

The testimony of sacred scripture is this; that the redeemed of God, justified freely by faith in Jesus Christ alone, shall persevere in that faith until the return of our Lord and Savior. This is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, sometimes referred to as eternal security.<sup>1</sup> In spite of adversity, various and certain trials, and struggle against sin, those who are in Christ will continue in their faith to the end, kept by the power of God, not by any virtue of their own. God's own purpose, faithfulness, power and intercession are the bedrock upon which this doctrine is built and sustained.

What rich instruction and exhortation the Ephesian church received from the apostle Paul! Holy living, spiritual fruit, love between the brethren, spiritual warfare, Christ and His bride – a panoramic theological portrait of divine nature partakers. These are “lavished upon” the recipients of God's grace “according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will”. (Eph. 1:11) This treatise may conclude here and segue into doxological outburst. But it is here in the beginning, in the mind or counsel of God who “changes not”, that the guarantee of perseverance is established. Indeed, the confidence of the saint in God's promise is bolstered by an oath God “made with himself, thereby demonstrating the unchangeable character of his purpose.” (Heb. 6:17) The creator purposed the

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<sup>1</sup> Eternal security must be primarily understood as God “securing” our position or unity with Him for eternity. But the term can cause confusion and has at times been erroneously employed to affirm a profession of faith that bears no fruit, and a false sense of assurance.

creature. Whatever else may be spoken of the creature (man) regarding his duty towards God, the preeminence of God in the fulfillment of those duties is asserted.

Phillip Keller offers a poignant illustration from a shepherd's perspective.

"David...knew beyond dispute that if the flock was to flourish and the owner's reputation was to be held in high esteem as a good manager, the sheep had to be constantly under his meticulous control and guidance."<sup>2</sup> God will have a people for Himself to declare his greatness and pleasure – a redeemed people.

Moses understood that God had staked His own name on the people he had chosen for deliverance. God's name is bound to His purpose and therein is His glory manifest. "I am not doing this for your sake, declares the Lord GOD, let it be known to you." (Ez. 36:32) When the Israelites had committed idolatry at the foot of the mountain, God threatened to destroy them. Moses reminded God of His oath and glory:

"Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever. And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people". (Ex. 32:12-14)

Moses reminds God of His glory and purpose many times. Had God forgotten? No.

But that God's people would contemplate with fear and trembling their proclivity to

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<sup>2</sup> Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1970), p. 71

wander, and of the certitude of His intention to accomplish His will nonetheless, scripture instructs. The Lord will not abandon His chosen people on account of His great name and the pleasure of making a people for Himself. (1 Sam. 12:22, Titus 2:14).

A great host - past, present and future – constitutes that glorified assembly for whom all things work together for good according to God's purpose. These God has chosen, called, predestined and sanctified to the end that they would be conformed unto the image of His Son (Rom. 8:28-30), in whom He is well pleased. John MacArthur comments, "God has not predestined us to the beginning of our salvation, but to the end of our salvation". And Paul reminds the Philippian church that God will complete the good work, which *He* has begun. (Phil 1:6). The elect are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand..." (Eph. 2:10). These verses collectively convince of the plan of God to possess a people who will declare His excellencies throughout the ages. (1 Pet. 2:9). Perseverance then is that process that describes God's action in creating and redeeming an elect people whom by nature "fight the good fight and keep the faith". (2 Tim. 4:7)

Jesus came to do the will of the Father who sent Him (6:38), and filled with the Holy Spirit He carried out that will (Lk. 4:18). He came to serve and give his life a ransom for many (Mk. 10:45), and to be the propitiation for sins (Rom. 3:25, 1 Jn. 4:10). God has purchased a people with His own blood (Acts 20:28), thereby

securing for them an “eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12). The atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ is of such a power and efficacy that it is irreversible for those who have been reconciled to God by it. The focus of this paper is the doctrine of perseverance of the saints. At the same time, it must be insisted that the atonement is limited in its saving effect to a particular people, even whilst it could indeed have saved an exponentially greater number had God been so pleased thus to do. Alas, “Christ did not die for Judas as he did for Peter; he did not shed his blood for Demas as he shed it for Paul”.<sup>3</sup> Particular redemption without consequent perseverance is as unreasonable as a resurrection without an empty grave. Of all the Father gave to Jesus, none are lost but are raised up on the last day. (Jn. 6:39). Paul exhorts the believers in Rome to continued faith and assurance, reminding them that the death and life of Christ are the justifying, reconciling and wrath sparing endowments of the redeemed (Rom. 5). “And the transgression which occurred through the tree was undone by the obedience of the tree...”<sup>4</sup>

The Holy Spirit inspires or moves men to write the word of God; the imperishable seed by which are human beings are born again (1 Pet. 1:23, 2 Pet. 1:21). The Spirit testifies with the human spirit that those who are the sons and daughters of God, *are* the sons and daughters of God (Rom. 8:16). The nature of sinful rebellion is such that it takes God to overcome the fear and uncertainty that it

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.spurgeon.us/mind\\_and\\_heart/quotes/a2.htm#definite](http://www.spurgeon.us/mind_and_heart/quotes/a2.htm#definite)

<sup>4</sup> St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), p. 62.

produced. In other words, the Spirit convinces of us of sin then convinces us of the reconciliation! Spirit inspired faith in the complete atoning work of Jesus Christ for our personal sin then inspires perseverance. For God would not so reconcile one to Himself without the glory of His name being delighted in by the one whom he redeemed. And this delight though at times interrupted by sin<sup>5</sup>, continues on to the rapturous consummation initiated by death or the Lord's return, at which time uninterrupted delight in His glory begins - without end. Such is the effect and intent of the atonement for the saints' perseverance.

So firm a foundation for the perseverance of the saints is the atonement, that Christ "ever liveth to make intercession" (Rom. 8:34, Heb. 7:25 KJV) for the saints according to it. Lutheran theologian R.H Lenski comments, "His intercession cannot fail since it is backed by his expiation."<sup>6</sup> Reformed Baptist James R. White writes, "Indeed, upon what ground can Christ intercede except that perfect work accomplished on the cross?"<sup>7</sup> And that renowned prince of preachers C. H. Spurgeon writes, "That he makes all his people persevere to the end, is greatly to his honor. If they should fall away and perish, every office and work and attribute of Christ would be stained in the mire". The atonement is to the ongoing intercession of Christ what the rainbow is to the promise not to destroy again the earth by water. It is a constant reminder and efficacious and priestly presentation before the father

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<sup>5</sup> Additional comment on the varying degrees of this manifestation of assurance is follow below.

<sup>6</sup> R.H. Lenski, *Interpretation of Romans*, (Columbus, Oh: Wartburg Press, 1945), p. 572.

<sup>7</sup> James R. White, *The Potters Freedom*, (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Publishing, 2000), p. 238.

of that one once for all sacrifice in his blood (Heb. 10:10, 14). How God loves to remind Himself of His own covenant, goodness and works!

The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us of all sin and thereby protects and assures against the war within – that ongoing enmity between the flesh and the spirit. So even when we cannot do as we would, we are sanctified still by Jesus our advocate (Gal. 5:17, 1 Jn. 1:7), our consciences also being thus purified by the intercession in his blood (Heb. 9:14).

No less a threat against our souls is that great conflict that comes from without, especially the enemy of our souls, the devil, that serpent of old. Hence the saints also may take great comfort in the high priestly prayer offered by our Lord before his agony in the garden. There looking forward to the cross and His physical departure He prays that God's own would be not taken out of the world, but kept from the evil one (John 17). And Jesus knew that the father always heard him (Jn. 11:42), and since the Father always heard Him, we know that Christ had the petitions he desired of the father, as He always prayed according to the father's will. (1 Jn 5:15). He who came to abolish the works of the devil will keep the saints from ultimate ruin by the evil one. One fellow sojourner has aptly said, "We are his personal property and the devil deals wrongly with us to his own peril."<sup>8</sup>

Paul eloquently speaks of the impossibility of the saints' separation from the love of Christ. He who freely delivered up Christ for them all, also freely with him

gives them all things. The context of the passage in Rom. 8:31-39 is the plethora of threats which would compromise the saints' union with Jesus Christ, and the triune God by extension. It is therefore the intercession of Christ that prevents that falling away, lest mortal wounds be inflicted on the soul of the redeemed. So Paul knew in whom he believed and was persuaded that he (Jesus Christ) was able to keep that which Paul committed unto Him against that day (2 Tim. 1:10). This language can only refer to the intercession of Christ, in whom the saints place their trust, their faith. "Christ's intercession for us is enough to fulfil or joy in him; nothing more effectual to silence all our fears and mistrusts, and to furnish us with strong consolation, than this, that he always appears in the presence of God for us."<sup>9</sup> Neither does Christ intercede merely for our sakes, but "that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." (Eph. 5:27).

The Spirit intercedes when we don't quite know how to "pray as we should" (Rom. 8: 28). This intercession is but a portion of the entirety of the Holy Spirit's function in the saint's perseverance. We are sealed by the spirit, a pledge or down payment of the final salvation and inheritance that awaits the redeemed (Eph. 1"13-15). Ezekiel conveyed God's promise to place the Holy Spirit within God's people so that they would walk in His statutes and observe God's ordinances (Ez.

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<sup>8</sup> Saket Badola offered this comment during our Modular Christian Apologetics *Essential Christian Doctrine* on line class discussion.

<sup>9</sup> Mathew Henry's commentaries, available on many websites and in print.

26: 25,27). And these are not grievous commands, but happy trails by which the purchased people of God exercise their liberty in Christ to tread upon.

Besides those aforementioned specific and clearly delineated roles of Father, Son and Holy Spirit to possess and obtain a royal priesthood and holy nation, the scripture abounds in precious promises concerning the saints' perseverance. God who has promised is faithful, and so our hope is made sure (Heb. 10:23). Jesus promised His disciples that He was going ahead of them to prepare a place for them, so that they would be where he is (Jn. 14:3). This applies to all the saints. God is faithful through whom we were called into fellowship with His Son (1 Cor. 1:9). Paul encouraged the church in Thessalonica with the thought of our faithful God sanctifying them completely, preserving them blameless in body, soul and spirit (1 Thess. 5:23-24) at the return of Jesus. In his second letter to that same flock he reminded them of the Lord's faithfulness to "strengthen the believers and protect them from the evil one" (2 Thess. 3:3). Our Lord assures His disciples with the truth that no one can pluck any of His sheep from either His hand or His Father's hand, as they united in the saving and keeping effort (Jn. 10:28-30). God is at work in His people to do and work for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). It is God who is able to keep us from stumbling and present us before His glory with exceeding joy (Jude 24). We may with David rejoice, for the cup of our salvation surely "runneth over". It is the glory of God to do it, and it is God who receives the glory for it. Therefore

those who endure to the end will cast down their golden crowns around the glassy sea.

It seems of course that no doctrine in scripture is unattended by those passages which, particularly in isolation, present some tension for us to grapple with. The perseverance of the saints is no exception. Perhaps God in the vast inscrutable richness of His wisdom and counsel has thus allowed such difficulty that the saints would be sharp in their thinking and further scale the height of His glory. Of course many of those same verses are warnings. There are surely tares amongst the wheat in many assemblies, today as in the past, and until our Lord's return. Some of these warnings will be the means by which God turns false professors of faith into true possessors of faith. All of God's word is inspired. Not by hearing John 3:16 only is one transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col. 1:13). As varied as are those deceptions that bind man in sinful darkness are the words of God to free him from the same, and that by His spirit as the scripture unanimously attests.

Hebrews 6:4-8 is invariably pressed into service against the doctrine of perseverance. Here it is maintained that man's partaking of the Holy Spirit and enlightening equals salvation. A full exegesis of this passage is beyond the scope of this paper; but neither is such a full scholarly treatment necessary. Wayne Grudem writes,

“The same Greek word (*geuonmai*) is used in Matthew 27:34 to say that those crucifying Jesus ‘offered him wine to drink, mingled with gall; but when he *tasted* it, he would not drink it.’ The word is also used in a figurative sense meaning ‘come to know something’.<sup>10</sup>

So one may, as many have, taste of the Holy Spirit. Grudem also goes on to comment that those who commit apostasy are not “compared to a field that once bore good fruit”, but to “*land that never bore good fruit*”.<sup>11</sup> The force of his points cannot be dismissed. Given the abundance of testimony in Holy Writ that argues against the possibility of genuine believers being eternally falling away (including those presented in this paper), we have every God given reason to be sure of His intent to keep his own.

The practical implications of this doctrine for joyous and holy living must not be missed. It is our confidence that we shall see Him face to face. It is precious nutrient to the root of our faith, that the blossoms of obedience would show forth the glory of God. By it we wage war in the spirit. We overcome doubts. We fear and tremble while yet protected. We daily preach the gospel to ourselves. It is our daily bread.

It is also true indeed that the fullness of assurance that this doctrine promises is given to peaks and valleys. Faith is not evidenced in one steady measure. Our Lord himself told Peter that Satan wanted to sift him like wheat. But Jesus prayed

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<sup>10</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1994), p. 797

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 800

that His faith would not fail altogether, and it did not despite the needful agony that accompanies denying the Lord (Lk. 21:31-32).

“Weak faith will as fully apprehend God’s promises for the pardon of sin as strong faith, though not so soundly, even as a man with a palsied hand can stretch it out as well to receive a gift at the hand of a king as he that is more sound, though it may not be so firmly and steadfastly.”<sup>12</sup>

And, “Assurance is requisite to the well being of a Christian, but not to the being:”<sup>13</sup>

Even this fluctuation is beneficial to the Christian and may be the means God uses to chasten us at times, that we might more diligently seek Him with all our hearts.

Ultimately, those in Christ are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). “No creature is at liberty to change the fundamental liberty of its nature, for that is the prerogative of God the creator.”<sup>14</sup> The Ethiopian cannot change the color of his skin, nor the leopard his spots (Jer.13:23). Neither can man undo that divinely accomplished work of regeneration. The apostle John wrote to those “who believe in the name of the Son of God, that we may know that we have eternal life” (1 Jn. 5:13). For his own name and glory God has redeemed His elect. All in that happy throng may rejoice that “we are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time...even though now for a little while, if necessary, we have been distressed by various trials”. God would have us all sing with gladness,

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine, Oh what a foretaste of glory divine.*

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<sup>12</sup> *Exposition of the Creed*, by William Perkins, minister of Christ in the University of Cambridge, 1612. Quoted in J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*. (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, reprint 1997), p. 124

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 126, quoting Thomas Brooks, *Heaven on Earth*, St. Margarets, Fish Street Hill, London, 1654.

<sup>14</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1932), p. 184