

The Perseverance of the Saints

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Introduction

We should draw confidence from the fact that in Christ we have been accepted by the Father. We should have the security of knowing that, by adoption, we are part of His family. But truths can be misapplied. Things that can be done right can also be done wrong. The Jews had every confidence of right standing before God. That confidence was in fact one of the things that led them to crucify Christ. They knew He was a false prophet, despite the witness of the Holy Spirit, because He questioned the basis for their security (see Matt 23:1-39). Anyone who said such things about them as He did could not be speaking for God. It was clear that God was on their side. Had He not chosen Abraham? And were they not his descendants? These were unassailable arguments.

There was a theological component in the Pharisees' response to Jesus, where the point at issue was precisely the basis on which mankind has right standing with God. Theirs were "the adoption of sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises" (Rom 9:4). To speak against things such these, which were of more than human origin, was blasphemy. That is how Christ's words must have come across when He swept all such things aside and said, "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). If the Jews already possessed so much, what need did they have for anything more? More specifically, why did they need anything Jesus could offer them? They already had every spiritual blessing they could want. Who was this that called into question God's gifts? Let us acknowledge at the outset that security is a subject capable of being misunderstood. Otherwise, it is not capable of being misunderstood. Was the Jewish concept of security correct?¹

In the book of Hebrews faith is belief in what we cannot see (Christ is in heaven) but it also encompasses the idea of waiting steadfastly until we are in a position to see it.² This is why Hebrews has so many calls to persevere and not to give up one's faith before the promised blessings arrive. Thus, the question in Heb 6, for example, is not whether it is possible to fall away--the author of Hebrews would say it is--but whether, having fallen, it is possible to come back. The figure of an anchor in 6:19 is the culminating figure introduced in that chapter. The security of the believer is firmly anchored in what Christ has done and is doing--not in the fact that we have set out to follow the Shepherd but the Shepherd's continued leading in our lives. The one experience is not a substitute for the other. Persevering means more than starting well; it means finishing well.

According to one currently popular view of eternal security, ironically, the element of persevering has no place in perseverance. The perseverance of the saints is a unilateral act of God. Thus, it is not the saints who persevere but the One who has called them. It is certainly true that God is faithful. The question is whether we are and the answer is we are not--at least not with any consistency.

The idea that God's faithfulness makes it unnecessary for His people to reciprocate this quality did not just appear out of nothing. It follows from a particular concept of the role of time in receiving blessings from Christ. There is a present sense in which we now have all the

blessings of Christ and this must be resolutely defended (see 1 John 5:10-11). But if everything is ours now in the only sense that it will ever be ours, eternity has already begun and the unending reward of the saints cannot be lost because what they have received is eternal. It is not a matter of losing it. If what they have is not eternal, then they must never have had it to begin with. To think of losing eternal life in this context makes no more sense than eternity itself coming to an end, which of course is inherently contradictory. Anything that ends is by definition not eternal. "Eternal" means unending. All of this might follow if we grant the premise on which it is based. But is the premise valid?

The best evidence against the above position is that we are still here. Christ has not yet returned. Until He does there is something more to look forward to. Paul says, "but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23). And Christ says, "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End" (Rev 22:12-13)? The "reward" of Christ (Rev 22:12) is the "gift" of God (Rom 6:23). The two passages are saying identically the same things. To receive the gift in its ultimate and most plenary sense, Christ must return. God says to us as well as to Abraham, "I am your shield, your very great reward" (Gen 15:1). "I am" (see John 8:58), not "I have." The reward is not only something He gives us. It is He Himself. And so, because we have Christ now, the blessings of the gospel are ours already, whereas in a different though equally valid sense, they are not yet ours in the fullest sense that they will ever be ours. Until Jesus comes there will still be something more for the church to wait for (see 1 Thess 4:13-18).

The Early Christian Centuries

If the author of Hebrews had had Calvin's concept of eternal security, the epistle would read far differently from what it does. Another thing that would read differently is the history of the Christian church, especially during its earliest centuries.

The great persecutions

Those who went through the great persecutions of the first, second, and third centuries A.D. would have been able to get along quite well with the Roman emperors if they had held that sin and ultimately apostasy reduce one's reward in eternity perhaps but do not compromise his or her salvation. We do not have life in ourselves (see 1 Tim 6:15-16) and there is no way to earn it. But death is earned. Paul calls it "the wages of sin" (Rom 6:23). Thus, when those die who have refused to accept or retain the free gift of eternal life, they are receiving the wage that they have earned by their sinning. There is an asymmetry between the gift and the wage that we must grasp or fail to understand what Paul is saying (see also Rom 4:4-5).³ What sin brings is death and not merely less life.⁴ We can indeed lose our salvation by persisting in sin.

Sin is the epitome of human works. It is our own doing and not an act that God imposes on us--nor on the other hand is it one that He ignores. At least this was the view of those who allowed themselves to be thrown to the lions rather than give up their faith in Christ. The early church, knowing only Paul's doctrine of eternal security and not that of Augustine, Calvin, and Calvin's more recent interpreters were led by that belief to stand firm despite every provocation. For them apostasy meant separation from Christ and was tantamount to being finally lost. Under an extreme form of Calvinist teaching they could have thrown their pinch of incense to Caesar knowing that the result would be a reduced reward but that nothing could cancel it altogether--a

small price to pay for present safety in view of how abundant the reward was to be in the first place. If the earliest Christians had believed they could not be lost, the concept of apostasy as standing apart (and therefore being separated) from Christ--their only Source of life (see John 11:25)--would have been meaningless to them. But in fact it was not. The author of Hebrews writes eloquently against the danger of apostasy and treats it as a mortal threat. Other New Testament writers hold similar views. At least these are the views the early church understood them to hold. No one who went through the great persecutions of the second, third, and fourth centuries would have claimed that apostasy was impossible in principle.

The later Donatist controversy

Further evidence that those who survived the great persecutions knew nothing of Calvin's concept of eternal security is the protracted and bitter Donatist controversy in North Africa after those persecutions finally ended in A.D. 311.⁵ For Donatists the question was not whether a person could fall having once responded to grace, but whether a fallen person could be restored to church leadership (or fellowship) after falling. Their answer was he could not.

It is significant that Augustine was one of the Donatists' most vigorous opponents. This fact is usually considered apart from his views on election and grace but the two are related. He eventually went so far as to allow Donatists to be persecuted by the civil power,⁶ which is not a fact that anyone can be proud of. For Augustine apostasy was a serious matter, but it was more on the order of something to be deplored rather than something to refuse fellowship over.

The Christian's Assurance Resides in the Sanctuary

Our emphasis when dealing with Christian security should be placed where the author of Hebrews places it--in the sanctuary. Let it be immediately granted that our security does not rest on anything in ourselves. But neither does it rest on the false philosophy of fatalism: I have received the gift of God. The gift is eternal life. Eternity is unending. Therefore I can never fall. This is not what Paul says:

(17) If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, (18) do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. (19) You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." (20) Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. (21) For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. (Rom 11:17-21)

Our security rests, precisely, in Christ. Where is Christ? If He is the heavenly sanctuary, it follows that our security is in the heavenly sanctuary. This is the point the author of Hebrews was making. When he spoke about security, he was speaking in the context of the sanctuary:

(19) We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, (20) where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. (Heb 6:19-20)

Here we have the counterpart to the fulfillment of prophecy. When God gives predictions to the prophets that is not fatalism. Instead He is committing Himself to bring about certain foreseen results.⁷ Some have used this fact to weaken our concept of God's foreknowledge. Anything can be done wrong. God's foreknowledge of the future does not in itself cause those future events to happen. But He does know which events they are. In the same way, our security does not depend on some logical property of the word "eternity," but on Christ who is actively ministering for us in heaven now. His ongoing ministry of His once-for-all sacrifice on the cross is the basis for our security. We are always secure because He always ministers. No ministry, no security. The two go together and cannot be separated. The gospel is more than past realities. It involves present realities as well.

Discussion

Is it the case that, if someone apostatizes, that merely demonstrates there was nothing to apostasize from? Here again there is a contradiction. Apostasy becomes a nonevent, an unhappening--a reversion to a condition the person never left, which is also contradictory. Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28), i.e., against their own will. No external force can separate them from Me. Paul says the same thing: "(38) For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, (39) neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). No external factor can do this. But an act of our own will can. We can leave Him if we choose. Otherwise, why does the author of Hebrews urge his readers not to do that? If what he urges them not to do is impossible anyway, why does he urge them not to do it? Why does he not simply tell them they won't?

If I mention the example of Judas, someone will object that he was never saved to begin with. So we need not talk about Judas. Instead consider Adam. All will agree that he fell. If he did not, then Augustine has nothing to say. Is it the case that Adam never fully entered the condition he fell from? What condition was that? Before he fell from it there was only one to choose from and that was perfect holiness. Angels have fallen too (see Rev 12:7-8)--one third of them according to Rev 12:4 ("His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth"). And what shall we say about Lucifer himself? He was God's crowning achievement as the Creator--the best and brightest of all heaven's angels. About him the Scriptures say:

"You were the model of perfection,
 full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
 (13) You were in Eden,
 the garden of God; (Ezek 28:12-13)

If the highest angel in heaven can fall from a sinless condition amid ideal surroundings, should we think it is impossible for people born lost and fallen to revert to their former condition? But if this is impossible, what is Paul trying to say when he explicitly warns: "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor 10:12)? He goes on to add the comforting assurance that God is faithful and "will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear" (vs. 13). But his context for saying these things is one of drawing lessons from Israel's experience: "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings

for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (vs. 11). "For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either" (Rom 11:21).

Jesus' sheep know His voice and follow Him. The only way we can know whose sheep we are is by which shepherd we follow. We cannot come to Him now, go our way later, and remain forever His while in a state of de facto separation from Him. We must come to the Shepherd. That is one fact to consider. And then we must follow Him. That is another. If we do not follow Him, we are not His (see Rom 8:14). I am not talking here about wandering off, as all do, but ceasing to follow--going a different way and insisting on staying there. We must both come to Christ and also remain in Him. Correctly understood, perseverance does indeed involve persevering.

Salvation is forever. But when does forever begin? It is a fundamental question. Forever begins now in one sense but in another important and neglected sense it begins when Jesus comes in glory and human history finally ends. Herein lies a fundamental point of difference between Seventh-day Adventists and those who accept and perhaps even extend Calvin's already extreme views on perseverance. Just as Christ's ongoing ministry in the heavenly sanctuary is central to our understanding of perseverance, His second coming is central to our understanding of eternity. The role the second coming plays in ushering in eternity is not irrelevant to what the Bible means by eternal salvation.

There has been a progressive radicalization of Paul's teaching over time. Augustine's views on election were considered extreme by his contemporaries and few accepted all of them:

The Pelagian system had been vanquished by Augustine, and rejected and condemned as heresy by the church. This result, however, did not in itself necessarily imply the complete approval of the Augustinian system. Many, even opponents of Pelagius, recoiled from a position so wide of the older fathers as Augustine's doctrines of the bondage of man and the absolute election of grace, and preferred a middle ground.⁸

Calvin presses Augustine's views farther than Augustine. And modern interpreters have pressed Calvin's views farther than Calvin. The net result is a serious theological imbalance.

The book of Hebrews brings this fact to light more clearly than any other in the New Testament, because its theme throughout is one of urging people not to give up their faith. It does this not on the basis that giving up genuine faith is impossible but on the basis of Christ's ongoing ministry for us in the heavenly sanctuary. The message of the book of Hebrews would have been widely different if it had been written by a twentieth century Calvinist theologian. Instead of urging the readers to persevere, he could simply have pointed out that they will or, alternatively, that whether they do or not their place in heaven is assured. But this is not what he says at all.

I submit that the author of Hebrews was warning against apostasy, that apostasy is both real and eminently possible, and that when it happens it is not irrelevant to salvation. Otherwise, it is irrelevant to salvation. Where do we read that in Scripture? The one place more than others where we do not read it is in the book of Hebrews.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible

Society.

¹This is not a question on which all Christians agree. The Evangelical view of Israel is essentially that which Israel had of themselves. With or without reference to anything they might do, they are still the chosen people of God and after the Gentiles have finished occupying the present interim period God will get back to the real business at hand, which is blessing literal Israel. Saying that the church is spiritual Israel is widely different from this. At issue is whether right standing with God can ever be lost. I submit that it can.

²It also encompasses the idea of heart obedience as we wait steadfastly for God has promised to do for us. There is nothing shallow in the concept of faith that we find in the book of Hebrews. See Dennis Hamm's excellent paper, "Faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Jesus Factor," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990): 270-91.

³Perhaps I have misread Paul. Could he mean that sin prior to salvation brings death but that sin afterward does not? What are the implications of saying so? One implication would be that being saved changes sin from something that brings death as its wage into something that does not bring death as its wage. Thus, salvation is from condemnation only and what it changes is sin. If I am not twisting anything, i.e., if there are those who actually hold this belief, it is an explosive doctrine. Paul's statement about the wages of sin in Rom 6:23 is true for those persons who have not yet been saved but not true for those who have been. A person cannot sin with impunity before knowing Christ but can sin with impunity after knowing Christ. This is precisely the basis on which some popular evangelists reject the Lord's prayer. It is appropriate for Jews (who have not yet been saved) but not for Christians (who have been)--because in it the speaker asks to be delivered from sin, which makes no sense if he already has been. But what does it mean to be delivered from sin? Does it mean not sinning or does it mean sinning without being condemned for it? Is the deliverance Christ brings only from condemnation or is it from sin itself? The former concept is shallow and unbiblical. "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21).

⁴According to George Eldon Ladd, a popular Evangelical author, "This judgment is not 'a declaration of doom, but an assessment of worth,' involving not condemnation or acquittal, but rewards or loss on the basis of the worthfulness or worthlessness of the Christian's life. . . . Their works, like wood, hay, and stubble, will be consumed in the flames of judgment so that nothing remains as a result of their life on earth. This does not mean loss of salvation: 'he himself will be saved,' but he will suffer loss of the 'well done, good and faithful servant'" (*A Theology of the New Testament*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], p. 566). This is purely and simply wishful thinking. Those from whom Christ withholds the "well done" will not be found anywhere close to heaven: (26) "His master replied, "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? (27) Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. (28) Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. (29) For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. (30) And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"" (Matt 25:28). The outer darkness referred to is not purgatory but hell.

⁵Donatism was by far the most important schism in the church of the period before us. For a whole century it divided the North African churches in to two hostile camps" (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprint ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984], vol. 3: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity from Constantine the Great to Gregory the Great, A.D. 311-600*, p. 360).

⁶He charges his Donatist opponents with inconsistency in seeming to approve the emperors' prohibitions of idolatry, but condemning their persecution of Christian heretics. It is to the honor of Augustine's heart, indeed, that in actual cases he earnestly urged upon the

magistrates clemency and humanity, and thus in practice remained true to his noble maxim: 'Nothing conquers but truth, the victory of truth is love.' But his theory, as Neander justly observes, 'contains the germ of the whole system of spiritual despotism, intolerance, and persecution, even to the court of the Inquisition' (ibid., 3:145).

⁷According to Bruce William Jones, "Much of what is called 'determinism' in Daniel is really confidence in God's ability and willingness to save Israel" ("Ideas of History in the Book of Daniel" [Ph.D. dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 1972], p. 165. Jones goes on to say that he finds "many opportunities in the bok for the exercise of free choice. As a unit, the book is an appeal to its readers to exercise that choice, to become one of the wise and righteous, and to share in God's blessings" (ibid., p. 177). See Hardy, "An Historicist Perspective on Daniel 11" (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 1983), p. 66.

⁸Schaff, *Church History*, 3:859.