

## MAJOR BIBLE DOCTRINES

### Part 35: The Holy Spirit: preservation

To *preserve* is to conserve, protect or keep. To *persevere* is to persist, continue or endure. Christians *persevere* because God *preserves*. "It is, strictly speaking, not man but God who perseveres" (Berkhof).

Conservation is a gracious work of God, whereby he so keeps the elect, the redeemed, the regenerated, the faithful and the sanctified, though in themselves weak, and apt to fall away, internally by the most powerful efficacy of his Spirit, externally by the means which he has wisely appointed for that purpose, that they shall never quite lose the habits of those graces once infused into them, but be certainly brought, by a steadfast perseverance, to eternal salvation—Herman Witsius [*The Economy of the Covenants*, vol.2, 55]

Those whom God has accepted in the Beloved, and has effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, and given the precious faith of His elect, can neither totally nor finally fall from the state of grace, but they will certainly persevere in that state to the end and be eternally saved. This is because the gifts and calling of God are without repentance, and therefore He continues to beget and nourish in them faith, repentance, love, joy, hope, and all the graces of the Spirit which lead to immortality—LBC [17:1]

#### I. Preservation

##### A. Three aspects of preservation

1. *The nature of preservation.* God preserves His people both *in* grace and *from* their enemies. [1] Preservation in grace. God keeps His people in Christ, enabling them to persevere in grace and duty. "God does not preserve His people by the mere putting forth of physical power, but by renewing their graces, particularly their faith. It is through their continued reliance upon Christ, their trusting in the Divine promises and on God's perfections as engaged to fulfil them, their keeping of His commands and their overcoming the world (1Jn.5:4) that the saints are secured from fatality" (Pink). "Perseverance may be defined as that continuous operation of the Holy Spirit in the believer, by which the work of divine grace that is begun in the heart, is continued and brought to completion" (Berkhof). "Praise our God, O peoples, let the sound of His praise be heard; He has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping" (Ps.66:8-9). [2] Preservation from enemies. Left to himself, the best Christian would be destroyed by the flesh, Satan, and the world. Every Christian perseveres through enemy territory, because God preserves them. "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one" (Jn.17:15). "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (Rom.6:14). "For everyone born of God overcomes the world" (1Jn.5:4).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Grace is that which God implants in the heart against great opposition of enemies, great opposition from the corruption of the heart, and from Satan and the world. Great are the efforts of all these against the implantation of it, and they all labor to the utmost to keep it out. Seeing therefore that God manifests his all-conquering power in giving grace a place in the heart in spite of those enemies, he will doubtless maintain it there against their united efforts to root it out. he that has so gloriously conquered them in bringing in grace, will not at last suffer himself to be conquered, by their expelling that which he has brought in by his mighty power. He that gloriously subdued those enemies under his feet, by bringing this image of his into the soul, will not suffer this image of his finally to be trampled under their feet. God alone could introduce it. It was what he undertook; and it was wholly his work, and doubtless he will maintain it. He will not forsake the work of his own hands. Where he has begun a good work, he will carry it on to the day of Christ—Jonathan Edwards [*Works*, vol.2, 600]

When we speak of conservation, we mean that God so continues to cherish, by his gracious influence, the principle of spiritual life once engrafted, and the habits of Christian graces once bestowed, that though they may be many ways shaken by various temptations, and sometimes by very grievous sins, yet they are never quite extinguished; but afterwards resuming strength, and renewing faith and repentance, they shall at last triumph over all their enemies, and continue steadfast unto death—Herman Witsius [*Economy of Covenants*, vol.2, 58-59]

(1) Ps.37:23-24; Ps.121:1-8; Jer.32:38-41; Jn.10:27-30; 1Pet.1:3-5; 1Jn.2:18-23; 1Jn.5:18-19

2. *The reasons for preservation.* Perseverance results from God's electing love, the Son's perfect redemption, and the Spirit's indwelling. [1] The Father's electing and unending love. Every person foreknown (fore-loved), is predestined, justified, and glorified (Rom.8:30). "I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore with loving kindness have I drawn you" (Jer.31:3). "Those who are once the objects of God's love, are always so; his love to them in every state and condition into which they come is invariable and unalterable; it is constant, permanent, perpetual, and for ever: God loves his people with the same love he loves his Son, and therefore it will always continue; and if it always continues, it is impossible they should ever perish" (Gill). [2] The unbreakable nature of God's covenant. In the covenant of grace, God promises for the sake of His Son, to receive and never forsake His people.<sup>2</sup> "My covenant I will not break, nor alter the word that has gone out of My lips. Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David: His seed shall endure forever, and his throne as the sun before Me" (Ps.89:34-36). "The Father has, by an immutable covenant and testament, promised to take care, that the elect should not fall away from him to their eternal destruction" (Witsius). Thus promises of preservation, are covenant promises based upon the faithfulness of God. "He will confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful" (1Cor.1:8-9). [3] The irreversible nature of salvation. Calling, regeneration, justification, and adoption are unchanging and permanent acts. Those called, regenerated, justified, and adopted can never be un-called, un-regenerated, un-justified or un-adopted. "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom.11:29). "Such who are justified, can never be unjustified, or be removed from the state of condemnation, but always remain righteous persons through the righteousness of Christ, imputed to them; the righteousness by which they are justified is an everlasting one; the sentence of justification passed upon them, can never be reversed by man or devil; if God justified who can bring a charge of an avail? who or what can condemn? there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ, and are clothed with his righteous" (Gill). "For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jer.31:34). "Those for whom Christ has shed his blood, for whose sins he has made satisfaction by his sacrifice; these God pardons for Christ's sake; and these he forgives *all* trespasses; he heals *all* their diseases, and forgives *all* their iniquities; not one sin of theirs is left unsatisfied for by Christ, or unpardoned by the Lord; and if so, then all the sins they ever fall into, or are guilty of, are pardoned; and consequently, they never so fall, as to perish everlastingly" (Gill). [4] The mediation of Christ. Christ's priestly mediation is twofold, oblation and intercession. "Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justified. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us" (Rom.8:33-34). "Those whom Christ loves, were given to him, and for whom he died, for them he ever lives to make intercession; in which he is always heard, and therefore they cannot perish: in particular he prays for their perseverance; he prays for them that their *faith fail not*; that God would *keep them* through his name, that they might *be one*; that he would *keep them from the evil* of the world, and that they might *be with him where he is*, to behold his glory; and now as he himself says to his Father, *I know that thou hearest me always*: if he

<sup>2</sup> Isa.54:10; 55:3; 59:21; Jer.31:31-37; Hos.2:19; Heb.6:13-20

is always heard, and his intercession is prevalent and effectual in all things, for which it is made, then it is impossible that those for whom it is made, should perish everlastingly" (Gill). [5] The indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is "the earnest [pledge or down-payment] of our inheritance" (Eph.1:14). "He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us *is* God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee" (2Cor.1:21-22). The Spirit seals, sanctifies, and preserves. "He who dwells in a house, keeps the house in repair; so the Spirit dwelling in a believer, keeps grace in repair. Grace is compared to a river of the water of life (Jn.7:38). This river can never be dried up, because God's Spirit is the spring that continually feeds it" (Watson).

*Q.79. May not true believers, by reason of their imperfections, and the many temptations and sins they are overtaken with, fall away from the state of grace? A. True believers, by reason of the unchangeable love of God, and his decree and covenant to give them perseverance, their inseparable union with Christ, his continual intercession for them, and the Spirit and seed of God abiding in them, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation—Larger Catechism*

The perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father, upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ and union with Him, the oath of God, the abiding of His Spirit, and the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace; from all which arises also the certainty and infallibility thereof—LBC [17:2]

But God, who is rich in mercy, according to his unchangeable purpose of election, does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from his own people, even in their melancholy falls; nor suffers them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption, and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death; nor does he permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction—Canons of Dort [5:6]

(1) Jer.32:38-41; Jn.6:37-40; Rom.8:35-39; 1Thess.5:23-24; Heb.7:24-25; 1Jn.3:4-9

3. *The objections to preservation.* Romanists<sup>3</sup>, Lutherans<sup>4</sup>, and Arminians<sup>5</sup> deny the certainty of perseverance.<sup>6</sup> They largely suggest three objections: [1] Exhortations to persevere. It is admitted that Christians are exhorted to endure.<sup>7</sup> "Those who endure to the end will be saved" (Matt.24:13). But, perseverance is not the *condition* but the *evidence* of salvation. Perseverance proves salvation.

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<sup>3</sup> If any one says, that a man once justified can sin no more, nor lose grace, and that therefore he that falls and sins was never truly justified...let him be anathema—Council of Trent

<sup>4</sup> That false opinion is to be earnestly confuted and rejected, which certain feign, that faith, and realized justification, and salvation itself, can not be lost by any sins or crimes whatsoever—Formula of Concord

<sup>5</sup> Whether they (true believers) are capable, through negligence, of forsaking again the first beginnings of their life in Christ, of again returning to this present evil world, of turning away from the holy doctrine which was delivered them, of losing a good conscience, of becoming devoid of grace, that must be more particularly determined out of the Holy Scripture, before we ourselves can teach it with the full persuasion of our minds—Confession of Remonstrates

<sup>6</sup> The carnal mind is unable to comprehend this doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and the certainty thereof, which God has most abundantly revealed in His Word, for the glory of His Name, and the consolation of pious souls, and which He impresses upon the hearts of the faithful. Satan abhors it; the world ridicules it; the ignorant and hypocrite abuse it, and heretics oppose it; but the spouse of Christ has always most tenderly loved and constantly defended it as an inestimable treasure; and God, against whom neither counsel nor strength can prevail, will dispose her to continue this conduct to the end. Now, to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honor and glory forever. Amen—Canons of Dort [5:15]

<sup>7</sup> Jn.15:5-6; Rom.11:22; 1Cor.15:1-2; Col.1:19-23; Heb.3:14; Jas.1:12

"If you continue in my word, you are My disciples indeed" (Jn.8:31). That is, "Your future loyalty to My teaching will prove the reality of your present profession" (Robertson). "For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end" (Heb.3:14). Holding steadfast to the end is not the *condition* but *evidence* of being made partakers of Christ. These exhortations drive Christians to diligent use of the means whereby God preserves His people. "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering...and let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together" (Heb.10:23-25). [2] Warnings of apostasy. The Scriptures often warn of final apostasy and falling away. "If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned "(Jn.15:6). These warnings are addressed to the professing church comprised of true and false converts. Promises of eternal life, belong to present perseverance in faith and holiness. Thus, strong warnings of apostasy are given to professing Christians. "If any draw back, My soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul" (Heb.10:38-39).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, warnings convince true Christians of their weakness and drives them to Christ for strength. "They prompt self-examination, and are instrumental in keeping believers in the way of perseverance" (Berkhof). "It has pleased God, by the preaching of the gospel, to begin this work of grace in us, so he preserves, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of his Word, by meditation thereon, and by the exhortations, threatenings, and promises thereof, as well as by the use of the sacraments" (Canons of Dort). [3] Examples of apostasy. "The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints does not maintain that all who profess the Christian faith are certain of heaven" (Steele). "Our doctrine does not each that many will not be finally lost, who are connected with the visible Church outwardly, and whom the Scriptures may call believers in a certain sense, because they have a temporary or historical faith, like that of Simon Magus. But those who have once had in them the true principle of spiritual life, never lose it" (Dabney). Apostates appear to be Christian, but are not truly converted. "It has happened to them according to the true proverb: A dog returns to his own vomit, and a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire" (2Pet.2:22). They were never truly sheep, but only washed pigs (mere professors).

Perseverance of the saints, therefore, does not mean that everyone who claims to have received Christ as his Savior, participates in Christian work, and manifests various gifts is '*eternally secure*' (Matt.7:21-23). The church includes hypocrites who manifest the external signs of persevering saints...The church also includes people like Demas, who seem to be godly but whose departure from the truth and the church reveal that they never really were in saving union with Christ (2Tim.4:10; Heb.6:4-6)—Joel Beeke [*Living for God's Glory*, 123]

(1) 2Tim.2:16-21; 1Jn.2:18-23

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<sup>8</sup> Christians do not arrive at perseverance when they sit still and do nothing. It is not with us as with passengers in a ship, who are carried to the end of their voyage while they sit still in the ship...but we arrive at salvation in the use of means; as a man comes to the end of a race by running, to a victory by fighting—Thomas Watson [*Body of Divinity*, 280]