

The Paradox of Saving the Soul (Part 1)

Save Now; Lose Later.

Jesus warned of the possibility of an eternally-secure believer losing his soul at the Judgment Seat of Christ. This does not mean he will be denied eternal life, for his spirit has been justified and regenerated. Rather, losing one's soul at the Judgment Seat is the equivalent of what the apostle Paul described in [1 Cor. 3:15](#), "saved, yet so as by fire." It is the prospect of suffering loss, shamefully entering the millennial kingdom, and perhaps even heaven, with no reward, and no glory. The very thought should make one shudder.

In order to correctly understand the salvation of the soul, it is essential to comprehend the Scriptural teaching regarding [The Three Tenses of Salvation](#), discussed in a previous article. In summary, the *spirit* of every believer *has been saved* – justified, regenerated, and positionally sanctified. The *body* of every believer *will be saved*, when it is redeemed one day in the future. What about the soul? It *is being saved* presently in this life.

Does this mean that only one-third of a believer is actually saved? It depends on how one defines the word "saved." From man's perspective, the whole man is saved, because we are incapable of separating spirit, soul and body. However, God is able to divide asunder the three parts of man, and so theologically, it is accurate to refer to them independently. We have a responsibility to recognize what God has done, what He is doing, and what He will do in each part of our being!

He Who has begun a work in you will complete it ([Phil. 1:6](#)). While eternal salvation was determined at a past point in time, it is only the beginning. The work of salvation in its complete sense (from God's perspective) continues over one's lifetime. Though we often refer to the ongoing aspect as "sanctification," it is technically part of God's complete salvation "package," and is accurately described as salvation of the soul. How one fares regarding the saving of his soul will be determined at the Judgment Seat.

Salvation of the spirit is a gift from God ([John 3:16](#); [Eph. 2:8-9](#)) that anyone can receive now, by faith alone in the finished work of Christ; whereas salvation of the soul is a reward from Jesus, based on the quality of one's work for Him, that only believers will receive in the future ... or not. Scripture is abundantly clear that the soul is not automatically saved (i.e., sanctified). Every believer must choose to cooperate with God in the process. Those who do not make choices in accordance with the will of God will lose their soul.

Losing One's Soul

What does it mean to lose one's soul? Let us focus on the teaching of Jesus in [Matthew 16:24-28](#):

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom.

The King James translators interchange the words "life" (v.25) and "soul" (v.26) in this passage, though they are translations of the same Greek word, *psyche*, which means "soul." Thus, verse 25 could be read, *For whosoever will save his **soul** shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his **soul** for my sake shall find it.*

Some have mistakenly concluded that to "lose" one's soul means to be eternally condemned – to "perish," as the word is translated in [John 3:16](#) and other places in the New Testament. However, that particular definition is not suitable for this text, as will be demonstrated in the following five reasons.

First, this particular Greek word is also translated "lose" and "lost" several times in the New Testament, as here. For example, Luke 15 gives the parable of the man who has one hundred sheep but "loses" one of them. The man certainly does not perish, nor does his sheep. Rather, he is deprived of his possession, and that is how the word is used in Matthew 16. One who does not deprive himself of his soul's desires here and now, will be deprived of his soul's desires in the world to come. In that sense his soul will be lost. On the other hand, one who deprives himself now – by denying self and taking up his cross – his soul will not be lost (deprived or forfeited), but found (rewarded)!

Second, Jesus is speaking with His disciples here, and in all the parallel passages ([Matt. 10:39](#); [Mark 8:35](#); [Luke 9:24](#); [17:33](#); [John 12:25](#)), about the costs of discipleship. These are already saved men. They don't need to know how to be saved. They need to know how to "come after" Jesus and follow Him. Incidentally, following Jesus is a process, not a point-in-time event like justification. Clearly, this passage has nothing to do with the new birth. Jesus is teaching here about sanctification.

Third, if the means of salvation from eternal condemnation is denying self and taking up one's cross, then salvation would be by works, not of faith alone. Denying self and taking up one's cross are only possible when a

believer depends upon the indwelling Spirit to enable to take such radical behavioral steps. An unbeliever is dead in trespasses and sins and therefore unable to obey God.

Fourth, verse 27 ties this matter of the saving of the soul to the time when Jesus will “reward every man according to his works.” Some say that is a reference to the Great White Throne Judgment when the dead are judged “according to their works” ([Rev. 20:12](#)). However, Jesus gives a clear indication in vs. 27-28 as to which judgment is in question. The Son of Man coming “in the glory of his Father” (v.27) is equated with the Son of man coming “in his kingdom” (v.28), which is an obvious reference to the Bema, a judgment for believers only, that precedes the millennial kingdom.⁽¹⁾

Fifth, defining “losing” one’s soul as eternal condemnation in the first half of verse 25 demands that it be defined the same way in the last half of verse 25. But commentators do not consistently apply the same definition, because the result is nonsensical. For example, when Jesus says, “whosoever will save his life (soul) shall lose it,” many commentators interpret that to mean whoever refuses to deny self and take up his cross will face God’s wrath and be eternally condemned. But in the latter half of the verse, when Jesus says, “whosoever will lose his life (soul) for my sake shall find it,” they do not interpret losing the soul as eternal condemnation, because to do so would imply that one must go the lake of fire in order to obtain eternal life. Furthermore, if losing one’s soul means perishing in the lake of fire, then how is that done for Jesus’ sake? And how does one ever find his soul if he is cast into the lake of fire? It makes no sense, and so defining “losing” the soul as eternal condemnation forces one to interpret the passage inconsistently.

In summary, losing one’s soul has nothing to do with eternal condemnation. It is being deprived of it at the Judgment Seat. It is suffering loss ([1 Cor. 3:15](#)) rather than receiving rewards. It is entering the millennial kingdom without glory, not being able to enjoy the incredible wonders of that Edenic world to come, and consciously regretting that more spiritual (good soulish) choices were not made in this life.

The paradox of Christ’s teaching is that a believer loses his soul at the Judgment Seat by “saving” it here and now, in this life; that is, by refusing to deny self, take up his cross, and follow Jesus. Instead, he caters to self, avoids hardships and pays lip service to following Jesus, not counting the cost of discipleship.

In Luke 17 Jesus precedes His discussion of saving/losing one’s soul with an admonition: *Remember Lot’s wife* ([Luke 17:32](#)). It is important to remember that this Old Testament woman was righteous (justified), as her husband Lot was, and because of her righteous standing before God, she was also delivered from Sodom. But despite the warnings of the angels, she turned and looked, and instantly became a pillar of salt. She gained the world (“saved” her soul), and thereby forfeited her soul. Lot’s wife is a metaphor for saints who “lose” their soul by “saving” it.

^[4] Adding further credence to this view is Jesus' prediction that some standing there (whom we know to be Peter, James, and John) would not die until they would see Jesus coming in His kingdom. Contextually, this is a reference to the transfiguration, which is fulfilled just six days later ([Matt. 17](#)). Jesus gives His inner circle a glimpse of His glorified, millennial body.