Grace Changes Everything



Part 6 – Perseverance of the Saints

Total Depravity
Unconditional Election
Limited Atonement
Irresistible Grace
Perseverance of the Saints

"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." – *WCF* 17:1

"The elect are not only redeemed by Christ and renewed by the Spirit, but also kept in faith by the almighty power of God. All those who are spiritually united to Christ through regeneration are eternally secure in Him. Nothing can separate them from the eternal and unchangeable love of God. They have been predestined to eternal glory and are therefore assured of heaven."[1]

Perseverance of the Saints in Scripture

- **Isaiah 54:10** – "For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you.
- **Jeremiah 32:40** – "I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me."
- **Matthew 18:12-14** – "What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."
- **John 3:16** – "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."
- **John 3:36** – "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."
- **John 5:24** – "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."
- **John 6:35-40** – Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."
- **John 10:27-30** – "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, 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. I and the Father are one."
- **John 17:11-12** – "And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

[1] Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Philipsburg, NJ, 2004) p. 64

While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled."

- **Romans 5:8-10** – "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life."
- **Romans 8:29-30** – "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."
- **Romans 8:35-39** – "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

  For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
  we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.
- No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."
- **Ephesians 1:13-14** – "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory."
- **Ephesians 4:30** – "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."
- **1 Thessalonians 5:23-24** – "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it."
- **1 Peter 1:3-5** – "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."
- **Jude 24-25** – "Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."

Perseverance of the Saints Explained

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints asserts that God will preserve in saving faith those whom he has chosen and called and justified. Perseverance of the Saints goes beyond the slogan "once saved always saved," in that it seeks to do justice to the Scriptural warnings concerning those members of the visible church who fall away.

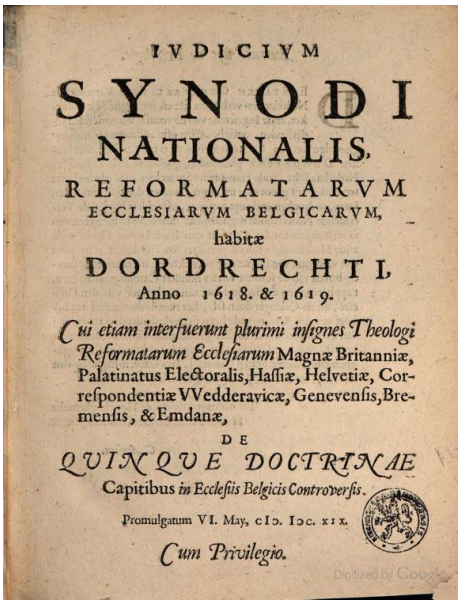
The doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints affirms God's power and faithfulness to eternally keep all his elect while at the same time offering robust assurance to those who have been genuinely born again. The doctrine also provides a means by which the elect may make sure their calling and election.

The Remonstrants rejected the confessions of the Protestant churches that the elect can never finally fall away. They asserted that the truly regenerate can fall away from grace and become truly unregenerate. What is more, they held that this process could be repeated numerous times throughout the life of a believer.

The Synod of Dort responded in several ways to the errors of the Remonstrants concerning the final perseverance of the elect. First, Dort affirmed that the truly regenerate would not be entirely free from sinning this life. Nevertheless, the elect will persevere in repentance and fleeing to Christ. Under the chapter "The Fifth Main Point of Doctrine," Dort affirms the following:

- **Article One:** Those people whom God according to his purpose calls into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord and regenerates by the Holy Spirit, God also sets free from the dominion and slavery of sin, though not entirely from the flesh and from the body of sin as long as they are in this life.

- **Article Two:** Hence daily sins of weakness arise, and blemishes cling to even the best works of saints, giving them continual cause to humble themselves before God, to flee for refuge to Christ crucified, to put the flesh to death more and more by the Spirit of supplication and by holy exercises of godliness, and to strain toward the goal of perfection, until they are freed from this body of death and reign with the Lamb of God in heaven.[2]


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SYNODI
NATIONALIS,
REFORMATARVM
ECCLESIARVM BELGICARVM,
habitæ
DORDRECHTI
Anno 1618. & 1619.
Cui etiam interfuerunt plurimi insignes Theologi Reformatarum Ecclesiarum Magnæ Britanniæ, Palatinatus Electoralis, Hassiæ, Helvetiæ, Correspondentiæ VVedderavicæ, Genevensis, Bremensis, & Emdanæ,
DE
QUINQUE DOCTRINAE
Capitibus in Ecclesiis Belgicis Controversis.
Promulgatum VI. May, cIↃ. IↃc. xix.
Cum Privilegio.

So what is to be done about the fact that even the elect continue to struggle against sin, often failing in the fight? Dort answers:

- **Article Three**: Because of these remnants of sin dwelling in them and also because of the temptations of the world and Satan, those who have been converted could not remain standing in this grace if left to their own resources. But God is faithful, mercifully strengthening them in the grace once conferred on them and powerfully preserving them in it to the end.[3]

In other words, contra the Remonstrants, Dort affirms that God does more than merely provide general access to grace so that the formerly regenerate have available a resource to once again return to a state of grace. If the sinner is left mere access to grace then it is sure that he will *not* persevere to the end. What is required is an effectual grace applied by the Holy Spirit such that the regenerate will never finally fall away.

Against the Remonstrants assertion that the regenerate can become truly lost Dort affirms:

- **Article Five**: For God, who is rich in mercy, according to the unchangeable purpose of election does not take the Holy Spirit from his own completely, even when they fall grievously. Neither does God let them fall down so far that they forfeit the grace of adoption and the state of justification, or commit the sin which leads to death (the sin against the Holy Spirit), and plunge themselves, entirely forsaken by God, into eternal ruin.[4]
- **Article Eight**: So it is not by their own merits or strength but by God's undeserved mercy that they neither forfeit faith and grace totally nor remain in their downfalls to the end and are lost. With respect to themselves this not only easily could happen, but also undoubtedly would happen; but with respect to God it cannot possibly happen. God's plan cannot be changed; God's promise cannot fail; the calling according to God's purpose cannot be revoked; the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified; and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated nor wiped out.

"Let it first be said that in declaring the eternal security of God's people it is clearer to speak of their preservation than, as is commonly done, of their perseverance. Perseverance means persistence under discouragement and contrary pressure. The assertion that believers persevere in faith and obedience despite everything is true, but the reason is that Jesus Christ through the Spirit persists in preserving them." - J.I. Packer

"The Bible teaches that true believers, real genuine Christians, shall persevere in their religion to the end of their lives. They shall never perish. They shall never be lost. They shall never be cast away. Once in Christ, they shall always be in Christ. Once made children of God by adoption and grace, they shall never cease to be His children, and become children of the devil. Once endued with the grace of the Spirit, that grace shall never be taken from them. Once pardoned and forgiven, they shall never be deprived of their pardon. Once joined to Christ by living faith, their union shall never be broken off. Once called by God into the narrow way that leads to life, they shall never be allowed to fall into hell. In a word, every man, woman,

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[2] *Canons of Dort*, 5.1 & 5.2
[3] *Canons of Dort*, 5.3
[4] *Canons of Dort* 5.6

and child on earth who receives saving grace, shall sooner or later receive eternal glory. Every soul who is once justified and washed in Christ's blood, shall at length be found safe at Christ's right hand in the day of judgment."
- J.C. Ryle

What about the warnings about falling away?

If God eternally keeps all those whom he has elected from eternity then why are we warned against falling away? While some of the following passages are not explicit warnings, they do indicate that there are conditions connected to final perseverance.

- **Matthew 24:12–13** – "And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. *But the one who endures to the end will be saved.*"
- **2 Corinthians 13:5** – "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves."
- **Galatians 6:9** – "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest *if we do not give up*."
- **Colossians 1:22–23** – "...he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, *if indeed you continue in the faith*, stable and steadfast, *not shifting from the hope of the gospel* that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister."
- **Hebrews 3:14** – "We have come to share in Christ *if we hold firmly till the end* the confidence we had at first."
- **2 Peter 1:10** – "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to *make your calling and election sure*. For if you do these things, *you will never fall*, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."
- **1 John 2:3** – "We know we have come to know him *if we obey his commands*."

Perhaps the most thorough of the warning passages is **Hebrews 10:26-31**:

> "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

Who is in such jeopardy? It is they who, having been initiated into the covenant community (in chapter 6 he writes of being "enlightened," perhaps a metaphorical reference to baptism or having heard the gospel), who have "tasted of the powers of the age to come," and who now have walked away from their profession of faith.

We may rightly call them apostates who profess faith only to turn their backs on Christ. They were in the visible covenant community. They received the sign of the covenant. They did profess faith. They benefited from the blessings of the covenant community. In short, they were members of the visible church. But, as John says, "They went out from us because they were not of us" (1 John 2:19). They were *never* united to Christ.

Such apostates (as defined above) should be in fear of the holy wrath of God. All those, whether in the visible church or outside of it, who are not covered by Christ's righteousness are in grave danger.

It is true that there is in Scripture two sides to the doctrine of the saints' perseverance. One is the gracious *preserving* of all God's elect. The other is the sure *persevering* of God's elect in the faith. The Bible does not teach a cheap grace whereby a mere professing of right belief or the praying of a "sinner's prayer" is the ultimate and final evidence of genuine regeneration. The prophets, Jesus, and the apostles all warned

God's people against a presumptuous and empty faith which only produces a veneer of godliness. Such a faith cannot save.

John Murray writes:

> "The doctrine of perseverance is the doctrine that believers *persevere*; it cannot be too strongly stressed that it is the *perseverance* of the saints. And that means that the saints, those united to Christ by the effectual call of the Father and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, will persevere unto the end. If they persevere, they endure, they continue. It is not at all that they will be saved irrespective of their perseverance or their continuance, but that they will assuredly persevere. Consequently the security that is theirs is inseparable from their perseverance."[5]

Warnings are not contrary to grace. Indeed, the warning passages in Scripture function as means by which God preserves his elect. God warns His people because He intends them to heed the warning. So the warnings and conditional statements function as means by which believers remain faithful. When a father warns a child from danger, it is not because the child may lose his status as his father's beloved. Rather, the warning is itself an expression of love and one of the means by which the father keeps his child safe. When the Scriptures warn God's flock of danger, the warning does not undermine the flock's security. It is a means toward the flock's security.

The warning passages in Scripture serve to awaken and sober the elect. They correct us when we wander into sin. They expose careless presumption and call us out of danger. In short, the warning passages help the saints to persevere in the faith.

Dort Affirms:

> "And, just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so God preserves, continues, and completes this work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments."[6]

J.I. Packer writes:

> "Sometimes the regenerate backslide and fall into gross sin. But in this they act out of character, do violence to their own new nature, and make themselves deeply miserable, so that eventually they seek and find restoration to righteousness. In retrospect, their lapse seems to them to have been madness. When regenerate believers act in character, they manifest a humble, grateful desire to please the God who saved them; and the knowledge that he is pledged to keep them safe forever simply increases this desire."[7]

What it would mean if a regenerated child of God could fall away

1. God would be robbed of glory.
   Romans 5:6-11; 8:32; Jude 24-25
2. God's purpose in redemption would fail.
   Romans 8:29-30; Philippians 1:6
3. God's will would fail to be accomplished.
   John 6:38-40
4. God would be refusing to answer the prayers of his Son.
   John 17:11, 15
5. God's power would be subordinate to man's will.
   John 10:28-29; Romans 8:35-39
6. God would prove to be faithless.
   1 Corinthians 1:7-9; 10:13; I Thessalonians 5:23-24
7. Christ will have failed in the purpose for which He died

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[5] John Murray, Redemption Accomplished and Applied (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) p. 155
[6] *Canons of Dort*, 5.14
[7] J.I. Packer, from Concise Theology

John 6:37-40; 10:14-18, 27-30
8. Christ will have failed in the purpose for which He was raised
   Romans 4:24-25
9. Christ will have failed in the purpose for which He now intercedes in the presence of the Father
   Rom. 8:31-34; 1 John 2:1-2; Heb. 7:25
10. Christ will fail to accomplish the goal for which He is to return to this earth
    John 6:40b
11. Christ will prove to have been a liar
    John 6:37; 10:27-28
12. The Holy Spirit will have failed in his work of sealing.
    2 Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30
13. The Holy Spirit will have failed in his ministry as a pledge of the future consummation of our redemption
    2 Cor. 1:21-22; 5:5

"The elect are not only redeemed by Christ and renewed by the Spirit, but also kept in faith by the almighty power of God. All those who are spiritually united to Christ through regeneration are eternally secure in Him. Nothing can separate them form the eternal and unchangeable love of God. They have been predestined to eternal glory and are therefore assured of heaven."[8]

Who cares about grace?

Before the *Synod of Dort* conducted its business, each member took a solemn oath that "I will only aim at the glory of God, the peace of the Church, and especially the preservation of the purity of doctrine." They ended with a prayer: "So help me, my Savior, Jesus Christ! I beseech him to assist me by his Holy Spirit." The delegates at Dort were joyfully serious about promoting and preserving the truth of God's grace against errors that would diminish God's glory and the assurance of the elect.

Do we care as much about defining and defending grace?

The Apostle Paul writes that "there is a remnant, chosen by grace" (Romans 11:5). He then moves to defend and define this grace, maintaining that "if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace" (Romans 11:6). Words mattered to Paul as means to teach and defend the truth. He was never content to casually speak the same vocabulary as his opponents if he knew they were using different dictionaries. He understood that people can proclaim grace while still losing the very meaning of the word.

At its very heart, the *Canons of Dort* are about the nature of God's grace — supernatural, sovereign, effecting, redeeming, and keeping grace. This glorious grace offends human pride but ultimately comforts the soul. This is the grace that the men of the Synod Dort sought to affirm and defend. Some truths – indeed, some words – are worthy of careful definitions and vigorous defense.

> "This teaching about the perseverance of true believers and saints, and about their assurance of it—a teaching which God has very richly revealed in the Word for the glory of his name and for the comfort of the godly, and which God impresses on the hearts of believers—is something which the flesh does not understand, Satan hates, the world ridicules, the ignorant and the hypocrites abuse, and the spirits of error attack. The bride of Christ, on the other hand, has always loved this teaching very tenderly and defended it steadfastly as a priceless treasure; and God, against whom no plan can avail and no strength can prevail, will ensure that the church will continue to do this. To this God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honor and glory forever. Amen."[9]

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[8] Steele, Thomas, Quinn, The Five Points of Calvinism 2nd Edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 64.
[9] *Canons of Dort*, 5.15