

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Persevering Grace

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*What can separate my soul
From the God who made me whole,
Wrote my name in heaven's scroll?
Nothing. Hallelujah!
Trouble, hardship, danger, sword
Brought by those who hate my Lord?
Slander here? Or no reward?
Nothing. Hallelujah!*

1

The doctrine we are dealing with ... is perseverance, which is also called eternal security. Or, as some say colloquially, "once saved, always saved." It is the truth that those who have been brought to faith in Jesus Christ—having been foreknown and predestined to faith by God from eternity past, having been called, regenerated, and justified in this life, and having been so set on the road to ultimate glorification that this culminating glorification can even be spoken of in the past tense—that these persons never will and never can be lost. Perseverance is implied in each of the other doctrines we have studied and is a logical consequence of salvation being the work of an eternally loving and utterly immutable God.

SOME COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Yet we do not want to distort the doctrine of perseverance by over-simplifying it, as some do. We want to understand it as it is taught in Scripture, and this means that first we need to eliminate some common misunderstandings.

1. *Perseverance does not mean that Christians are exempted from all spiritual danger just because they are Christians.*

On the contrary, the opposite is true. They are in even greater danger, because now that they are Christians, the world and the devil will be doggedly set against them and will try to destroy them—and would destroy them, if that were possible. One of the greatest statements of the believer's eternal security in the entire Bible is Romans 8:35-39. But this section of Scripture is bold in listing the dangers Christians face. Paul writes of trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword, concluding, "For your

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sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (v. 36, quoting Ps.44:22). But in spite of these many hostile forces, the Christian will be kept by God's power and love. It is because we really do face these spiritual dangers that the doctrine of perseverance is so important.

2. *Perseverance does not mean that Christians are always kept from falling into sin, just because they are Christians.*

2

Sadly, Christians do sin. Noah fell into drunkenness. Abraham lied about his wife Sarah, claiming that she was his sister rather than his wife, thinking to protect his own life. David committed adultery and then arranged for the murder of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. Peter denied the Lord. These examples lead us to conclude that perseverance does not mean that Christians will not fall, only that they will not fall away. Jesus predicted Peter's denial, but he added, "I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32).

Lorraine Boettner points out that the elect are often like the prodigal son in that they are deluded by the world and led astray by their own corrupt desires. They waste their substance on wrong living. They feed on the world's husks, which do not satisfy. But sooner or later they come to their senses and say, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you" (Luke 15:17-18). And when they return they find a loving Father and a joyful reception. Boettner says that "this is a thoroughly Calvinistic parable in that the prodigal was a son, and could not lose that relationship. Those who are not sons never have the desire to arise and go to the Father."¹

3. *Perseverance does not mean that those who merely profess Christ without actually being born again are secure.*

We live in a day when many claim to be Christians but are destitute of any true knowledge of the faith and any genuine Christian experience or character. Others know a great deal about religion and may be able to pass even the strictest examination for church membership. But knowledge like this is no guarantee that the individual is actually saved, and membership in a church is no guarantee, either. None who are in any of these categories of religious profession can assume that the doctrine of perseverance applies to them.

¹ Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), 189.

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This sad truth explains the many warnings that appear in Scripture to the effect that we should give diligent attention to make our “calling and election sure” (2 Pet. 1:10). Jesus’ statements are among the most direct. For example, he said, “All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matt. 10:22). We are able to stand firm only because God perseveres with us. But it is also true that we must stand firm. In fact, the final perseverance of believers is the only ultimate proof that we have been chosen by God and truly have been born again.

3

The Christian doctrine of perseverance does not lead to a false assurance or presumption, though some who claim to be saved presume on God by their sinful lifestyles and willful disobedience. Perseverance does not make us lazy. As Calvin insisted, “It is not enough that God should choose any people for himself, except the people themselves persevere in the obedience of faith.”² Nor does per-severance make us proud.

The doctrine of perseverance is precisely what Paul declares it to be in Romans 8, namely, that those whom God has foreknown and predestinated to be conformed to the likeness of his Son will indeed come to that great consummation. They will be harassed and constantly tempted. Frequently, they will fall. Nevertheless, in the end they will be with Jesus and will be made like him, because this is the destiny that God in his sovereign and inexplicable love has predetermined for them, and because he accomplishes this end through his sovereign acts of calling, regenerating, justifying, and glorifying the believer.

This doctrine has a logical connection to the other Calvinistic distinctives, of course. Because we are radically depraved and because salvation depends on God’s sovereign acts in our salvation, we have a security that is based on his ability and will rather than our own. If salvation depended in any measure on what we were able to do or contribute to it, we would not be secure at all. But there is a strange anomaly in contemporary evangelicalism at this point. The great majority of evangelicals are theologically Arminian. That is, they do not believe in radical depravity or election. They believe that the deciding factor in whether a person becomes a Christian and is saved is not God’s regenerating power but the individual’s free will, by which he can choose either to believe or disbelieve. In other words, he is able to put himself into the kingdom or keep himself out. But in spite of this synergistic (see chapter 1) and ultimately man-determined theology, most evangelicals nevertheless believe in perseverance, insisting that when a person is once saved, he is saved forever. It is a correct point, but Arminian theology provides no basis for it.

² John Calvin, *The Commentaries of John Calvin on the Prophet Hosea*, Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1999), 83.

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The Westminster Confession of Faith rightly and wisely grounds our security in God's acts when it says of perseverance, "They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved" (Chap. 17, Sec. 1).

MANY PERSEVERANCE VERSES

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One reason why many contemporary Arminians believe in perseverance in spite of its being inconsistent with their basic theology is that so many Bible verses teach it, not to mention the fact that it is a comforting doctrine to embrace. Here is a selection:

- *Psalm 34:7*. "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them."
- *Jeremiah 31:3*. "I have loved you with an everlasting love."
- *Jeremiah 32:40*. "I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me."
- *Ezekiel 11:19-20*. "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh."
- *John 5:24*. "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."
- *John 6:51*. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever."
- *Romans 11:29*. "God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."
- *2 Corinthians 4:8-9, 14*. "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. . . . We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his presence."
- *Hebrews 10:14*. "By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."

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- *1 Peter 1:3-5.* “In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”
- *1 John 5:11-13.* “This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

These verses are taken from many places in the Bible and are all plain statements that the one who called the believer to faith will also preserve him in that state to the end. It is a double security. We are told that, on the one hand, God will never depart from us but will keep, preserve, and defend us; and that, on the other hand, and because he acts in this way, we for our part will not depart from him. Left to our-selves we surely would. But Christ has prayed for us, as he did for Peter, and therefore our faith will not fail. God perseveres with his saints, and because he does, the saints themselves also persevere.

THREE GREAT PERSEVERANCE VERSES

The previous list of verses that teach perseverance omits three passages that are among the strongest, and thus deserve to be discussed in a little more detail. The verses are Philippians 1:6; John 10:27-30; and Romans 8:35-39.

1. *Philippians 1:6.* “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” This verse teaches that when it comes to our salvation, God finishes what he starts. This is true of all God’s plans: he never begins a work that he does not fully intend to complete. But this is true specifically of the gracious, sanctifying work of his Spirit in the minds and hearts of his elect people. Since God never abandons his plans or purposes for our eternal destiny, he will not leave this work unfinished. He refuses to give up on us until he makes us like Jesus Christ.
2. *John 10:27-30.* “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” These verses are significant for our purposes because they touch on nearly all five points of Calvinism. Jesus identifies his sheep as having been given to him by the Father. In other words, they are the gift of God’s electing love. However, these are the same

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sheep for whom Christ died (see v. 15), and thus they are the special objects of his atonement. Christ died exclusively for them, bearing the penalty for their sins in particular. Furthermore, by the efficacious work of the Holy Spirit, these sheep respond to God's irresistible grace. They are said not only to listen to Jesus' voice, but also to follow him.

What these verses emphasize, however, is God's persevering grace. The sheep are in some danger. There is the apparent threat that someone might try to snatch them away from salvation. Yet Jesus asserts their absolute security, emphatically promising their perseverance in three different ways. First, he gives his sheep eternal life. But of course this life can only be termed "eternal" if it lasts forever, which depends on the perseverance of God's grace. Second, Jesus says that his sheep will never perish. Once again, for this promise to have any validity, it requires the perseverance of God's grace. Finally, Jesus says "no one can snatch them out of my hand." This would seem secure enough. However, lest we think that somehow it is not secure enough, Jesus wraps his Father's hand around his own: "No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." Thus we are doubly secure, clutched by both the Father and the Son. And if we still feel insecure, we should realize that even when we are held in this manner, both the Father and the Son have a hand free to defend us!

3. *Romans 8:35-39*. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." It is difficult to think of any words that could be more comprehensive than these, which prove that once we come to Christ, nothing can ever separate us from God's love. In these verses the apostle Paul lists no fewer than seventeen obstacles to salvation. Yet none of them poses even the slightest threat to the believer's eternal security. Having considered all the contenders, Paul remains convinced that none of them could ever detach us from Christ. The point, of course, is not simply that these particular obstacles can be overcome but that *nothing* in time or eternity can ever threaten the security of God's elect, who must therefore persevere to the very end.

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ANOTHER PERSEVERANCE PROMISE

These verses prove the power of God's persevering grace, yet they are not the only verses in the Bible that teach this doctrine, and it is to another that we turn now, because of its use of the word *grace*: 1 Peter 5:10. This verse says, "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will him-self restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." Here are a few things to know before we examine the verse in detail:

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1. *Peter was writing to Christians scattered throughout certain parts of Asia Minor, which we call Turkey.* Peter calls these people "God's elect, strangers in the world" (1 Peter 1:1).
2. *These believers in Christ had been suffering many kinds of trials.* There are four passages in the letter that deal with their trials: 1 Peter 1:6-7; 3:13-17; 4:12-19; and 5:9. These passages indicate that the suffering these Christians were experiencing included malicious slander from unbelievers, possible persecution from government authorities, and spiritual assaults from Satan—the very kind of sufferings believers face today.
3. *Peter wanted to encourage them by the certainty of a glory yet to come.* He does this throughout the letter. In chapter 1 he speaks of the believers' "living hope" (v. 3) and of "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you" (v. 4). He says that their trials have come so that their "faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (v. 7). In chapter 3 he reminds them that "Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (v. 18). In chapter 4 he says, "Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (v. 13).

The text we are focusing on (5:10) does this as well. It encourages the Christians of Asia Minor by reminding them of the glory that is to be theirs when they complete their earthly course and are with the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven, and it assures them that in the meantime God will strengthen them and keep them for the work they have to do here.

The text functions as a benediction, or a word of blessing, since it comes almost at the end of the letter. But it is important to note that the verbs in the verse are in the future indicative rather than the optative mood. That is, they express a promise, not a wish. If it were the latter, the verse would say something like: "May the God of all grace . . . restore you and make you strong." Benedictions are often like that, and this is the way the King

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James Version actually translates Peter's words: "The God of all grace . . . make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you." But the verse is actually a promise in the future tense, not a wish, which means that it is a promise that "the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, *will* himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." It is this future tense that makes 1 Peter 5:10 an important verse about persevering grace, a strong statement of the truth of eternal security.

NO ESCAPE FROM SUFFERING

When we look at 1 Peter 5:10 the first thing we see is that perseverance does not mean that believers in Christ are automatically delivered from all suffering. In fact, the verse teaches the opposite. It teaches that we will experience suffering, though it will be of relatively short duration (for this life, rather than for eternity), and that suffering will be replaced in time by an eternal glory.

Where did Peter get this understanding of suffering in the Christian life? It is no great mystery. He learned it from Jesus Christ. This was one of the themes of the last discourses of Jesus before his crucifixion, recorded in chapters 14–16 of John's Gospel. In chapter 15 Jesus spoke of the world's hatred, which would lead to persecutions: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. . . . If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (vv. 18-20). In the next chapter he tells of religious persecutions: "They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me" (16:2-3). His final words were: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (v. 33).

Obviously, Peter had learned from this. Besides his own experiences as a Christian, his observations of the life and hardships of the early Christian community assured him that Jesus was not being hypothetical when he forecast suffering and persecution for his followers. Peter knew, and is reminding us, that suffering is both real and expected.

We notice something else that is important if we glance back one or two verses in 1 Peter 5 and place verse 10 in that context. In verses 8 and 9 Peter is writing about Satan, the devil, and he is saying that the suffering he is concerned about here is the suffering Satan causes. He calls Satan the Christian's enemy: "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings."

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But how can we do that, if Satan is really as powerful as the Bible says he is? The answer is that in ourselves we cannot resist the devil even for a moment. We can only resist him by the grace and power of God, which is where our text comes in. It assures us that in spite of Satan's threats, "the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ . . . will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast."

Peter had learned this from Jesus, too. Recall how Jesus told Peter at the Last Supper that "Satan has asked to sift you as wheat" (Luke 22:31). The devil must have meant something like this: "I know you are placing a lot of hope in these twelve disciples that you will be leaving behind when you return to heaven. But it is a hopeless gamble, and I will show you how hopeless it really is. If you will just let me get at Peter, your leading apostle, I will shake him so badly that all his faith will come tumbling out like chaff at threshing time, and he will be utterly ruined."

Satan is a liar, of course, but he was not lying at this point. He must have remembered how easy it had been for him to ruin our first parents in Eden long ago, and he concluded that if he had brought Adam and Eve to ruin, when they were then in their unfallen and pristine glory, it would be easy to knock down Peter, who was (unlike Adam) already sinful, ignorant, brash, and foolishly self-confident. And he was right. Peter had boasted that he would never deny Jesus. He thought that he was stronger than the other disciples, saying, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will" (Matt. 26:33). He told the Lord, "I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). But when Satan blew upon Peter, he fell. In fact, it took only a little servant girl to say of Peter, "This man was with him [Jesus]" (v. 56), and at once Peter denied that he even knew the Lord.

What Satan had not counted on was what Jesus also told Peter in the Upper Room. He warned him that Satan would indeed attack him and that he would fall, but he added, "I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (v. 32).

If Peter could explain that statement, he would probably say something like this: "When Jesus told me he had prayed for me so that my faith would not fail, he was telling me that I could not stand against Satan alone. And neither can you! Satan is much too powerful for us. So do not make the mistake I made, assuming that because I loved Jesus I could never deny him. Satan can bend us any way he wishes. But if we are joined to Jesus, we will find that he is able to keep us from falling or, if he allows us to fall, he is able to keep us from falling the whole way, and will forgive us, bring us back to himself, and give us useful work to do."

Years ago at a Reformed theology conference, John Gerstner reflected on this story, suggesting (in jest) that before his fall Peter had written a hymn that goes, "Lord, we are

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able. ..." But what Peter learned is that we are *not* able, not in ourselves, and that if we are to stand against Satan, it must be by the preserving grace of God. The doctrine of perseverance thus provides a stimulus to prayer. Reverend Al Martin, who serves as pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Montville, New Jersey, has written a helpful booklet on *The Practical Implications of Calvinism*, in which he writes,

If I believe the confession that God saves sinners, that he not only regenerates them, bringing them to repentance and faith, but that he keeps them and ultimately brings them into his presence—if that is his work then it will produce a consistent prayerfulness, not only a holy watchfulness and distrust of myself, but a constant application to him that he would perform in me that which he has promised. For what is prayer in the last analysis? It is a conscious spreading out of my helplessness before God. The true Calvinist is the man who confesses with his lips that grace must not only awaken him, and regenerate him, but that grace must preserve him.³

FOUR THINGS GOD WILL DO

In one respect, the King James translation of 1 Peter 5:10 is not as accurate as the New International Version, because it turns the promise "God ... will ... restore you" into a wish: "The God of all grace ... make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you." However, there is one way in which the King James Version is closer to the Greek text than the New International Version, and this is in the way it lists the four things Peter says God will do for believers. For some reason the NIV breaks them up, saying that God "will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." But in the original text these are four powerful verbs, each in the future tense: "will perfect," "will establish," "will strengthen" and "will settle." In other words, the verse simply lists four things that God will do for all believers.

1. *God will perfect you.* The word that the King James Version renders "perfect" means "to make fully ready" or "to complete." It was used of making fishing nets ready by mending them, which is probably where the New International Version translators got the idea of restoration. But this is not what Peter is thinking of. He has spoken of suffering, and the idea is not that we are restored from suffering but rather that suffering is used by God to complete or perfect what he is doing with us. The same idea emerges if we think of grace. The verse begins "and the God of all grace," which means that God is the source of every grace and will supply what we need to go on to spiritual wholeness or perfection.

³ A. N. Martin, *The Practical Implications of Calvinism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 20-21.

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2. *God will establish you.* The idea conveyed by this verb is to be established in a firm, defensive position so that the attacks of the devil will not dislodge the Christian from it. If we have any understanding of ourselves, we must worry at times about being dislodged from where God has placed us. What if Satan should attack our home? Our children? Our marriage? Suppose I lose my job? Or my health? Suppose the people I work with ostracize me because of my Christian faith, exclude me from office confidences, or pass over me for promotions? Will I be able to stand firm under such pressures? Or will I be ashamed of Jesus and disgrace him by refusing to speak up for him or by compromising what I stand for? What if I should even deny him, as Peter did?

Those fears are not groundless, because Christian homes some-times are broken up, Christians often do fail to stand for Christ, and others at times deny him. In the midst of our fears, this text comes as a tremendous promise: “God will establish you.” He will keep you in just such pressured situations. And if, in accord with his own wise counsel, he should allow you to stumble for a time and fall, you can know that Jesus nevertheless has prayed for you and that your fall will not be permanent. In fact, when it is past, you will be stronger than you were before and you will be able to use your experience of God’s grace to help others.

3. *God will strengthen you.* The previous promise, that “God will establish you,” had to do with holding one’s ground. That is, it concerned a defensive stand. This promise goes further. It concerns an offensive action. It says that God will “strengthen” us to resist Satan, which is exactly what Peter told us to do in the previous verse: “Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (v. 9). We cannot resist Satan in our own strength, but we can if God strengthens us.
4. *God will settle you.* The last of these promises is that God will “settle” us. The word means “to be made to rest securely,” like a strong building on a sure foundation. It is important for this reason: The purpose of Satan’s attacks is to dislodge us from our foundation, which is Jesus Christ. He will do that if he can. God’s purpose is to settle us on Jesus, and God has arranged things so that the attacks of Satan, rather than unsettling us, actually serve to bond us to that foundation even more firmly than before. That is why Paul told the Romans, “We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces per-severance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3-4).

That happened to Peter himself, of course. Before he was tempted by Satan, Peter thought he was secure; but he was not secure, because he was trusting in himself. After he had been tempted, he knew that he could never prevail against Satan in his own strength and

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therefore stayed close to Jesus. It was from that proximity to Jesus and by resting on that foundation that Peter was able to strengthen his brethren in similar situations, which is what Jesus said he would do and what he is actually doing here.

We have a natural tendency to rely on ourselves. But God has arranged even the assaults of Satan so that we will be weaned away from self-reliance to trust God instead. Few experiences in life are more useful in settling us on the only sure foundation than the temptations and sufferings that come to us from Satan.

THE PROBLEM PASSAGES

It is not possible to present the doctrine of perseverance without dealing with some of the passages that seem to contradict it. This is because these passages trouble people and are often in their minds when they hear the security of the believer mentioned.

What about Hebrews 6:4-6, which says, "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance. . . ."? Doesn't that imply that those who are saved can be lost?

Or 2 Peter 2:1-2: "But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves." Doesn't that suggest that people who have been redeemed by Christ can later deny him and thus fall away and perish?

Or what about Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:27, where he says, "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize"?

Or what about the four kinds of soil in Jesus' parable in Matthew 13? Some of the seed springs up quickly, but is later scorched by the sun or choked by weeds. It perishes.

Or what about the five foolish virgins of Matthew 25? They were waiting for the bridegroom's coming, but because they went away to get oil and were not actually there when he came, they were excluded from the wedding banquet.

It is important to wrestle with these texts, of course, and not merely to dismiss them with some glib statement of "once saved, always saved." Otherwise, we will indeed be presumptuous, and we will miss the very important warnings these texts convey. However, a careful examination of these passages will show that although they can be

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said to put a proper hedge around perseverance, lest we presume upon it or take it lightly, they do not contradict it.

THREE CATEGORIES

How do we approach these difficulties? Martyn Lloyd-Jones does it at great length in more than one hundred pages of careful argument in the second of two volumes on Romans 8. Those who want to examine the matter in greater detail can consult the Welsh preacher's work.⁴ However, Lloyd-Jones is helpful for us in that he puts the problem texts into a few manageable categories and treats them in that way. In a much briefer scope, we will follow that procedure here.

Category 1: Passages suggesting that we can "fall away" from grace. This category contains the most difficult and most frequently cited passages. Therefore, it is the one we need to explore at greatest length. The first passage is the one in which the phrase "fallen away from grace" occurs, Galatians 5:4. An examination of the context shows that Paul is addressing the problem of false teaching that had been introduced into the Galatian churches by a party of legalistic Jews. They were insisting that circumcision and other Jewish practices had to be followed if the believers in Galatia were truly to be saved. Here the contrast with grace is law, and Paul is saying that if the believers allow themselves to be seduced by this false teaching, they will be led away from grace into legalism. This is not the same thing as saying that they will lose their salvation, though the doctrine of the legalists was indeed a false doctrine by which nobody could be saved. Paul's argument is that the Galatian Christians should "stand firm" in the liberty Christ had given them and not become "burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

The parable of the four kinds of soil also falls into this category of problem texts. Does it teach that it is possible for a person to be genuinely born again and then fall away and be lost, because of either the world's scorching persecutions or its materialistic entanglements? The image we have of young plants suggests this, since the plants in the story obviously do have life. But if we examine Jesus' own explanation of the story, we will see that he makes a distinction between a person who "hears" the word only and a person who "hears the word and understands it" (Matt. 13:19, 23). The one who merely hears may receive "with joy" the word he does not actually understand, and thus seem to be saved. But "he has no root" in him, which he proves by lasting only a short time. Those who understand and thus have the root of genuine life in them show it by their endurance and fruit. Jesus' point, since the parable concerns the preaching of the gospel

⁴D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans, An Exposition of Chapter 8:17-39, The Final Perseverance of the Saints* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1976), 263-366.

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in this age, is that not all preaching of the Word will be blessed by God to the saving of those who hear it. Only some will be converted.

Another passage that falls into this category of problem texts is the story of the five wise and five foolish virgins. This is a disturbing parable because it teaches that there will be people within the visible church who have been invited to the marriage supper, profess Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and actually seem to be waiting for his promised return, but who are nevertheless lost at the end. It is meant to be disturbing. But if we compare it with the other parables in the same chapter—the parable of the talents and the parable of the sheep and the goats—it is clear that Jesus is saying only that in the church many who are not genuinely born again will pass for believers, until the end. It is only at the final judgment, when the Lord returns, that those who are truly saved and those who merely say they are saved will be distinguished.

The most difficult of the passages that seem to suggest that believers can fall away from grace is 2 Peter 2:1-2, which refers to people “denying the sovereign Lord who bought them.” This sounds like people having been redeemed by Jesus and having believed in him later denying him and falling away.

We should be warned against this misunderstanding by the way the chapter continues, for it speaks of people who have learned about Jesus Christ and have even escaped a considerable amount of the external pollution of the world by having the high standards of the Christian life taught to them, but who have repudiated this teaching in order to return to the world’s corruption, which they actually love. Peter rather crudely compares them to “a dog” returning to its vomit and “a sow that is washed” but which nevertheless goes back to “her wallowing in the mud” (v. 22). The reason they do this is because their inner nature is unchanged. They may have been cleaned up externally, but like the Pharisees, their insides are still full of corruption. These unbelievers are the ones who deny the Lord who bought them.

But how can Peter say that Jesus “bought” them? This is a difficult text and has proved so for many commentators. We began to address its difficulties near the end of chapter 5. In addition to what was stated there, it should be noted that Peter seems to be thinking of an external purchase or deliverance. Since he begins by speaking of those who were false prophets among the people of Israel, what he seems to be saying is that just as these false prophets were beneficiaries of the deliverance of the nation from Egypt but nevertheless were not true followers of God, so there will be people like this within the Christian church. They will seem to have been purchased by Christ and will show outward signs of such deliverance, but they will still be false prophets and professors.

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None of these passages teaches that salvation can be lost. Some refer to something else, such as falling from grace into legalism. Others teach that those who are mere professors, however orthodox or holy they may seem, will fall away. As John writes in his first letter, “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us” (1 John 2:19).

Category 2: Passages suggesting that our salvation is uncertain. There are a large number of verses in this category, but they are much alike and therefore do not each require separate treatment. Examples include Philippians 2:12, which says, “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling”; 2 Peter 1:10, “Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fail”; and Hebrews 6:4-6, “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance.”

This last passage is particularly troubling to many, so it is a good place to begin. One observation is that even if the text indirectly teaches that a Christian can fall away and be lost, its specific teaching would be that such a person could thereafter never be saved a second time “because [they would be] crucifying the Son of God all over again” (v. 6). Few would want to accept such a denial of any second chance. So even those who do not believe in eternal security need to find another, better interpretation.

In this case, as we saw in chapter 5, the answer lies in the entire thrust of Hebrews, which was written to encourage Jews—who had been exposed to Christianity and had even seemed to accept it some-what—to go on to full faith and not to fall back again into Judaism. Everything in the book points in this direction. So in this “problem” passage the writer is warning his readers against denying the faith. Speaking somewhat hypothetically, he points out the very real danger in being part of the church without ever actually becoming a true Christian. People may “taste” some of God’s spiritual benefits in the church yet fail to partake of Christ himself. If this has happened, they will not come back, because in a certain sense they have been inoculated against Christianity.

However, the real situation emerges in verse 9, where the author of the book writes, “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation.” In other words, the author considered his readers to be genuine believers, which meant that, in his opinion, they would not commit apostasy but would go on to embrace the fullness of the doctrines of the faith, as he is urging them to do.

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The other verses—Philippians 2:12 and 2 Peter 1:10—are not nearly so difficult. They merely remind us of what we saw earlier, namely, that the fact of God’s perseverance with us does not suggest that somehow we do not have to persevere, too. We *do* have to persevere. In fact, it is because God is persevering with us that we will persevere. Remember that Philippians 2:12, which tells us to “work out” our salvation, is immediately followed by verse 13, which says, “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” God gives us the desire and then enables us to achieve what he desires.

Category 3: Warning passages. The final category of problem passages contains warnings, like Romans 11:20-21, “Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either”; or Hebrews 2:3, “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation”; or 1 Corinthians 9:27, where Paul issues a warning to himself, “so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.”

The reason for these passages is that we need warnings from God in order to persevere. Or, to put it in other language, it is by means of such warnings that God ensures our perseverance. The proof of this is seen in the different ways in which unbelievers and believers react to such warnings. Do the verses I have been studying in this chapter trouble unbelievers? Not at all. Either they regard them as mere foolishness, something hardly to be considered, or they take them in a straightforward manner but assume that their lives are all right and that the verses therefore do not concern them. It is only believers who are troubled, because they are concerned about their relationship with God and do not want to presume that all is well with their souls when it may not be.

These passages provoke us to higher levels of commitment and greater godliness, which is what they were given to accomplish. And even this should encourage us. As Lloyd-Jones says, “To be concerned and troubled about the state of our soul when we read passages such as these is in and of itself evidence that we are sensitive to God’s Word and to his Spirit, that we have spiritual life in us.”⁵

GRACE AND GLORY

A few pages ago, in our discussion of 1 Peter 5:10, we called attention to the glory that is the Christian’s ultimate destiny and hope: “God . . . who called you to his eternal glory in Christ . . .” We return to that theme now, because glory is the obvious place to end a study of the subject of the persevering grace of God. Grace perseveres with us precisely so that we might be brought to glory.

⁵ Ibid., 332.

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But glory is a difficult term to define. The Hebrew language has two words for it: *kabod*, which has the idea of “weight,” and therefore of that which has value; and *shekinah*, which refers to the unapproachable light that surrounds and represents the Deity. In the New Testament the word for glory is *doxa*, which is used to translate both Hebrew words and embraces both of the Hebrew ideas. All three words are chiefly used of God, as in Psalm 24, which describes God as the King of glory:

Lift up your heads, O you gates;
lift them up, you ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

Who is he, this King of glory?
The LORD Almighty —
he is the King of glory (vv. 9-10).

The psalm is teaching that God alone is of ultimate weight, worth, or value, and therefore that he alone is worthy of our highest praise. We are to give glory to God and to him only.

But here is where a problem arises: the word “glory” is also used of our destiny, as in 1 Peter 5, where Peter speaks of believers being “called to his eternal glory.” What does that mean? It could mean being called to God himself, that is, to God’s presence. But when we look at other relevant Bible passages we see that it means more than this. It means that we shall also share in God’s glory, that in fact we shall be glorified. In other words, it does not refer only to where we will end up as Christians but also to what we will be and how we will be received when we get there.

Some of the most stimulating words that have ever been written on this subject are by C.S. Lewis in his essay “The Weight of Glory.” Lewis began by admitting that for many years the idea of glory seemed unattractive to him because he associated it only with fame or luminosity. The first idea seemed wicked. Why should we want to be famous? Isn’t that un-Christian? And as for the second idea, well, who wants to go around like a high-powered electric lightbulb?

However, as he looked into the matter, Lewis discovered that wanting to receive God’s approval was not at all wicked. He remembered how Jesus said that no one can enter heaven except as a child, and he reflected on how natural and proper it is for a child to be pleased with praise. There is a wrong way of desiring praise, of course. It occurs when we want praise to come to us rather than to go to someone else. Moreover, it is always easy for a right desire for praise to lapse into a warped, evil, harmful desire. The pursuit of praise can take us over and consume us. But pursued in the right way, pleasure at being praised is the exact opposite of the pride Lewis had at first thought it signified. It

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is actually humility of a childlike sort. Since God is our Father, it is right that we should want to please him and be pleased at having pleased him.

This is not due to anything in ourselves. Salvation is God's work from start to finish. But what Lewis is saying is that for Christians the day will come when we will stand before God, who has persevered with us until the end, and who will look upon us and be pleased with what he sees. He will say, "It has all been worthwhile. It was good for me to have sent my Son to die on that cross, suffering the pain, agony, and torment of the crucifixion to save this sinner from his sins. He is what I wanted to make him. He is like my Son. I am satisfied. I am well pleased." When we hear that, we will be well pleased too. And far from taking glory to ourselves for what has happened, we will glorify the God who has glorified us.

Lewis says that the opposite of glory is to be ignored by God, to be rejected, exiled, and estranged. To be glorified is to be noticed, welcomed, acknowledged, and received. To be ignored by God is to be humiliated, turned aside, and shut out. He expresses the positive side like this:

If we take the imagery of Scripture seriously, if we believe that God will one day give us the Morning Star and cause us to *put on* the splendor of the sun, then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and the modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy. At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of the morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in. When human souls have become as perfect in voluntary obedience as the inanimate creation is in its lifeless obedience, then they will put on its glory, or rather that greater glory of which Nature is only the first sketch.⁶

Lewis was a professor of literature, not a theologian, and he freely admits that much of what he has written about glory in his essay is merely human speculation. But he has captured something of the wonder of what is in store for those who have become the objects of the electing, sanctifying, and persevering grace of God. Isn't it splen-did? And shouldn't it transform how we look at the experiences we are passing through now?

The English hymn writer William H. Burleigh thought so, and thus he wrote:

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (1949; repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1969), 13.

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Let us press on, in patient self-denial,
Accept the hardship, shrink not from the loss;

Our portion lies beyond the hour of trial,
Our crown beyond the cross.^{7 8}

⁷ William H. Burleigh, "Trust" (1868).

⁸ Boice, J. M., Ryken, P. G., & Sproul, R. C. (2002). *The doctrines of grace: rediscovering the evangelical gospel*. Crossway Books, chapter seven.