

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Preservation

“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.” —John 10:27-29

Introduction

In 1610, the followers of Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) produced a five-point summary of their opposition to the standard teaching of the Dutch Reformed Church. Their summary was entitled “the Remonstrance of 1610,” and its signatories were called “Remonstrants.” They identified five articles of their counter-perspective and petitioned for freedom to teach these convictions: (1) conditional election; (2) universal atonement; (3) serious depravity; (4) resistible grace; and (5) uncertain perseverance. With respect to this fifth point they stated,

That they who are united to Christ by faith are thereby furnished with abundant strength and succor sufficient to enable them to triumph over the seductions of Satan, and the allurements of sin; nevertheless they may, by the neglect of the succors, fall from grace, and, dying in such a state, may finally perish. This point was started at first doubtfully, but afterward positively as a settled doctrine. (Article 5)

The Remonstrants—who would later be called “Arminians”—believed that at conversion every believer was given the spiritual resources (“succors”) needed to remain in the faith for the rest of life. However, if the believer did not avail himself of these resources as he ought, he could be seduced by temptation, return to his old life of sin, and lose his salvation. If he then died in this state, he would perish in hell eternally.

The views of the Remonstrants were examined at the historic “Synod of Dort” (1618). Around ninety theologians from all over Europe converged in the Dutch city of Dordrecht to debate the five articles, and after six months they produced a formal response known as “the Canons of Dort.” These “canons” provided a detailed response to each of the five points of the Remonstrants’ opposition. The synod affirmed: (1) unconditional election; (2) limited atonement; (3) total depravity; (4) irresistible grace; and (5) perseverance of the saints. (These five points are often referred to as “the five points of Calvinism,” summarized by the acronym “TULIP.” But it must be remembered that they represent a response demanded by the five points of Remonstrance. Moreover, the five points, TULIP, were not intended to summarize all the key points of Reformed doctrine.)

In particular, the Canons of Dort contain a beautiful defense of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. A portion of that defense reads as follows:

Thus, it is not in consequence of their own merits or strength, but of God’s free mercy, that they do not totally fall from faith and grace, nor continue and perish finally in their backslidings; which, with respect to themselves, is not only possible, but would undoubtedly happen; but with respect to God, it is utterly impossible, since His counsel cannot be changed nor His promise fail, neither can the call according to His purpose be revoked, nor the merit, intercession and preservation of Christ be rendered ineffectual, nor the sealing of the Holy Spirit be frustrated or obliterated. (Article 8, “Of the Perseverance of the Saints,” Canons of Dort)

A. Key Terms and Definitions

The security of the believer’s salvation is not merely an issue for academics to debate. Apart from the impassioned debates of theologians and apologists, believers often pose the sincere question, “Can I lose my salvation?” The following terms must be carefully defined in response.

1. **“Preservation of the Saints.”** While the doctrine of the believer’s security is most often found under the title “perseverance of the saints,” it is best to begin with the concept of *preservation*. *Preservation* refers to **God’s unending work to sustain the faith of those whom He has made alive by the Spirit (regenerated) and united with Christ (union)**. This unending work continues all the way **from the believer’s conversion to his glorification**. In other words, *preservation* emphasizes God’s sovereign, gracious, and personal role in *preserving* every true believer’s

Key idea:
God’s unending work to sustain the faith of a believer from regeneration to glorification.

faith. Louis Berkhof explains this concept as “that continuous operation of the Holy Spirit in the believer, by which the work of divine grace that is begun in the heart, is continued and brought to completion. It is because God never forsakes His work that believers continue to stand to the very end” (*Systematic Theology*, 546). Explaining his preference for the term *preservation* over the term *perseverance*, R. C. Sproul states,

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. However, they persevere not because they are so diligent in making use of the mercies of God. The only reason we can give why any of us continue on in the faith is because we have been preserved. So I prefer the term *the preservation of the saints*, because the process by which we are kept in a state of grace is something that is accomplished by God. My confidence in my preservation is not in my ability to persevere. My confidence rests in the power of Christ to sustain me with His grace and by the power of His intercession. He is going to bring us safely home.

The concept of *preservation* is communicated in such texts as:

- John 6:37-40; 10:27-29; Rom 8:29-30, 35-39; 1 Cor 1:4-9; Eph 1:13-14; 4:30; 1 Pet 1:3-5, 23; 5:10; etc.

This preservation is *trinitarian in nature*, as it is grounded in the Father’s will, the achievements of Christ, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit.

2. “**Perseverance of the Saints.**” While *preservation* looks at the security of salvation from the perspective of what *the Triune God does*, *perseverance* looks at the security of salvation from *the perspective of the believer’s participation*. Divine sovereignty, love, and power do not negate the believer’s role in enduring to the end. That responsibility is described in the repeated exhortations made to believers to *persevere*. As Berkhof states, “The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is to the effect that **they whom God has regenerated and effectually called to a state of grace, can neither totally nor finally fall away from that state, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved**” (*Systematic Theology*, 545).

Key idea:
The believer’s effort and inevitable endurance enabled by God’s continuous empowerment.

The necessity of the believer’s perseverance is communicated in such texts as:

- Matt 10:22; John 8:31-32; 15:5-6; 1 Tim 1:18-19; 4:16; 2 Pet 1:5-11; etc.

It is important to note that the quality of perseverance is a key “test” of the authenticity of one’s faith. It is certainly not that perseverance is what qualifies a person for eternal life. Not at all. Eternal life is a gift given by God on the basis of His grace, not on the basis of a person’s merit—past, present, or future. Rather, when true faith is present in a person’s life, that faith is of such a supernatural and transformative nature that it will inevitably result in endurance. The true believer will still stumble. He will still commit sin. He may even experience prolonged periods of stubborn disobedience. But he will recognize and return to his Lord and Savior, Jesus. In the words of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, “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” (17.1).

3. “**Eternal Security.**” The phrase “eternal security” accurately describes the state of the believer in Jesus Christ: he is *eternally secure*. As John 3:16 states, “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” This gift of eternal life is not held out as a promise to be given at the end of life. It is a promise that is described as beginning *in the present*—beginning at the very first heartbeat of faith. And because this life is *eternal* in nature, it can never die. The repeated references to *eternal* life in John’s Gospel make this evident (e.g., John 3:36; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 10:28; 17:3).

But the terminology of “eternal security”—and especially the motto “once saved, always saved”—has been abused by some, especially those of the Free Grace Theology movement (see “Sanctification, Pt 3”). These phrases have been used to describe the state of “carnal Christians”—a supposed category of Christians who have claimed the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life, but have never experienced repentance or sanctification, who do not acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, and who continue to love their sin with the same dedication as before they heard about the gospel. To defend this supposed classification of Christians,

proponents say that such carnal Christians nonetheless have eternal security. Since they have been saved, they are always saved.

To avoid the implications created by this misuse of these phrases, “preservation of the saints” and “perseverance of the saints” are preferred. Scripture nowhere recognizes the category of carnal Christians, much less their security, and instead teaches that “No one who is born of God practices [continues in] sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin [as one enslaved to sin], because he is born of God” (1 John 3:9). Thus, as John Murray (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 160-61) states,

In order to place the doctrine of perseverance in proper light we need to know what it is not. It does not mean that every one who professes faith in Christ and who is accepted as a believer in the fellowship of the saints is secure for eternity and may entertain the assurance of salvation.

4. “**Apostasy.**” This term is an essential part of the discussion, but will be covered in the future session entitled “Assurance” (5/6/2020).

B. Essential Characteristics

The following qualities are part of a biblical theology of God’s preservation of the saints:

1. **The doctrine of preservation is consistent with *sola gratia*.** As part of their recovery of the gospel, the Reformers asserted *sola gratia*—that salvation is “by grace alone.” This applies not only to the entrance into salvation, but to its entire experience. It is always *by grace alone*, never by merit. Rom 4:16; 6:23; Eph 2:8-9.

“The denial of the doctrine of perseverance virtually makes the salvation of man dependent on the human will rather than on the grace of God.” —Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 549

2. **The doctrine of preservation applies to the regenerate, not to mere professors.** The failure to recognize the vast numbers of *false professors* in Christendom today is what leads either to the Free Grace Theology understanding of eternal security, or to the Arminian understanding of the loss of salvation. But neither are necessary. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that not everyone who professes to be a believer is one in reality.

- Matt 7:13-14, 21; 13:18-23; the example of Judas Iscariot; 1 Tim 4:1; 1 John 2:19

John Murray states,

It is possible to give all the outward signs of faith in Christ and obedience to him, to witness for a time a good confession and show great zeal for Christ and his kingdom and then lose all interest and become indifferent, if not hostile, to the claims of Christ and of his kingdom. . . . The doctrine of perseverance is the doctrine that believers *persevere*; it cannot be too strongly stressed that it is the *perseverance* of the saints. (*Redemption Accomplished & Applied*, 161, 164)

“If you have it—that is, if you have genuine faith and are in a state of saving grace—you will never lose it. If you lose it, you never had it.” — R. C. Sproul

3. **The doctrine of preservation includes the participation of the believer.** God’s power to *preserve* the believer enables and works in conjunction with the believer’s effort to *persevere*. There is a *necessary partnership* involved in keeping the faith, but it is not a 50/50 relationship. God wholly remains the ultimate cause of the believer’s perseverance; the believer’s effort is the secondary cause of his perseverance. This same truth applied to the doctrine of progressive sanctification, as Paul states, “work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13). It is as if God says, “Persevere in your faith . . . for it is God who preserves you!” Herman Bavinck writes,

Scripture speaks of the perseverance of the saints in the same way it does about sanctification. It admonishes believer to persevere to the end (Matt 24:13; Rom 2:7-8); to remain in Christ, in his word, in his love (John 15:1-10; 1 John 2:6,

24, 27; 3:6, 24; 4:12ff); to continue in the faith, not shifting (Col 1:23; Heb 2:1; 3:14; 6:11); to be faithful to death (Rev 2:10, 26). (*Reformed Dogmatics*, 4.266)

4. The doctrine of preservation incorporates God's use of means. Even when we affirm that God *preserves* every true believer, we seldom ask the question, *How?* Answer: He does this through *various means*. For example, consider that God sovereignly *elects* sinners unto salvation (see "Election," 10/2/2019), yet He achieves this through the *means* of the preacher who proclaims the gospel (Rom 10:14-15). In the same way, God sovereignly *keeps* believers faithful to the end, and He achieves this also through *means*. The means used to preserve the believer include: watchfulness (2 John 8); the study of Scripture (Ps 37:11); prayer (1 Pet 4:7); fellowship with believers (Heb 10:24-25); church discipline (Matt 18:15-20); trials (Rom 5:1-5; James 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-9); the intercession of Jesus and the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:26-27, 31-34; Heb 7:23-25; 1 John 2:1); etc. This is precisely where the *warning passages* of Scripture have their role. Those texts which warn the Christian about the dangers of failure are used by God to keep him on the narrow way.

5. The doctrine of preservation is never a license for sin. Rom 6:1-2; 1 John 3:9-10; etc. As Murray states,

It is not true that the believer is secure however much he may fall into sin and unfaithfulness. Why is this not true? It is not true because it sets up an impossible combination. It is true that a believer sins; he may fall into grievous sin and backslide for lengthy periods. But it is also true that a believer cannot abandon himself to sin. (*Redemption Accomplished & Applied*, 163)

6. The doctrine of preservation is based on the character of God, not of the believer. It is crucial to remember that the believer's endurance to the end is not based on his own willing and working, but on the willing and working of God. God's *keeping of believers* is tantamount to the *keeping of His Word*, and it is impossible for God to lie. God's *preservation of believers* is synonymous with the *preservation of His omnipotence*, and it is impossible for God to fail.

- Phil 1:6; 1 Thess 5:23-24; 2 Thess 3:3-4; Rom 8:29-30, 31-30

7. The doctrine of preservation rightfully leads to humility, confidence, and worship. Challenges to this doctrine arise because of the suspicion that the promise of divine preservation is *too good to be true*, or that it will *surely be abused*. But the gospel *is* good news—the very best news. And the mere potential for abuse of this doctrine cannot negate its truthfulness, any more than the abuse of the patience of God negates His character. Rightly understood, this doctrine inspires humble adoration of the greatness and goodness of God.

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: John 10:27-29

Recommended Reading:

- MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 644-49.
- John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished & Applied*, chapter 8, "Perseverance."
Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chapter 40, "The Perseverance of the Saints."

Homework:

- In your own words, define the concepts of *the preservation of the saints* and the *perseverance of the saints*. These concepts are both part of the doctrine of salvation, but emphasize slightly different things. Explain.
- It is common in our day to use the phrases "eternal security" or "once saved, always saved." Although these sayings communicate truth, they are also frequently misused. Explain how these phrases are twisted.
- The doctrine of preservation should lead us to profound worship as we contemplate the unfathomable riches of God's grace—evident not only in conversion, but in our endurance. Spend time this week singing through the three hymns listed below (in *Hymns of Grace*). Give thanks to the Lord for the truths these hymns articulate.

Hymns: "Christ Will Hold Me Fast" (#388); "It Is Well with My Soul" (#407); "His Forever" (#156)

This Week's Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: April 30 – "Intercession"