

The Perseverance of the Saints

When I fear my faith will fail, Christ will hold me fast;
 When the tempter would prevail, He will hold me fast.
I could never keep my hold through life's fearful path;
 For my love is often cold – He must hold me fast.

Those He saves are His delight – Christ will hold me fast;
 Precious in His holy sight – He will hold me fast.
He'll not let my soul be lost: His promises shall last;
 Bought by Him at such a cost: He will hold me fast.

For my life He bled and died – Christ will hold me fast;
 Justice has been satisfied: He will hold me fast.
Raised with Him to endless life – He will hold me fast;
 Till our faith is turned to sight, when He comes at last.¹

These words are extremely comforting and encouraging to Christians. But are they true? Does the Bible indeed teach that Christ will “not let our souls be lost”?

Despite the attempts of the most ardent Arminian, the Bible clearly, unequivocally, unashamedly, and repeatedly teaches that the God who unconditionally elects in eternity past also sovereignly preserves those very elect for whom Christ shed His precious and efficacious blood.

As Michael Horton notes, “There is no indication in Scripture that God effectually calls (i.e. regenerates) those whom He has not chosen or that He draws into vital union with His Son those whom He allows finally to perish. The believer's perseverance is guaranteed by God's perseverance.”²

One of the clearest examples of this is found in Jesus' words in John 6:37-40:

¹ Words: Vv. 1-2 by Ada Habershon (1861-1918), v.3 by Matt Merker (2013 Getty Music).

² Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 320.

“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never cast out.³ For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I should lose nothing of all that He has given Me,⁴ but raise them all up on the last day.”

Similarly, in John 10, Jesus says:

“My sheep hear My voice,⁵ and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never (οὐ μὴ) perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” (10:27-30)

In fact, if any of God’s elect for whom Christ effectually died falls away, Jesus’ prayer in John 17:11 was not answered: “Holy Father, keep them in Your name.” As God, Jesus confesses that He perfectly guarded them while on earth (17:12); now He prays to the Father to protect these helpless sheep from the dangers of the world and the schemes of the devil (17:14-15).

Knowing that the Father’s reputation and glory are on the line in preserving His elect, Paul’s words to the Philippians ought to provide us with much comfort regarding God’s promise to keep those He gave to the Son: “And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (1:6)

Because God is omnipotent, Paul can promise believers that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:39)

As with all the other spiritual blessings we have looked at – election, justification, adoption, sanctification – our perseverance is the fruit of our **union with Christ.**

³ πᾶν ὃ δίδωσίν μοι ὁ πατήρ πρὸς ἐμὲ ἤξει, καὶ τὸν ἐρχόμενον πρὸς ἐμὲ οὐ μὴ ἐκβάλω ἔξω

⁴ ἵνα πᾶν ὃ δέδωκέν μοι μὴ ἀπολέσω ἐξ αὐτοῦ

⁵ In the previous verse, Christ’s sheep (i.e. the elect whom the Father gave Him in eternity past [v.29; 17:2]) are contrasted with the unbelieving ‘goats,’ to whom Jesus says, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father’s name bear witness about Me, but you do not believe **because** (ὅτι) you are not part of My flock.” (10:25-26)

- Because believers have been once-for-all united into Christ by faith, they are now “one” with Him (cf. John 17:23); and thus the only way for them to be “cut off” from God is for Christ Himself to be cut off from God.

This is why, in the ‘golden chain of salvation’ in Romans 8, Paul can speak of the believer as **already glorified**:

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom he foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified.”⁶ (8:28-30)

In the Greek, picked up the KJV, Paul repeats the pronoun “these” in the second verb of every doublet. For example, “And those whom He predestinated these He also called...and those whom He justified these He also glorified.”

- This means that no one slips through the cracks. Every single one of God’s elect will – must!! – persevere to glorification.

According to Ephesians 2, the same grace that initiates our salvation also consummates our salvation: “For by grace you have been saved.” (2:5, 8)

- At first glance, this seems ‘forced.’ But the unusual Greek construction⁷ that Paul uses in these verses is hard to convey in a singular translation.
 - The sense Paul gives is that by grace we have been (past, [ESV]), are being (present [KJV]), and will be (guaranteed future) saved.
 - ➔ From first to last our salvation is all of grace. These verses carries the same logic as Romans 8:29-30, namely, that *everyone* who has been

⁶ Though some Greek snobs scoff at the “once-for-all aorist,” it definitely applies here. Just because some Greek novices make too much out of it or ‘find’ it in every text, it does not mean that it is non-existent in the Greek NT.

⁷ Known infamously as a perfect periphrastic.

justified by grace will be sanctified by grace, as well as ultimately glorified by grace.

Though there are an innumerable host of other Bible texts that buttress this glorious doctrine,⁸ we must press on.

Why I don't like the term 'Eternal Security'

The majority of Arminian churches that deny doctrines like unconditional election, particular redemption, and irresistible grace nevertheless [inconsistently] champion a distorted view of the biblical and reformed understanding of perseverance.

Known popularly as 'once saved always saved' or 'eternal security', this doctrine, in the hands of unlearned preachers and vile hucksters has unfortunately become a licence for imprudent presumption at best and wicked licentiousness at worst.

Broadly speaking, proponents of this view teach that as long as someone has "asked Jesus into their heart," they ought to have full assurance – and to make sure no one questions them – that their soul is eternally secure, regardless of how they live or what they believe.

Unfortunately, such a teaching does not square with Scripture, which calls for the elect to do things like "press on" and "make their calling and election sure."

For example, we read in Colossians 1:21-22:

"And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, [Christ] has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard."

Or, in 1 Cor. 15:1-2 we read:

⁸ For e.g., see 1 Cor. 1:8; 6:11; 1 Pet. 1:3-5; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; Heb. 7:25; 10:14; Rom. 11:29; John 3:36; 5:24; 1 John 5:4; 2 Thes. 3:3; 2 Cor. 5:17; Jer. 32:40; 31:3, etc.

“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believe in vain.”

The Bible teaches that many will make professions of faith, but only the elect will persevere to the end:

- Two of the four “soils” in Jesus’ parable showed initial signs of conversion, but eventually were proven to be false counterfeits that bore no fruit (i.e. the rocky soil and the thorn-infested soil).
 - See Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23; cf. Mark 4:1-9, 13-20.
- Jesus taught that not everyone that offers lip-service to Him is necessarily saved.
 - See Matt. 7:20-21; Luke 6:46
- When some false teachers who professed to be Christians left the church in Ephesus, the apostle John wrote, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” (1 John 2:19)

Thus, we must be careful about rashly giving assurance of salvation to any professing Christian living in unrepentant disobedience, unbelief, or apostasy.

Rather, we are to exhort such persons to consider whether they are saved or not:

- “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless you failed to meet the test!” (2 Cor. 13:5)
- “Brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities [see vv.3-8] you will never fall.” (2 Pet. 1:10).

The doctrine “once saved always saved” does not take into consideration either the passages that command us to endure or the warning passages about spurious faith.

The doctrine of perseverance, on the other hand, rightly teaches that God’s elect, by His sovereign and preserving grace, will persevere to the end (cf. Matt. 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13), even in face of suffering and death:

- Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.” (Rom. 8:35-36)

This is why Jude can offer his readers such encouragement to press on and press in, even in the bleakest of circumstances: God will keep His elect till the end!⁹

What about the passages that seem to teach we can lose our salvation?

As Horton notes, “apostasy is not only hypothetical; it actually happens.”¹⁰

Judas is a prime example. However, the Scriptures make it abundantly clear that Judas never lost his salvation. Rather, Judas was never saved to begin with, even if he learned how to fake it before the others.

- In contrast to the eleven, whom Jesus had “chosen” and thus who had “believed” and “come to know that [Jesus] is the Holy One of God” (John 6:69), Jesus calls Judas the future Christ-betrayer “a devil” (6:70-71).
- The reason why Judas never persevered was because he was not a sheep, and thus not preserved by the Good Shepherd. Speaking to the Father, the Son says, “While I was with them, I kept them in Your name...I have

⁹ Jude 24-25 – “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 322.

guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled." (John 17:12-13)

Perhaps the two most famous passages used to advocate that a true, born-again Christian can ultimately fall away are Hebrews 6:4-8 and 10:26-31.

Those whom the author says "have once been enlightened" and "have tasted the heavenly gift and the powers of the age to come" simply refer to unbelievers who belong to the visible church.

- That is, they have heard the gospel preached, and know – at least in their mind – the truths of the gospel and its doctrines, and yet have never themselves come to a personal and saving faith in Christ.
- Moreover, they have seen the Spirit powerfully at work in the lives of many others, and yet they themselves remain unconverted.

This is clear from the following verses that liken such unconverted church attenders to land that receives abundant rain, but instead of producing a "useful crop," bears only "thorns and thistles" – things Jesus Himself used to describe unregenerate unbelievers (Matt. 7:16).

This is further buttressed by v.9, where the author says that such people have never tasted of "salvation."

The same argument is used in Hebrews 10, where we read:

"For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries." (10:26-27)

Again, it is possible for people to have a head "knowledge" of the truths of the gospel, and yet never have been converted. Because such people have never received a new heart in regeneration, they can only fake Christianity so long, and when push comes to shove – here the author highlights persecution – they end

up denying and forsaking Christ, and thus “spurning the Son God” and “profaning the blood of the covenant.” (10:29)

There are many dead branches that appear to be part of the vine, but upon closer inspection, bear no fruit, and thus are dead and useless.

- Most frightening of all are the plethora of NT passages that tell us that many of these religious unbelievers are [false] teachers in the church!¹¹

If anything, passages like Hebrews 6 and 10 remind us not to play games with the living God, for it is a fearful thing to fall into His hands!¹²

So, although the Bible ubiquitously teaches that God will keep and preserve His elect, they, because they have received a new heart that delights in, and desires to, obey God, will – must!! – pursue “the holiness” without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

This balance is seen nicely in 2 Tim. 2:19:

“But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.’”

The One who predestined us to become holy and blameless (Eph. 1:4) will Himself ensure that this happens (1 Cor. 1:8).

Praise God. He will hold us fast!

¹¹ E.g. 2 Pet. 2-3; Jude 12-13 (cf. Eze. 34); 2 Tim. 3:6; Rev. 2-3

¹² Heb. 10:31