



■ What is the perseverance of the saints? Can a believer be given the gift of faith and then lose it? Can one be saved by the shed blood of Jesus Christ and then fall away into atheism or agnosticism? Is it possible for a Christian to fall from grace? What about the hard passages which seem to indicate that this is possible? What about the passages that urge Christians to stay true to the end? What about the real cases we know—people who sat beside us in the pew one Sunday but left and rejected Jesus the next? Can we be married to the Savior and choose to divorce God?

The answers to these questions are essential to understanding the Reformed faith. And for those of us who believe, with the famous Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon, that the Reformed faith is simply the gospel of Jesus Christ,¹ we would quickly add that the answers are vital to understanding biblical Christianity. As a pastor, I know, through countless firsthand experiences, that these questions and their corresponding answers have a direct correlation with the Christian life. All theology is practical. All truth has an impact on life. This is what Jesus meant when He said that “You will know the truth and the

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truth will set you free” (John 8:32). There is a resultant freedom that is associated with a deeper understanding of and willful ascent to the Word of God—a sunlit wide and open field of new life that can heal emotions, remove the stain of guilt, and give hope for living and a glorious, holy, defiant, Christ-honoring “blessed assurance” in the face of the tomb.

But I don’t want to rush to conclusions. I want to slow down and, if you could imagine it, take a seat beside you. This is not a debate. There are places for that. And I am not going to be “taking on” those who differ. Rather, “To the Law and to the testimony” (Isa. 8:20 KJV) and then “let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5 KJV). And I also promise that there will be no fighting. “Fighting among believers over doctrine?” you say. Strange but true. I remember when I was a ten-year-old boy at a little country school in South Louisiana. Out on the playground, during one particular recess, I, a little fellow from a Southern Baptist church, got into an argument with a little chap who was from the local Methodist congregation. And our argument was over this very thing: if having been saved by Christ, can you “lose you salvation?” The little Methodist boy (devoutly following Mr. Wesley’s line with admirable zeal) said it was possible to be saved and then to lose it, for the Bible said there were those who were a part of the church who fell away. I responded with perfect party talking points, “No way! Once saved, always saved!” I didn’t bother to actually answer his claims from the Bible. But our schoolyard debate got heated. In fact there was more heat than light. Disputations from the

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fifteenth century had nothing on us! We ended up fighting on the playground and had to be broken up by our teacher (who was also my Sunday school teacher). When she learned what we were arguing about she looked perplexed. Or maybe “really ticked off” is a better way of describing her demeanor at that moment! She told us: “You argue about the things of God and then fight each other like little heathens! Now what does that say about the both of you?” Well, it said a lot. And we were both punished as we should have been.

So, no debating, no bashing, and no fighting. Promise.

I assume that you who are reading these words now are in a new members or inquirers’ class at a local Presbyterian or Reformed congregation, or you may be traveling on a spiritual journey, digging deeper into the Reformed faith, or possibly even seeking answers to the deeper questions of Scripture. Perhaps you are a prodigal child trying to find your way home. You don’t need a lecture or a theological tome on this doctrine to get you there. But you just might like to have a friend—a friend who can relate to you; a friend who once asked, perhaps, the same questions you are asking today about the perseverance of the saints; and maybe even a pastor to open up God’s Word for you to discover what we mean when we speak of God’s people who are truly His persevering to all eternity. If so, I am your man. Or at least I want to be. So, if you will, pull up a chair. This isn’t going to be too long, but I hope—I pray—my words will lead you to discover what I believe is one of the most comforting, gracious and beautiful parts of faith in Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures. Indeed,

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I believe that the biblical revelation of the perseverance of the saints “. . . is a doctrine which lies at the foundation of all the hope which the believer enjoys; it inspires confidence in danger, comfort in sorrow, succor in temptation, and is an ‘anchor to his soul’ amidst tempests the most violent.”² I believe the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is God’s gift to us, “the truth” that will “set you free,” given in His Word in order to cultivate greater love for God and deeper gratitude to Jesus Christ for His sacrifice on the cross. I believe that this doctrine, like all doctrines, is a faith for living that will lead you to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

To understand this biblical truth that has shaped so much of Presbyterian and Reformed Christians’ faith, we might begin by considering several different aspects of this doctrine:

(1) *A definition of the doctrine*, in which we will see how Scripture answers our questions; (2) *distortions of the doctrine*, in which we will admit that there are popular misconceptions about perseverance of the saints; (3) *a defense of the doctrine* from the Word of God, in which we will admit the difficult passages and seek to interact with them; and finally (4) *delight in the doctrine* and joy in our souls as we meditate together on the practical benefits of this doctrine. I will then offer some closing thoughts on common questions surrounding the doctrine.

One note. As I write to you, I will use endnotes, not only as a reference point, but to illustrate my statements with the very Word of God on this vital topic to your soul. So don’t stop without reading the endnotes! Go to them and where I have provided Scripture, study it, soak in it,

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go back to it, deal with it, pray over it, and inwardly digest it. I have no need to argue this case. I would rather let the fullness of Scripture, attended by the Author of that Scripture, convince you, as He did me.

What then is the truth about the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints?

THE DOCTRINE OF PERSEVERANCE DEFINED

Perseverance Defined Biblically

The truth, which we call the perseverance of the saints, is not an obscure doctrine. One cannot read the Bible without finding evidences of "what God starts, God completes." If one were to go to only one passage in Scripture, as I was challenged to do in my own Christian experience, this one would bring you face to face with this comforting truth:

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. (John 10:27–29 NIV)

Jesus' metaphor of a shepherd holding lambs provides a warm and pastoral image of the truth that Christ Himself, who saved me, would take responsibility to guard me from eternal harm. No enemy can touch these lambs. But there