

Does Ezekiel teach a believer can lose their salvation?

Key texts: 3:20-21; 18:24-26; 33:12-13, 18.

Principles of interpretation we must remember:

1. Where are we in redemptive history?

- Ezekiel is writing to the exiles in Babylon:
  - Israel has been judged by God for unfaithfulness to His covenant (i.e. the “Mosaic” covenant).
    - E.g. Deut. 28:15-68
  - This covenant is for *national* Israel, and the blessings and cursings laid out in the covenant are by-and-large *temporal* and *physical*.<sup>1</sup>
    - National Israel is a “mixed multitude”; that is, she is made up of regenerate Israelites and unregenerate Israelites.
      - ❖ Rom. 9:6-8, 27, 31-32
  - Moreover, there was a non-saving “righteousness” that even unbelieving Israelites could merit.
    - **Rom. 10:5** – “For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them.”
      - ❖ This is the kind of righteousness that Ezekiel is talking about in all 3 of the passages listed above, where the “righteousness” of the “righteous” person cannot save him.

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<sup>1</sup> Contrast this with the new covenant which the author of Hebrews says is built upon “better promises” (8:6): this new covenant is only for regenerate members (e.g. Jer. 31:31-34, and even more notably, Eze. 36:26-27). In the new covenant, “Israel” will be a totally resurrected nation (Eze. 37; cf. John 5:25). The new covenant is not for physical Israel, but “spiritual” Israel, and its promises are eternal and spiritual (even the “land” in Eze. 36:38 is “transformed” to include more than just Palestine [i.e. the new heavens and new earth]). In Ezekiel’s time, one could simply be “born” into the covenant community; in our time, one must be born again to be part of the new covenant community (cf. John 3:3-8).

→ In **Rom. 10:3**, Paul says that there is a difference between “the righteousness of God” and “their own righteousness.”

❖ Cf. Rom. 1:16-17: the saving righteousness of God comes only through faith in His promises (revealed most clearly for us in the gospel of Jesus Christ).

- In **Phil. 3:6**, Paul says that he was “blameless” in regards to his “righteousness under [lit. “in”] the law.”

This leads us to our second hermeneutical principle when interpreting difficult OT passages:

2. Is Ezekiel using the word “righteousness” in the same way that Paul does when he is talking about justification?

- If he is, then the Bible most certainly teaches that a believer can lose “their” salvation.
- But the Hebrew word צַדִּיק (*tsadiq*, “righteous”) refers primarily to a standard, and how ‘close’ one adheres to the standard.
  - For e.g., a judge is a “righteous” judge if he judges in accordance with God’s standard (i.e. the Torah/Law).
  - In Eze. 45:10, the prophet uses the adjective צַדִּיק (*tsedeq*) three times in regards to this understanding of a “standard.”

→ Thus, when in 16:51 the prophet denounces Judah for all of her great acts of unfaithfulness, going so far as to say that Samaria – the despised ‘half-breed’ enemies of Judah – was “righteous” in comparison to her, he is simply saying that Samaria was not as far “off” the standard as Judah was.

❖ It is obvious that Ezekiel is not referring to Samaria’s salvation when he depicts her as “righteous.”

- This is why we must be careful of importing Ezekiel’s use of “righteous” into Paul’s usage of it when he is teaching on justification by faith, that is, when “the righteousness of God” is imputed once for all to the sinner who believes the gospel of Christ (again, Rom. 1:16-17; 3:21-5:1; Gal. 2:15-16, 21; 3:7-14).
  - Paul clearly and repeatedly teaches that “keeping” or living “according to” the law cannot justify any sinner.
    - ➔ Under the old covenant, obedience to the Torah/Law could indeed bring about temporal blessings, even a better “life”, but it could never justify – in our modern language, “save” – a guilty sinner.
- When Paul uses “justification/righteousness” language, it almost always refers to the law court, where God declares sinners to be righteous (“not guilty”) “in Christ” because of their faith in Jesus.
  - Because by faith, Jesus’ perfect righteousness (earned through His perfect life of obedience to the Father) is imputed/reckoned to the account of the sinner, and the sinner’s sin (the unrighteousness he/she has earned) is imputed to Christ on the cross (Col. 2:14).
    - ❖ This is “the great exchange”, and it happens only through faith (something Ezekiel never mentions in any of the passages mentioned).
      - 2 Cor. 5:21 – “[God] made [Christ] who knew no sin to become sin in our place, so that in [Christ] we might become righteous before God.”
- THIS is why we believe a true believer cannot lose ‘their’ salvation: because his or her salvation rests on the merits of Christ and His perfect obedience.
  - This is the major interpretative difference between Ezekiel (in chs. 3, 18, 33) and Paul.

- ➔ For Ezekiel, “the righteous” are merely those who live in adherence to the Mosaic covenant/Law.
- ➔ For Paul, “the righteous” are those “in Christ”, and therefore are declared perfectly righteous by God Almighty. The only way they can be “lost” is if Christ somehow loses His righteousness (since they are “in Him”, they would lose it too).

This leads to our last hermeneutic.

### 3. The clearer and more authoritative texts must interpret the less clear texts.

- This does not mean the OT texts are not authoritative, but rather that they must “yield” to the fuller revelation of the NT, and the old covenant must be interpreted in light of the “better” and “final” new covenant.
  - Heb. 1:1-2 – “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son.”
  - Matt. 5:17 – “Do not think that I [Jesus] have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”
- And so, when Jesus says in John 6:37, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never cast out”, we need to make sure that the unclear usages of Ezekiel are interpreted in light of what He clearly teaches here.
  - “Cast out” (ἐκβάλλω, *ekballō*) does not mean “turn away”, but literally to put something out that was already in (always used in the contexts of casting out demons). Once one is “in Christ”, He will never be cast out from Christ.
- John 10:27-30 – “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life and they will never (οὐ μὴ, *ou mē*) perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given

them to Me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of My hand. I and the Father are one.”

- In fact, as one studies the gospel of John, they realize that those who believe “already” have eternal life (e.g. 5:24). Eternal life is a present reality, not a future ‘hope’ (e.g. 3:16, etc.).
  - Paul clearly teaches that those who belong to Christ cannot lose ‘their’ salvation.
    - Phil. 1:6; Rom. 8:29-30, 38-39; 1 Cor. 1:8-9, etc.
  - Paul is not alone. The rest of the NT clearly bears witness that because salvation is all of grace from beginning to end, those whom God predestined will certainly persevere till the end.
    - Heb. 12:2 – Jesus is not only the “Author” (KJV) of our faith; He is also the “perfecter” of it.
    - 1 Pet. 1:5 – the “elect exiles” of v.1 will be “kept by God’s power through faith” for God’s end-time salvation.
      - ➔ Even saving faith is a gift from God (cf. Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29). “Natural” faith will not persevere to the end, but will soon fizzle out when trials come (cf. Matt. 13:21).
4. The NT clearly teaches that there are those who “look” like believers, but have not truly been born-again:
- 1 John 2:19 – “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”
  - Cf. Matt. 7:21-23; 13:20-22; John 6:60-66; 15:2; Acts 8:18-24; Heb. 6:4-8
  - This is why we must be diligent to make our calling and election sure.
    - 2 Pet. 1:10 (cf. 2 Cor. 13:5)

- The “elect” will make it to the end. God will protect them (e.g. Matt. 24:24; cf. Rom. 11:7).
- This is why the “warning” passages must be considered God’s means of grace to keep the elect on the straight and narrow.
  - E.g. Col. 1:23; Heb. 6:9; 10:26ff., etc.

### Conclusion:

Though it may appear from passages like Ezekiel 3, 18, 33 that one can lose their salvation, the Bible clearly teaches this is not so.

1. Ezekiel is not equating “righteousness” with salvation (the way Paul does in the NT).
2. The new covenant makes it abundantly clear that it is Christ’s righteousness and perfect obedience that guarantee eternal and “unlosable” salvation for all those whom the Father gave Him before the foundation of the world (John 17:6, 9, 24). All who are united to Christ by saving faith have His perfect righteousness imputed to them. Therefore, the only way they can lose “their” righteousness is if Christ loses His. The doctrine of union with Christ guarantees this.
3. The NT clearly and unambiguously teaches that all who are justified will be glorified (Rom. 8:30). God will not lose one of His sheep (i.e. elect), for Jesus must bring them to the Father (John 10:16; cf. 17:9).
  - Paul is so certain of this that he actually uses a past (aorist) tense verb: “He glorified” (ἐδόξασεν, *edoxasen*). In God’s eyes, it’s already a done deal (i.e. not a future possibility!).

If salvation were up to man, no one would be saved (Eph. 2:1-3; cf. Eze. 37:3). Left to ourselves, we couldn’t keep “our” salvation, but would “lose” it in a heartbeat.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Those who believe a Christian can lose their salvation need to wrestle with Heb. 6:4, that says it is “impossible” for such a person to be “restored” (i.e. “re-saved”). If you lose it once, you’re hooped!

But because salvation is of the LORD (Jonah 2:8), and because His hand keeps us, we have a great “anchor for our soul” (Heb. 6:19).

Soli Deo Gloria!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Precisely what Paul says, right after acknowledging that God will sovereignly bring him home (2 Tim. 4:18).