

The Perseverance of the Saints

by Ronald Hanks

The perseverance of the saints is the doctrine that teaches that all those who receive salvation can never again lose it or fall away from it, due to the sovereign grace of God.

Scripture: John 10:27

Topics: "Eternal Security", "Sanctification"

Description

Ronald Hanks preaches on the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, the last of the Five Points of Calvinism, emphasizing that those who are truly saved will continue in faith and salvation to the very end. The sermon addresses misunderstandings of this doctrine and highlights the responsibility of believers to persevere in faith and holiness, emphasizing that saints are made holy by God's grace and not by their own works. The importance of prayer, gospel preaching, holiness, and finding peace through the assurance of God's faithfulness in preserving His people are key practical implications of the doctrine of perseverance.

Transcript

The last of the Five Points of Calvinism is represented by the letter P in the word TULIP and is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. This doctrine deals with the question whether those who are once brought to faith and salvation will continue in faith and in that salvation to the very end or, in other words, whether those who once believe will finally and surely go to heaven.

There are some who call themselves Calvinists who have reservations about this doctrine and some who reject it altogether, though they may accept some or all of the rest of the Five Points. In some cases this is due to a misunderstanding of the doctrine, and it is our hope and prayer that this presentation of the doctrine will not contribute to those misunderstandings but rather make as clear as possible what the Bible teaches.

A. The Name

There are three different names that are used for this doctrine.

1. The perseverance of saints.

The name used in the original Five Points of Calvinism, the Canons of Dort, is the perseverance of the saints. This name, as we shall see, emphasizes the responsibility of every believer to continue or "persevere" in faith and holiness.

2. The preservation of saints.

Many Calvinists prefer to speak of the preservation of the saints because this name emphasizes the same thing that the other points emphasize, i.e., the sovereignty of God in salvation and the truth that salvation is all of grace from beginning to end. The emphasis of this name, then, would be on the fact that God "preserves" all those whom He has chosen and redeemed and in whose hearts He has worked by the power of His irresistible grace.

3. Eternal security.

The third name that is used for this doctrine is eternal security. This name emphasizes the comfort that believers receive from this doctrine, that is, that they are secure in their salvation not only through this life but into eternity.

It is worthwhile knowing all three of these names because they all emphasize important facets of this doctrine, all of which we will be talking about as we study the doctrine here.

B. The Doctrine

Whatever name is used for this doctrine, it teaches that all those who receive salvation can never again lose it or fall away from it, i.e., "once saved, always saved." The words perseverance, preservation, and eternal security all emphasize this.

1. Saints.

When we speak of the perseverance or preservation of saints, then we are emphasizing the truth that those who are saved persevere to the end as a result of the grace of God, not as a result of their own strength or works, but always in the way of real, personal holiness.

The name saints when it is applied to believers (as it is in almost all of the epistles of Paul, i.e., Rom. 1:7; I Cor. 1:2; II Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; etc.) is a name that refers to their holiness. The name, in fact, means holy ones. And it is very important for our discussion that the doctrine is not just called perseverance, or preservation, but the perseverance or preservation of saints. It is important, first of all, because it reminds us of the real issue. The question raised by this doctrine is not just whether or not the Bible teaches that a person once saved is always saved but also what the Bible teaches about saints. Our definition of a saint will probably determine whether or not we believe in this doctrine and how we interpret the teaching of the Scriptures. If a saint is a self-made person, i.e., one who has made himself holy or who is able to be holy by his own strength, then, obviously, whether or not he will always be holy also depends on him and whether or not he will continue to make himself holy.

The Bible, however, indicates that saints are holy only by the grace of God, that they are only sinners of themselves and have no natural holiness or power to be holy, thus teaching us that it is God Who makes saints. Then, too, it is clear that if saints are made such by God, their continuing in holiness also depends on Him and on His grace and not on themselves.

If you define a saint, therefore, as one who is chosen unconditionally from eternity, whose sins are fully paid for by the blood of the atonement, and who is inwardly regenerated and renewed by the irresistible power of the Holy Spirit, then it is impossible to believe in anything else but the preservation and perseverance of that same saint.

2. Preservation.

It is exactly this that the name preservation of saints emphasizes - that God by His grace and in His goodness, sovereignly and eternally preserves those in whose hearts He has begun to work and finally brings them to glory in Christ. From this point of view, the doctrine is only an extension of the doctrine of irresistible grace, for it is exactly that irresistible grace which preserves and keeps safe God's saints and brings them to glory. To deny this is to teach that God's work can come to nothing and His power be thwarted, in other words, that His grace is not after all irresistible.

3. Perseverance.

However, that God sovereignly preserves His chosen and redeemed saints does not take away their responsibility to live holy and thankful lives. True Calvinism has never taught this and never will. God does preserve His people in salvation but always in such a way that they also persevere in holiness. That is why the Canons of Dordt use the name perseverance of saints: to make it as clear as possible that this doctrine does not give His saints the excuse to be anything but saints in their conduct. It is emphatically saints who are preserved by the grace of God. Those who are unholy, wicked, and profane do not and cannot have the hope of being preserved.

4. Falling but no falling away.

On the other hand, this doctrine does not mean that God's saints never fall into sin or temptation. The very names that are used, preservation and perseverance, imply that God's people are surrounded by spiritual dangers and enemies and that they themselves are always liable to fall into temptation and to be overcome by their enemies, the devil, the wicked world, and their own sinfulness. All the doctrine means is that as far as God is concerned, He never allows them to fall away completely or to lose their salvation but always brings them back. As far as they are concerned, it means that they, by the grace of God, always come again to repentance and begin anew the struggle to be holy. The parables of the lost sheep and of the prodigal son are illustrations of what this doctrine teaches, the former parable teaching especially the preserving power of God in and through Jesus Christ, our Shepherd and the latter parable demonstrating our repentance and spiritual renewal.

In summary, then, this doctrine teaches the following:

- a. That saints are such by election, the atonement, and sovereign grace.
- b. That they cannot, therefore, be lost.
- c. That this assurance of eternal salvation does not remove the obligation they have to live as saints in the world, holy and obedient.
- d. That they must be preserved and persevere exactly because of their own weakness and sinfulness and because of their spiritual enemies, the devil and the wicked world.

C. Scripture Passages

As always, it is necessary to show that this doctrine is biblical, as indeed it is, being taught both in the Old and the New Testaments.

1. Passages which speak of preservation.

- a. Psalm 37:23, 24. The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand.

This passage reminds us that it is possible for God's people to fall into sin and temptation but in contrast to that also speaks of the impossibility of their falling away completely and ascribes this not only to the power of God but to His eternal decree ("his steps are ordered by the Lord").

- b. Psalm 37:28. For the Lord loveth judgment, and forsaketh not his saints; they are preserved forever: but the seed of the wicked shall be cut off.

This passage not only speaks both of preservation and of the fact that it is the saints who are preserved but also indicates that this all depends on God. The saints are "His," and they are preserved because God in His faithfulness does not forsake them, and He does not forsake them because He is righteous.

- c. Isaiah 45:17. But Israel shall be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation: ye shall not be ashamed nor confounded world without end.

Perhaps even more important than the passage itself here is the context which grounds the assurance of salvation in the power of God and insists (v. 19) that to say otherwise would make God's call powerless, and He Himself unrighteous and a liar, for He would then be promising what He Himself was unable to give.

- d. Isaiah 49:16. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.

Not only does this passage connect election and preservation in a most beautiful way, as though the names of God's people are actually engraved in the palms of His hands but assures God's people of this in answer to their fears. This verse is an answer to Zion's complaint: "The Lord hath forsaken me, and my God hath forgotten me" (v. 14).

- e. Jeremiah 32:40. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, and they shall not turn away from me.

This passage is particularly important because it makes Israel's restoration after the captivity a figure and type of the preservation of the church in every age, assuring the people of God that the fruit of God's grace to them will be that they will not turn away from Him. That, clearly, shows the connection between the grace of God which preserves and the resultant perseverance of the saints.

f. Luke 22:31, 32. And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.

Here Christ not only assures Peter, and with him everyone of us, that He will pray for Peter in time of temptation, knowing already what will happen, but also tells Peter that even when he falls he will be converted in answer to Jesus' prayer.

g. John 3:16. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Strangely enough, this passage, which is so often quoted by those who believe salvation depends on the choice of man's own will whether or not he will believe and whether he will continue to believe and have everlasting life actually teaches the very opposite, that is, that those who believe shall not perish, but by virtue of their faith have everlasting life, which we know is a gift of God (Rom. 6:23). Similar passages are John 3:36 and 5:24.

h. John 6:39. And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.

Here Jesus not only shows the connection between election and the atonement (He actually saves [does not lose] all those whom the Father gave Him and does that according to the Father's own will) but also the connection between both of those doctrines and preservation (those whom the Father gave Him and whom He does not lose shall also be raised up again in the last day). This passage, then, is a very beautiful and powerful reminder that the guarantee of perseverance and eternal security is not our faithfulness but God's grace in election and in the cross.

i. John 10:27-29. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand.

Not only does this passage ground the preservation of saints in election ("I know them") and in the almighty power of God which cannot be thwarted ("My Father ... is greater than all"), but read in the context of the whole chapter which speaks of Jesus as the Shepherd of the sheep, it also shows that these sheep are preserved and must be preserved because the blood of the Good Shepherd was shed for them. Notice, too, that all this involves the sheep's following Jesus. They are not preserved to walk their own way but unto holiness of life and obedience to Jesus.

j. John 17:11, 24. And now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are.

Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.

This passage is especially important in light of Luke 22:32 which shows that Jesus' prayers on behalf of His people are surely answered. Here Jesus is not only praying that His people may be preserved in the world (v. 11) but also for their final heavenly glory. Thus the preservation of saints is founded also on the perfect intercession of Christ, which would be revealed as powerless and ineffectual if they were not kept.

k. Romans 8:35-39. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This passage assures believers of three things, first, that persecution and other such trials will not cause them to be separated from Christ; second, that neither will spiritual powers, including the devil himself be able to do that; and third, that this is true because of the love of God in Christ, which the context says is revealed in the death of Christ, in His resurrection and intercession, and in our justification before God. So, once again, the passage shows so very clearly that for saints to fall away, the cross and intercession of Christ would have to be made of none effect and the love and grace of God become powerless.

l. I Corinthians 1:7-9. So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful by whom ye were called in the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

That we are confirmed unto the end is simply an evidence of the faithfulness of God Who called us. For us not to be confirmed unto the end and unto blamelessness would be unfaithfulness on God's part, not just to us, but to Himself and His own work, for He called us.

m. II Corinthians 4:8. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh.

Here is another passage which shows that the perseverance of the saints does not mean that God's people are preserved from all troubles, trials, and temptations but only that God protects them in their tribulations and brings them safely through.

n. Philippians 1:6. Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Here again, the perseverance of saints is ascribed to the faithfulness of God and the work of God. That salvation is of grace at the beginning means that it is all of grace and shall certainly be finished in all those in whom it is begun.

o. II Timothy 2:19. Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

This assured statement is made in the face of the evil work of those who had been troubling the church and had even "overthrown the faith of some." The Word of God means to say, therefore, that whatever had happened to those whose faith was "overthrown," they were never the Lord's, and the only conclusion one can come to, then, is that their faith also was only a sham, what is sometimes called a "temporary

faith."

Even more significant is the fact that the seal, or assurance that God's work will not come to nothing or be overthrown, is not only election ("the Lord knoweth them that are His") but our sanctification ("let everyone that nameth the name of the Lord depart from iniquity"). This does not mean that we are preserved by our good works but that we have the assurance of preservation through good works and cannot be preserved except in the way of good works and holiness.

p. II Timothy 4:18. And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

There is no one who would dare to say this if his future glory depended in any way on himself and no one who would be able to say it if he did not know that God in His faithfulness does preserve His people.

q. Hebrews 7:25. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.

This is another passage which connects our preservation and Christ's intercession. But remember that it is not only Christ's prayers that go unanswered if any of those who are once saved fall away but also that His blood is valueless for it is on the basis of His blood that He makes intercession for His people.

r. Hebrews 10:14. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.

The point of this passage is simply that it is Christ's sacrifice which assures every child of God once saved of reaching perfection. That means that Christ's death is indeed powerful to save (not just making salvation a possibility) and also that it is powerful to earn for His people every blessing of salvation including eternal life and glory.

s. I Peter 1:5. Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

This passage, too, not only speaks plainly of preservation ("who are kept by the power of God") but shows again that preservation and the assurance of preservation in no way detract from or take away the calling to believe and do the works of a living faith. Those who are kept are kept through faith, and that is the only way they can or will be kept.

t. I Peter 1:23. Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever.

This particular passage is important because it speaks of regeneration, and of the fact that the seed, whatever that may be, by which we are born again, is incorruptible and abides forever.

2. Passages which speak of perseverance.

Many of the passages at which we have already looked show the connection between God's preservation and our persevering and make it very clear that God does not preserve His people without also giving them grace and strength to persevere in holiness and obedience. There are a number of passages, however, which emphasize our calling to persevere and since the doctrine is usually called the

perseverance of the saints, it is good that those passages also be added to ones we have already cited.

a. Genesis 18:19. For I know him that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.

Here God speaks of Abraham's obedience as the way in which he will fulfill the promises He made to Abraham and speaks also of the certainty of Abraham's continuing in obedience.

b. Psalm 119:33. Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes; and I shall keep it unto the end.

Not only does David express in this passage his confidence that he will persevere in the keeping of God's law until the end but ascribes this to the grace of God which teaches him those commandments. This illustrates, therefore, the teaching that perseverance is by the grace of God and not by works, though it results in a life of good works.

c. I John 3:2, 3. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.

There is probably no other text in the Scriptures which speaks so plainly, on the one hand, of the fact that once being made sons of God we have the certain assurance that we shall someday be like Christ and shall see Him as He is, and on the other hand, of the fact that this hope does not beget carelessness and carnality but rather holiness and purity.

d. I John 5:18. We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not.

This passage not only shows that the devil can no more overcome those who are regenerated but also that the regenerated can no more commit the unpardonable sin. That is the sin about which John is talking here, as is clear from verses 16 and 17, though he calls it the sin unto death. And certainly if the regenerated child of God cannot commit the sin unto death, he cannot fall away from God. Rather he will keep himself, or persevere, even though the whole world lies in wickedness.

Also, it should be emphasized once again, that the many commands in the Scriptures to continue and persevere, to be holy and continue holy, do not imply that the child of God, redeemed by the blood of Christ and regenerated by the Holy Spirit, can fall away from grace and salvation and go lost. They only imply that he can fall, even fall very grievously. Nor do they imply that the doctrine of perseverance encourages careless, immoral, unholy living by Christians. In fact, these many commands, instead of implying that he can fall away and be lost or be and remain a carnal Christian, are exactly what God uses both to keep him from falling away and from becoming careless.

D. Difficult Passages

There are a number of Scripture passages which are often cited as contradicting the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Before we look at these passages individually, there are several comments that need to be made that apply to them all in general.

First, it cannot be denied that these passages do speak of persons "falling away" and perishing, even of their faith being "overthrown."

Second, it cannot be that the Word of God contradicts itself. Either the Word teaches perseverance or it does not. And we do well at this point to remember that mere preponderance of passages which speak of God's faithfulness and of the power of Christ and of the Holy Spirit as the guarantees of continued and eternal salvation would indicate that the Scriptures do teach the perseverance of the saints. The passages which might seem to contradict this are only a few.

Third, all these passages which are used to teach a "falling away of saints" can be answered by one passage of Scripture, I John 2:19; "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us."

I John 2:19 clearly teaches that those who fall away were never really part of the body of believers or of the faith, though it may have appeared for a time that they were. The very fact that they fall away, if indeed they fall away finally and forever, is proof that they never had a part or place in the kingdom of heaven and were never partakers of the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus. They never were elect, never were purchased by the blood, never did receive the Holy Spirit and regeneration, never were justified or sanctified, and never had the gift of holiness. They were the stony and thorny soil and the wayside in the parable of Jesus, and the Word, however it affected them, never had root or fruit.

With that in mind the passages which are quoted against the doctrine of perseverance can easily be reconciled with it.

1. I Samuel 10:6.

This passage speaks of King Saul's receiving the Holy Spirit and even says he would prophesy and be turned into another man. This is sometimes used to contradict the perseverance of saints in light of the rest of the story of Saul which shows him becoming more and more wicked and finally dying in his sins.

We should remember several things about Saul, however. (1) That the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of prophecy was sometimes given to those who were not saved. The best examples are Balaam and Caiaphas. Thus, the fact that Saul prophesied does not prove him a child of God. (2) The Holy Spirit gives other gifts besides the blessings of salvation, and He certainly did give to Saul the gift of courage and zeal, both of which were necessary for his work as king (cf. 11:6). This is very likely all that Samuel meant when he said that Saul would become another man, since Saul was originally too fearful and cowardly to assume the duties of the kingdom (10:21, 22). (3) There is no indication in the Scriptures that Saul had any of the marks of regeneration. He never showed any signs of true repentance, even in the beginning, nor any zeal for God. (4) In fact, the testimony of the Scriptures leads us in the opposite direction and seems to indicate that Saul was not only an unregenerated person but was known as such in Israel, so that this prophesying became a byword among the people for anything out of character (cf. 10:11, 12).

2. Galatians 5:4.

Here is a passage which actually uses the words "fallen from grace." Paul is speaking here to those who wanted to make circumcision a condition for salvation and for membership in the Christian church, and he tells them that if this is what they believe then not only is Christ become of no effect to them but they are fallen from grace.

The correct explanation of this passage is very simple. Paul is not saying that these people once received the grace of God and have now lost it and are perishing, but that they, by their belief in salvation through law-works, have separated themselves from salvation by grace and from the cross of Christ. They stand by their own teaching as those for whom the cross is of "none effect" and to whom grace is meaningless.

3. II Timothy 2:18.

This is the passage that refers to the faith of some being overthrown by the false teaching of Hymanaeus and Philetus. There are two things that must be remembered here: (1) in the very next verse the Word of God assures us that the Lord knows them that are His and at least implies that those who are His cannot be overthrown, and (2) that the Scriptures do speak of a faith which is not a true and saving faith (Matt. 13:19-21; James 2:14-20). That is the only kind of faith which can be overthrown, for true faith is a gift and work of God. Those, then, of whom the Scriptures are speaking here are also those who never had true faith, whom the Lord never knew and who were never of the company of true believers and never departed from iniquity. They were hypocrites.

4. Hebrews 6:4-6.

This passage is probably most often used to teach a falling away of saints, since it speaks of those who were enlightened, tasted of the heavenly gift, were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come, and who yet fall away and not only are not but cannot be renewed to repentance.

Again, it should be remembered here that the Holy Spirit gives other gifts and does other works than salvation, and for the rest, that it is not impossible for an unbelieving person to see, at least intellectually and emotionally the blessedness of salvation, to the extent that he even feigns faith and obedience (Matt. 13:19-21; Acts 8:9-23; 26:28). Also, it may not be forgotten that this passage, rather than teaching that it is possible to come to be saved over and over again, instead teaches the impossibility of renewing to repentance these people who are described here. Finally, if this passage does indeed teach a falling away of saints, then it contradicts itself, for in verses 9-19 the chapter teaches the perseverance of saints, founding the hope of perseverance on the immutability of God's own counsel and oath.

We must conclude, therefore, that this passage also speaks of those who do come under the gospel and its call, who are taught the Scriptures, hear the promises, and perhaps even respond emotionally to the gospel, but who are nevertheless spiritually dead and never bear true fruit like the barren earth of which Hebrews 6:8 speaks. Rather, therefore, than teaching a falling away of saints, it speaks of terrible judgment that shall come on all those who hear the gospel and turn from it and of their greater damnation, and it stands as warning to all who hear.

5. Hebrews 10:26, 27.

This passage is sometimes interpreted as though it teaches that it is possible for sacrifice to be made once for a person's sins and then for that person through unbelief to lose that salvation and come under the judgment of God.

This is not what the text says, however. We should note that the passage very carefully speaks of "those who have received the knowledge of the truth" and does not say that sacrifice for sin was made for them. In fact, the word more in the KJV leaves an entirely wrong impression. The idea is not that there is no additional sacrifice for sin (over and above that which they have already received) but that there is no longer any possibility of sacrifice for sin for them. In other words, the passage is talking about those who commit what is sometimes known as the "unforgiveable sin," that is, those who with full knowledge of the truth wilfully reject it and who, by that, show themselves beyond any hope of salvation.

6. II Peter 2:1.

This passage, too, at first glance might be taken as contradicting the perseverance of the saints, and so it is sometimes quoted as though it says that some come to deny the Lord Who bought them. The passage then would be speaking of those who had been purchased by the blood of Christ, and who perhaps had even been brought to believe that but now deny it to their own condemnation and destruction.

It should be noted, however, that the text really says the opposite about these people. It not only calls them false teachers but says that they brought in, i.e., into the church, with them their damnable heresies. Nor is the idea of the passage that Christ bought them and now they deny Him but rather that their heresy is exactly that they deny the blood of atonement and that it was shed either for them or for anyone as the only way of salvation. Literally, the passage says that they deny "the Lord having bought them." And so the passage not only does not contradict the rest of the Scriptures but really does not speak to the matter of perseverance at all.

E. Objection

The chief objection that is brought against the doctrine of perseverance is that it leads to carelessness on the part of Christians, so that they are not as concerned about holiness and Christian living as they should be.

Against this objection stand all the passages cited above which show that the doctrine of perseverance is in no sense of the word a denial of our responsibility to be godly and holy in all our conduct and speech and even in our thoughts and motives.

It is interesting, though, that the Bible itself deals with this objection in several places. Both in Romans 3:5-8 and in Romans 6:1, 2 Paul deals with the idea that grace encourages sinning. That, of course, is a step beyond the idea that sovereign grace leaves a person without any reason to be holy. In this case, some were apparently saying that the doctrines of grace (including perseverance) were themselves a reason for sinning, since the more a person sins, the more God's grace is revealed.

The Bible deals very harshly with this idea and with those who taught it. In Romans 3:8 Paul says that those who say such things speak slander and will suffer just damnation. His answer in Romans 6:2 is by itself a sufficient answer to all who might think this. "God," Paul says, "forbids it."

But even in Romans 6, Paul goes on to explain what is really the answer of the Scriptures to all such objections, that is, that grace is one. The same grace by which we are chosen, redeemed, and preserved, also leads us inevitably to holiness by bringing us regeneration, sanctification, calling, and conversion. No one can have just part of that grace. He cannot possibly be chosen and justified without also being sanctified and made holy. If he has no holiness, the only possible explanation is that he is not chosen and redeemed either. There cannot possibly be such a thing as a "carnal Christian."

F. Denials

1. Roman Catholicism.

On the one hand, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the grace of justification can be lost, and not just the assurance of justification. This, according to Roman Catholic teaching, is true to the extent that a man who has lost that grace must be justified all over again. In fact, one loses one's justification every time one commits a mortal sin and is re-justified through the sacrament of penance. It is also possible, according to Roman Catholic teaching, to lose even faith through infidelity, which is far more serious. This, of course, goes along with the Roman Catholic teaching of salvation by good works. If salvation is by works, then to cease from works is to lose salvation. The conclusion, therefore, of the Roman Catholic Church regarding perseverance is that though there is hope for it, there is no absolute certainty of it.

This clearly contradicts the teaching of the Scriptures, which found the certainty of perseverance not on our faithfulness and good works but on the grace and sovereignty of God.

On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church encourages a false security by teaching a kind of automatic salvation merely through the receiving of the sacraments from the church. This is really a denial of the perseverance of saints, since it encourages carelessness and wickedness.

2. Arminianism.

Arminianism, the false teaching against which the Five Points of Calvinism were originally formulated, teaches and has always taught that it is possible to be redeemed in Christ and regenerated by the Spirit and yet lose everything and perish everlastingly. Along with this, Arminianism teaches that it is possible not only for believers to commit the sin unto death, but also for those who have fallen away to be regenerated over again and even often again.

This not only contradicts those passages which clearly teach the perseverance of saints but even the passage which is most often used to defend a falling away of saints, Hebrews 6:1-4, which states that there is no renewing to repentance for those who fall away. It should not be forgotten, however, that this denial of perseverance is really rooted in a denial of unconditional election. If election is indeed unconditional, then it guarantees perseverance. If it depends on man's works or faith, then perseverance does also and is not guaranteed. Thus the difference between Arminianism and Calvinism is not just that

one denies and the other accepts the doctrine of perseverance, but that they each have a different understanding of what a saint is. Arminianism views a saint as one who is such by his own faith and good works, while Calvinism looks at the saint as someone made such by God and only by God. This, of course, makes all the difference in the world, for if we are saints by our own faith and obedience, then our continuing as such depends on our faithfulness and continuance. If we are saints by the grace of God, then our persevering depends also upon that sure, faithful, infallible grace and only upon it.

I Peter 1:23 is especially important here because it shows that regeneration, the very first work of God's grace in us, is something that takes place through the planting of an incorruptible and ever-abiding seed.

3. Free will.

This teaching, that man has of himself a freewill to choose God and salvation and which views faith as an act of man's own will, is really just a form of Arminianism. Obviously, it has no room for any doctrine of perseverance, since if the faith by which we are saved is indeed an act of our own will, then whether or not we retain it also depends on our will, which can and does change. Only if salvation depends on God's will and not on man's can there be any security and hope of perseverance for saints.

4. Antinomianism.

This error is on the opposite side of the spectrum from Arminianism. This error teaches that because God preserves His people, because election is sure, and because the blood of the cross is efficacious, there is no urgency in the call to holiness and good works, and that it is possible that a Christian, chosen and redeemed, continue carnal and unholy, that he need not and even cannot do the good work of prayer and worshipping God, and that it is a repudiation of the doctrines of sovereign grace and perseverance to read and preach the law of God and call men to repentance, faith, holiness, and perseverance in the same.

The misunderstanding that leads to these errors is that the call to repentance, faith, and holiness implies that sinners in and of themselves have the ability to heed that call, whether it be the call to faith or the call to persevere in faith. That is not true, for the call of the gospel is powerful only to those who receive the Spirit and is heard by the rest only for their condemnation, not at all implying that they are able to heed it.

Even more important is the fact that the Scriptures flatly contradict this error. Not only do they teach generally that the doctrines of sovereign grace do not encourage or even allow for sin and carelessness (Rom. 6:1, 2) but also that the doctrine of perseverance does not do so either. I John 2:2, 3 teaches that most plainly: "He that hath this hope (of persevering to the end and seeing Christ) purifieth himself even as he is pure."

Rather similar is the popular teaching today that there is such a thing as a carnal Christian. This teaching arises out of an Arminian type of evangelism that is done with the altar call and which teaches the theology of salvation by "accepting Jesus" and which most often results neither in godliness nor even in faithful church membership. Thus in the interests of preserving the appearance of success which this kind of evangelism with its large numbers of "conversions" appears to have, this new class of Christians has been invented.

5. Perfectionism.

Perfectionism goes to the opposite extreme and denies entirely the need for God's preserving grace or for our persevering by that grace, because it teaches that it is possible, desirable, and even normal for a Christian to live a life that is free from sin altogether or at least from all known sin. Obviously, if the Christian has reached such a state of perfection, there is no sense anymore in talking about his being preserved or persevering.

Pentecostalism teaches this as does the pernicious idea of a "victorious Christian life." So does the "health and wealth" gospel, though from a little different viewpoint. The "health and wealth" gospel teaches that there is no need for perseverance because the Christian in this life is to be free from sickness, poverty, suffering, and trial. The "positive thinking" enthusiasts and all such who teach that the solution to life's problems is mental, psychological, or even physical, also entirely divorce perseverance from the grace of God and the struggle for holiness.

Not only is all this nonsense contrary to the experience of believers; not only does it destroy their peace when troubles and temptations do come; but it is also against the Word of God, which tells us in I Peter 4:18 that the righteous are scarcely saved, and which assures us in Romans 8:17 that only if we suffer with Christ will we be glorified with Him, and in all the passages which speak of temptations and trials of God's people. It is also flatly contradicted by the complaint of the apostle Paul in Romans 7:19: "for the good that I would (thus showing that he is even while he speaks a regenerated child of God) I do not: but the evil that I would not (thus also showing his regeneration, for no unregenerated person can will the good or hate evil as Paul does here) that I do."

G. Practical Importance

The doctrine of perseverance is a most valuable treasure of the church and of the people of God, not only because it so powerfully demonstrates the sovereignty of God in salvation, but also because it is full of practical implications.

1. Perseverance and prayer.

Because Calvinism teaches so strongly that preservation and perseverance are two sides of the same coin and that God preserves His people in such a way that they also must and do persevere and because Calvinism teaches that even our persevering is only by the grace of God, the doctrine of perseverance is another way of stressing the importance of prayer in the Christian life. That is so true that there is no hope of perseverance without prayer.

This is the teaching of the Canons in Chapter V, Article 4:

Although the weakness of the flesh cannot prevail against the power of God, who confirms and preserves true believers in a state of grace, yet converts are not always so influenced and actuated by the Spirit of God, as not in some particular instances sinfully to deviate from the guidance of divine grace, so as to be seduced by, and comply with the lusts of the flesh; they must, therefore, be constant in watching and prayer, that they be not led into temptation. When these are neglected, they are not only liable to be drawn

into great and heinous sins, by Satan, the world and the flesh, but sometimes by the righteous permission of God, actually fall into these evils. This, the lamentable fall of David, Peter, and other saints described in Holy Scripture, demonstrates.

Scripture confirms this in many places, notably in Matthew 26:41; "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

2 Perseverance and the preaching of the gospel.

What is true of prayer is also true of the preaching. It is the other great means God uses to preserve and keep His people. The warnings, admonitions, and encouragements of His Word are designed exactly for that purpose. This means, then, that the doctrine of perseverance also magnifies the importance of the preaching of the gospel and its necessity in the lives of believers. This, of course, shows once again, that rather than destroying lively gospel preaching, the doctrines of grace make it necessary and give power to it.

That perseverance requires gospel preaching is clear from John 10:27, 28: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." Only through the preaching of the gospel do we hear the voice of Jesus and that is our hope of never perishing.

3. Perseverance and holiness.

Here again the calumnies of those who hate Calvinism are shown false. The doctrines of grace do not destroy holiness and promote carelessness and worldliness as some have charged. Rather, the call to perseverance is the call to holiness, and it makes no sense even to talk about perseverance except in terms of holiness, godliness, Christian piety, and faithful obedience.

Certainly we believe that God surely and infallibly preserves His people but only in the way of their persevering in holiness, so that without holiness, no one shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

4. Perseverance and peace.

It should also be evident that only the doctrine of perseverance can give Christians any peace in the world. In view of the fact that they fight against principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness and in view of the fact that they themselves are sinful and weak, they know that there is no hope of glory for them apart from the grace of God. The doctrine of perseverance assures them that God is faithful and that He will not abandon or turn away from the work He has begun in them, though they themselves may feel that that work is very small.

A good example of this is to be found in the questioning of a person who is struggling to find assurance of salvation. The very fact that they are concerned and afraid is the fruit of God's saving grace working in them, and they can and must be told that God Himself will continue that work of grace and bring it to full fruit.

Also in persecution, in suffering, and in temptation, each one of God's people through the doctrine of perseverance may rest on the faithfulness and grace of God and know that nothing can separate him from God and from eternal life. That is the thing that must be emphasized, too. Believing in the doctrine of the perseverance of saints, one believes in God Himself, in His love and mercy and grace and unchangeableness and finds in them hope and peace.

H. Relation to the Other Four Points

In conclusion let us remember that the doctrine of perseverance is inseparably connected with the rest of the Five Points of Calvinism. The elect are preserved, and they are preserved both because God has chosen them and because Christ died for them. They need that preserving grace because in themselves they are totally depraved and can do no good and certainly not the great good of finding and obtaining life everlasting. That grace which God gives them is powerful and irresistible, so that not only their own sins but also the devil and the whole wicked world cannot prevent them from being saved with an everlasting salvation.

To deny the doctrine of perseverance is to say that God's counsel can be changed - that God Himself can change. It is to say that Christ groaned and bled and died on Calvary for nothing, that God's promise can fail, and that the gifts and calling of God can be revoked, and that by weak, sinful man himself. God forbid that it should be so. Thanks be to Him for the work of grace, sovereignly begun, sovereignly brought forward, and sovereignly finished.

Soli Deo Gloria!

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