

# The Perseverance of the Saints.

## Part 1

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### 1. STATEMENT OF THE DOCTRINE

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is stated in the Westminster Confession in the following words: "They whom God hath 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." Or in other words we believe that those who once become true Christians cannot totally fall away and be lost,—that while they may fall into sin temporarily, they will eventually return and be saved.

This doctrine 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 effectually applies to them the benefits of redemption, the inescapable conclusion is that these persons shall be saved. And, historically, this doctrine has been held by all Calvinists, and denied by practically all Arminians.

Those who have fled to Jesus for refuge have a firm foundation upon which to build. Though floods of error deluge the land, though Satan raise all the powers of earth and all the iniquities of their own hearts against them, they shall never fail; but, persevering to the end, they shall inherit those mansions which have been prepared for them from the foundation of the world. The saints in heaven are happier but no more secure than are true believers here in this world. Since faith and repentance are gifts of God, the bestowing of these gifts is a revelation of God's purpose to save those to whom they are given. It is an evidence that God has predestinated the recipients of these gifts to be conformed to the image of His Son, i.e., to be like Him in character, destiny, and glory, and that He will infallibly carry out His purpose. No one can pluck them out of His hands. Those who once become true Christians have within themselves the principle of eternal life, which principle is the Holy Spirit; and since the Holy Spirit dwells within them they are already potentially holy. True, they are still exercised by many trials, and they do not yet see what they shall be, but they should know that that which is begun in them shall be completed to the end, and that the very presence of strife within them is the sign of life and the promise of victory.

In regard to those who become true Christians, but who, as the Arminians allege, fall away, why does God not take them out of the world while they are in the saved state? Surely no one will say that it is because He can not, or that it is because He does not foresee their future apostasy. Why, then, does He leave these objects of His affection here to fall back into sin and perish? His gift of continued life to these Christians amounts to an infinite curse placed upon them. But who can really believe that the

heavenly Father takes no better care of His children than that? This mistaken doctrine of the Arminians teaches that a person may be a son of God today and a son of the Devil tomorrow, that he may change from one state to another as rapidly as he changes his mind. It teaches that he may be born of the Spirit, justified, sanctified, all but glorified, and that even then he may become reprobate and perish eternally, his own will and course of conduct being the determining factor. Certainly a sovereign loving God would not permit His ransomed children to thus fall away and perish.

In addition to this, if God knows that a certain Christian is going to rebel and perish, can He love him with any deep affection even before his apostasy? If we knew that someone who is our friend today would be led to become our enemy and betray us tomorrow, we could not receive him with the intimacy and trust which otherwise would be natural. Our knowledge of his future acts would in large measure destroy our present love for him.

No one denies that the redeemed in heaven will be preserved in holiness. Yet if God is able to preserve His saints in heaven without violating their free agency, may He not also preserve His saints on earth without violating their free agency?

The nature of the change which occurs in regeneration is a sufficient guarantee that the life imparted shall be permanent. Regeneration is a radical and supernatural change of the inner nature, through which the soul is made spiritually alive, and the new life which is implanted is immortal. And since it is a change in the inner nature, it is in a sphere in which man does not have control. No creature is at liberty to change the fundamental principles of its nature, for that is the prerogative of God as Creator. Hence nothing short of another supernatural act of God could reverse this change and cause the new life to be lost. The born-again Christian can no more lose his sonship to the heavenly Father than an earthly son can lose his sonship to an earthly father. The idea that a Christian may fall away and perish arises from a wrong conception of the principle of spiritual life which is imparted to the soul in regeneration.

## 2. OUR PERSEVERANCE NOT DEPENDENT ON OUR OWN GOOD WORKS BUT ON GOD'S GRACE

Paul teaches that believers are not under law, but under grace, and that since they are not under the law they cannot be condemned for having violated the law. "Ye are not under law but under grace," Rom. 6:14. Further sin cannot possibly cause their downfall, for they are under a system of grace and are not treated according to their deserts. "If it is by grace, it is no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace," Rom. 11:6. "The law worketh wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there transgression," Rom. 4:15. "Apart from the law sin is dead" (that is, where the law is abolished sin can no longer subject the person to punishment), Rom. 7:8. "Ye were made dead to the law through the body of Christ," Rom. 7:4. The one who attempts to earn even the smallest part of his salvation by works becomes "a debtor to do the whole law" (that is, to render perfect obedience in his own strength and thus earn his salvation), Gal. 6:3. We are here dealing with two radically different systems of salvation, two systems which, in fact, are diametrically opposed to each other.

The infinite, mysterious, eternal love of God for His people is a guarantee that they can never be lost. This love is not subject to fluctuations but is as unchangeable as His being. It is also gratuitous, and keeps faster hold of us than we of it. It is not founded on the attractiveness of its objects. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins," I John 4:10. "God commendeth His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by His blood, shall we be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much

more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by His life," Rom. 5:8-10. Here the very point stressed is that our standing with God is not based on our deserts. It was "while we were enemies" that we were brought into spiritual life through sovereign grace; and if He has done the greater, will He not do the lesser? The writer of the book of Hebrews also teaches that it is impossible for one of God's chosen to be lost when he says that Christ is both "the Author and Perfecter of our faith." We are there taught that the whole course of our salvation is divinely planned and divinely guided. Neither the grace of God nor its continuance is given according to our merits. Hence if any Christian fell away, it would be because God had withdrawn His grace and changed His method of procedure or, in other words, because He had put the person back under a system of law.

Robert L. Dabney has expressed this truth very ably in the following paragraph: "The sovereign and unmerited love is the cause of the believer's effectual calling. Jer. 31:3; Rom. 8:30. Now, as the cause is unchangeable, the effect is unchangeable. That effect is, the constant communication of grace to the believer in whom God hath begun a good work. God was not induced to bestow His renewing grace in the first instance, by anything which He saw, meritorious or attractive, in the repenting sinner; and therefore the subsequent absence of everything good in him would be no new motive to God for withdrawing His grace. When He first bestowed that grace, He knew that the sinner on whom He bestowed it was totally depraved, and wholly and only hateful in himself to the divine holiness; and therefore no new instance of ingratitude or unfaithfulness, of which the sinner may become guilty after his conversion, can be any provocation to God, to change His mind, and wholly withdraw His sustaining grace. God knew all this ingratitude before. He will chastise it, by temporarily withdrawing His Holy Spirit, or His providential mercies; but if He had not intended from the first to bear with it, and to forgive it in Christ, He would not have called the sinner by His grace at first. In a word, the causes for which God determined to bestow His electing love on the sinner are wholly in God, and not at all in the believer; and hence, nothing in the believer's heart or conduct can finally change that purpose of love. Is. 54:10; Rom. 11:29. Compare carefully Rom. 5:8-10; 8:32, with the whole scope of Rom. 8:28-end. This illustrious passage is but an argument for our proposition; 'What shall separate us from the love of Christ?'"

"God's love in this respect," says Dr. Charles Hodge "is compared to parental love. A mother does not love her child because it is lovely. Her love leads her to do all she can to render it attractive and to keep it so. So the love of God, being in like manner mysterious, unaccountable by anything in its objects, secures His adorning His children with the graces of His Spirit, and arraying them in all the beauty of holiness. It is only the lamentable mistake that God loves us for our goodness, that can lead any one to suppose that His love is dependent on our self-sustained attractiveness."

Concerning the salvation of the elect, Luther says, "God's decree of predestination is firm and certain; and the necessity resulting from it is, in like manner, immovable, and cannot but take place. For we ourselves are so feeble, that if the matter were left in our hands, very few, or rather none, would be saved; but Satan would overcome us all."

The more we think of these matters, the more thankful we are that our perseverance in holiness and assurance of salvation is not dependent on our own weak nature, but upon God's constant sustaining power. We can say with Isaiah, "Except Jehovah of hosts had left us a very small remnant, we should have become as Sodom, we should have been like unto Gomorrah." Arminianism denies this doctrine of Perseverance, because it is a system, not of pure grace, but of grace and works; and in any such system the person must prove himself at least partially worthy.

### 3. THOUGH TRULY SAVED THE CHRISTIAN MAY TEMPORARILY BACKSLIDE AND COMMIT SIN

This doctrine of Perseverance does not mean that Christians do not temporarily fall the victims of sin, for alas, this is all too common. Even the best of men backslide temporarily. But they are never completely defeated; for God, by the exercise of His grace on their hearts infallibly prevents even the weakest saint from final apostasy. As yet we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power (or the glory) may be of God, and not from ourselves (II Cor. 4:7).

Concerning his own personal experience even the great apostle Paul could write: "The good which I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I practice. But if what I would not, that I do, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me... I find then the law, that, to me who would do good, evil is present. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man; but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then I of myself with the mind, indeed, serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin." Rom. 7:19-25. In these lines every true Christian reads his own experience.

It is, of course, inconsistent for the Christian to commit sin, and the writer of the book of Hebrews says that those who do sin "crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh and put Him to an open shame" (6:6). After David had committed sin and had repented he was told by the prophet Nathan that his sin would be forgiven, but that nevertheless through it he had "given great occasion to the enemies of Israel to blaspheme," II Sam. 12:14. David and Peter fell away temporarily, but the basic principles of their natures called them back. Judas fell away permanently because he lacked those basic principles.

As long as the believer remains in this world his state is one of warfare. He suffers temporary reverses and may for a time appear to have lost all faith; yet if he has been once truly saved, he cannot fall away completely from grace. If once he has experienced the inner change which comes through regeneration he will sooner or later return to the fold and be saved. When he comes to himself he confesses his sins and asks forgiveness, never doubting that he is saved. His lapse into sin may have injured him severely and may have brought destruction to others; but so far as he is personally concerned it is only temporary. Paul taught that the life work of many people should be burned since it is constructed of wrong materials, though they themselves shall be saved "so as by fire," I Cor. 3:12-15; and it was this teaching which Jesus brought out in the parable of the lost sheep which the shepherd sought and brought back to the fold.

If true believers fell away, then their bodies, which are called "temples of the Holy Spirit," would become the habitations of the Devil, which of course would make the Devil rejoice and insult over God (I Cor. 6:19). "The Christian is like a man making his way up hill, who occasionally slips back, yet always has his face set toward the summit. The unregenerate man has his face turned downwards, and he is slipping all the way,"—A. H. Strong. "The believer, like a man on shipboard, may fall again and again on the deck, but he will never fall overboard."—C. H. Spurgeon.

Each one of the elect is like the prodigal son in this, that for a time he is deluded by the world and is led astray by his own carnal appetite. He tries to feed on the husks, but they do not satisfy. And sooner or later he is obliged to say, "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight." And he meets with the same reception, tokens of unchanging love; and a father's welcome voice echoes through the soul, and melts the heart of the poor returning backslider, "This my son was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found." Let it be noticed that this is a

thoroughly Calvinistic parable in that the prodigal was a son, and could not lose that relationship. Those who are not sons never have the desire to arise and go to the Father.

Our judgments may at times be wrong, as was that of the bewitched Galatians (3:1); and our affections may cool, as in the Ephesian Church (Rev. 2:4). The Church may become drowsy, yet her heart awakes (Song 5:2). Grace may at times seem to be lost to a child of God when it is indeed not so. The sun is eclipsed, but regains its former splendor. The trees lose all their leaves and fruit in winter, but has fresh buddings with the spring. Israel flees once, or even twice, before her enemies, and yet they conquer the land of promise. The Christian, too, falls many times, but is finally saved. It is unthinkable that God's elect should fail of salvation. "There is no possibility of their escaping the omnipotent power of God, so that, like Jonah, who fled from the will of God, which was to carry the message to Nineveh, yet was pursued even into the belly of the fish by the power of God until he willingly obeyed God's command, so they will eventually return to the Saviour, and after confession receive pardon for their sins and be saved."

#### 4. AN OUTWARD PROFESSION OF RIGHTEOUSNESS NOT ALWAYS A PROOF THAT THE PERSON IS A TRUE CHRISTIAN

We have no great difficulty in disposing of those cases where apparently true believers have gone into final apostasy. Both Scripture and experience teach us that we are often mistaken in our judgment of our fellow men, that sometimes it is practically impossible for us to know for certain that they are true Christians. The tares were never wheat, and the bad fish were never good, in spite of the fact that their true nature was not at first recognized. Since Satan can so alter his appearance that he is mistaken for an angel of light (II Cor. 11:14), it is no marvel that sometimes his ministers also fashion themselves as doers of righteousness, with the most deceptive appearances of holiness devotion, piety and zeal. Certainly an outward profession is not always a guarantee that the soul is saved. Like the Pharisees of old, they may only desire to "make a fair show in the flesh," and deceive many. Jesus warned His disciples, "there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect," Matt. 24:24; and He quoted the prophet Isaiah to the effect that, "This people honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men," Mark 7:6, 7. Paul warned against those who were "false apostles, deceitful workers, fashioning themselves into apostles of Christ," II Cor. 11:13. And to the Romans he wrote, "They are not all Israel, that are of Israel: neither, because they are Abraham's seed are they all children," Rom. 9:6, 7. John mentions those who "call themselves apostles, and they are not," Rev. 2:2; and a little later he adds, "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead," Rev. 3:1.

But however effectively these may deceive men, God all the time knows "the blasphemy of them that say they are Jews, and they are not, but are a synagogue of Satan," Rev. 2:9. We live in a day when multitudes claim the name of "Christian," who are destitute of Christian knowledge, experience, and character,—in a day when, in many quarters, the distinction between the Church and the world has been wiped out. Like Samuel, we are often deceived by the outward appearance, and say, "Surely the Lord's anointed is before us," when if we really knew the motives behind their works we would conclude otherwise. We are often mistaken in our judgment of others, in spite of the best precautions that we can take. John gave the true solution for these cases when he 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 they might be made manifest that they all are not of us," I John 2:19. All of those who fall away permanently come under this class.

Some persons make a great profession of religion although they know nothing of the Lord Jesus in sincerity and in truth. These persons may outstrip many a humble follower in head-knowledge, and for a season they may quite deceive the very elect; yet all the time their hearts have never been touched. In the judgment day many of those who at some time in their lives have been externally associated with the Church will say, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast out demons, and by thy name do many mighty works?" And then He will reply to them, "I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity," Matt. 7:22, 23; which, of course, would not be true if at some time He had known them as real Christians. When every man shall appear in his own colors, when the secrets of all hearts shall be manifest, many who at times appeared to be true Christians will be seen never to have been among God's people. Some fall away from a profession of faith, but none fall away from the saving grace of God. Those who do fall have never known the latter. They are the stony-ground hearers, who have no root in themselves, but who endure for a while; and when tribulation or persecution arises, straightway they stumble. They are then said to have given up or to have made shipwreck of that faith which they never possessed except in appearance. Some of these become sufficiently enlightened in the scheme of the doctrines of the Gospel that they are able to preach or to teach them to others, and yet are themselves entirely destitute of real saving grace. When such fall away they are no proofs nor instances of the final apostasy of real saints.

Mere church membership, of course, is no guarantee that the persons are real Christians. Not every member of the Church militant will be a member of the Church triumphant. To answer certain purposes, they make an outward profession of the Gospel, which obliges them for a time to be outwardly moral and to associate themselves with the people of God. They appear to have true faith and continue thus for a while. Then either their sheep's clothing is stripped off, or they throw it off themselves, and return again to the world. If we could see the real motives of their hearts, we would discover that at no time were they ever actuated by a true love of God. They were all this while goats, and not sheep, ravening wolves, and not gentle lambs. Hence Peter says of them, "It has happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog turning to his own vomit again, and the sow that had been washed to wallowing in the mire," II Peter 2:22. They thereby show that they never belonged to the number of the elect.

Many of the unconverted listen to the preaching of the Gospel as Herod listened to John the Baptist. We are told that "Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. And when he heard him he was much perplexed; and he heard him gladly," Mark 6:20. Yet no one who knows of Herod's decree to put John the Baptist to death, and of his life in general, will say that he was ever a Christian.

In addition to what has been said it is to be admitted that often times the common operations of the Spirit on the enlightened conscience lead to reformation and to an externally religious life. Those so influenced are often very strict in their conduct and diligent in their religious duties. To the awakened sinner the promises of the Gospel and the exhibition of the plan of salvation contained in the Scriptures appear not only as true but as suited to his condition. He receives them with joy, and believes with a faith founded on the moral force of truth. This faith continues as long as the state of mind by which it is produced continues. When that changes, he relapses into his usual state of insensibility, and his faith disappears. It is to this class of persons that Christ referred when He spoke of those who receive the Word in stony places or among thorns. Numerous examples of this temporary faith are found in the Scriptures and are often seen in every day life. These experiences often precede or accompany genuine conversion; but in many cases they are not followed by a real change of heart. They may occur repeatedly, and yet those who experience them return to their normal state of unconcern and worldliness. Often times it is impossible for an observer or even the person himself to distinguish these experiences from those of the

truly regenerated. "By their fruits ye shall know them," is the test given by our Lord. Only when these experiences issue in a consistently holy life can their distinctive character be known.