unashamedly proclaimed the Good News to all of his soldiers. His lifestyle was completely transformed, from his language to his actions and heart posture. And because soldiers respected and looked up to him, Tom was able to lead many more soldiers to Jesus. After about a year of discipling Tom, the army moved me. Around that time, I noticed Tom began acting and demonstrating characteristics that were similar to what he did before he started following Jesus. My last conversation I had with Tom was when I picked him up from a bar. He was drunk and I very lovingly, but directly, told him he was heading down a dark path that does not entail living in an abiding relationship with Jesus. While that was the last conversation we had together, it did not stop me from laboring for him in prayer for the next seven years.

Just this past year, after not talking for seven years, Tom picked up the phone and gave me a call. We talked for nearly four hours, and at the end of the phone conversation Tom,

weeping, put His faith and allegiance back in Jesus. During that phone call, Tom shared that around the last time we talked, his wife left him, his best friend had committed suicide, and he began questioning everything about God. He got heavily into drugs and alcohol and got several girls pregnant. Finally, one day he took a pistol to his head and pulled the trigger, but it jammed. In disbelief, he removed the pistol from his mouth, aimed it at the floor, and pulled the trigger. This time it went off. Tom knew this was a sign, so he began giving his life over to every god and spirit out there. He tattooed himself from head to toe as an offering to these deities. Eventually, the week before he called me, he had hit rock bottom and stumbled upon a church. Figuring he did not have anything to lose. He sat through a Sunday service and experienced Jesus once again. Today, after half a year of discipling Tom, I can confidently say he is radically following Jesus once again. When I share this story, some people say that during those seven years, Tom did not reject Jesus but was just confused. Therefore, they continue, he ever truly lost his faith. Tom will be the first one to tell you he, with all of his might, thought, and will, rejected Jesus' atoning blood and God as the King. When he was worshiping other spirits and idols, he disavowed everything about Jesus and God. Tom will also be the first to admit to you that he has been completely redeemed, reborn, and washed in the blood and Spirit of Jesus. As an outsider looking in, I truly see a man who has given his entire mind, soul, and spirit to Jesus and lives in an abiding relationship with Him. So much so, that over the last six months, Tom has led his son and a Muslim friend to Jesus and baptized them. Like Tom, any Christian who walks away from their faith, I would continue to pray for, knowing that as they rejected salvation, they can also choose to follow Jesus, again.