

# SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

## PART 21

### KEY TERMS: PERSEVERANCE

Perseverance. Earlier when I quoted Thomas Schreiner, he also mentioned perseverance. His five point Calvinism claims that an elect believer cannot ever fall away from the faith or commit egregious sins and if they do, they have “proven” they were never saved. He does not believe people can lose their salvation; he believes by their behavior they can prove they never had salvation. The end result is the same: no salvation. His Calvinist theology is that the person who falls away was merely a professing believer and not a true believer. A professing believer is one who claims to be a believer but really is not; such a person has apparently accepted the facts of the gospel in his mind but not in his heart and his profession is not sincere. They base this determination on observable behavior rather than on the content of what has been believed. This doctrine also results from their definition of the sovereignty of God. If God elects those who will believe, then only those elect will believe and they cannot fall away from God or commit egregious personal sins because if they do, God failed in His purpose and that is obviously impossible. But if God's plan is believe and thereby possess eternal life and it doesn't depend on what you do or do not do apart from belief, then how has God failed if a person falls away or commits some sort of egregious sin? God hasn't failed; we may fail, but He will not fail.

We will see that the doctrine of perseverance as defined by Reformed theologians is false. True perseverance is a very important doctrine and we will come to a biblical understanding of how it should be defined. In Reformed theology, perseverance, which means performing good works, living an at least mostly sinless Christian life, and being obedient to biblical commands, is the ground for assurance rather than the ground for assurance being found in the promises of God and appropriated by belief. As we just learned in our study of assurance, assurance is found only in the promise of God and not in anything we do or do not do. Perseverance is absolutely a desirable, commendable, and even commanded Christian lifestyle and we are called to persevere but it does not prove justification salvation to God; He knows whether or not you have truly believed. Our works can justify us in the sight of men so they may know we are Christians, but that doesn't justify us. Perseverance is completely a sanctification issue.

This Reformed theology is well documented in the Westminster Confession of Faith [accessed at [www.reformed.org](http://www.reformed.org)]. The Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is as follows:

I. They, whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

II. This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which arises also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

III. Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve His Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.

Note that according to this Reformed declaration, perseverance is part of being saved; if there is no perseverance to the end, there is thought to be no justification salvation. The elect person must show proof of that election and without it, salvation is considered to be lacking; he has proven he was never saved. God insures perseverance because the elect must persevere; it is certain and infallible and God will insure that the true believer does, in fact, persevere. While they acknowledge that a Christian may fall into grievous sin, they limit it to "a time" because one who does not turn from that sin has proven to be unsaved. This whole doctrine is serious, grievous error. The Reformed theologian Horton makes the claim that the "...believer's perseverance is guaranteed by God's perseverance...our perseverance in faith is guaranteed by God's electing, redeeming, and calling grace...If our regeneration is the consequence of God's election, redemption, and effectual calling rather than our decision and effort, then he will enable us to persevere to the end." Horton goes on to deny the doctrine of eternal security as we understand it as Free Grace dispensationalists and instead he calls what we believe "inconsistent synergism." Synergism is defined by Reformed theologians as the "human will cooperating with the divine will in achieving salvation" [Donald L. McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, rev. and exp., 2<sup>d</sup> ed., s. v. "synergism"]. The English dictionary definition of synergy is "the interaction or cooperation of two or more organizations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects" [*The Oxford American College Dictionary*, s. v. "synergy"]. In other words, the accusation is that we think we help God save us and without our help we cannot be saved. The Reformed definition is accurate in terms of being a definition but it is completely false concerning the Free Grace position on the process through which a person is born again. True synergism as it exists today is found in the "spirituality" of many people when they pick and choose

from all kinds of religions, including Christ and Christianity, to make up their own personal view of salvation. True synergism is actually found in the Reformed theology that Horton espouses because his gospel is faith plus works as proof of that faith. Horton accuses us of the same sort of synergistic theology when he writes, "...this view locates security in the believer's decision to accept Christ. According to this view, although genuine Christians may fail to grow in their sanctification and persevere in the faith—in fact, may never even begin to bear the fruit of righteousness—they are assured of eternal life. Such 'carnal Christians' may leave the church, even deny Christ, and thereby lose the blessings of living as 'victorious Christians' as well as the rewards in the next life for faithful service, but they will be saved, though 'as through fire' (1 Co. 3:15)...this position...implies that human beings are capable of responding to God in faith apart from a prior regeneration, bases election on foreseen faith, rejects the particular scope of the atonement, and maintains that the Spirit's sovereign call may be resisted. Even its teaching of eternal security is based on the believer's decision to accept Christ..." [Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, pp. 680-686]. Horton did a fairly but not completely accurate summation of Chafer's theology and it is generally what we believe the Bible teaches but because Horton's theology is contrary to the Bible and to Free Grace theology, he has to reject our biblical position. His position and our position are opposed to one another. Believing the facts of the gospel is not a synergistic effort between God and man. God's plan is this: hear the good news, believe the good news, and receive eternal life. It is based entirely on God's promise and not on anything we have done, are doing, or will ever do. If that is His plan, who are we to argue with it? Horton actually has his reasoning exactly backwards. Works makes God a debtor to us but faith is not a work of any sort.

Romans 4:4–5 <sup>4</sup>Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. <sup>5</sup>But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,

Reformed theologian Loraine Boettner, I think unwittingly, admits that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is a logical implication of Reformed theology as presented in the Westminster Confession. If that is true, then the Reformed understanding of perseverance is only as good as the confession is biblical and concerning this doctrine it is not in conformance to the revealed Word. The problem with this method of doctrinal formation is we do not develop sound doctrine from the logical implications of theological confessions; we develop sound doctrine from Scriptural exegesis based on literal hermeneutics. Notice too, that he elevates his system of theology into a position of superiority over the Scriptures. Boettner writes, "This doctrine [perseverance of the saints] does not stand alone but is a necessary part of the Calvinistic system of theology. The doctrines of Election and Efficacious Grace logically imply the certain salvation of those who receive these blessings. If God has

chosen men absolutely and unconditionally to eternal life, and if His Spirit effectively applies to them the benefits of redemption, the inescapable conclusion is that these persons shall be saved..." [Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 182]. This statement is a theological philosophical argument and not an argument of hermeneutics and exegesis. A foundational presupposition to the Reformed argument on the doctrine of perseverance is that the Calvinistic system of theology as it defines election is the correct definition and I maintain that their definition of election not correct.

The Puritan John Owen rejected the biblical truth that believers can fall away and fail to persevere. "Owen did not deny the existence of backsliders and apostates. However, he suggested that Goodwin's error [he is critiquing an argument made by a man named John Goodwin who claimed the Scriptures taught that a believer could defect from a state of grace], like that of all Arminians, was to assume that all who profess faith in Christ are true believers. In exhaustive detail, Owen examined scriptural passages describing people who fell away from faith, concluding that they had never been true believers. Owen said these apostates had experienced only a 'temporary holiness' that did not change their natures...Thus biblical references to hypocrites, who are the tares sown among the Lord's wheat, are no argument against perseverance of the true Christian in faith..." [Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, p. 604]. Calvinists make up a lot of syllogisms in order to prove their theology. Owen created one to "prove" that no true believer can fail to persevere.

1. The elect cannot fall away.
2. Some who profess to believe fall away from the faith.
3. Hence, professors who fall away are not elect believers. [p. 604 as cited above in the Puritan theology text].

Notice that the presupposition for this false syllogism is the doctrine of election. The presupposition that the elect cannot fall away is completely false and that nullifies his conclusion. False theological presuppositions coupled with a theological hermeneutic in place of a literal hermeneutic can only lead to false doctrine. Owen was wrong concerning his exegetical conclusions. The Bible clearly shows us that true believers can depart from God and fall away from the faith. This syllogism is clearly driven by theology and not by biblical truth.

Owen is obviously making a distinction between what he believes to be doctrinal truth identifying saving faith as opposed to spurious faith. The problem is he denies the truth of the Bible to do it. One example he uses to "prove" spurious faith is Simon the Sorcerer. Acts 8:13 specifically says that Simon the Sorcerer was among the Samaritan believers who were brought to faith by Philip. Owen denies that Simon was a believer even though the Bible clearly and unequivocally states he believed.

Acts 8:13 <sup>13</sup>Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

I'm not going to go into detail concerning Simon and this pericope; I did that in the Bibliology series in lectures 2 and 3. I'm pointing out here what John Owen did with this Scripture in order to prove that Simon could not have been a believer. Owen claimed there are two kinds of "faith." The second kind of faith is a false faith that one has and then abandons. The problem is there is no such thing as a false faith; a person either has faith or does not have faith. People can lie about having faith, but that is not faith by definition.

"For there is a faith whereby we are justified, which he who has shall be assuredly saved; which purifies the heart and works by love. And there is a faith or believing, which does nothing of all this; which who has, and has no more, is not justified, nor can be saved....Thus it is said of Simon the magician, that he 'believed,' Acts viii.13, when he was in the gall of bitterness and bond of iniquity" [p. 493 as cited above in the Puritan theology text]. This is serious biblical error. He has imposed his theology onto the text which, in turn, forces him to deny what the Bible explicitly records and that is that Simon believed. In order to maintain his theology, Owen has to deny the plain teaching of Scripture which clearly says Simon believed. There are not separate categories of belief; one either believes or one does not believe and the Scriptures clearly say that Simon believed. Can a person say they believe and remain an unbeliever? Of course, but that is a lie and it is an issue between that person and God. We can't determine what a person truly believes based on their subsequent behavior. They may be engaging in a spiritual charade but we don't know that. If the person's behavior is such that it requires the intervention of pastors, elders, or other believers, then disciplinary guidelines were provided by the Lord to intervene (Mt. 18:15-20). James also encouraged believers to intervene in the lives of those who departed from the truth in an effort to turn them back (James 5:19-20). The point is, we have to consider a person who can articulate the gospel reasons for their claim to be a believer at face value and treat them accordingly. In this case, we aren't simply accepting the word of Simon because the infallible Word of God says that Simon was a believer. It is not our place to contradict that biblical truth.

The primary Greek word used for perseverance is ὑπομονή. It means remaining behind, endurance, perseverance, steadfastness, or patience; it is the capacity to continue to bear up under difficult circumstances. This word is clearly used in a sanctification salvation sense. Perseverance as a biblical doctrine has no bearing on justification salvation except it is a desired hallmark of the Christian life. Justification salvation is the

point at which perseverance begins in the life of the believer. Perseverance is a sanctification salvation issue.

2 Thessalonians 1:4 <sup>4</sup>therefore, we ourselves speak proudly of you among the churches of God for your perseverance [ύπομονή] and faith in the midst of all your persecutions and afflictions which you endure.

Titus 2:2 <sup>2</sup>Older men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance [ύπομονή]. [also translated endurance, patience, and steadfastness in other translations]

In the Parable of the Sower and the four soils, there are three classes of believers and one class of unbeliever. The believers of soils 2 and 3 fall away and as a result they do not bear fruit but they remain believers. Those who do bear fruit in the good soil are commended for their steadfast faithfulness resulting in bearing fruit. The believers operating in soil 4 are commended for their perseverance.

Luke 8:15 <sup>15</sup>“But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance [ύπομονή].

The Lord's explanation of the rocky and thorny soils clearly indicates these people came to life but fell away due to persecution and to the worries of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth. But the person represented by the good soil stands firm and by persevering in a steadfast, faithful walk is said to bear fruit. One thing to bear in mind here is that this parable is set in the context of the Kingdom offer by the King to Israel but the application is valid throughout history. The characteristics of those who remain unbelieving and who believe but fall away and with those who are faithful, productive believers seem to be some unchanging characteristics of people in all dispensations.

There is a definite connection between living a life of perseverance based on sound doctrine and bearing spiritual fruit. Sound doctrine can only be gleaned from a good working knowledge of the Word of God which flows from the use of literal hermeneutics. Apart from knowing the Word of God, perseverance becomes impossible because no one can know how to persevere and know what constitutes perseverance unless and until they are grounded in the Word of God. No one can know what it means to bear spiritual fruit without knowing the Word of God well.

Romans 15:4 <sup>4</sup>For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance [ύπομονή] and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

“Then Paul stated a significant principle concerning the purpose and ministry of the Scriptures: For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us (lit., ‘for our instruction’). The Scriptures serve to give believers endurance [perseverance] and encouragement so that they might have hope (pres. tense, ‘keep on having hope’...). As Christians learn from the *past* (what is written in the OT about others who did not please themselves) they are motivated to endure and be comforted in the *present*, looking ahead in hope (confidence) to the *future*” [John A. Witmer, “Romans” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 2:495].

The point I want to make here highlights the importance of perseverance. The one who falls away isn't in a position to even bear fruit much less to be spiritually productive in the process of bearing that fruit. That situation has a bearing on rewards at the Bema seat. Those who do not know the Word and do not bear spiritual fruit are not glorifying the Lord with their life. Glorifying and serving the Lord are factors the Lord will evaluate at the judgment seat of Christ. Rewards that have eternal significance are at stake. Believers need to consider these things as they make their way through their Christian life; we have to live life with this eternal perspective.

The verb form of the word is ὑπομένω means to remain under, in other words to persevere, endure, sustain, or bear up under and it also carries the concept of maintaining faith in the face of misery, adversity, persecution or provocation.

Hebrews 12:1-3 <sup>1</sup>Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance [ὑπομονή] the race [ἀγών] that is set before us, <sup>2</sup>fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured [ὑπομένω] the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup>For consider Him who has endured [ὑπομένω] such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

These verses in Hebrews obviously have a lot to say to us about perseverance. This Christian life we are in is a particular kind of race; and contrary to the average American's Christian experience it is a difficult race, a hard race. In modern America, we have been the exception to this rule. The Greek word for race, ἀγών, means fight, struggle, conflict, opposition; it refers to a race involving competition and struggle. Our English word “agony” is derived from this word. Our English word “race” which we think of as simply a speed contest between participants doesn't really convey the aspect of difficulty, conflict, and opposition the Greek meaning carries. While American Christians have, to this point, had an easy Christian life compared to many of the brothers and sisters who have come before us in other parts of the world, the Christian life is a struggle and a life of conflict and opposition. The Scriptures continually call us to endure

and persevere in this struggle with our focus on Christ and on eternity. The Scriptures continually call us to persevere and endure in the face of serious opposition. I'm sorry to say it appears that we are entering a period of more intense struggle and conflict in American Christianity today and we may be called on to persevere in the face of this kind of difficulty. It is normative for the Christian life to be an agonizing race that calls for perseverance. Are you prepared to do that? Are you willing to do that? This is a lifelong race that begins the moment of our new birth. Jesus is our example; He endured the cross, which is an absolutely horrifying way to die, on our behalf. Just as the Lord kept His eye on the goal, we are to keep our eye on the goal rather than on the troubles of this life. But even in this comparatively easy Christian life we have in America, many Christians still fall away and fail to persevere. Even though there is no real societal pressure to abandon Christianity and there is no physical violence as of yet, people still leave the faith. They aren't being driven away; they are voluntarily withdrawing. They just get lazy or they get involved more in the world more than they are involved in and with the things of Christ. So many minor issues are used as excuses to fall away. That is even more amazing because we generally have an unchallenged walk, at least at this time, in terms of persecution. John is a good example of persevering in the face of persecution and in the midst of his exile to the Patmos prison; he was blessed to receive the Revelation of the Christ even in the midst of serious persecution and personal harm.

Revelation 1:9 <sup>9</sup>1, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance [ὑπομονή] which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Another word for persevere, translated this way only once, is ἐπιμένω, means to remain, stay, continue, keep on, and persevere; it is to continue in an activity or state. The verse in which this word is translated as "perseverance" is clearly a sanctification salvation Scripture.

1 Timothy 4:16 <sup>16</sup>Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere [ἐπιμένω] in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.

A final word used only once is προσκατέρησις meaning persistence or perseverance; it is to continue to do something with intense effort with the possible implication of despite difficulty.

Ephesians 6:18 <sup>18</sup>With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance [προσκατέρησις] and petition for all the saints,

True biblical, Christian perseverance does mean to be faithful throughout the Christian life, but we also need to realize that a faithful walk is not a guarantee as a result of the



new birth. Believers can and do fail to persevere but they nevertheless retain eternal life. Besides, no believer lives a perfect life and who decides how much faithfulness and obedience is enough to prove faith, or, conversely, how much sin and disobedience “prove” unbelief? This doctrine also has a significant element of remaining faithful in the face of persecution, however, we must also acknowledge that a person who wilts under personal, physical persecution and denies the Lord or the Christian faith is not proving a lack of salvation nor is it proof that the person was never saved. On the other hand, the believer who stands firm in the face of persecution will be rewarded by the Lord at the Bema. A failure to persevere will affect rewards but it does not negate eternal life.

James 1:12 <sup>12</sup>Blessed is a man who perseveres [ὑπομένω] under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

Revelation 2:10 <sup>10</sup>Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Unger has, in my view at least, a doctrinally sound view of perseverance. “...In ethics it denotes the duty and privilege of a Christian to continue steadfastly in obedience and fidelity to Christ, not in order to inherit eternal life but to demonstrate love and gratitude to Christ for His great salvation....The Christian's fidelity and obedience will be rewarded at the judgment seat of Christ. His salvation is not affected by lack of human faithfulness, but his rewards are....When men begin to interject human faithfulness and human works into the question of their eternal salvation, they take it off the rock of Christ's finished work and place it upon a flimsy basis. If getting to heaven depended upon human merit or faithfulness in any degree, no human being would ever get there or claim merit for entrance. Christ will abundantly reward faithfulness in His redeemed children, but He can never accept their faithfulness as merit for salvation. Failure to distinguish between salvation and rewards has confused this subject in theological thinking...” [Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, s. v. “perseverance”].

Scripture is very clear concerning the doctrine of perseverance. Perseverance is a doctrine distinct from justification salvation; perseverance is strictly a sanctification salvation issue. “God *preserves* irreversibly for all eternity the one who believes in Christ and the believer can be sure of this, based on His [God's] promise. Everlasting life is just that because God promises it. The *believer*, though, has an *opportunity and privilege to persevere* in holiness in this present world and will likely do so in accord with the quality of his fellowship with God, his allegiance to Christ, and his willingness to be led by the Spirit of God in his Christian walk. Perseverance, it is suggested, is a worthy goal for a

successful and glorious reception of the believer at the Judgment Seat of Christ. To say that 'results may vary' in the lives of Christians seems self-evident. All believers are at different levels of spirituality, maturity, yielded-ness [sic], and obedience. To see perseverance in holiness as an additional requisite for eternal salvation or to make an evaluation of one's works and faithfulness a requisite for assurance of possessing eternal life is to grossly confuse the issue....*Having* eternal life by faith alone and *living/working out* eternal life as a faithful disciple are distinct and should never be confused or intermingled in our understanding. *Having* eternal life assures that one will live forever; *living out* eternal life subsequently produces the reaping of eternal life with Christ throughout the endless ages" [Anthony M. Badger, *Confronting Calvinism: A Free Grace Refutation and Biblical Resolution of Radica Reformed Soteriology*, p. 322-323].