

THE GOSPEL LESSON 18

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 6

TULIP – Perseverance of the Saints

John 10:27-29 – My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

REVIEWING THE GOSPEL OF YOUR SALVATION

Last lesson took up the fourth petal, Irresistible Grace, and found the whole doctrine staked on a single claim about order: that God regenerates the dead sinner first, and only then can he believe. Scripture states the order the other way at every point where it states it at all. Life comes through the word believed; the one who hears and believes is born of imperishable seed and sealed in Him, *en autō*, with the Holy Spirit of promise. Grace is prior, necessary, and sufficient, and it comes in the word, sincerely offered to every man and made the power of God unto salvation in everyone who believes.

The method has not changed. Each text is read literally in its normal sense, in its grammar, and in its historical and cultural setting, asking first who wrote it, to whom, when, and why. The movement is from the text toward conclusions, and the conclusions are revised when the text resists them. The standard is what the text states and what its author intended, and no doctrine is granted standing because a system requires it "by good and necessary consequence" (WCF 1.6).

The fifth petal, Perseverance of the Saints, is different from the four before it. On its central affirmation there is no quarrel at all. The one who believes has eternal life, is sealed, is kept by God's power, and cannot be lost. The quarrel is with a condition the doctrine attaches to that affirmation: that the ones God keeps will necessarily continue in faith and good works to the end, so that continuing becomes the evidence, and in practice the test, of whether a person was ever saved at all. A believer who fails, was never a believer.

I. INTRODUCTION – KEY DISTINCTIONS

1. Preservation and Perseverance. These are two different things, and the doctrine depends on treating them as one. Preservation is God's act: He keeps the one who has believed, holds him in His hand, seals him, and raises him up on the last day. Perseverance is the believer's act: he continues in the faith, walks worthy of his calling, and endures. Scripture states the first as a certainty resting on God. It commands the second as a responsibility resting on the believer, and never says that the first guarantees the second. A father who will never disown his son has not thereby guaranteed that his son will never disgrace him.

2. Security and Assurance. Security is the fact of the believer's standing before God; it is true whether or not he feels it. Assurance is the believer's knowledge of that fact. Scripture grounds assurance in the promise of God and in the object of faith, so that the believer looks away from himself to Christ and to what God has said. The Reformed system, having made perseverance the evidence of election, must locate assurance in the believer's fruit, and so it

THE GOSPEL LESSON 18

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 6

TULIP – Perseverance of the Saints

turns his eyes from the promise to himself. We have previously established that faith produces no automatic behavioral change, and that assurance rests on the object of faith and on God's word, never on behavioral evidence. The fifth petal leans on the same error from the other side.

3. Loss of Life and Loss of Reward. When Scripture describes a believer who fails, it names the consequences: loss of reward (1 Corinthians 3:15), natural consequences, discipline (Hebrews 12:6), even loss of physical life (1 Corinthians 11:30; 1 John 5:16). It never names the loss of eternal life, and it never explains a believer's failure by saying he was never a believer.

II. PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS - DEFINITION

The doctrine is answered in its own words, quoted from the confessions and its living teachers, not from its critics. Two claims stand at its center: that the effectually called cannot finally fall away, and that they will therefore certainly persevere to the end, so that perseverance is the mark of the truly elect.

The Westminster Confession states the first claim and welds the second to it (Chapter 17.1):

They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

The Canons of Dort supply the necessary continuance (Fifth Head, Article 3):

By reason of these remains of indwelling sin, and the temptations of sin and of the world, those who are converted could not persevere in a state of grace if left to their own strength. But God is faithful, who having conferred grace, mercifully confirms and powerfully preserves them therein, even to the end.

The modern statement is the plainest. Wayne Grudem defines the doctrine in two halves: all who are truly born again will be kept by God's power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again (Systematic Theology). R. C. Sproul, who preferred the term "preservation of the saints," nevertheless held that a professing believer who falls away and does not return demonstrates that he was never truly converted. John MacArthur states the same doctrine from the side of obedience: true faith will not fail to produce a persevering, obedient life.

Two things are fixed there. First, the keeping is God's, and on that point every text of Scripture agrees. Second, and this is the doctrine, the keeping is said to guarantee the continuing, so that "only those who persevere" were ever saved. The second sentence is never stated in Scripture. It is deduced from the fourth petal: if grace is irresistible in bringing the elect to faith, it must be equally irresistible in keeping them faithful, or the system would

THE GOSPEL LESSON 18

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 6

TULIP – Perseverance of the Saints

have to admit that grace can be received and then resisted. The doctrine is required by the system, and the texts are then read to supply it.

III. PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS – ARGUMENTS AND BIBLICAL RESPONSES

The keeping texts are taken first, then the anchor text of 1 John 2:19, the continuance clauses, the warning passages of Hebrews, and last the texts of fruit and of "I never knew you." Each is granted its strongest form before it is answered.

1. The Keeping Texts Read as Conditional.

The Reformed Claim. Christ's sheep are secure because they are His sheep, and His sheep are known by what they do. "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish" (John 10:27–28). The following comes before the promise, so the ones who never perish are the ones who follow. Likewise, "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6): God's work in the believer does not stop, and where the work has stopped, God never began it.

Biblical Response. The sheep are secure, the security is Christ's gift, no one snatches them from His hand or the Father's, and the good work begun will be completed. Verse 27 describes the sheep, and it describes them accurately; they hear, they are known, they follow. What the text does not do is make the following the ground of the security. Verses 28 and 29 supply the ground, and it is entirely outside the sheep: "I give eternal life to them," "no one will snatch them out of My hand," "My Father... is greater than all." The security rests on the Shepherd's gift and the Father's greatness, not on the sheep's feet, and the promise is stated absolutely, "they will never perish," οὐ μὴ ἀπόλωνται *ou mē apolōntai*, the strongest negation Greek can form, with no condition attached. Philippians 1:6 is a promise about God's work, not a test of the believer's; the verb is God's, He "will perfect it." Both texts describe preservation. The perseverance is imported by turning a description of the sheep into a requirement for remaining a sheep.

2. The Anchor Text – 1 John 2:19.

The Reformed Claim. "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us." Here is the doctrine in one verse. The ones who depart were never truly among the saved; had they been, they would have persevered. Departure proves that the faith was never real.

Biblical Response. The verse is affirmed exactly as it reads: these particular men were never of us. The surrounding verses say who they were. They are "antichrists" (2:18), and their mark is doctrinal: "Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son" (2:22). The letter is written against a specific departure, men who had been in the assembly and left denying that Jesus

THE GOSPEL LESSON 18

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 6

TULIP – Perseverance of the Saints

is the Christ come in the flesh (4:2-3). Their leaving showed that they had never believed the one thing that makes a believer. The verse says nothing about a believer who sins, drifts, or fails; it describes unbelievers exposed as unbelievers who infiltrated the Apostles to gain credence and lead others astray. To make it a rule that anyone who falls was never saved is to take a verse about false teachers who deny the Son and lay it over every struggling son. It proves that a man who never believed was never saved. It does not touch the man who believed.

3. The Continuance Clauses.

The Reformed Claim. Scripture repeatedly makes the final outcome conditional on continuing. Christ "has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach, if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast" (Colossians 1:22–23). "We have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end" (Hebrews 3:14). "The one who endures to the end, he will be saved" (Matthew 24:13). The "if" is real; those who do not continue are not presented, are not partakers, are not saved.

Biblical Response. In each text the question is what the "if" governs, and in each text the answer is something other than the possession of eternal life. Colossians 1:23 does not even carry the English "if." The conjunction is εἴγε *eige*, an intensified form of the first-class condition, which assumes the reality of what it states and is better rendered "since." The verb "you continue," ἐπιμένω *epimenō*, is present indicative, a statement of status, you are in the faith; "firmly established" is a perfect participle, describing who these believers are as the settled result of a past act. The sentence is a statement of certainty about believers, not a call addressed to them. And the presentation it serves is the presentation of the reconciled before God, holy, blameless, and beyond reproach, the standing of Romans 8:33, "Who will bring a charge against God's elect?" That standing is stated in verse 22 as accomplished, "has now reconciled you," and no fidelity of the believer increases or maintains it.

Hebrews 3:14 is not eternal life but partnership: "partakers of Christ," μέτοχοι τοῦ Χριστοῦ *metochoi tou Christou*, the word this letter uses for companions in a work (1:9; 3:1), sharers in the Messiah's reign and rest. The whole chapter is built on Israel in the wilderness, a redeemed people who forfeited the land through unbelief and did not forfeit their redemption (3:16–19). Holding fast keeps the believer in the company that enters the rest; it does not keep him redeemed.

Matthew 24:13 must be left where it is spoken: in the Olivet Discourse, to Israel, of the Seven Years of Tribulation, when "there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world" (24:21). The one who endures to the end of that period is saved out of it alive, "unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved" (24:22). It is a statement about physical deliverance at the end of the Tribulation.

THE GOSPEL LESSON 18

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 6

TULIP – Perseverance of the Saints

4. The Warning Passages of Hebrews.

The Reformed Claim. Hebrews 6:4-6 describes those who "have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit" and who then "have fallen away," and it says it is "impossible... to renew them again to repentance." Hebrews 10:26-27 says that "if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment." These describe people who had every mark of faith and yet fell away to judgment; therefore, on the Reformed reading, they were never regenerated, and their tasting was not possessing.

Biblical Response. The letter is written to Jewish believers under persecution who were drifting back to the Levitical system, and its argument throughout is that Jesus is better than the shadow. In chapter 6 the ones described are marked by a string of articular participles: the ones having been enlightened, having tasted the heavenly gift, having become partakers of the Holy Spirit, having tasted the good word of God. This is the language of believers, stated emphatically, and the letter has no vocabulary for a partaker of the Holy Spirit who does not possess Him. The verb rendered "fallen away" is παραπίπτω *parapiptō*, to fall; apostasy in the sense of becoming an unbeliever is not in the word but is supplied by the interpreter. The ones who have fallen are believers who have left the completed work of the Messiah to go back to the sacrifices, and of these it is "impossible," ἀδύνατος *adunatos*, not forbidden but incapable, to lay the foundation a second time (6:1). They cannot be re-saved, because they were never un-saved; to re-lay the foundation would be to crucify the Son of God again, as though the one sacrifice were insufficient (9:26). The passage warns believers against going backward. It does not describe unbelievers going to hell.

Chapter 10 is answered by its own subject, sacrifice for sin. The annual sacrifice of the Day of Atonement (10:1-10) and the daily sacrifices of the priests (10:11-18) are fulfilled and ended in the one offering of Christ, so that "there is no longer any offering for sin" (10:18). Verse 26 asks the question a Levitical mind would ask next: the sacrifices are ended, so what remains for the one who sins willfully, with a high hand? The answer is the answer of the Law. For the defiant sinner there was never a sacrifice; he was cut off and fell into the hands of God (Numbers 15:30-31). "There no longer remains a sacrifice for sins" means the Levitical remedy is gone and Christ's one sacrifice is not to be repeated; it does not mean that Christ's sacrifice is withdrawn from the believer. The one who so sins is left to the Lord, who says, VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY, and THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE (10:30). He is judged as one of His people, a wayward son in his Father's hands, which is exactly what discipline proves (12:6-8). Neither passage teaches that a believer can be lost, and neither teaches that the ones who fell were never believers. Both teach that a believer can fall, and that God deals with him as a son.

THE GOSPEL LESSON 18

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 6

TULIP – Perseverance of the Saints

5. Fruit, Abiding, and "I Never Knew You."

The Reformed Claim. Jesus said that the branch that does not abide in Him "is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned" (John 15:6), and that on that day many who prophesied and cast out demons in His name will hear, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matthew 7:23). The unfruitful are burned, and the ones who claimed Him without obedience were never known by Him. Perseverance in fruit is what separates the saved from the lost.

Biblical Response. The vine discourse is spoken to the eleven, men already "clean because of the word which I have spoken to you" (15:3), and it is about fruit (15:5). Abiding, μένω *menō*, to remain, is a matter of service, and its opposite in this discourse is not damnation but fruitlessness; the burning of verse 6 demonstrates the uselessness but it is not a picture of hell." The whole passage is a command, "abide in Me," which would be empty if abiding were guaranteed.

Matthew 7:21–23 answers the doctrine from the other direction. The ones sent away are workers; their entire plea is what they did, and the verdict is "I never knew you." They are not believers who failed to persevere but people who never believed and offered works in place of faith, which is precisely the offer a doctrine that makes works the evidence of election teaches the believer to bring.

A text that describes believers is read as a condition of remaining one; a text that describes unbelievers is read as a description of failed believers; a text that warns believers is read as proof that the warned were never believers. In every case the believer's standing, which Scripture places in Christ, is made to depend on the believer's conduct, which Scripture commands and never guarantees.

IV. BIBLICAL FAILURE

Scripture states the principle of failure and then names the men. The principle is 2 Timothy 2:13: "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself." The word is ἀπιστέω *apisteō*, to disbelieve, and the subject is "we," the Apostle and his son in the faith. The believer's unbelief is treated as a real possibility, and God's faithfulness is stated as the fixed thing that does not move when the believer does. The verse before it names the consequence of failure within the family: "if we deny Him, He also will deny us," which in context ("if we endure, we will also reign with Him") is a denial of reigning, of reward, not of sonship. He cannot deny Himself, and the believer is in Him.

Examples: Lot lived in Sodom, offered his daughters to the mob, and fathered Moab and Ammon in a cave; Scripture calls him "righteous Lot" three times in two verses (2 Peter 2:7–8). Solomon in his old age had his heart turned to other gods and built high places for them (1 Kings 11:4–9); the Lord's word to David about him stands: "I will correct him with the rod of men... but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him" (2 Samuel 7:14–15).

THE GOSPEL LESSON 18

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 6

TULIP – Perseverance of the Saints

The Corinthians were "sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling" (1 Corinthians 1:2) and were also carnal, quarreling, tolerating incest, and profaning the Lord's table, so that "many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep" (11:30).

Hymenaeus and Alexander "suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith" and were "handed over to Satan so that they will be taught not to blaspheme" (1 Timothy 1:19–20), a discipline applied to men of the household.

Demas, a fellow worker named beside Luke (Philemon 24), "having loved this present world, has deserted me" (2 Timothy 4:10), and no word is added that he was never a brother.

The consequences named for these men are discipline, loss, sickness, death, the rod of men. Never is it said that one of them lost eternal life, or that his failure revealed he had never had it. The system must read each as a hypocrite or an exception. Scripture reads them as believers who failed, and uses them to warn believers, which it could not do if believers could not fail.

V. BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF PRESERVATION

The one who has believed in Jesus Christ has eternal life and is kept by God, and nothing in heaven or earth or in the believer himself can undo it. That is preservation, and Scripture states it without a condition. The Father's will is stated: "this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day" (John 6:39). The Son's gift is stated: "I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:28). The Spirit's seal is stated: "having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance" (Ephesians 1:13–14), a seal that holds "for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30). The court is closed: "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies" (Romans 8:33), and the list that follows, death, life, angels, principalities, things present, things to come, "nor any other created thing," does not exclude the believer's own failure, since the believer is himself a created thing (8:38–39). The inheritance is "reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed" (1 Peter 1:4–5). The apostle's own assurance rests with Christ: "I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day" (2 Timothy 1:12). And the last word of the last letter before Revelation is to "Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy" (Jude 24).

To the believer, then, Scripture speaks two words, and it never confuses them. The first is a promise: you are kept, and you cannot be lost. The second is a command: walk worthy, abide, hold fast, endure. The promise is God's to keep and He cannot fail. The command is the believer's to obey and he can fail; when he does, God disciplines him as a son, he may lose reward, he may lose his life, and he will not lose the life given him when he believed.