

Lesson 21: 2LCF Chapter 17: Of the Perseverance of the Saints

*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.
My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch
them out of the Father's hand.*

John 10:28-29

Few doctrines of the Christian faith have been as fiercely contested as the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. This is plainly seen when we compare two quotes from well-known Protestant Christian thinkers:

In 1754, John Wesley preached a sermon entitled “Serious Thoughts Upon the Perseverance of the Saints” in which he declared the following:

Calvinists, who deny that salvation can ever be lost, reason on the subject in a marvellous way... They tell us, that no virgin's lamp can go out; no promising harvest be choked with thorns; no branch in Christ can ever be cut off from unfruitfulness; no pardon can ever be forfeited, and no name blotted out of God's book! They insist that no salt can ever lose its savor; nobody can ever “receive the grace of God in vain”; “bury his talents”; “neglect such great salvation”; trifle away “a day of grace”; “look back” after putting his hand to the gospel plow... They use reams of paper to argue that if one ever got lost he was never found. John 17:12; that if one falls, he never stood. Rom. 11:16-22 and Heb. 6:4-6; if one was ever “cast forth,” he was never in, and “if one ever withered,” he was never green. John 15:1-6; and that “if any man draws back,” it proves that he never had anything to draw back from. Heb. 10:38,39; that if one ever “falls away into spiritual darkness,” he was never enlightened. Heb. 6:4-6; that if you “again get entangled in the pollutions of the world,” it shows that you never escaped. 2 Pet 2:20; that if you “put salvation away” you never had it to put away, and if you make shipwreck of faith, there was no ship of faith there!! In short they say: If you get it, you can't lose it; and if you lose it you never had it. May God save us from accepting a doctrine, that must be defended by such fallacious reasoning!²²¹

Wesley's response to such a doctrine is almost incredulous. He cries out, “May God save us from [such] a doctrine!” Meanwhile, John Calvin argued in support of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints with these words:

For those whom Christ enlightens with the knowledge of his name, and admits into the bosom of his Church, he is said to take under his guardianship and protection. All whom he thus receives are said to be committed and entrusted to him by the Father, that they may be kept unto life eternal. What would we have? Christ proclaims aloud that all whom the Father is pleased to save he has delivered into his protection (John 6:37-39, 17:6, 12). Therefore, if we would know whether God cares for our salvation, let us ask whether he has committed us to Christ, whom he has appointed to be the only Savior of all his people... Let us, therefore, embrace Christ, who is kindly offered to us, and comes forth to meet us: he will number us among his flock, and keep us within his fold... We are sufficiently taught by experience itself, that calling and faith are of little value without perseverance, which, however, is not the gift of all. But Christ has freed us from anxiety on this head; for the

²²¹ John Wesley, *Serious Thoughts Upon the Perseverance of the Saints*. Excerpt published by the Society of Evangelical Arminians. Retrieved from: <https://evangelicalarminians.org/john-wesley-quote-on-the-possibility-of-losing-salvation>.

following promises undoubtedly have respect to the future: “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me, and him that comes to me I will in no wise cast out.” ²²²

While Wesley mocks the reasoning of Calvinists, Calvin argues that “God cares for our salvation” because he keeps his elect secure. He goes as far as to argue that a effectual calling and faith are of little value apart from perseverance.

Who is correct in this great debate? With whom should we align ourselves? With Arminius and Wesley? Or with Calvin and Whitefield?

The framers of the Second London Baptist Confession demonstrate that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is neither incredible as Wesley would argue, nor is it distinctly Calvinistic, but it is ultimately biblical!

Sam Waldron outlines the Confession as follows:

Outline

Paragraph 1

I. The fact of perseverance

A. Stated

1. The subjects of perseverance
2. The significance of perseverance

B. Expanded

1. The cause of perseverance
2. The obstacles to perseverance
3. The assurances of perseverance

Paragraph 2

II. The grounds of perseverance

A. Their presupposition

B. Their identity

1. The immutability of the decree of election
2. The efficacy of work of Christ
3. The perpetuity of the indwelling spirit
4. The dependability of the oath of God
5. The infallibility of the covenant of grace

C. Their result

Paragraph 3

III. The difficulty with perseverance

A. The various causes of backsliding

B. The tragic fruits of backsliding

C. The positive resolution of backsliding²²³

²²² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.24.6.

²²³ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 5th ed. (Welwyn Garden City, UK: EP Books, 2016), 255.

Paragraph 1.

Those whom God has accepted in the beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, and given the precious faith of his elect unto, can neither totally nor finally fall from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved, seeing the gifts and callings of God are without repentance, from which source he still begets and nourishes in them faith, repentance, love, joy, hope, and all the graces of the Spirit unto immortality; and though many storms and floods arise and beat against them, yet they shall never be able to take them off that foundation and rock which by faith they are fastened upon; notwithstanding, through unbelief and the temptations of Satan, the sensible sight of the light and love of God may for a time be clouded and obscured from them, yet he is still the same, and they shall be sure to be kept by the power of God unto salvation, where they shall enjoy their purchased possession, they being engraved upon the palm of his hands, and their names having been written in the book of life from all eternity. John 10:28,29; Phil. 1:6; 2 Tim. 2:19; 1 John 2:19; Ps. 89:31,32; 1 Cor. 11:32; Mal. 3:6

Exposition

Paragraph one provides a detailed and yet succinct explanation of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Here many of the contentions of Wesley are addressed when we get our categories right and when we define the doctrine biblically. Sam Waldron provides clarity on this point:

Perseverance of the saints does not mean that all who claim to be Christians or even appear to us to be Christians, persevere. It is only true saints who are said to persevere. This is the conclusive response to the argument from experience against this doctrine. One will often hear when this doctrine is discussed among Christians: I know someone who was a Christian, but fell away and died in his sins. This doctrine is not the doctrine of the perseverance of all professing Christians, or even of all those who appear to be Christians. It is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints...²²⁴

Furthermore, Waldron summarizes the teaching of paragraph one. Speaking on this phrase, “[God] still begets and nourishes in them faith, repentance, love, joy, hope, and all the graces of the Spirit unto immortality...” he writes:

Perseverance is perseverance in faith, repentance, love, hope and joy in the gospel. One who does not know himself to be in present possession of these graces may scarcely draw comfort from such a doctrine to press on in sin.²²⁵

Here we see that the Confession teaches that the we not only persevere in our standing before God, but we persevere in all of these grace:

- Faith (1 Peter 1:5; 1 John 5:1-5; I Cor. 15:1,2; Col. 1:23; Heb. 10:39)
- Repentance (1 John. 1:7-9; Ezek. 16:60; Matt. 5:4)
- Love (1 John. 3:14, 15; John 15:9)
- Hope (Col. 1:23; 1 Thess. 1:3)
- Joy (Matt. 13:44)²²⁶

²²⁴ Ibid., 256.

²²⁵ Ibid., 257.

²²⁶ Listed by Waldron in a symbolics lecture at Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary. I’ve added 1 Peter 1:5 in support of preservation of/by faith.

Waldron outlines the remainder of paragraph one with this summary:

How long do they persevere? The Confession states the answer, 'to the end. The meaning is that they persevere till death or the second coming of Christ (Matthew 24:13; 2 Timothy 4:7).

To what do they persevere? Again the Confession answers very clearly that they persevere to eternal salvation (Hebrews 3:6, 14; 10:39). This must be maintained against those who regard perseverance as optional. We do not persevere only to a few extra rewards, but to salvation itself.

How certainly do they persevere? The Confession specifies that the saints shall certainly persevere therein to the end'. The perseverance of the saints does not mean that most will make it or that in general Christians persevere, but that every true Christian does certainly persevere.

Why is it necessary to persevere? Perseverance is defined in one dictionary in this way: 'to continue doing something in spite of difficulty, opposition. The Confession emphasizes this implication of the word in the second half of paragraph 1 and paragraph 3.

Perseverance is necessary because the Christian life is a fight-a war against many enemies who would keep us from being saved in the end (2 Timothy 4:7). It is running, fighting, guarding. We must not be surprised, or doubt that we are saved, when our Christian life seems filled with obstacles, setbacks and sins. The Christian life and ultimate salvation involve genuine perseverance.²²⁷

But, the ultimate question is this: Can this doctrine be clearly discerned in the pages of Scripture? If so, what passages teach this doctrine?

John 5:24; 6:37-47; 10:27-30

Romans 8:28-29; 11:29

Ephesians 1:13-14

Philippians 1:6

2 Thessalonians 3:3

2 Timothy 1:12; 4:18

Hebrews 7:25; 12:2

1 Peter 1:5

1 John 2:19

What then do we make of the warning passages in Hebrews (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29) that are cited by Wesley and others? There are several views:

- 1) True believers are threatened with eternal judgment if they fall away.
- 2) These passages serve as a warning to unbelievers.
- 3) These passages threaten loss of rewards or something other than salvation.
- 4) These passages are a means by which believers are kept from falling away.

²²⁷ Ibid., 257.

Thomas Schreiner notes that he believes these passages speak to true believers. However, he offers an important qualification:

Those warning are the means God uses to keep us until the end... Those warnings are always effectively and always ultimately work in our lives... No one is who is truly chosen by God ever fully falls away from Christ... The warnings effectively keep us in the family of God... The warning is the means by which the promise comes to pass.²²⁸

Paragraph 2.

This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father, upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ and union with him, the oath of God, the abiding of his Spirit, and the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace; from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

Rom. 8:30, 9:11,16; Rom. 5:9, 10; John 14:19; Heb. 6:17,18; 1 John 3:9; Jer. 32:40

Paragraph 3.

And though they may, through the temptation of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins, and for a time continue therein, whereby they incur God's displeasure and grieve his Holy Spirit, come to have their graces and comforts impaired, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded, hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves, yet shall they renew their repentance and be preserved through faith in Christ Jesus to the end.

Matt. 26:70,72,74; Isa. 64:5,9; Eph. 4:30; Ps. 51:10,12; Ps. 32:3,4; 2 Sam. 12:14; Luke 22:32,61,62

Exposition

Commenting on these paragraphs, Calvin Walden has argued that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints can be demonstrated by the following truths:

1. Immutability of the Decree of Election

Man is brought to faith in God only by the divine selection of God. Paul, writing to the people of God in Thessalonica, says of them, "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation" (2 Thess. 2:13)... Because men are divinely selected by God's immutable decree, they will continue living by faith until the end.

2. The Efficacy of the Merit and Intercession of Jesus Christ and Union with Him.

In Romans 8, Paul argues that no one can bring a charge against God's elect and the believer stands in the place of no condemnation. His argument is built upon the truth that "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all... It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us" (8:32, 34). It is by the work and intercession of Christ for those united to Him by the effectual call of God that the believer is kept in grace.

3. The Oath of God

²²⁸ Thomas Schreiner, Interview: *Can You Lose Your Salvation? What About the Warning Passages?* The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DvX4z9ZeMq8>.

The third pillar upon which this blessed doctrine rests is the oath of God. In Hebrews 6:16-20, we read of the oath which God made toward His people. Abraham was a recipient of the promise of God and the certainty of God's Word was given to him by an oath. It is so with the child of God who is called an heir of the promise. God not only gives a promise, but also confirms that promise with an oath.

4. The Abiding of His Spirit

Paul tell the Christians in Jesus that they "were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise" Eph. 1:13). This seal was a pledge of the complete expression of God's redemptive purpose in His creatures

5. The Seed of God within Them

This fifth pillar is very much tied to the fourth pillar. The Holy Spirit not only works as a pledge for the believer, but also indwells the believer. "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin because he is born of God" (1 John 3;9).

6. The Nature of the Covenant of Grace

The language of the New Covenant gives assurance of salvation and perseverance to those who are a part of it. "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them." He then says, "and their sins and iniquities will I remember no more" (Heb. 10:16-7). That which is accomplished through the one offering of Christ comes with the assurance that 'their sins and lawless deeds I will remember no more! The nature of the covenant of grace assures more than just the forgiveness of sin, for the reality is that God will remember them no more.²²⁹

We may conclude with J.C. Ryle's words:

Christ declares that His people "shall never perish." Weak as they are, they shall all be saved. Not one of them shall be lost and cast away: not one of them shall miss heaven. If they err, they shall be brought back: if they fall, they shall be raised. The enemies of their souls may be strong and mighty, but their Savior is mightier; and none shall pluck them out of their Savior's hands!²³⁰

²²⁹ Calvin Walden, "Chapter Seventeen: Of the Perseverance of the Saints," in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 320-321.

²³⁰ J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospel, St. John*. Vol. II. (Cambridge: James Clare & Co, Ltd., reprinted 1976), 230.