

# The Perseverance of the Saints – Part II

John G. Reisinger  
[Sound of Grace](#)

In our first article (*Sound of Grace*, Vol. 5. No. 3) we mentioned that the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints as it was taught by our forefathers and the doctrine of Eternal Security as taught by most evangelicals today are two radically different things. We insisted that we must begin any discussion of perseverance by defining what it means to be a true child of God. It is impossible to discuss whether one can be saved and then lost if we are not agreed on what it means to be saved in the first place. One cannot lose something one never possessed in the first place.

Several things should be obvious by this time. When we ask a person if he is a Christian, we are not asking him if he is a Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Methodist, etc. It is possible that a person can be any one these and be a truly converted person, and likewise it is also possible to be any one of these and be as lost as the Devil. No one is a Christian *because* he is a Baptist or Catholic nor is anyone excluded from heaven only because they are a Presbyterian or a Methodist. The question, "Are you a Christian" is the same as asking, "Are you in Christ." (See *Sound of Grace*, Vol. 5, No. 3 for what it means to be 'in Christ.')

We know that not all Presbyterians are saved nor are all Baptists. Not everyone who goes forward in an evangelistic meeting and prays 'the sinners prayer' truly receives Christ in saving faith. We keep insisting that the three elements of Romans 6:17 (see above referenced article) must be present in some degree before there is true conversion.

We are not just insisting on correct doctrine as if mentally believing the true gospel brought you into Christ. Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 1:4, 5 should be written in golden letters across every pulpit.

Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake (1 Thes. 1:4, 5).

In verse four Paul expresses his assurance that these people are truly part of God's elect. What made him so sure? Some would think he had seen their baptismal certificate; others would suggest they saw these people walk down the aisle to the altar; and still others might say, "These people are all Calvinists who understand sovereign grace." Paul was sure these people were part of the elect because of the gracious and powerful effect that the gospel had on them. There are several truths in this passage that demand a clear understanding.

First of all, Paul said the "gospel came not in *word only*." It is vital that we realize that the gospel always comes in words. It does not come in dreams, dramas, visions, or through the waters of baptism or communion cups. The gospel always comes in words or clear facts of history. The gospel is a story and must come to us in words that teach us the true story. However, the intellect can sincerely receive the information in the words and never receive the person of Christ Himself. That is why Paul adds to "not only in words" the truth that the gospel words declared were accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit. Stated another way not only was the mind illuminated by the truth, the Holy Spirit also applied that truth to the heart and affections. The result was assurance and a wholehearted desire to follow the disciple's teaching.

One of the key texts is 1 Peter 1:5, "Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." Notice the following:

God's people are *kept* persevering in faith and none of them will ever be lost.

They are kept in this good work by *God's power*, not their own efforts.

They are kept *through*, signifying the means used, not *because of* their faith.

This is not inconsistent with the exhortations in verses 13–16.

The whole process begins with sovereign election in verse 2.

I mentioned earlier that until recently there were only two views on the subject of perseverance and now there is a third view. Perhaps it would be good to spell these views out clearly. I remember preaching a sermon entitled, "You are saved as long as you believe." I was with a group of university students and a young lady come up after the message and said, "Mr. Reisinger, you don't believe the Bible." I don't know why people are always saying that. Just because you don't agree with my interpretation does not mean that I don't believe the Bible. Most of the time when people say, "You don't believe the Bible," what they really mean is "you don't believe my interpretation of the Bible." There is a man in Tennessee who is convinced I am not saved because I speak of "our Arminian brethren." He writes long letters warning me of my lost estate. He cannot see that he has placed his particular understanding of truth on the same level as inspiration. The poor man's entire theology is, in his eyes, just as verbally inspired as the Bible itself.

The young lady mentioned above said, "You don't believe in eternal security." I replied, "I do not know what that phrase means to you." I learned a long time ago that labels mean ten different things to ten different people so I'm not about to say yes or no to any label until one tells me what that specific label means to them. I asked, "What do you mean by 'eternal security'?" She opened her Bible and ran her finger over John 10:27–28. When she reached the "eternal life/never perish" part, she thumped the Bible with her finger and asked, "Do you believe that?" In response I asked, "Are you telling me that this verse means that not one of Christ's sheep can ever perish because they are all guaranteed eternal life?" She replied quite emphatically, "That's exactly what the verse is saying!" I replied, "Do you mean God gives everyone of His sheep, *without a single exception*, eternal life and it is absolutely impossible for *even one of them to perish*." The young lady said, "That's what the text says."

I looked at the text for a few moments in silence and then asked her, "Who are His sheep?" She said, "What do you mean?" I asked again, "Who are these sheep who can never perish? Is everybody who comes down the aisle and comes forward in a church meeting a sheep with eternal life? Is everybody that has been baptized a sheep? Is everybody who has ever been led to make a confession of faith certain of never perishing because they have everlasting life?" To each of these questions she slowly answered, "No." I repeated, "Alright then, exactly who are these sheep that have everlasting life and cannot possibly ever perish?" She was looking a bit confused and I pressed her again with the same question and received no answer. I then took my finger and ran it over another part of John 10:27. I said, "Jesus said that these sheep who have everlasting life and can never perish have two distinct marks that identifies them as sheep. They all have a mark on their ear—they *keep on hearing*, and they have a mark on their feet—they *keep on following*. The text says, "My sheep *hear* (literally keep on hearing) my voice and I know them and they *follow me*." You cannot put that sheep label on every outward professor and then assure that professor that he is 'eternally secure.'

The young lady asked, "But what if they don't follow?" I said, "What if Christ doesn't give them eternal life?" You can't take the one part of the verse without the rest of it. If you are going to attach the label of "sheep" to every person that you run through your particular ritual or "soul winning system," whatever it might be, (and every church has its own ritual of manufacturing confessions of faith) you are really going to run into trouble. You will indeed need a 'carnal Christian' doctrine to explain why your converts do not act differently than lost people. We must insist that we take all of John 10:27–28 and when we do that we will be teaching the biblical doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. We must never deny the eternal security of the *saints*, but that is totally different from the eternal security of every person who merely makes a profession of faith. We dare not preach the eternal security of wicked and openly profane sinners and imply that there is security even in sin.

The confused girl said, "But all true Christians will keep on believing." "I agree," I said. "That is exactly what I said. You are a Christian as long as you believe and, as you say, if you have truly believed you will keep on believing. I just said it a little differently. Listening to you I get the impression that you think you can quit believing and still have everlasting life."

I sometimes read John 10:27–28 three different ways in order to clearly illustrate the three views concerning perseverance. The first time I add the word *if* and read, "My sheep hear my voice and *if* they follow me I give ..." That is the saved-and-lost position. It makes ultimate salvation to be the reward for my perseverance. That is salvation by works. The second time I leave out the words *follow me* and greatly emphasize the rest of the verse. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and [skipping *they follow me*] I give them *eternal life* and they shall *never perish*" That is the eternal-security/carnal-Christian view. Lastly I read the verse correctly and remind the audience that Jesus emphasized *both* the *following* and the *never perishing*. We must never separate the great blessings of eternal life and never perishing from the mark on the sheep's ear and the mark on his feet.

We must preach the necessity of faith producing effects, but again we must be careful that we do not get into a works sanctification. I have some friends that have twisted the doctrine of perseverance to the place that they are purely legalistic. They have exalted the law to the place that they are bringing the Christian's conscience under the condemning power of the law. Under such preaching even the best of saints lose the joy and the assurance of God's so great salvation. We must avoid both of these extremes, which is no easy task.

On the one hand we dare not hold assurance of salvation hostage to the fruits of sanctification or we will become legalists. On the other hand we dare not isolate justification from sanctification in such a way that sanctification is not an essential part of biblical salvation or we will become antinomians. How we preach these two concepts will quickly prove whether we are legalistic, antinomian, or believe in biblical grace.

I believe any honest person will admit there are texts of Scripture that may appear to teach that you can be saved and lost. The answer to this problem is not to drown out these texts by giving more texts that teach one cannot be lost after having truly believed. Nor is the answer to evade either the texts or the important truth that they teach. We must recognize that truth has two sides and we must believe and teach both sides even when we cannot fully understand how they fit together. Perseverance is essential in biblical salvation, and perseverance is absolutely guaranteed by God to every true sheep.

Let me correct a great error that keeps insisting that the truth of God is found 'in the middle.' Almost always the people who dislike clear doctrine use this argument to blunt the edge of clear texts of

Scripture. They are always ready to "tone down the extreme" and strive to be non-offensive by being in the middle of the road. The truth of God is not found in the middle of the road. It lies in daring to *assert both of the extremes*. Let me illustrate this with the doctrine of the person of Christ. The gospel confronts us with a person born of a human mother. He gets hungry, goes to sleep, and weeps. Obviously he has all the attributes of humanity and any reasonable person would agree that this person is a *man*. And of course that is correct. Jesus is a true man.

The gospel also reveals that this individual could raise the dead, control the weather, forgive sins, call God His Father. He even claimed that He was God. There is much evidence to support His claim of being deity just as there is much evidence to prove He is a man. What shall we do with this apparent contradiction? Is He man or is He God? Many would insist that He cannot be both God and Man. It must be an either/or situation but which one? Those dear 'middle of the road' people will solve the problem and "reconcile" the problem by toning down both of the extremes. They will say that Jesus is half God and half man and avoid both wild extremes and reach the middle of the road. The only problem is they have lost the biblical truth of the person of Christ. They have a person who is half God and half man that in essence is neither. We must take both of the extremes at the same time and say that Jesus is "God of God and Man of Man" united in one unique person. I make no attempt to explain how it can be possible. I merely state that is what the Bible clearly teaches.

The Bible is also crystal clear that only those who persevere to the end will reach heaven. The perseverance of the saints is an essential part of the gospel of sovereign grace. The Bible is equally clear that not everyone who merely professes to be going to heaven is really going there. And lastly, the Bible is clear that all who persevere in faith and ultimately make it to heaven do so only because the sovereign grace and power of God enabled them to do so. We must insist on two clear facts: One, perseverance is essential, and two, perseverance is absolutely certain for all of the elect. Kevin Hartley has covered this well in the article which begins on Page 1.

It might be well to mention the major objections to the doctrine of perseverance. The first objection concerns freedom of the will. The argument goes something like this: "If man's will is truly free then he can choose to be lost after he is saved. If this is not true then man loses half of his will power when he becomes a Christian. Before he was saved he had the power to choose to reject or to believe, but after choosing to believe he is then no longer able to choose to reject." If this is true, then the sinner indeed has twice as much will-power as the saint. I personally do not think there is a valid answer to this objection. If the premise that man has a free will—the unencumbered or unaided ability to either accept or reject the gospel—is true, then that same free will can choose to renounce the gospel after one is saved. It is logically impossible to believe in free will and also believe you cannot be saved and then lost. Most evangelicals do not see the utter absurdity of their free will religion.

We must add that even though we reject the doctrine of the free will of man, we do believe that every person who savingly believes does so because he wants to with all of his heart. No one, including God Himself, makes a person do something they do not choose to do. Every act of man is an act of free choice. But God can, and indeed He does, make us willing to do what we are totally unwilling and unable to do by nature. We covered this in the articles on regeneration (see *Sound of Grace*, Vol. 5, Nos. 1 and 2). The question is not "does the sinner willingly believe" but "whether the willingness is a product of his free will or the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit?" Likewise, the question is not "must every sheep, and does every sheep, persevere unto the end," but rather "does he do so by the power of free will or free grace?" Paul said the folks at Achaia had "believed through grace." They had *willingly* believed but it was *sovereign grace* that made them *want* to believe.

The second argument states that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints will lead to immoral behavior. At its roots this argument is always a form of legalism that cannot trust the awesome power of grace to transform and teach a child of God. This view is usually accompanied by a very weak view of regeneration. We must admit that the doctrine of eternal security and its twin sister the carnal Christian doctrine does indeed lead to immoral living. It must be remembered that the Holy Spirit giving a new heart and writing the law on the heart in regeneration is not at all essential to the proponents of the doctrines of eternal security/carnal Christians. This second argument is a valid evaluation and condemnation of much of evangelicalism today.

The old Methodist mourner's bench was far closer to the truth than modern day mass evangelism and the altar call system. There are two reasons for this statement. First, they made the sinner keep praying until he "got through." They did not give very good directions on how to get through to God but they did insist that *no one had a right to tell you that you were saved except God Himself!* They did not have personal workers trained in how to badger you into an assurance of salvation. They believed the Holy Spirit alone could validate His own work and give you assurance. They were right on that point.

The second thing they taught was that if "getting through" did not make you a radically changed person on Monday then you must not have gotten through and you better come back and get another dose. In other words, they insisted that salvation made people holy in their hearts. The carnal Christian doctrine would have been just as odious to them as it is to thinking people today.

The third argument is a modified form of the previous one. This argument states that "if the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints does not lead to overt sin it will surely lead to an indolent "could-not-care-less" attitude. If I am eternally secure then I need never fear or worry about my soul." Again we must admit that this charge is valid when made against the "eternal security/carnal Christian" people. However, this is only because these people view salvation as "insurance" and not as "biblical assurance." They totally distort the truth of perseverance. Following are a few differences.

Perseverance is not merely "rely and relax" but it is "trust and obey."

Perseverance is not merely "let go and let God" but it is "pick up your cross and follow."

Perseverance is not "salvation is certain if we have *once* believed," but it is "perseverance (keeping on) is certain if we have *truly* believed."

Perseverance is not "persistent effort (holding out to the end) on the sinner's part is necessary to stay saved, but it is "if you are truly saved you are certain of succeeding in your perseverance."

Perseverance is not "salvation is certain regardless of what you do once you are saved," but it is "perseverance (following) is guaranteed if we have truly believed."

Perseverance is not "you must keep yourself saved by your efforts," but it is "He whom we trust has promised that He will not let our faith fail."

It is easy to see from these comparisons that there is a great difference in how different theologies view the security of a true child of God. In the next issue of *Sound of Grace* we will discuss the Carnal Christian doctrine and these distinctions will become even more clear.

One of the things that is often overlooked in any discussion of perseverance is the tremendous stake that God Himself has in the security of a child of God. I am sure you remember how Moses pleaded with God to spare Israel when He announced that He was going to wipe the whole nation out and start all over with Moses as the new Abraham. Hear again the exchange between God and Moses:

(9) And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: (10) Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation. (11) And Moses besought the LORD his God, and said, LORD, why doth thy wrath wax hot against thy people, which thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power, and with a mighty hand? (12) Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people. (13) Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidst unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever (Exodus 32: 9–13).

Notice how Moses argues that the very glory and reputation of God is at stake. The heathen will say that God's grace and power are not sufficient to fulfill His purposes. His professed love for this people is not strong enough for Him to forgive and keep them. Moses pleads God's covenant promise and God's power. God's oath, power, purpose, and reputation is tied with Israel His chosen people.

Our Lord realized that He was responsible for the safety of every sheep the Father had given Him. This is clear in the following verses:

While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost...(John 17:12).

That the saying might be fulfilled, which he spake, Of them which thou gavest me have I lost none (John 18:9).

Again it is clear that the both the glory and reputation of our Lord and His Father is tied up with the perseverance of every one of the sheep. There are three things involved in this subject. There is the *stated purpose* of God, the *specific promise* of God, and the *sovereign power* of God.

The *stated purpose of God* is clearly set forth in the five golden links in the chain of grace described in Romans 8:28–32. Every person who has been chosen and predestinated to be conformed to the image of Christ is going to be effectually called and perfectly justified. They are already—past tense—glorified in the mind and purpose of God. If one of the sheep in the chain of grace is lost the whole chain is broken and God's purpose is unrealized.

The *specific promise of God* is set forth in, among many others, 1 Corinthians:

(4) I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; (5) That in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge; (6) Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you: (7) So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ: (8) Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the

day of our Lord Jesus Christ. (9) God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor. 1:4–9).

Notice the clear promise in verse 8. God has pledged to confirm the elect "unto the end." Verse 9 assures us that God is faithful to perform the things that He promises. Just as He faithfully called those He had chosen, so He will be faithful in keeping them in grace. Granted this has two sides. 1 Peter 1:5 tells us that we are "kept by the power of God" and Jude 21 exhorts us to "keep ourselves in the love of God." These are the two sides of one coin and are not in contradiction. We keep ourselves in the love of God purely through the grace and power of God that is given to us. Notice how John states the matter. "We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not (1 John 5:18). The "keeping" of ourselves is because of the truth of regeneration giving us a new nature. "...greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

The *sovereign power of God* in keeping His people is set forth in 1 Peter:

(3) Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, (4) To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, (5) Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (6) Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: (7) That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: (8) Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: (9) Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:3–9).

The salvation of God begins with God's abundant mercy choosing us. We are then begotten by God's power unto a living hope. That same grace enables us to keep on believing in spite of many hindrances and temptations. We are enabled to rejoice even in tribulation because we are positively certain of reaching the final and full salvation of our souls.

The eternal-security crowd does not consider the biblical exhortations to perseverance and the saved-lost crowd incorrectly think that such exhortations would never have been given if it were not possible to fall away. It never occurs to these people that the very means that God uses to assure our efforts to persevere are the warnings against apostasy. Someone has said, "To warn a traveler to keep to a certain path, and by the warning keeping him to the path, is no evidence that he will ever fall into a pit by the wayside just because you warned him about it. The very warning was necessary to keep him in the path." John Bunyan said, "There are two deep ditches on either side of the road to heaven. The one is the ditch of despair and the other is the ditch of presumption. In front of the ditch of despair God has placed a row of hedges made of promises to keep the poor pilgrim from despair in times of defeat. In front of the ditch of presumption he has placed another row of hedges made of up of fearful warning to keep the poor pilgrim from presuming on the grace of God." J.C. Ryle said there were two thieves on either side of Christ. The one was saved in order to show there are death bed conversions and the other was lost to show that no one should wait and presume.

One last thing. Whenever you say that a man was saved and is now lost you make two possible grievous mistakes. You judge the man's heart in saying he was saved, and then you judge the second time when you say he is lost. We would all have pronounced Judas saved for nearly three whole years and we would have been wrong. We would also have labeled Peter a lying hypocrite when he cursed and swore and again we would have been wrong. Judas was lost even when everyone would have put him on the saved list, and Peter, though back-sliden, was a true believer even though all of us would have put him on the lost list.

We will come back to the nature of true salvation when we cover both assurance of salvation and the carnal Christian doctrine in upcoming issues of Sound of Grace.