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Perseverance and the Promises of God

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In this article I will argue that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is grounded on the truth and reliability of the divine promises of salvation, which come to focus in Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and man. I use the phrase “the perseverance of the saints” advisedly. Often the idea that true believers will continue in faith until the end and so surely be saved is called “the eternal security of the believer.” There are powerful reasons why this is best described as the perseverance of the saints and why using this form of words draws attention better to the full range of the Biblical teaching on salvation.

When we speak of *perseverance*, we immediately conjure up the idea of struggle against a wide variety of obstacles. We persevere “through many dangers, toils, and cares.” There are a host of enemies ranged against us. There is the world, with its insidious attractions and subtle temptations to deviate from the path of faith and obedience. Even closer to home, we battle against the flesh; even if we were to withdraw into the desert like the Egyptian monks and so avoid the lure of the surrounding culture, we would carry with us the remaining indwelling bias towards sin that will not be finally eradicated until our salvation is complete. Lurking in the background, too, is the devil and the hosts of wickedness against which, the apostle Paul contends, our warfare is waged (Eph. 6:10-18). From general suffering - the lot of

all in a fallen world - to overt persecution for being a follower of Christ, together with the temptations to sin that abound on every side and also within, we are faced with a legion of obstacles. Is it any wonder that Peter can write that “the righteous is scarcely saved” (1 Pet. 4:18)?

Thus, “the perseverance of the saints” points to the need for the help of God. In our pilgrimage through this world we, as Christian believers, “by God’s power are being guarded through faith” (1 Pet. 1:5). We are in dire need of help, divine help, help that the Holy Spirit alone can give. This is a far cry from the connotations raised by talk of security, an idea that conjures up images of carefree reclining in comfortable, plush padded chairs, safe and secure from all alarms, hermetically sealed from contact with the nasty realities of spiritual battle.

From another angle, the phrase “the perseverance of the saints” draws attention to the inescapable and essential factor of sanctification. Those who persevere are *the saints*, those who belong to Christ and are in the process of becoming increasingly conformed to his image. There is a struggle, the help of the Spirit is urgently and vitally needed – but this help is forthcoming, for the struggle is marked by progress, slow and erratic as it may be, but nonetheless heading in the same direction, to eventual and final conformity to Jesus Christ in the eschaton. In contrast, the phrase “the eternal security of the believer” makes the subject one who simply believes. While it is obvious that the saints are, and must be, believers, this description tends to detach faith (however it be defined) from sanctification, rendering the latter superfluous. We are talking here of definitions and do not mean for one moment that those who speak in this way intend to belittle or diminish our urgent task of holiness; simply that the form of words does not do justice to an utterly essential element of salvation, for “without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14), and so implies a certain complacency.

Having said that, what exactly is the perseverance of the saints? It is simply this; that all those whom God the Father has chosen before the foundation of the world to salvation in Christ his Son will certainly be brought to saving faith, and be maintained in faith by the Holy Spirit until the very end of their days, and so will inherit eternal life. It entails, in the words of *The Lambeth Articles* (1595) that “a

true, living, and justifying faith, and the Spirit of God justifying [sanctifying], is not extinguished, falleth not away; it vanisheth not away in the elect, either finally or totally.”¹ See also *The Canons of the Synod of Dort, rejectio errorum circa doctrinam de perseverentia sanctorum*.² I shall argue that this great, fortifying and robust doctrine is founded on the impregnable rock of the promises of the triune God and expressly evidenced in the person and work of our saviour, Jesus Christ.

There are three indestructible pillars on which the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints rests – the faithfulness of God, the resulting truth of his promises, and the sovereignty of his grace.

The Faithfulness of God

The uniform testimony of Scripture is that God does not act in any way contrary to his own character. This is not due to any constraint from without but simply that he is always true to himself; this is his freedom. Hence, he cannot change in himself (Ja. 1:17). If this were not so, he might move from one degree of perfection to another and consequently at some point he would be less than perfect. Again, he cannot die since he is “the living God” (Heb. 10:31). Nor can he deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13). These are not limitations on God’s freedom; they affirm it, for he is free to be himself, to live and act as the infinite, almighty, righteous and gracious God. In similar vein, he cannot lie (Heb. 6:18) for he is the God of truth. If he could lie he would be an arbitrary despot and all basis for morality on our part would be destroyed. The negation in Hebrews 6:18 in reality affirms that God always tells the truth, precisely as the similar negation in 2 Timothy 2:13 (he cannot deny himself) stresses his faithfulness to who he is.

In this way, the covenant of grace and the whole of our salvation rests upon the faithfulness of God. Since he is faithful and true, all he has done for sinful man in redemption is utterly certain to be fulfilled. Precisely because redemption is God’s act, implemented by his Word and power, so it is free from the arbitrary and capricious uncertainty common to human actions. There is no vacillation with the triune

¹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 3:523-4.

² *Ibid.*, 3:575.

God. That is why Abraham's faith rested on Yahweh and why he was satisfied to wander throughout his life estranged from the tangible possession of the promised covenant land. Since salvation is nothing short of the complete fruition of covenant fellowship with God in union with Christ, it is a progressive and eventually consummated awareness of the faithfulness of God realised in union with him.

The Truth of God's Promises

The truth of the central promise of God's covenant "I will be your God, you shall be my people" follows from the faithfulness of God himself. This – and all the promises God makes in Christ – entails two things. First, it is true in contrast to false. It also means that it genuinely represents the attitude of God towards those to whom it is made.

Naturally, any idea of the falsity of the covenant promise is ruled out on the grounds of the character of God as true and faithful. However, certain questions have arisen over the sincerity of God's intention as and when the gospel promise is made indiscriminately in pursuance of the Great Commission. How, it is often asked, can God sincerely desire to grant salvation to any to whom the promise is made when many of those who hear it may be destined for everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord (2 Thess. 1:9)? The suggestion is then made that, in fact, the destiny of the unbeliever is not condemnation after all. Surely, it is thought, God has revealed himself as loving and merciful and will not consign those he made in his own image to eternal punishment or even to annihilation? This misses the point that gospel proclamation is presented in the NT as an utterly urgent matter (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8, 17:30; Rom. 10:14ff; 2 Pet. 3:9-10). This urgency would be missing if hell did not exist as a real and terrible alternative. Moreover, Jesus himself spoke frequently of condemnation – and did not hide the fact that its duration is to be everlasting. On the other hand, there are others who – accepting these facts – consider that the gospel offer is to be restricted to those who are inwardly convicted of sin, since God cannot and does not sincerely offer forgiveness and eternal life to those from whom he has decreed to withhold it and who will in fact never believe. This sounds very logical but its Achilles heel is the NT requirement that the gospel be proclaimed indiscriminately, and the apostolic example of constant preaching to as wide a circle as possible. Besides, we ourselves

cannot know for sure who is under conviction of sin at any one point (Dt. 29:29).

There is, however, a more basic problem with this line of thought. This is the mistake of making God's inscrutable decree of election the basis for our actions. The Bible clearly teaches that God chose his people to salvation "from before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). Paul, John and Jesus himself all affirm this. On the other hand, we are also warned that the secret things belong to God; it is what is revealed that belongs to us, that we may do it (Dt. 29:29). If eternal election is made the basis for action we are close to a dehistoricizing of salvation. What happens here and now in human history is then emptied of significance. This is a distortion of perspective rather than content; an imbalance between the foreordination of God and the real significance of history.

The Sovereignty of God's Grace

Note the frequency with which Paul rests assurance of salvation on effectual calling. In effect, the ineffable decree of election is made known in its historical and temporal dimensions by the gracious power of God displayed in the renewal and resurrection of those who were dead in trespasses and sins. Paul's argument in Romans 8:29-30 destroys all objections. Salvation in its consummated form is inevitable for those who have been called by his invincible grace. This is so not because of a rigidly deterministic fatalism, a matter of logical necessity that reduces us to robots, but because of the irrevocable will of the faithful God (Rom. 11:29). We must be clear here that the will of God is not that of an arbitrary despot but a loving and self-sacrificing Father who did not spare his own Son, going to such lengths not for good people but for outright sinners and rebels (Rom. 5:8, 8:32). The electing decree of God bursts into the milieu of history at the point of calling and justification, and so proves the basis for the unbreakable "golden chain" of salvation that Paul unfolds in Romans 8:29-30. From first to last, salvation is an exercise of God's grace to elect sinners and so is lifted out of the realm of the merely possible. God's grace is given to us and maintained in us by the work of the Holy Spirit, who does not leave things half done but brings to perfection those works he has begun (Phil. 1:6).

As a direct corollary, assurance of salvation has only ever flourished in Reformed theology, where the sovereignty of grace has

been most attested. The key to assurance is precisely perseverance. A denial of the perseverance of the saints removes the confidence that we will possess the eternal inheritance the Father has promised in Christ to those who love him. If a chance exists that one may fall from grace and perish eternally there can be no certainty that we will eventually be saved. Any such assurance we actually have is despite this theology rather than because of it. All remains in the balance right until the end, like a game of cricket that swings dramatically one way and then the other until the final ball is bowled. That is why the *Remonstrant Articles* (1610), produced by the followers of Arminius, adopting an equivocal position on perseverance, effectively removed the possibility of assurance of ultimate salvation and why, in response, the Synod of Dort (1618-19) so strongly affirmed that the elect are given the grace to persevere and so are also able to obtain the certainty, by the Holy Spirit, of their preservation.³ That is also why the semi-Pelagian theology of Rome denies the possibility of infallible certainty of ultimate salvation, apart from special revelation or the pronouncement of the Church. Similarly, the Wesleyan movement has denied perseverance and so can lay claim only to assurance of the present possession of salvation, not salvation in the ultimate sense, for no one can be sure that they will not fall from grace totally or finally.⁴

The Focus of God's Promises Is in Christ

All that God intends and has effected for our salvation is done in his Son and by his Spirit. In Christ all the promises of God find their clinching affirmation (2 Cor. 1:20).⁵

There are many places in Scripture, especially in the NT, where God promises to preserve his elect people for salvation and to do this in and through his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus speaks of the Father's determination to give a people to the Son. Each and every one of these will believe in him and will be raised from the dead at the last day (Jn. 6:37-40). He distinguishes between his sheep, who believe

³ Ibid., 3:548-9, 571-4.

⁴ Mark A. Noll, John Wesley and the Doctrine of Assurance, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (April-June 1975): 161-177.

⁵ See Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Leicester / Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press / InterVarsity Press, 1993), 39-53.

him and follow him, and those who are not his sheep, who do not believe in him. He knows his sheep and calls them by name. He gives them eternal life. They shall never perish and no one can snatch them out of his hand. Moreover, the Father will not allow this danger to occur either, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand (Jn. 10:1-30, especially 28-30). In his great prayer to the Father, Jesus refers to the fact that none of those were lost who the Father had given him (Jn. 17:1-26). Paul emphatically argues that those called to salvation in Christ by the powerful action of the Holy Spirit are justified by faith and – aorist – glorified; so certain is it that Paul represents it as a definitive act, something done and dusted. See also 1 Corinthians 1:8-9, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-4, Ephesians 5:25-7, where he writes of Christ's purpose to save, sanctify and beautify his church as a bride in union with himself. We could go on.

In contrast the writer to Hebrews (Heb. 3:7-4:10, 6:1-8, 10:26-39, 12:25-9) appears to some to counteract this teaching when he warns so strenuously of the imminent danger of apostasy. He is dealing with Hebrew Christians who may have idealised the wilderness generation of Israel that, after turning back from the Promised Land, perished in the desert. Similarly, many of their own number had repudiated the Christian faith in some public way. The writer's point is that, while the generation that experienced the Exodus tasted the Word of God and saw his power, they did not believe his promises. Theirs was a superficial acquaintance with the saving work of Yahweh; it stopped short of saving faith (Heb. 4:1-2, 6; Ps. 106:12-5). So too those who had identified with the Christian church but then at a later time reverted to some form of Judaism had made a once and for all repudiation of Christ. They had not known Christ in the first place. As John wrote of a heretical group that abandoned the Christian church through a rejection of fundamental Christian doctrine, "they went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 Jn. 2:19).

Paul, in Ephesians 1:3-14 unfolds the great drama of salvation from election by the Father before the foundation of the world (v4), to redemption by the Son through the shedding of his blood at the cross (v7), to the work of the Holy Spirit as the guarantor of the inheritance we shall receive at the end of history (vv13-14). This plan of salvation

has a trinitarian pattern; the Father has chosen and foreordained us (vv3-5), the Son has redeemed us by the cross and will head up all things (vv7-10), while the Holy Spirit is the earnest of the full inheritance (vv13-14).⁶ However, throughout this huge sentence conglomeration there is a recurring phrase, *in him* or *in Christ*, denoting that each and every aspect of our salvation is received in union with Christ. This is the central theme not only of Paul's treatment here but of the whole gamut of salvation from eternity through time to its ultimate consummation.⁷ Hence our salvation consists of union with Christ, working itself out in various dimensions.

In this context, Paul's frequent theme of Christ as the second Adam is noteworthy. Paul sees Christ as the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). Adam was created in the image of God but the true image, the archetype, is Jesus Christ.⁸ In this way, Christ recapitulates Adam, taking our place and obeying God, where Adam had disobeyed. So, whereas Adam was tested in a beautiful garden and failed, Jesus was tempted in a desolate wilderness but remained faithful. It is precisely as the *incarnate* Son, one with us, that Jesus offered himself to the Father as a perfect sacrifice. His obedience – on our behalf and in our place – rendered his self-offering acceptable in the Father's sight. Consequently, we are accepted in him and in him have access to the Father on a continual basis, by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:18).

In terms of Christ's mediation, he endured suffering throughout his life and ministry, reaching a pinnacle around the time of the cross. In the words of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, 37 “all the time he lived on earth, but especially at the end of his life, he bore, in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race.”⁹ He was tempted in all points like we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:14-15). He faced abandonment and betrayal by his friends, murderous hostility from the ruling authorities, the fierce onslaughts of Satan and – on the cross – abandonment by the Father. Was this all in vain? Of course

⁶ See Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 75-8.

⁷ Letham, *The Work of Christ*, 80-1, 86.

⁸ See Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁹ Schaff, 3:319.

not! On the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from where he will come to judge the living and the dead. And why all this struggle and anguish?

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam carry the ring through an endless succession of hideous adventures, death threatening at every turn. Eventually, exhausted and traumatised, they reach their goal and the ring is consigned in remarkable circumstances to destruction in the Cracks of Doom, and the evil empire of Mordor crumbles. Yet the two hobbits escape by the skin of their teeth; as the world around them quakes to its foundations and erupts in a consuming fireball, they are plucked from certain death and flown to safety by the wonderful eagles. But why? Why, my late uncle asked, why could not the eagles have flown them there in the first place and so relieved them of the desperate dangers?

Why, then, did Jesus Christ have to suffer so to bring us home to safety? The answer is the justice and righteousness of God, with which as the eternal Son of God he was fully and completely one. There was no other way, since God is just and true to himself. There was no other way other than by taking into union our nature and in our nature repairing the damage done by the first man. There was no other way, other than by uniting us to himself through the Holy Spirit and so restoring us to God – more, introducing us to something the first Adam never knew; union and communion with the holy trinity in Christ.

Hence, the question of perseverance needs to be redrawn. While it refers to us and the question of our continuing in faith to the end of our life in this world and thus to the ensuing completion of our salvation at the return of Christ it is, first and foremost, a question relating to Christ the Son of God. Over and above the issue of our persevering to the end it becomes the question of whether the Father will actually give to his Son his church which he has purposed to do from all eternity. Will the Father fail to provide his Son with his bride? Remember Jesus' comment that an earthly father – being evil – knows how to give good gifts to his son! (Matt. 7:7-11). In turn, will the Holy Spirit fail to bring to the Son those whom the Father has given him? At the end of the day, will the holy triune God be disappointed, frustrated, unable to bring into effect his eternal plan?

Will his purposes fail? Will the persons of the trinity let one another down?! The answer is obvious: he will no more be thwarted than he was in bringing the universe into being, or in bringing into effect the incarnation of his Son!

If from the side of God, the issue is clear-cut, then equally we must affirm from the human angle that God's ultimate purpose will not fail. Since there is to be no breakdown of the plans of the holy trinity, this means that from our side that all true believers will persevere in faith to the end, whatever the obstacles may be. This is rooted in the purpose and promises of God, which come to expression in Jesus Christ. It is seen in the cross, where the living triune God goes to the utmost extremity to deliver us. It is heard in the cry of dereliction Jesus utters (Matt. 27:46), citing Psalm 22 and thus including in its ambit its triumphant conclusion. It is demonstrated in the empty tomb, and in Jesus' ascension to the right hand of the Father, bearing there our own humanity, hands uplifted in priestly benediction (Lk. 24:50-1).

Thanks be to God!