

THE GOSPEL LESSON 20

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL – PART 2

The Required Result

Galatians 3:3; 2 Timothy 2:13 – Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? ... If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.

WHERE WE ARE

The last lesson weighed the first four petals. They make claims about God: His decree, His choice, the extent of the provision, and the manner of His grace. They add no condition to heard, believed, sealed (Ephesians 1:13). On the test of Galatians 1, they are a disagreement in theology, and those who hold them are brethren, though they narrow God's love, divide His will, and reverse the order of His justice in order to keep a decree consistent.

The keeping of the believer was settled in Lesson 18. God guards by His power (1 Peter 1:5), gives eternal life that none can snatch away (John 10:28–29), began a work He will finish (Philippians 1:6), and remains faithful when the believer is unbelieving, because He cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13). That is preservation and is not the point of disagreement; the fifth petal is not a synonym for it.

What the fifth petal attaches to that keeping is a result that must appear in the believer, and it makes that result necessary for final salvation. This lesson takes up the addition, and what the addition does to the gospel as it is preached and as it is held.

THE CLAIM

The doctrine of the Preservation/Perseverance of the Saints is not the claim that God keeps His own. It is two further claims laid on top of that one.

The first is that a believer's faith cannot fail. Westminster carries it in the words "neither totally nor finally" (WCF 17.1). Scripture does not state it, and 2 Timothy 2:13 supposes the opposite case and answers it. "If we are faithless (unbelieving - apostate), He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself." The verse does not deny that a believer may stop believing. It assumes the case, and the answer given is not that such a man was never a believer. The answer is that God does not change when the man does.

The second is that the life must show the works. This is the claim that reaches the gospel, and it is the subject of this lesson. It is not usually presented as a condition. It is presented as the necessary evidence of a faith that God Himself guarantees, and those who hold it are careful to say that the works are never the ground of a sinner's standing.

I do think they are sincere in their attempt at making that distinction, but it is a point that is contested and this is where the strongest examination must be made, because a result that must appear is doing work in their system regardless of the attempt to explain it away.

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PERSEVERANCE IN ITS OWN WORDS

The assertion is that the saints *"shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved"* (WCF 17.1). Sproul states the same without hedging: *"I believe that saints do persevere in faith, and that those who have been effectually called by God and have been reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit endure to the end."*

What the persevering consists of is defined in a different chapter of the Confession. *"These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith"* (WCF 16.2). Works are given an office. They are what a "true faith" is known by.

Assurance is *"an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption"* (WCF 18.2). Assurance is not the result of the promise and the faithfulness of the one who made the promise. Assurance is a product of the Holy Spirit worked in the life of a true believer.

Dort states it with less reserve. Assurance is obtained *"by faith in the promises of God, which He has most abundantly revealed in His Word for our comfort; by the testimony of the Holy Spirit, witnessing with our spirit that we are children and heirs of God and, finally, by the serious and holy pursuit of a clear conscience and of good works"* (Fifth Head, Art. 10). Good works stand in the confession's own list of the grounds on which a man may be sure of himself.

Grudem states the assembled doctrine in one sentence: the perseverance of the saints means *"all those who are truly born again will be kept by God's power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again."* The first clause is God keeping His own. The second reverses the direction of the evidence, and persevering to the end becomes the test of whether the new birth ever occurred.

Piper states the consequence in plain speech: *"These works of faith, and this obedience of faith, these fruits of the Spirit that come by faith, are necessary for our final salvation,"* and, as a rule, *"No holiness, no heaven."* Justification is by faith alone. Final salvation is not.

Piper's wording is disputed within Reformed circles. His critics object that final salvation must rest on the obedience of Christ received by faith, and that calling works a condition of it concedes too much. They do not deny that the works are necessary. They argue over the kind of necessity.

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REFORMED THEOLOGY MOVES THE GROUND OF KNOWING

Reformed Theology states that salvation is complete, that the decree is certain, and that the works follow a finished thing as inevitably as fruit follows a living root. What they leave unsettled is how can know. The salvation is certain; whether the person in question (or yourself) has it is the thing to be determined, and Reformed Theology teaches that it is his own record as the instrument of the determination. Westminster finds assurance on the promises, on "the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made," and on the testimony of the Spirit (WCF 18.2). Dort finds it on the promises, on the Spirit's witness, and "finally, by the serious and holy pursuit of a clear conscience and of good work" (Fifth Head, Art. 10). Grudem states the same move as a rule: only those who persevere to the end have been truly born again. In every one of those statements the believer's own life is load bearing. The works are not in addition to a settled question. They are part of how the question gets settled.

That is the addition, and it is made at the point where a man asks whether or he is a "true" believer.

Scripture locates the knowing somewhere else entirely. Salvation is stated as a past act and as a future certainty, and in the present tense the language is possession and does not insist on introspection. "He who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). The verb ἔχω (echō) is in the present indicative, a thing owned now, and the one who owns it is identified by believing and by nothing further.

Where the certainty is argued it is argued from a past action. "Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him" (Romans 5:9). The movement is from the work already accomplished to the one still to come. The believer's record between the two is never introduced, because it carries no weight in the argument.

Where salvation is assumed to be understood as a progression, the form is an articular participle naming a class of persons rather than a process. "The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). Two classes are named. No progress is measured.

Between the past act and the future outcome there is a walk, and the walk is real. The believer is commanded to put off the old man and put on the new, to set the mind on things above, to deny the rebellion of the body. We hold that the walk proceeds from a believer informed by the Word of God, and that learning and believing sound doctrine makes a man spiritually mature. It does not follow that doctrine believed produces the walk. Believing makes the right choice known and makes it easier. It does not make the choice. The walk requires volition, and volition can go the other way.

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This is not a weakness in Reformed Theology; it is the position, and the doctrine of perseverance is built on denying it. We understand that believers have known God greatly, with all of His promises before them, and have still failed. Scripture records them by name and Scripture never revokes their sonship in response to their failure.

FROM EVIDENCE TO CONDITION

The defense of Reformed Theology rests on a distinction: the works are evidence and never ground. They teach that God guarantees the result; the believer contributes nothing to his standing; the works are the fruit by which a real work of God is known, and to call them a condition is to misstate what is taught.

The distinction is coherent when it is written down. However, it does not survive being used.

We begin with the claim that testing reveals whether faith is genuine, because the whole evidentiary system depends on it.

"So that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:7).

The word is δοκίμιον *dokimion*, which describes something improved in quality by being proved. What is refined is not the genuineness of the faith but its usefulness to the believer. Pressure reveals the usefulness. It does not produce, and the text does not say it authenticates.

Four things follow, and they are practical rather than theoretical. The text nowhere states that testing demonstrates genuine faith. Faith already stands in no need of being shown to be so. All we have to identify fellow believers is what they say, and the only two who know what a person believes is the person in question and God. Based on Reformed Theology no man can know his faith is genuine before it has been tested. And a man who passes one test and fails the next has been handed a verdict that moves.

Westminster itself concedes the case that breaks the distinction. The saints "may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein" (WCF 17.3).

No measure is set for how long a time may be, and none can be set. For the length of that time the believer in grievous sin is indistinguishable from a man who was never saved at all, and he is indistinguishable to himself.

Then comes the question Reformed Theology must. A man has heard the gospel, believed it, and been sealed, and the works never came. Reformed Theology teaches he does not enter

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heaven. It does not matter where they assign the works, they are necessary for heaven, and a thing necessary for heaven is part of the formula.

John MacArthur: a person who professes Christ but lives in “a perpetual state of willful rebellion or ungodly indifference” is not a backsliding believer. He is a false Christian who was never accepted by Christ (Matt 7:21–23; 1 John 3:4–10). If there is no check against habitual sin in someone who professes to be a Christian, “salvation never took place.” Do not comfort him with “once saved, always saved” while he clings to the sin.

John Piper: Warn him that this kind of sinning is not the sin of a struggling saint. It is evidence he may never have come to share in Christ. Call him to repentance now.

R/T Forums: Unrepentant sin is a warning sign that such a person does not have true faith.

Question	Typical Calvinist reply
Is the profession enough?	No. Profession is not possession.
Can a true saint cling to known, unrepentant sin as a settled pattern?	No. That pattern is evidence he was never regenerate.
Can we know his election for certain?	No, not while he lives.
Do we treat the profession as credible?	No.
How do we address him?	Confront, withhold assurance, discipline if he is in the church, call him to repent and believe, hope God may yet grant repentance.

The distinction between ground and evidence is therefore not a fine line; it is a distinction without a difference at the only point where it is used. A man's access to whether God's guaranteed result occurred is inspection of his own life. The question of whether God has preserved him is answered by the question of whether he has persevered, and a result that must be present for the promise to hold is a condition by any other name.

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WHAT IT DOES TO THE GOSPEL AS OFFERED

The invitation in Scripture carries nothing beyond salvation by grace given to the believer.

"Whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). "The one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37). "Let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost" (Revelation 22:17). Nothing is said in any of them about what must afterward appear.

If Reformed Theology is true, every one of those invitations is incomplete as it stands. The hearer is being handed something that comes with a required result, and he is not being told. An honest presentation under Reformed Theology must add a disclosure: what you are receiving will produce a life you cannot yet inspect, and if that life does not appear, you did not receive it.

There are only two ways to preach the gospel from the Reformed Theological stance. The message is stated as the full doctrine, and the offer is no longer the free offer Scripture states. Or the disclosure is withheld, and the hearer accepts terms he was not told. The gospel of Ephesians 1:13 is neither of those. It is a message heard, believed, and sealed, with the sealing done by God on the spot and nothing held back pending review.

The dying thief settles the matter in one exchange. He had hours, no opportunity, and no record. He asked to be remembered, and the answer was immediate and unqualified: *"Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise"* (Luke 23:43). No holiness followed, and heaven was not withheld. A doctrine that states the rule as no holiness, no heaven has to make that man an exception. Scripture presents him as an illustration.

WHAT IT DOES TO THE GOSPEL AS POSSESSED

The question then moves from the man being offered the gift to the man who has received it, and the doctrine changes what he holds.

Scripture puts the possession in the present tense and in the perfect. *"He who believes has eternal life"* (John 6:47), the verb "has" - ἔχω (echō) in the present indicative, a thing owned now. *"He has passed out of death into life"* (John 5:24), the verb passed - μεταβαίνω metabainō in the perfect, a completed act with a standing result. He was sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as the pledge of the inheritance (Ephesians 1:13–14). The inheritance itself is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, and reserved - τηρέω (tēreō) in the perfect (1 Peter 1:4).

Under the doctrine of perseverance, the believer holds something else. He holds a claim whose validity is established by a record not yet written. He cannot read the verdict today, because the evidence on which it turns is his own performance. Assurance becomes

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retrospective, and a retrospective assurance is unavailable at the moment a man most needs it.

The intervention for struggling believer gets backwards in Reformed Theology, and it is visible in practice. Under the Reformed Theology, a believer in serious sin is directed to examine whether he was ever saved at all. Scripture directs the same man elsewhere entirely. It tells him whose he is and calls him to walk accordingly: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). The remedy applied to a sinning believer is his standing, not doubt about it.

The hardest case in the New Testament church is handled the same way. The man of 1 Corinthians 5, in sin not even named among the Gentiles, is delivered over to Satan *"for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus"* (5:5). He is disciplined severely, and his salvation in that day is stated rather than questioned.

And the case the doctrine cannot absorb is stated outright two chapters earlier. A man builds with wood, hay, and straw; the fire takes all of it; nothing survives. *"If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire"* (1 Corinthians 3:15). A believer whose works are entirely consumed is saved. That sentence and the rule that no holiness means no heaven cannot both stand.

THE VERDICT

Scripture has already ruled on an addition made at the back end. The Galatian error did not deny that justification begins with faith. It added to what faith had begun, and the addition came afterward. "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3). It was not answered as a difference in emphasis. It was answered as another gospel, under an anathema pronounced twice (Galatians 1:6–9).

One statement held together: The first four petals make claims about God and leave "heard, believed, sealed" untouched. The fifth does not. It requires a result in the believer and makes that result necessary for final salvation. That changes the offer into a conditional one and changes the possession into a claim awaiting review. A required result is a condition, whatever office the system assigns it, and a gospel with a condition added after faith is adding works to the Gospel and is a false gospel.

What Scripture offers instead is clear. Eternal life is possessed now by the one who believes (John 6:47). The believer was sealed at the moment he believed, and the Spirit is the pledge (Ephesians 1:13–14). The inheritance is reserved by God and guarded by His power (1 Peter 1:4–5). Nothing in that is held back pending a review of behavior.