

easy chairs,

*Conversations on the Liberty of God*

HARD WORDS

Douglas Wilson

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## Preface

I must confess that for many years I was prejudiced against the truths about grace contained in this small book, and taught against them with a sincerity common to the ignorant. But God is good; perhaps He will use this volume to undo some of the harm that I did. Although our God is almighty, and does as He pleases, the Scripture teaches us that He uses *means* to accomplish His purposes. It is consequently my prayer that He will use this book to lead more of His people out onto the ocean of His grace, until there is no land in sight.

The book is structured around a series of conversations between an older pastor, Martin Spenser, and a young man who has come to him for counsel. Although the truths contained in the conversations are biblical truths, the characters are entirely fictional, along with most of the incidents or events they relate. I have put these truths into

a fictional setting merely to make them more readable, and hence more understandable.

I fear that the production of this book has placed me deeper in debt to quite a few people. My thanks go to those who read over the manuscript for me, making appropriate and helpful suggestions—Douglas Jones, Terry Morin, and my wife, Nancy. Of course any remaining problems are my responsibility. I am grateful to Tom Boyd for making it all possible, and to Mark and Chris LaMoreaux. All quotations from Scripture are from the New King James Version.

I offer this book to you with the hope that it will serve to advance the kingdom of God, and of His Christ. To the extent that the writing of any creature can, I pray that it will result in glory to God.



## Introduction

I was brought up in a church which emphatically taught that a Christian could lose his salvation (there is no need to mention the denomination), so the doctrinal questions that assailed me now were uncomfortable, to say the least.

It would distress my parents grievously if I left the church, so I had never expressed my doubts to them. At the same time, I felt I needed to do something to answer the questions that came into my mind every time I opened my Bible. But how could I get answers without rocking the ecclesiastical boat?

One night after Sunday Service, when I couldn't get the message to even shake hands with the text, I was in a pretty desperate condition. There was a small church across town which I had sometimes heard contemptuously dismissed as "Calvinistic." I had always accepted that assessment, although I sometimes wondered what it meant.

All I knew was that they believed Christians couldn't lose their salvation.

I looked up the name of the church in the yellow pages (there is no need to mention the denomination here either), and jotted down the name of the pastor. I looked at the clock and decided it wasn't too late to call, so I did.

I introduced myself, and said I had some pressing theological questions, and would he meet with me? His name was Martin Spenser, and he said he would be happy to. I explained my family situation to him, and told him that I was willing for the family to be disrupted over the "truth," but that I didn't want any commotion over my confusions and searching. He understood, and we set up an appointment for the next Wednesday.

One thing led to another, and the one meeting turned into a series of meetings. I had gone into the first meeting with a handful of basic, perplexing questions, and came away with a *truckload* of questions, and a buzzing head. It was apparent to both of us that we would have to meet many more times, which he quite pleasantly agreed to do.

As best as I can remember them, I have collected in this book our conversations. There has also been some reconstruction from my notes, as well as occasional lists of verses which I have also inserted. I hope the conversations are as edifying for you as they were for me.





## CHAPTER I

# Can Salvation Be Lost?

Martin Spenser sat easily in a large chair next to the fireplace. We were in his study at home. After the usual exchange of pleasantries, I began the discussion. I still didn't know him very well at all, so I began somewhat nervously.

“Could you tell me how you became a Calvinist?”

He laughed and said, “Well, I didn't.”

I must have looked baffled, so he went on.

“The term ‘Calvinist’ is really misleading. The issue for Christians should always be, ‘What does the Bible say?’ If the Bible teaches something, then it should be accepted as the biblical position. If the Bible does not, then it shouldn't be accepted at all.”

“Then why do so many ‘Calvinists’ use the term?”

“Well, many biblical Christians use the term simply for the sake of convenience. It is for them a term of theological

shorthand. They can let someone else know what their position is very quickly. Unfortunately, there are other Christians who adopt the term with the attitude forbidden by Paul—I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, and so forth.”

“So why do you avoid the label?”

“I have found that it only works as a form of shorthand with people who are theologically educated, and it is frequently a problem even with them. With many people, I would have to say, ‘I am a Calvinist, *but . . .*’”

I must have still looked puzzled, because he went on.

“Look. The church you grew up in defines a Calvinist as anyone who believes in eternal security. But eternal security is only one tiny part of the teaching of what is called ‘Calvinism.’ There is no way that I could tell someone in that church that I am a Calvinist and be understood.”

“So what label do you use?”

“I am a Christian. And the doctrines I hold are the doctrines of the Bible.”

“But doesn’t that sound arrogant? ‘My position is the biblical position. What’s *yours*?’”

“Yes, it can sound arrogant, and if I don’t watch my heart constantly, it can actually be arrogant. But it appears to me to be what the Bible requires.”

“What about the term ‘Reformed’? I have heard some people use that before.”

“It’s better than ‘Calvinist,’ although I think the Bible discourages this kind of labeling at all. So I try not to use either. But I have had this opinion of labels for over twenty years, and people still insist on calling me a ‘Calvinist,’ and ‘Reformed.’ So if someone has to use something other than ‘Christian,’ I prefer to be called ‘Reformed.’ People don’t understand that term either, but at least it doesn’t carry a lot of negative baggage with it. They don’t understand, but they don’t *misunderstand* either.”

“Okay,” I said, getting to the question that was keeping me up nights. “Can a Christian lose his salvation?”

Martin didn't answer with a yes or a no. In fact, I was sort of surprised at how he began.

"I guess I have to ask *you* to define your terms. What do you mean by 'Christian,' and what do you mean by 'salvation?'"

I sat and thought a minute.

"A Christian is someone who has been born again, and has faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation is from sin and the consequences of sin. Someone loses his salvation when he foolishly rejects Christ, and falls back into the eternal consequences of that choice." I leaned back in my chair, feeling a little pleased with my definitions.

"And it bothers you to think that this sort of thing might happen?"

"Yes, it does. I know that in some places the Bible seems to teach that this can happen, but there are other passages which make it seem unthinkable."

"We'll look at some of those passages later. For now, let's continue with our definitions."

I nodded in agreement, so he went on.

"Suppose you saw a lifeguard rescuing a drowning person. The lifeguard was pulling the person in, and then for some reason the drowning man began to fight the lifeguard, pulled free, and went to the bottom."

"All right," I said.

"Did the drowning man lose his 'salvation?'"

"Well, yes."

"Really? Was he ever *saved*?"

"Okay, not in any ultimate way. True salvation would be the possession of those up on the beach."

"In other words, a man is only saved from something if that something doesn't happen to him, right? He is only saved from drowning if he doesn't drown?"

"Right."

"Now with regard to salvation from sin and hell, does God know which individuals will be 'up on the beach'?"

eventually? Does He know who will wind up in heaven?"

"Certainly. God knows everything."

"So then, God sees who will possess this ultimate salvation?"

"Yes."

"Can this final salvation be lost?"

"Obviously not."

"So once you are *saved*, then you cannot lose it."

I nodded my head, wondering where this was taking me.

"So then, the disagreement between Christians is not over whether salvation can be lost. It is over whether a man in this life can know that *he will be saved*."

I thought for a moment, and then agreed.

"Another way of putting this is to say that some Christians think that regeneration can be reversed, and other Christians do not. And that leads us to your definition of a Christian. You said that a Christian was someone who was born again through his faith in Jesus Christ, right?"

"Yes," I said.

"So his regeneration is dependent upon his faith?"

"Well, of course."

"But what if faith is dependent on regeneration?"

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose faith is a gift? And suppose further that the way God gives this gift is through regenerating a sinner's heart?"

"It is all very well to suppose. How do you know that it is? And if faith is a gift from God, then how is it genuinely *mine*?"

"There are two questions there. In order, we know that faith is a gift because the Bible says it is."

"Where?"

"Philippians 1:29. *For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.* This teaches that suffering for Christ

is a gift, along with believing in Him. Both are gifts, and both are from God.”

“Anywhere else?”

“Yes. Acts 18:27. In talking about the ministry of Apollos, Luke tells us that he was a great help to *those who had believed through grace*. It doesn’t say that they believed in grace, but rather through grace. Grace enabled them to believe. So again, faith, or belief, is a gift.”

This was all pretty strange to me, so I asked for another passage.

“Well, this one is disputed, but it is worth noting. Ephesians 2:8–9. *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*”

“What is the dispute over?”

“It is over the referent of *that*. What is the gift of God? Salvation? Grace? Faith? A plain reading of it in English would indicate that you have been saved by grace, through faith, and that faith was not from yourself, but was a gift from God. The fact that faith is a gift keeps anyone from boasting.”

“You said English. What about Greek?”

“That is where there is some dispute. Some have argued that *faith* cannot be the referent of *that* because in Greek the noun *faith* is feminine, while the pronoun for *that* is neuter.”

“Well, doesn’t that settle it? Doesn’t the pronoun have to match the noun in gender? I don’t know much Greek, but. . . .”

“No, it doesn’t have to match. With concrete nouns, like *house*, or *ship*, it usually will match. But abstract nouns like *faith*, *hope* and *charity* take the neuter. Thus, there is no reason in the Greek grammar of the passage to reject the plain reading of the text. Faith is a gift.”

“You said there were two questions I had raised.”

“Yes. You asked how faith could be *mine* if it were a gift.”

“Oh, right,” I said.

“You are concerned that if faith is a gift from God, then my faith in Him is really an optical illusion; it *looks* like I am exercising faith, but it is really He who does it?”

“Yes. That’s exactly it. It makes the whole thing seem like a charade.”

“Do you mind a physical example?”

“Not if it helps.”

“When a young man hits adolescence, does he find himself, all of a sudden, with sexual desire?”

“Well, of course.”

“Is the desire *his*?”

I answered carefully. “He experiences it. It sure isn’t somebody else’s desire.”

“Prior to this, had he by an act of the will commanded his body to change?”

“No. It just happens.”

“So his body is filled with testosterone, and his mind with desire.”

“Right.”

“And it is *his* desire?”

“Yes.”

“But who made the body this way?”

“God.”

“So this body, and the bodily desire he has, are *gifts*? From God?”

“Yes.”

“And the desire is nevertheless *his*, and he is responsible for how he acts, based on those desires?”

“I guess so.”

“So why do we have a double standard? If God can give physical gifts this way, why do we say He cannot give faith? It is the same sort of thing. He gives me a new heart, and this new heart believes in Him. And I am the one believing.”

I thought I almost had it, so I said, “Could you say it briefly another way?”

“Sure. I have faith in God because He gave it to *me*. Of course it is mine. He gave it to me.”

I grinned. “I see. Suppose someone told me that a birthday present wasn’t mine because it was given to me. That’s not an argument against my possession of it. It is mine *because* it was a gift.”

“Right. And the fact that we are dealing with faith doesn’t change things at all.”

“Okay. Now how did we get here? We were talking about whether Christians can lose their salvation.”

“It all ties in. If my salvation is something God does in me, through me, and for me, then He will not cease doing it. If I am saved through faith, and I am, and faith is a gift, and it is, then that faith will not falter. It is the work of God.”

“I see.”

“But if I am saved by faith, and faith is the work of man, then I have every right to be insecure. I may in fact be lost.”

I nodded my head, and got up to go. “Thank you very much. I am afraid that’s more than enough to chew on. May I see you next week?”

“Next week.”