

# James Montgomery Boice on Romans 8:28–30

## The Perseverance of the Saints

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*... those he justified, he also glorified.*

Romans 8:30



We are all familiar with the saying about people who can't see the forest for the trees, and you must know people like that. You probably even know Bible teachers like that. I do not want this to be true of our study of Romans 8. So, at this point of our studies, having examined each of the five great terms of verses 28–30 in detail, I want to step back and look at the great doctrine of which they are all only individual parts.

It is not at all hard to recognize what that doctrine is, for we have been mentioning it in one way or another ever since we began the chapter. It is the perseverance of the saints, or eternal security. Or, as some say colloquially, “once saved, always saved.” It is the truth that those who have been truly 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 will never and can never be lost. Perseverance is implied in each of the terms we have studied, but this is the place to go back and look at the entire forest.

### THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE

Yet we do not want to distort the doctrine by oversimplification, as some do. We want to understand it as it is taught in Scripture—as Paul teaches it in Romans 8, for instance. Therefore, we need to begin our overview by excluding some common misunderstandings about perseverance.

First, 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, if that were possible. We do not need to go very far in Romans to see this fact, for in the next section of this

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chapter Paul lists some of the hostile forces believers face. He will speak of trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword, concluding, “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered” (v. 36, quoting Ps. 44:22).

It is because we really do face many spiritual dangers that the doctrine of perseverance is so important.

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Second, the doctrine of perseverance does not mean that Christians are always kept from falling into sin, just because they are Christians. Sadly, Christians do sin. Noah fell into drunkenness. Abraham lied about his wife Sarah, saying she was his sister rather than his wife, thinking to protect his own life. David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged for the murder of Uriah, her husband. Peter denied the Lord. 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 22:31).

Third, perseverance does not mean that those who merely profess Christ without actually being born again are secure. This 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 Peter 1:10). In this area Jesus’ statements are among the most direct. He said, for example, “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 they have been chosen by God and have truly been born again.

The Christian doctrine of perseverance does not lead to a false assurance or presumption, though some who claim to be saved do presume on God by their sinful lifestyles and willful disobedience.

Perseverance does not make us lazy.

Perseverance does not make us proud.

No, the real doctrine of perseverance is precisely what Paul declares it to be in Romans 8: 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 frequently tempted. Often they will fall. Nevertheless, in the end they will be with Jesus

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and will be like him, because this is the destiny that God in his sovereign and inexplicable love has predetermined for them.

## THE PROBLEM PASSAGES

However, it is not possible to present this doctrine, even in the context of an exposition of Romans 8, without dealing with some of the biblical passages that seem to contradict it. These passages trouble some Christians and are often in their minds when they hear the security of the believer mentioned. Perhaps they trouble you.

Consider, for example, 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 what about 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. Many will follow their shameful ways....” Doesn’t that say 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? “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.” Are believers subject to “disqualification”?

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

Or what about the five foolish virgins of Matthew 25? They are 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.

I am sure you can add your own “problem” texts to these suggestions.

It is important to wrestle with these passages, of course, and not merely dismiss them with some glib statement of “once saved, always saved.” Otherwise we will indeed be presuming, and we will miss the very important warnings the texts convey. However, a careful examination of these passages will show that although they can be said to put a proper hedge around perseverance, lest we presume upon it or take it lightly, they do not contradict the doctrine.

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## 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. I do not want to take that much space to do the identical thing here. Those who want to examine the matter in greater detail can use the Welsh preacher's work.<sup>1</sup> However, Lloyd-Jones is helpful for us in that he puts the problem texts I have been introducing into a few manageable categories and treats them in that way. In a much briefer manner, I want to follow his procedure.

Category 1: *Passages that seem to suggest 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 what Paul is addressing is the problem of false teaching that had been introduced into the Galatian churches by a party of legalistic Jews who 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 the apostle is saying that if the believers should allow themselves to be seduced by this false teaching, they will have been led away from grace into legalism. This is not the same thing as saying that they will have lost 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, either because of 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 only "hears" the word and a person who "hears the word and understands it" (Matt. 13:19, 23). The one who merely hears may receive the word he does not actually understand "with joy" and thus seem to be saved. But "he has no root" in him, which he proves by lasting "only a short time."

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyd-Jones, D.M. (1976). *Romans, An Exposition of Chapter 8:17-39, The Final Perseverance of the Saints*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 263-366.

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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 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 in 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 only profess to be saved will be differentiated.

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 as if Peter is describing people who, having been redeemed by Jesus and having believed in him, later deny him and fall away.

We should be warned against this misunderstanding by the way the chapter continues. Then we see that Peter is actually speaking 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” [that] returns to its vomit” and “a sow that is washed” but 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 are the people who deny the Lord who bought them.

But how can Peter say that Jesus “bought” them? As I say, this is a difficult text and has proved so for many commentators. But the answer seems to be that Peter is also thinking of an external purchase or deliverance here. 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 they were beneficiaries of the deliverance of the nation from Egypt but were nevertheless not true followers of God, so there will be people like this within the churches. They will

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seem to have been purchased by Christ and will show outward signs of such deliverance, but they will still be false prophets and false professors.

None of these passages teach that salvation can be lost. They are either referring to something else, like falling from grace into legalism, or they are teaching that those who merely make an external profession of faith, 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).

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*Category 2: Passages that seem to suggest 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. For example, there is Philippians 2:12: “... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” And 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 also 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, which I have already mentioned, is particularly troubling to many. So let me begin with it. One observation is that even if the text does indirectly teach 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 that. So even those who do not believe in eternal security need to find another, better interpretation.

In this case, the answer is in the entire thrust of Hebrews, which was written to Jews who had been exposed to Christianity and had even seemed to accept it somewhat, to go on to full faith and not to draw back again into Judaism. Everything in the book points in this direction. So this “problem” passage is actually talking about people who might have had a taste of Christianity but who fall away without ever actually becoming true Christians. If this has happened, they cannot 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 draw

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back but would go on to embrace the fullness of the doctrines of the faith, as he is urging them to do.

The other verses—Philippians 2:12 and 2 Peter 1:10—are not nearly so difficult. They merely remind us of what I said earlier: that the fact of God’s perseverance with us does not suggest that somehow we do not have to persevere, too. We do. 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.” That is, God gives us the desire and then enables us to achieve what he desires.

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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 2:1–3, which urges us to “pay more careful attention ... to what we have heard” and ends with “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 for the prize.”

The reason for these passages is that we need warnings from God in order to persevere. Or, to put it in other language, they are one of the ways God has to ensure our perseverance. The proof of this is seen in the different ways unbelievers and believers react to them. Do the problem verses I have cited as “warnings” trouble unbelievers? Not at all. Either they regard them as mere foolishness and something hardly to be noticed, 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 relationships 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 are given for. And even this should encourage us. As Martyn 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.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lloyd-Jones (1976), 332.

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## GOD'S PLAN AND GOD'S GLORY

As I said at the beginning of this study, I have taken a great deal of time to discuss these “problem passages” because I know that they loom large in the minds of Christian people whenever the doctrine of perseverance is discussed. And rightly so. We need to consider them carefully. But there is a danger in such close examination, for then we may give the impression that the related texts are all on the problem side and that there are very few passages that teach eternal security. That is not true, of course, even though in this study I will not balance my treatment of the problems with an equal number of passages on the positive side.

There are many such texts. I am sure you know some of them. There are two in the words of the Lord himself:

“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” (John 10:27-28).

“And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day” (John 6:39).

There are also the confident words of Paul that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). And, of course, Romans 8:31-39, the end of the chapter:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. 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

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else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Why will we persevere? We will persevere because this is God's plan for us, and the end of it all will be God's glory.<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>3</sup> Boice, J. M. (1991–). *Romans: The Reign of Grace*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2:943-950.