

Perseverance of the Saints

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I Corinthians 10:13

“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

I Corinthians 10:1-21

“Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. Wherefore,

my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to wise men; judge ye what I say. The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread. Behold Israel after the flesh: are not they which eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? What say I then? that the idol is any thing, or that which is offered in sacrifice to idols is any thing? But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils. Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils.

PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

Fifth Head of Doctrine: Of the Perseverance of the Saints.

It is not the perseverance of man but the perseverance of God which is assured to us in the Scriptures. It is not the faithfulness of man which is assured, but the faithfulness of God. It is not the changelessness of man which is assured, but the changelessness of God.

The *Fifth Head of Doctrine*, Art. VIII, points out, “. . . it is not in consequence of their own merits of strength, but of God's free mercy, . . . since his counsel can not be changed, nor his promise fail, neither can the call according to his purpose be revoked, nor the merit, intercession, and preservation of Christ be rendered ineffectual, nor the sealing of the Holy Spirit be frustrated or obliterated.”

Once we understand that God is the author and the finisher of our redemption, that He determined the number and the identity of the elect before the foundations of the world were laid, that He Himself works the New Birth within us, that He brings about our repentance and our conversion, then it is impossible to believe any other thing than this: When God has made of us a new creation, He will not allow that new creation to be destroyed.

Jesus Himself testified to this truth in the great High-Priestly Prayer recorded in the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel According to John. At this time Jesus prayed, “Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou has give me. . . . While I was with them, I kept them in thy name . . . ; and I guarded them, and not one of them perished but the son of perdition that the Scripture might be fulfilled” (vv. 11-12).

In this prayer we learn certain important truths. First, God has given to Christ a certain number of people. We make no attempt to estimate their number, for their

number is known only to God. They are called the elect, the children of God, the born again, the believers, the sheep, and are known by various other designations. Jesus referred to them as “mine own,” for He said, “I know mine own and mine own know me.” A moment earlier in His High-Priestly Prayer Jesus had said, “I pray not for the world, but for them whom thou hast given me, for they are mine, and I am glorified in them” (John 17:9-10).

Second, Jesus reports that not one of these has perished, and for that matter, that none shall ever perish. In the tenth chapter of John (vv. 28-20) He had previously indicated this fact. In speaking of His sheep He said, “I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My father, who hath given them unto me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”

Third, Jesus reports that they have not perished, because He has guarded them. The Evil One, the Tempter, has sought to snatch them from His hand, seeks continually in all ages to snatch them from the hand of Christ, but the Tempter cannot succeed, because the Father who is greater than all will not permit them to be snatched away.

Having ascertained this truth from the Word of God we ask: Why did our forefathers in the faith choose to speak of this truth as the “Perseverance of the Saints”? An understanding of the individual words will help.

The term *saint* was a favorite with Paul. He commonly used it as a form of address in the writing of his epistles. His epistles begin: To the saints in Rome; To the saints in Corinth; To the saints in Ephesus; To the saints in Philippi. Paul also relates in the book of Acts that he confined many of the “saints” to prison prior to his conversion. We read, too, that many of the “saints” also came forth from their graves after the resurrection of Christ on the third day.

But who is a saint? Our common usage of the term is scarcely correct. We say of a man: “He is a saint.” Or of a woman: “She is a saint.” And by that term we usually refer to some person who has given special evidence of godliness. But Paul did not so restrict the use of the term “saint,” nor does our modern dictionary. The dictionary defines a saint as one who is “a holy or godly person; one who is regenerated and sanctified or undergoing sanctification.”

We must not make the term to include too much or too little. A saint is a regenerated person; that is, he is born again. The mere fact that one may attend an occasional church service does not mean that he is a saint. The mere fact that one may have become a member of the visible church at sometime or other does not serve in itself to make him a saint. The mere fact that one may call himself a Christian does not serve to make him a saint. A saint is regenerated; he is born again. God has worked a miracle in him and made him to be a new creature in Christ Jesus our Lord. “And this is the regeneration so highly celebrated in

Scripture and denominated a new creation: a resurrection from the dead; a making alive, which God works in us without our aid." *Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine*, Art. XII.

But it is more than that. According to the dictionary, a saint is not only one who is born again, but he is "sanctified or undergoing sanctification." Now, the dictionary is a bit loose at this point. None of us is ever completely sanctified in this life. We are all undergoing the process of sanctification. By that we mean that everyone who is truly a child of God is growing daily, growing away from sin and growing toward Christlikeness.

This is the external manifestation of the new birth. When we see our conduct growing more pure daily; when sins which we once committed are committed no more; when our speech and our thoughts are turned increasingly away from the world and toward God; when there is an increasing desire within us to do the will of God — when we see these things, then we know that God has implanted a new life within us, and that that new life is growing in stature.

At the same time, this definition applies to every child of God. Not merely to a few, not merely to those who have become martyrs, not merely to those who are serving in the mission fields, but to every man, woman and child who is truly born again into the kingdom of God.

And, now, the term *perseverance*. The dictionary states that "to persevere" is "to go on resolutely in spite of opposition." One could scarcely construct a better definition of the Christian life: To go on resolutely in spite of opposition. In spite of the opposition of the sinful nature within us, in spite of the opposition of the carnal world round about us, in spite of the opposition of the spiritual wickedness which reigns in high places, in spite of the opposition of Satan and the hosts of the demons, in spite of the opposition of the principalities and powers of darkness — in spite of all these, the Christian perseveres; he goes resolutely on, on in the new life, on in the faith once for all delivered to the saints, on in the worship and service of God. This is the perseverance of the saints.

Let us understand clearly, however, that this is a tribute, not to man but to God. Notice the Scriptural emphasis. "I have guarded them," said Jesus. "No one shall snatch them out of *my* hand" (John 17:12). Jesus explained further why this should be so, for He said, "The Father, who gave them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand."

In these words are contained two items of import. First, there is a definition of God's sovereignty; He is greater than all! Second, one finds an explanation for the assurance which Christ gives the children of God. They belong to God, and no one can take them from the hand of God, because He is greater than all!

God is greater than the sin within our members; God is greater than the carnal world round about us; God is greater than the spiritual wickedness which is found in high places; God is greater than Satan and the hosts of the demons; God is greater than the principalities and powers of darkness. That is why no one can or shall snatch us from the hand of God. The perseverance of the saints is a tribute to the irresistible, invincible, sovereign power of God!

At no time do we imply that this means the Christian life is devoid of temptation or of wrestling to overcome temptation; on the contrary, "The Scripture moreover testifies that believers in this life have to struggle with various carnal doubts, and that under grievous temptations they are not always sensible of this full assurance of faith and certainty of persevering. But God, who is the Father of all consolation, does not suffer them to be tempted above that they are able, but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that they may be able to bear it (I Cor. 10:13); and by the Holy Spirit again inspires them with the comfortable assurance of persevering." *Fifth Head of Doctrine* Art. XI.

Paul explained how all this comes to pass in the life of the Christian when he wrote, "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

When, therefore, I am faced with temptation and am enabled to overcome it, it is not I who have overcome temptation, but Christ who liveth in me. When I am lured by the enticements of the world and will not be turned aside by them, it is not I who have overcome the world, but Christ who liveth in me. When I am steadfast, unmovable, abounding in the work of the Lord, it is not I but Christ who liveth in me. And when I have endured unto the end and receive the crown of life, His shall be the crown, for it is not I who shall endure unto the end, but Christ who liveth in me. To Him be all the glory, both now and forever more, world without end!

Eternal security . . . "is so far from exciting in believers a spirit of pride, or of rendering them carnally secure, that, on the contrary, it is the real source of humility, filial reverence, true piety, patience in every tribulation, fervent prayers, constancy in suffering and in confessing the truth, and of solid rejoicing in God; so that the consideration of this benefit should serve as an incentive to the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works, as appears from the testimonies of Scripture and the examples of the saints." Art. XII, *Fifth Head of Doctrine*.

Because these things are true, there is no doubting the ultimate outcome of the Christian life. I am weak, to be certain, but Christ is strong. When I would stumble, His strong arms hold me in the way I ought to go. He will hold me in the hollow of His hand, until I am safe in the blessed kingdom forever, and no one shall snatch me out of His hand.

One of the old, favorite hymns explains the whole matter well:

I've found a friend, oh, such a friend! He loved me ere I knew Him;
He drew me with the cords of love, and thus He bound me to Him.
And round my heart still closely twine those ties which nought can sever,
For I am His, and He is mine, forever and forever.

I've found a friend, oh, such a friend! He bled, He died to save me;
And not alone the gift of love, but His own self He gave me.
Nought that I have I call my own, I hold it for the Giver,
My heart, my strength, my life, my all are His, and His forever.

I've found a friend, oh, such a friend! So kind and true and tender;
So wise a counselor and guide, so mighty a defender!
From Him who loves me now so well, what power my soul can sever?
Shall life or death, or earth or hell? No, I am His forever.

I am His and His forever! I am His for time and for eternity. He will not see His work upon the cross disrupted or nullified. "He shall see of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied." He shall see me, whom He in travail of soul redeemed upon the cross, standing before the throne of God, robed in His righteousness, and He shall be satisfied and glorified.

There remain two considerations. All that we have said in the foregoing does not imply that the Christian is beyond sin or sinning. The Scriptures point out that we have "this treasure," that is this treasure of the new life, in "earthen vessels." This mortal hath not yet put on immortality; this corruptible hath not yet put on incorruption. And along with the new life, we have within us yet the old nature, that vicious and corrupt nature, which is not finally mortified until we pass out of this world.

As a result, we not only can sin but we do sin. And sometimes, if one permits the old nature to take dominion over him, and does not constantly lean upon God for strength, God will allow one of His chosen ones to fall far. The Scriptural record allows no one to doubt but that David was a child of God; yet, the day came when David committed murder, and another day came when David committed adultery. The Scriptural record allows no one to doubt that Peter was a child of God; yet, it was Peter who with cursing denied his Lord.

Our forefathers-in-the-faith not only explained the "why" of it but offered a solemn warning concerning this condition. Thus we read, "Although the weakness of the flesh can not prevail against the power of God, who confirms and preserves true believers in a state of grace, yet converts are not always so influenced and actuated by the Spirit of God as not in some particular instances sinfully to deviate from the guidance of divine grace, so as to be seduced by, and to comply with, the lusts of the flesh; they must therefore be constant in watching and

prayer, that they be not led into temptation. When these are neglected, they are not only liable to be drawn into great and heinous sins by Satan, the world, and the flesh, but sometimes by the righteous permission of God actually fall into these evils. This the lamentable fall of David, Peter, and other saints described in Holy Scriptures, demonstrates.

“By such enormous sins, however, they very highly offend God, incur a deadly guilt, grieve the Holy Spirit, interrupt the exercise of faith, very grievously wound their consciences, and sometimes lose the sense of God’s favor, for a time, until on their returning into the right way by serious repentance, the light of God’s fatherly countenance again shines upon them.

“But God, who is rich in mercy, according to his unchangeable purpose of election, does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from his own people, even in their melancholy falls; nor suffer them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death; nor does he permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction.” *Fifth Head of Doctrine*, Arts. IV, V, & VI.

But have care, you who would pervert this doctrine and say, “All is well with my soul,” when all is wrong with your soul. Have care, you who would pervert this truth of God and say, “I may live in sin and yet not be lost.” There is something more important in the life of David than his sin, and that was his repentance. There was something more important in the life of Peter than his sin, and that was his repentance. That is precisely why we may know that each of these two men was a child of God, because God brought each of them to the place of repentance. When we see their heart-sickness for their sin; when we see their agony, their tears, because they had sinned, then we know that they are the children of God and not before.

Thus we read in the *Fifth Head of Doctrine* Art. VII that God so works in the elect that “by his Word and Spirit, he certainly and effectually renews them to repentance, to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator, may again experience and henceforward more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.” Basic to this sincere and godly repentance of the elect is the fact even “in these falls he preserves in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration from perishing or being totally lost,” (Art. VII) but, on the contrary, quickens it to repentance and renewed faith.

When one who is a member of the church sins willfully, deliberately, and continuously, whether his sin be neglect of the means of grace and the failure to worship God, or whether it be a poor stewardship of the material possessions God has given him, or whether it be the failure to nurture his children in the fear and admonition of the Lord, or drunkenness, or adultery, or murder — whenever

a member of the church so sins, we know that there are just two possible alternatives.

The first possibility is that he is not a child of God. He may have been a member of the church for years. He may have served in the consistory or as a Sunday-school teacher. He may have been the superintendent of the Sunday school. He may have sung in the choir or have been the director of it. He may have stood in the pulpit and posed as a minister of the Gospel, and yet never have been a child of God.

You ask: "Is this possible? Is it possible for a man to appear to be a child of God, even for many years, and then to discover that he was not a child of God from the beginning?" Of course it is possible. That is the human liability, that man looketh upon the outward appearance; only God looketh upon the heart. And sometimes appearances are most deceiving. This is one of the lessons of Jesus' parable of the sower and the four soils. You know the parable. Some seed fell on hard ground; it was picked up and carried away by the birds. Some seed fell on thin soil; it sprang up and flourished for a time and then withered away for lack of substance. This is one of the deceptive cases. Had one looked upon this grain in its early days, he would have seen nought that was wrong with it. Its appearance was precisely like that of the grain which grew in good soil; yet, from the beginning it was destined to wither and die. There are some like this in the church. They demonstrate, for a time, all the appearances of vitality and life; yet, they are destined from the beginning to fall by the wayside, for the kingdom of God is not within their hearts; the love of the world is upon them; they are unregenerate of heart and reprobate of mind.

There is one other possibility and only one. It may be that the one who has sinned is a child of God in all truth. His sin is nonetheless grievous; the consequences are nonetheless bitter. But there is one vast difference. One day he will come before God in an agony of repentance. Yes, in an agony of repentance, for if he is a child of God, he will remember that Esau sought the place of penitence with tears and could not find it. In an agony of tears he will seek the place of penitence, and if he be a child of God, he will receive grace to find it.

This, too, is the mark of the saint. God is not indifferent to sin but agonizingly aware of it. And this is the mark of his perseverance: that he will seek the place of penitence with tears, until he finds it.

And now you may ask: "How can I be certain that I am a child of God, and that He will never let me go?" Have you ever wept for your sin? Have you ever felt deeply and agonizingly that you have failed your God? You see, it is only that man, that woman, who in the agony of their guilt before God — not once but a thousand times — have sought forgiveness, who can know with certainty that God will not allow them to be lifted from the hollow of His hand.

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