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# THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

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Perseverance of the Saints



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## Introduction

We've come to the last of our five points, P – the perseverance of the saints. This is a doctrine about what will happen to you in the future. It is a doctrine about what will happen to everyone in the future, whether they are elect or non-elect. Of course, none of us is perfectly sure whether we are elect or not, so therein lies the difficulty with this doctrine.

We will first consider what happens to an elect person, how the change that was wrought in him by the Spirit of God was not just a random occurrence but was indeed the beginning of the work of God. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, sometimes referred to as “eternal security,” speaks to questions such as “Can I lose my salvation?” or “How do I know that I will remain a Christian to the end?”

We have two seemingly contradictory truths: On the one hand, the Bible says that once God saves you, you'll always be saved (e.g., John 10; Romans 8); on the other, it says that only if you endure to the end will you be saved (Matthew 24:13). Eternal security is a glorious and comforting truth. But notice what Paul says in Romans 11:21: “For if God spared not the natural branches, *take heed* lest he also spare not thee.” Here we have to sort out how these warnings can coexist with the absolutely guaranteed nature of the perseverance of the saints.

The word perseverance might be somewhat confusing because it could seem to communicate that God has started something, and now it is your turn: you must persevere. The biblical teaching, however, is that God has done something; God is doing something; and God will do something. The God who starts is the God who finishes. That is what Paul says in Philippians 1:6: “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” The historic Westminster Confession of Faith reminds us of this doctrinal truth when it says, “They, whom God has accepted in his Beloved [Jesus Christ, His only Son], 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” (17.1). The repeated pronoun “His,” tells us who is the subject of salvation is and how certain the results are.

The true doctrine depends on God altogether. The Confession continues:

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 ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

This statement gives us five reasons: (1) the immutability of the decree of election; (2) flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; (3) upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; (4) the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them and (5) the nature of the covenant of grace. We will follow this outline in this work.

Those who are elect and regenerate can fall into sin; can fall deep into sin and stay there a long time. And those who are non-elect can present themselves as good and upright creatures. The regenerate can fall into grievous sins that displease the Lord, grieves His Holy Spirit, have their hearts hardened and

themselves turned away from Christ. These must lack assurance. Though they are elect, they cannot have the least amount of assurance of their salvation.

The doctrine of assurance is one that is often confused with the perseverance of the saints. However the two ideas are completely distinct. Assurance is one's feeling of security. It is one's feeling that he is safe and secure. But an unbeliever may have much assurance – as we find on the streets all the time! – yet he cannot have any perseverance because he is not even a saint. We are discussing the perseverance of the saints which is the doctrine that every single saint will be saved. It is likewise assumed that the non-elect won't be able to even get started on the way because no one is on the way to anywhere except hell by nature. Assurance on the other hand is one's individual measure of security, whether real or not, to which he subscribes himself. The true believer may go up and down in his assurance – sometimes being very sure of his salvation, other times doubting that he is even saved. This is perfectly natural and will lessen over time, as the believer is conformed to Christ. However, his degree of perseverance, if we can call it that, is the same as it ever was -- absolutely guaranteed.

The Canons of Dort have the words,

Concerning this preservation of those chosen to salvation and concerning the perseverance of true believers in faith, believers themselves can and do become assured in accordance with the measure of their faith. By this faith they firmly believe that they are and always will remain true and living members of the church, and that they have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

We will track now how the perseverance of the saints is determined by the five reasons: (1) the immutability of the decree of election; (2) flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; (3) upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; (4) the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them and (5) the nature of the covenant of grace.

We can see each of the persons of the Trinity has a role in our salvation. Election and the free love of God the Father is the first of our measures. Then we will discuss the efficacy of Christ's intercession. Then we will discuss the purpose of the Holy Spirit and the seed within the individual. Finally, we will present all of this in the framework of the covenant of grace.

## The immutability of the decree of Election

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to [his] purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate [to be] conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. (Rom 8:28-30)

Here we have the marvelous chain of salvation – the golden chain that relates our predestination with our glorification. Everyone who was predestinated to eternal life was called and justified. There is that step between justification and glorification which involves us living out our lives. Our daily lives are that in which we may doubt, that in which we may come to wonder if our calling and election are real, in which we may be tempted by many things and fall prey to the worldly trappings.

Here we begin with foreknowledge, God knew us before the foundation of the world. He knew long before we even existed, God knew us from eternity. And He predestinated us to be conformed to the image of His Son, then He also glorified. This kind of blows our minds because we think we have ourselves under control, that we do what we want. But Scripture treats predestination, calling, justification and glorification as a single entity, or the single work of God in our lives. "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifies" (Rom 8:33). And whom He justified, these He also glorified (Rom 8:30). If you are elect, it is no matter what you think or feel you feel, you will be conformed to the image of Christ. You will be glorified by the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, our perseverance is not our work nor does it depend on us primarily but it is God's work. Yet God uses means. And the means that He uses depends on the individual and also are common: the church, the Word of God, other writings of men are the main and principal sources of aid.

## The free and unchangeable love of God the Father

The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, [saying], Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. (Jer 31:3)

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. (John 10:28-29)

Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. (2 Tim 2:19)

Another aspect of our perseverance is founded in the free and unchangeable love of God. This shows the amazing love that God the Father has toward His people. It's true that election can be seen as a dry and dusty topic but in God's mind it is full of His love. He appears to each of His children when they are converted and says, "oh I have loved thee with an everlasting love! Come and be with Me!" and such entreaties are made to the sinner that cannot possibly be resisted by him. The Lord presents such a love toward His people that it is impossible that He would lose any. No man nor angel nor any other creature (if there are any!) is able to pluck them out of Christ's or the Father's hand.

The foundation upon which everything stands is that the Lord knows those who are His. It is the foundation of God which stands sure, what could be imagined that would overthrow it? Will the foundation of God wobble? Will it be blown off course by the actions of men? Indeed not. It is the foundation of God – it stands absolutely and perfectly sure. And the seal of the foundation is that the Lord knows them that are His. Here is that love, that marvelous love that the Lord has for His people. The Lord knows each and every one that is His elect, and He loves them tremendously because His honor is at stake.

## The intercession of Jesus Christ

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, [art] in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. ... 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. (John 17:20-21,24)

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. (Heb 7:25)

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for [the sins of] the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2)

The first of the verses above shows how Christ made his great intercessory prayer for His people. He prayed not only for His people present with Him then but also for those people who would believe in Him through their efforts. This marvelous prayer takes these people and wraps up their eternal destiny in the glorification of the Son. That is, the prayer for the people for whom He prays is that they would see His glory.

And now Christ is already glorified, He is ascended to the right hand of the Father. Yet He still makes intercession for His people, the very same people for which He already made intercession. That is, the same people for whom Christ makes intercession now are the very same ones He prayed for in His earthly ministry. There he prayed that they would see His glory. Here He is able to save them to the uttermost that come to God by Him. All those who come to Christ are brought to the Father because our union with Christ is also union with the Father so that union with Christ means union with the Father. So those who come to Christ come to the Father to the uttermost.

Here we have the security of the believer depending on something absolute – that it, Christ’s intercession is absolute. There are no degrees, no half-measures supplied to the child of God to arrive at his destination. Christ makes sure that everything that is needed is supplied. Christ oversees the salvation process of each of His children. He brings them along. The Father always hears His Son and the Son ever lives to make intercession for His people. And we have someone who pleads His merit before the Father. He is Jesus Christ the righteous! He is the propitiation for our sins and by His blood our sins are taken away. He is the perfect Mediator between God and Man. He perfectly represents Man to God. Christ’s death removes our guilt and His righteousness shines forth upon us, making us as righteous as He is. We are accepted when we are in the Beloved. It is Christ’s intercession which is outside of us but which succeeds for His people. When we are in union with Him He brings our case and its needs all the way to the Father.

## The abiding of the Spirit and of the Seed of God within them

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

Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. (1 John 3:9)

In whom ye also [trusted], after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the

earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory. (Eph 1:13-14)

It is interesting in 1 Peter 1:5 that we are kept by the power of God through faith. That makes our saving faith to be something that God creates in us as a channel for our blessing. But saving faith is just our belief and trust in Christ, that He is our Savior. But it is also more – it is the work of God in the soul. Saving faith is not merely the belief in Christ but it also stands for an entire change of being that the creature has undergone. He has been born again. He is alive now; before he was dead. As soon as his eyes are opened by the renewing of the Holy Ghost he is in a new world. Old things have passed away, all things are become new. The apprehension of "the things of God" as true lies at the foundation of all the exercises of the renewed soul. It is the permanent nature of these new characteristics of the soul which stands out. The creature has passed from death to life and now lives. His new life is exercised in saving faith – that is the fundamental new way in which the soul interacts with the world.

That which is born of God does not commit sin. What the Apostle contends for stands as follows, that the design of regeneration is to destroy sin, and that all who are born of God lead a righteous and a holy life, because the Spirit of God restrains the lusting of sin. And he cannot sin. Here the Apostle ascends even higher, for he plainly declares that the hearts of the godly are so effectually governed by the Spirit of God, that through an inflexible disposition they follow his guidance. He cannot sin because he is born of God which describes me insofar as I am a new creature in Christ. I never sin. 😊 But, of course, I do sin but as Paul says, "nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me," and that part of me never sins.

Take care, however, to be clear as to what saving faith is. The Scripture does not teach that a man will reach his journey's end without continuing to travel along the road; it is not true that one act of faith is all, and that nothing is needed of daily faith, prayer, and watchfulness. Our doctrine is the very opposite, namely, that the righteous shall hold on his way as it says in Job 17:9; or, in other words, shall continue in faith, in repentance, in prayer, and under the influence of the grace of God. We do not believe in salvation by a physical force which treats a man as a dead log, and carries him whether he will it or not towards heaven. No, "he holds on," he is personally active about the matter, and plods on up hill and down dale till he reaches his journey's end.

And then after we trusted we received the Holy Spirit of Promise who is given to each of God's children. He controls us and keeps us from going wildly astray. He calls us back when we do go wildly astray. It is He who rules our hearts and our minds and causes us to worship Christ. He always glorifies Christ above all things. He teaches us and reminds us of things and guides us along. He is "the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession" – that is, He is not the final gift but He is a great gift to us! He is our guide until the redemption of the purchased possession. That is God's elect are His purchased possession and He will certainly not lose one of the least for whom He has paid. This is God. He does all things well. He does not begin a work in a creature and then forget about it. He will not leave one of His own, and God always sees everything through to completion. Though His elect die in the fiery furnace, yet He will give such grace in the situation that they will not mind the pain.

## The nature of the covenant of grace

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, that they shall not depart from me. (Jer 32:40)

For this [is] the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: And they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more. (Heb 8:10-12 KJV)

Here we could include everything that has already been said or the covenant of grace sits at the top of the theological food chain. But here we can focus on the overall gracious nature of the covenant and deduce from that there is no final aspect to be met by man. To be clear, the covenant is all of grace. The Father elected before the world began. Christ came, lived, died nearly 2000 years ago. The Father's election is eternal – it can never change. You and I were called in time, in our own lives, in a way unique to each of us. You were justified. Now you are here. What we need is a framework for contemplating all this. That is what covenant theology provides.

There is first of all the Covenant of Works. This is the natural condition of man. This is the earning before God of paradise on the basis of one's own works or failing and falling into sin. We are all guilty of many sins but some are awaiting condemnation. These are totally unwilling to come to terms of salvation. These have hearts that are twisted to themselves – their hearts lead to the glory of the individual and are bound in that condition by the condition itself. This is, in itself a miserable condition in which men are bound. They are ignorant of their condition and bound up in it.

Others come into the covenant of grace. Here is the exact same covenant of works but a Mediator is introduced who satisfies the terms of that covenant and opens the way for individuals to come to reconciliation with God the Father through Him. This covenant is all of grace. There is nothing which remains to be fulfilled by the individual. His faith is purchased and made real to him. Everything that he needs is purchased and merited by Christ. His overall person is secured by Christ.

Therefore, his actions have to be seen as secondary. They will in some fashion be guaranteed to end at Christ but what they are in the meantime is anybody's guess.

The verse begins "I will make an everlasting covenant with them" and then the Lord promises to do us good. He puts the fear of God in the heart at regeneration. This drives a person to Christ and keeps him there. No one will depart from Him because they fear Him. Normally one flees what one fears but here the people are going to that which they fear because it is the living God who also takes away that fear in Christ.

In the Hebrews passage, it also says, "I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more" which is marvelous grace. And it means that God will not remember our iniquities – how can that be? It catches everything up with it and just reveals that God is very gracious to us and that Christ has already borne everything that was due. There is no more wrath for me because Christ bore it upon Himself. How amazing is it that God will not remember our sins? He remembers us but not our sins. Therefore He accepts us as perfectly righteous. We all know Him because He has revealed Himself to each and every one of us. This is the covenant of grace – we know God because He decides to know us. He chose to know us. And He gives us everything we need to do that so that we can keep on knowing Him more and more.

## Warning Passages

For [it is] impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put [him] to an open shame. For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: But that which beareth thorns and briers [is] rejected, and [is] nigh unto cursing; whose end [is] to be burned. (Heb 6:4-8)

This is a long passage but it is also the most comprehensive. It is also the most terrifying since it cuts so close to the bone. Those who were once enlightened, have tasted of the heavenly gift and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost – these definitely sound saved but I hope we have seen that they cannot be. But these have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come! Still no! These are still not saved who fall away. Remember the five reasons I just went through.

Here we have to say that the apostle really heaps up phrases to make it sound as though these people are saved and then fall away. But it cannot be so we must understand that either there is no one in this category or the people who are described here are very close to being saved but are not. For it is simply the case that one who is saved cannot fall away.

There is also the fact that the elect who read this passage take it seriously and do bear fruit. The elect take the warnings of Scripture very seriously lest he fall into them. Those who reject the doctrine frequently tell us that there are many cautions in the word of God against apostatizing, and that those cautions can have no meaning if it be true that the righteous shall hold on his way. But what if those cautions are the means in the hand of God of keeping his people from wandering? What if God, in giving the fearful passage of eternal perdition has engraved upon the hearts of the elect this terrifying fear and so they are saved by it?

## Once Saved Always Saved

Now here we come upon a perversion of the doctrine. This usually comes in as follows: we are sharing the gospel with someone and they say they are saved. We say, Ok, and then ask them when they came to Christ. They tell us of a time many years ago when they prayed the prayer to receive Christ and since they prayed it, they are saved. Then, once saved always saved. We ask them if there is any fruit or if they are committing the same sins. They tell us that no, there is no fruit and yes they are committing the same sins that they were years ago. We ask them if they are going to church and they say, no.

Here we have the problem, not of once saved always saved but of never saved. We need to convince this person that they were never saved, not that they were saved and are still saved. If there is no fruit in the life then there is no life. If there is life then there will be fruit. This connection is guaranteed and where it is missing, where there is no fruit is where there is no life.



## Conclusion

We believe that God has an elect people whom he has chosen unto eternal life, and that truth necessarily involves the perseverance in grace. We believe in special redemption, and this secures the salvation and consequent perseverance of the redeemed. We believe in effectual calling, which is bound up with justification, a justification which ensures glorification. The doctrines of grace are like a chain— if you believe in one of them you must believe the next, for each one involves the rest; therefore I say that you who accept any of the doctrines of grace must receive this also, as involved in them.

I want to make it clear that this phrase, the perseverance of the saints, is dangerously misleading. It suggests that the perseverance is something that we do, perhaps in and of ourselves. I believe that saints do persevere in faith, and that those who have been effectually called by God and have been reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit endure to the end. However, they persevere not because they are so diligent in making use of the mercies of God. The only reason we can give why any of us continue on in the faith is because we have been preserved.

This teaching about the perseverance of true believers and saints, and about their assurance of it—a teaching which God has very richly revealed in the Word for the glory of his name and for the comfort of the godly, and which God impresses on the hearts of believers—is something which the flesh does not understand, Satan hates, the world ridicules, the ignorant and the hypocrites abuse, and the spirits of error attack. The bride of Christ, on the other hand, has always loved this teaching very tenderly and defended it steadfastly as a priceless treasure; and God, against whom no plan can avail and no strength can prevail, will ensure that the church will continue to do this. To this God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honor and glory forever. Amen.