

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN:

THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

Perseverance is a Promise of God

1. *The saints are those whom God has accepted in Christ the Beloved, and effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit. To them He has given the precious faith that pertains to all His elect. The persons to whom such blessings have been imparted can neither totally nor finally fall from the state of grace, but they shall certainly persevere in grace to the end and be eternally saved, for God will never repent of having called them and made gifts to them. Consequently He continues to beget and to nourish in them faith, repentance, love, joy, hope, and all the graces of the Spirit that issue in immortality. Many storms and floods may arise and beat upon them, yet they can never be moved from the foundation and rock on which by faith they are firmly established. Even if unbelief and Satan's temptations cause them for a time to lose the sight and comfort of the light and love of God, yet the unchanging God remains their God, and He will certainly keep and save them by His power until they come to the enjoyment of their purchased possession; for they are engraven on the palms of His hands, and their names have been written in the book of life from all eternity.*

This is a very important subject today, for it appears that many Christians do not persevere. Multitudes make a profession of faith in Christ but subsequently give up the Christian faith. So first we must be clear who they are whom God has promised will persevere to the end.

(a) **Who** perseveres? It is not all who claim or even appear to be Christians. But it is “His elect”, those He has “accepted in Christ” (not those who say they have accepted Him), “effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit”. These are true Christians in heart.

(b) **What** is perseverance? It is continuing in “the state of grace” until the end of one’s life and so being “eternally saved” (see Matthew 24:13, Hebrews 3:6). It is the result both of God’s call, and of His continually imparting “all the graces of the Spirit” to them.

(c) **Why** is perseverance necessary? It is because the Christian life is full of difficulties. There are so many temptations to leave the straight and narrow path. There are the “storms and floods” of life that come to us all, as they came in a very severe way to Job. Likewise the Hebrews had to be encouraged to persevere (10:32-39, 12:3-13).

(d) Is perseverance **certain**? Even “unbelief and Satan’s temptations” cannot make a true Christian to be lost. Consider the following Scriptures and note how the Confession has used Biblical language to teach the truth about perseverance – Isaiah 49:16, Romans 11:29, Revelation 13:8, see also John 6:39-40,44, 10:28-29, Romans 8:28-39, 1 Corinthians 1:8-9.

The Reasons why the Saints will Persevere

2. *It is on no free will of their own that the saints’ perseverance depends, but on the immutability of the decree of election, which in its turn depends upon the free and unchangeable love of God the Father, the efficacious merit and intercession of Jesus Christ and the saints’ union with Him, the oath of God, the abiding character of the Spirit’s indwelling of the saints, the divine nature of which they are partakers and, lastly, the terms of the covenant of grace. All these factors guarantee the certainty and infallibility of the saints’ perseverance.*

(a) **False** teaching. Perseverance does not depend on our “free will”. Even the most mature Christian is weak and undependable. So if perseverance depends upon us we can have no hope that we will persevere. But just as the grace of God is the first cause of our salvation (John 1:13, 6:44, Romans 9:16), so it is also of our perseverance.

(b) **True** teaching. Note that all the reasons the Confession lists depend entirely upon God.

1. The electing love of God the Father – God’s choice is unchangeable, and that choice is to an eternal salvation. Therefore, election guarantees perseverance (Romans 8:28-30, 11:29). And never forget that election has its source in God’s free (= uncaused) love (Ephesians 1:4-5).
2. The redeeming work of God the Son – Christ’s death actually redeems the elect by paying the price for our sins and providing a perfect righteousness (justification), so enabling the one united to Christ by faith to have confidence to the end (so Romans 5:1-2,9-10). Christ’s present ministry of intercession for the elect also guarantees their final salvation (Romans 8:33-34, Hebrews 7:25, remember John 17:24).
3. The oath of God (Hebrews 6:16-20) – God has confirmed His promises by swearing an oath by Himself. This is designed to give us “strong encouragement” (v. 18), “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (v. 19).
4. The indwelling of the Spirit – His indwelling in the Christian is “abiding”, not temporary. As such He is like a *seal* (2 Corinthians 1:22, Ephesians 1:13, 4:30), marking out as genuinely belonging to God, and protecting from harm; and like a *deposit* (2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5, Ephesians 1:14), guaranteeing full possession. It is He who implants the imperishable “divine nature” in us (1 Peter 1:23, 1 John 3:9).
5. The covenant of grace – As opposed to the old covenant that could be broken (Jeremiah 31:32, Hebrews 8:6-9), the new covenant assures the salvation and perseverance of all those in it (Jeremiah 31:33-34, 32:40). To fail to persevere would mean God has failed in keeping His promises.

Backsliding

3. *In various ways – the temptations of Satan and of the world, the striving of indwelling sin to get the upper hand, the neglect of the means appointed for their preservation – saints may fall into fearful sins, and may even continue in them for a time. In this way they incur God’s displeasure, grieve His Holy Spirit, do injury to their graces, diminish their comforts, experience hardness of heart and accusations of conscience, hurt and scandalize others, and bring God’s chastisements on themselves. Yet being saints their repentance will be renewed, and through faith they will be preserved in Christ Jesus to the end.*

(a) **Causes** of backsliding. We cannot avoid temptations that come through the world, the flesh and the devil. But we have no reason to neglect the “means appointed” for preservation = prayer, the Word, fellowship, etc.; if we do we can expect to fall into fearful sins.

(b) **Dangers** of backsliding. We must be watchful lest such bitter fruits grow.

- “Incur God’s displeasure” and “grieve His Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 4:30)
- “Do injury to their graces” and “diminish their comforts” (Psalm 51:10-12)
- “Hardness of heart” and “accusations of conscience” (Psalm 32:3-4, 73:21-22)
- “Hurt and scandalize others” (1 Timothy 6:1-2, Titus 2:5)
- “Bring God’s chastisements upon themselves” (1 Corinthians 11:27-32)

(c) Backsliding **cannot be final**. “Their repentance will be renewed.” Before they die true saints will be brought back to repentance. This is different to the common teaching under the name of ‘eternal security’ which implies that all who profess salvation will be saved no matter how they have lived, or whether or not they have repented of grievous sins. This is why we emphasize perseverance. Although a true Christian will not die in a backslidden state, e.g. living in adultery, the experience of backsliding is a very real possibility for every Christian. The pleasures of sin are light compared to the misery involved in repentance.