

The Perseverance of the Saints – Part III

THE DOCTRINE OF PERSEVERANCE: THE FUTURE OF A FRUITLESS FIELD 4-24-88

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Even though it was 17 years ago this month, I can remember the very class session almost as though it were yesterday. The class was called Unity of the Bible, Dr. Daniel Fuller was the teacher, and for the first time I was confronted with the Biblical fact that one of the ways God causes us to persevere in faith and be saved is by warning us that we could make shipwreck of our faith and be lost.

Or to put it another way, I had never been shown from scripture that God graciously warns us that we could drift away and be lost; and that he does this precisely in order to strengthen our assurance that we will not drift away and be lost. And if you are today like I was then, something inside you may be saying, "My assurance and hope are not particularly helped by being told that I might drift away from God and be lost."

Do you see what is at issue here? We all come to the Bible with needs for hope and encouragement and strength. And the Bible stands ready to meet those needs. But we also come with a set of expectations -- sometimes learned from our culture -- as to how those needs are to be met. Like patients coming to the doctor with prescriptions already written in their pockets which we expect the doctor to sign or us.

If then the Bible takes a radically different approach to meeting our need for hope and encouragement and strength, we have to make a very crucial choice: will we reject the Biblical prescription and go to another doctor who will endorse our prescription for hope? Or will we humbly admit that God knows us better than we know ourselves, loves us more than we love ourselves, and look patiently for the wisdom in his prescription and counsel.

That's where I was, and that is where some of you are. Eager to attain the spiritual health of assurance and hope, but very skeptical that the prescription of Hebrews 6 is of any help. And my prayer this morning as we look at this text is not only that its meaning will become clear, but also that its precious and gracious usefulness in the fight of faith and in the perseverance of the saints will be felt by all of us.

You remember from last week that the main aim of 5:11 - 6:12 is to help us have full assurance of hope. We see this in 6:11, "We desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end."

But we also saw that something was starting to ruin that assurance in this church. The problem is called sluggishness in 6:12 and its called dullness of hearing in 5:11. We pictured a gymnast part way through his floor routine, starting to get fatigued, and with the fatigue starting to feel uncertain that he could complete his routine. He spring into a high double back flip. He is almost overcome by a panic that he can't pull it out.

The coach has seen this coming and knows that there are two things (or three as we will see today) that this gymnast needs. He needs immediate help to get down without breaking his neck. And he needs counsel about his sloughing off in practice.

To get him down the coach shouts, "Find the floor!" Which means, Look to Jesus. He is firm and sure and gives hope and strength. Jesus gives us our equilibrium in panicky situations. We saw this from Hebrews 11:2; 3:1.

Then after the competition is over the coach tells him that one of the reasons he got into trouble was failure to put the basics into regular exercise. We saw this in Hebrews 5:14. "Solid food (more advanced gymnastic training) is for the mature, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil." In other words, this gymnast -- this church -- had not been putting his faith into daily practice. And when the organ of faith is not used it begins to die. And its faculties of discernment become dull and sluggish. And when the faculties of split-second discernment become dull, a gymnast begins to lose his confidence, and when a well-founded confidence begins to go, a terrible accident may be in the offing.

Which brings us to the third thing that the coach gives to his gymnast. The first was the urgent cry: Look to Jesus! He is a great Savior! The second was the serious counsel: go back to the beginning and exercise the organ of faith every day in little things and big things. And now third the coach gives a grave warning to the gymnast: if you ignore my counsel and continue on in this neglect you will become weaker and weaker and one of these days you are going to break your neck and never compete again.

And when the coach says that, it is not because he desires the ruin of his gymnast. He tells us very specifically what his desire for the gymnast is in 6:11-12 -- he wants him to have assurance and hope and confidence. He wants him (v.12) to have patient endurance. And he wants him to inherit the gold medal in the last day. But the difference between this Biblical coach and some of the Christian coaches of our day is that this coach does not want to give false assurance to gymnasts whose faculties are dull and unpracticed -- who don't exercise the organ of faith in acts of daily obedience. False assurance is even more likely to lead to a broken neck than no weak assurance.

So our Biblical coach does not say to his gymnast: You ought to put your faith to practice, you know, but whether you do or not, or even if you don't finish your routines in the future, or even if you quit gymnastics, you will get your trophy -- God will welcome you into heaven.

Instead here's what our coach says (and at this point I am going to drop the gymnastic imagery because in its place the Bible now puts a new image, namely, the image of two pieces of farm land, one that bears crops and one that brings forth thorns and thistles). The warning to the gymnast (who is now a farm) is in 6:4-8.

It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt.

For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.

We need to answer four questions about this warning in order to understand it and put it to work in our own fight to maintain the full assurance of hope to the end.

1. What is the danger? Lostness and condemnation? Or something less?
2. What brings this danger to pass? What must we do or not do so that this danger not befall us?
3. If this danger befalls a person, were they really born again, justified, adopted into God's family, sealed by the Spirit?
4. Should we, who believe that we are God's elect, justified by the blood of Jesus, reconciled to God, indwelt by the Spirit of sonship -- should we apply this warning to ourselves?

I will try to answer these questions briefly and show you the basis for my answers from the book of Hebrews, and then tonight there will be a chance for questions as we try to tie the loose ends together.

1. What is the danger? Lostness and condemnation? Or something less?

The danger is real lostness for ever -- the final curse of God and the fire of hell. He is not talking about a mere temporal disciplining of the child of God. He is talking about a final fiery curse. Let me give you three reasons why I think this is so.

1.1 First, the two pieces of farmland that are contrasted in verses 7-8 suggest that God's final curse is in view.

(First piece of farmland) Land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But (second piece of farmland) if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.

The two fields represent two kinds of persons: one a fruitful person. The other a fruitless person. Three words point to the final condemnation and lostness of the fruitless person. The fruitless field is worthless (Cf. Rom. 1:28; 2 Cor. 13:5-7; 1 Cor. 9:27; 2 Tim. 3:8; Tit. 1:16), and it is about to be cursed, and its end (not means but end) is burning. Worthless, cursed, destined for burning. That is the language of final condemnation.

1.2 Second, in Hebrews 10:35-39 the author urges them again not to throw away their assurance (v. 35) and he backs up his urging with another warning in verse 38,

My righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls.

What is at stake in this shrinking back is destruction -- the ordinary New Testament word for final condemnation. And the opposite of this destruction in verse 39 is keeping your soul.

1.3 Third, in Hebrews 12:14 the author says, "Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

The warning here is that a person that does not pursue holiness will not see the Lord. So what is at stake in this book is not seeing the Lord. But not seeing the Lord means exclusion from his presence, and that means ultimate and final separation in hell.

So what is at stake in this book when it urges us to persevere and warns us of danger if we don't is not merely some temporal discipline, but the curse and destruction and loss of never seeing the Lord Jesus and being burned in the fires of his righteous judgment. Hebrew 10:27 calls it "a fearful prospect of judgment and fury of fire." And 12:29 says, "Our God is a consuming fire."

2. Our second question is, What brings this danger to pass? What must we do or not do so that this danger not befall us?

Hebrews 6:6 speaks of apostasy or falling away. If they commit apostasy (fall away) then they get beyond the ability to repent. Now what is involved here?

The whole context tells us that more than a simple change of mind is involved. What's involved is a life that is persistently fruitless. That's the point of verse 7 -- the fruitless field. What brings the curse of God down on a person in this text is that they have drunk the rain of God's goodness year after year but have not brought forth any fruit. To use the words of 12:14, they have not pursued the holiness and therefore they will not see the Lord.

The issue of apostasy is not primarily doctrinal, but practical. It's the problem of 5:14 where they are unwilling to put their faith into practice, and so their faculties are getting dull, right and wrong are becoming hazy, and the writer says, if you don't stop drifting (2:1) and neglecting your salvation (2:3) and forsaking the assembling of yourselves together (10:25) you are going to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and fall away from the living God (3:12-13).

What exposes a person to the danger of eternal loss in this text is the persistent failure to exercise the organ of faith in pumping the blood of obedience (3:18; 4:11; 5:7-9; 10:36; 12:14). The issue at every point in 5:11 to 6:12 is the neglect of practical holiness not the abandonment doctrinal orthodoxy (as important as that is). And the falling away referred to in 6:6 is the point at which the heart becomes so hardened and indifferent that it is beyond help any more.

If you allow yourself to drift down the river of sin with no zealous pursuit of holiness and growth in grace, there will come a point of no return." This is the great folly of those who profess to be Christians but live a carnal life thinking that they will clean things up in their old age.

I've told the story once before of the vulture who spotted the corpse of a fox on a big hunk of ice floating down the river toward Niagara Falls. He flies to the ice, lands and begins to eat the fox. He watches the falls approaching and hears the warnings of danger, but he tells himself that he has wings and is free and does not need to pay attention to such warnings. He is destined for the sky. At the last minute he finishes his feast and spreads his wings but he can't fly because his talons have frozen in the ice and he is dragged over the falls to his destruction.

And so it will be with people who have heard the warnings of scripture to abandon their worldly lusts and pursue holiness, but who say, "I have wings, I am a Christian. I can fly anytime I want to." The day will come when they may try and will not be able to repent because they are so hardened and addicted to the world they can't even feel one genuine spiritual affection (12:17).

3. The third question was, Can this happen to persons who are really born again, justified, adopted into God's family, sealed by the Holy Spirit?

My answer is NO. It can't.

There are many texts in the New Testament that would demonstrate that this is so -- that those who are justified by faith will infallibly be glorified. But let me show you two texts from the book of Hebrews that teach this -- once you belong to Christ you always belong to Christ.

3.1 Hebrews 3:14 (NASB). "We have become (note the tense of the verb!) partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance (well-grounded assurance, not false assurance) firm until the end."

Note carefully: it does not say that you will become a partaker of Christ if you persevere. It says you HAVE become a partaker if you persevere. The point is that persevering does not earn your participation in Christ, it verifies your participation in Christ. Perseverance is not a payment for getting into Christ. It is a proof that you are in Christ.

So the person drifts along in sin and makes no business in life of holiness does not fall out of Christ. He was never in Christ.

3.2 Hebrews 10:14. "For by a single offering [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are sanctified (literally: "those who are being sanctified")."

In other words when Jesus died he perfected a group of people for ever. He has done this in the past. It does not say that his death will perfect them if they get sanctified. It says that his death HAS PERFECTED those who are being sanctified. It's done and it is eternal. This is the same kind of thought we saw in 3:14. The pursuit of holiness (sanctification) does not earn us this perfection that Jesus secured for us in the past; instead the process of sanctification simply shows that we are among that number who were eternally perfected by the death of Jesus.

So a person who drifts into sin and neglects the pursuit of sanctification and falls away from God is not a person who was once saved by the death of Jesus and then lost that salvation, because Hebrews 10:14 says that salvation is an everlasting accomplishment for a certain group of people. And our assurance of being part of that people is our perseverance in faith and the pursuit of holiness.

So I conclude, if someone drifts away from God and makes shipwreck of faith, they do not lose a salvation that they once had but show by their lack of perseverance that they never truly belonged to Christ, were never born again, justified, adopted, and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

4. Finally then we ask, If this is so, should those of us who believe that we are God's elect, that we are justified by the blood of Jesus, reconciled to God, indwelt by the Spirit of sonship -- should we apply this warning to ourselves? Should we read Hebrews 6:4-8 and take heed to ourselves.

The answer is Yes. We should. For at least two reasons.

4.1 When the writer of this book finishes his warning in 6:4-8 he says in verse 9, "Though we speak thus, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things that belong to salvation."

In other words, he has a strong confidence that his readers are NOT going to make shipwreck of their faith. They are not going to commit apostasy and fall away from God. They are going to persevere. But he knew this when he started writing this warning in chapter six just five verses earlier. So I conclude from this that the writer wants people whom he is very confident about to read his warning and take it to heart.

4.2 The other reason on believe this is the kind of description that he gives in verses 4-5 of the person who can fall away from God.

- * That person can be enlightened -- have much truth and insight into the Bible and the gospel.
- * He can have tasted the heavenly gift and be a partaker of the Holy Spirit -- the very Spirit of God can be at work in his life convicting of sin, drawing to Christ, revealing truths.
- * He can have tasted to goodness of the word of God -- sat under its influence from mother and Sunday School teacher, and pastor, confessed it to be good.
- * And he can have tasted the powers of the age to come -- he can, Jesus says in Matthew 7:22, prophesy and cast out demons and do mighty works in Jesus' name.

All this! and yet hear the dreadful words in the last day, "Depart from me, you workers of iniquity. I never knew you."

For those two reasons I say, yes we all should take heed when we read the warnings of scripture.

But still we ask why? If we have burning in your heart today the confidence

that He who began a good work in us will complete it to the day of Christ (Philippians 1:6), that God will equip us with everything good, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight (Hebrews 13:21), that he is able to keep us from falling and to present us without blemish before the throne of his glory with rejoicing (Jude 24),

then why should we take the warnings against falling away so seriously?

And the answer is really very simple: God's way to keep us from falling is by enticing us with promises and sobering us with warnings.

The point of the promises is to engage our affections for the eternal glory of God. The point of the warnings is to disengage our affections from the perishing glory of this world.

The point of the promises is to make our mouths water at the prospect of infinite happiness in God. And the point of the warnings is to make our hearts tremble at the prospect of falling under the wrath of God.

And so the warnings of the Bible support our assurance in this way: they make us aware of the real danger of careless spiritual drifting, and then send us back with vigilance to the two main sources of assurance that we saw last week,

1) looking to Christ and all that he has done, and

2) exercising the organ of faith in the pursuit of the holiness without which no one will not see the Lord.