



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

TRANSCRIPT

The Perseverance of the Saints

“Once Saved, Always Saved; or the Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints - II”

[Message] The general theme of this series of messages is “Once Saved, Always Saved; or the Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints.” This is the second of four messages on the theme. I hope you have your Bible before you and if you do we will be looking at John 11, verse 42, John 14, verse 16 and 17, Romans chapter 5 verse 10 and 11, and Ephesians chapter 1 verse 13 and 14, among a few other passages today. Once saved, or always saved?

We began our study of the perseverance of the saints in our last time together, and I said that I preferred the term the doctrine of eternal life as a more accurate term. But I admitted that after such long usage of the term the perseverance of the saints, I probably would be unable to get people to think more clearly on the point. We distinguished the doctrine of assurance from the doctrine of eternal life in this way; assurance has to do with our certainty of the possession of spiritual life now, while the doctrine of eternal life with our certainty of the possession of the life now and forever.

We also defined the doctrine properly for much of the misunderstanding that has arisen concerning it is traceable to misunderstanding concerning the essential teaching of it. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, or the doctrine of eternal life, is the biblical teaching that God secures in grace the salvation of true believers, keeping them

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from sinning as a practice and preserving them from apostasy for eternal life. We persevere because he preserves.

We concluded our study discussing, but not completing, the biblical defense of the doctrine. We demonstrated that the believer is secure because of the promises of the Father. And we looked at Romans 8:28-30, five divine and sovereign acts; foreknowledge, foreordination, calling, justification, and glorification. Certain as to the accomplishment guarantee our future. Second, we showed that the believer was saved because of the power of the Father. And we looked at 1 Peter chapter 1 and verse 5, infinite power at work in keeping us. And finally, we are secure because of the promise of the Son, a promise that includes the mountain tops and the valleys of life, the tempests and the calms, time and eternity. Jesus said, “I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish.”

This doctrine is held by those who believe in sovereign grace. It is not held by those who believe in conditional grace, as do the Arminian theologians. H.A. Ironside, the well known expositor of God’s word, pastor for many years of the Moody Church in Chicago, began his Christian life under an Arminian teacher who used to say to him, “Getting to heaven is like riding a bicycle. If I stop pedaling I will fall off.” The only problem with that illustration is this; getting to heaven is not like riding a bicycle. Getting to heaven is like being a sheep and being tended by a divine shepherd.

The believer is secure because of the prayer of the Son also. In John 17, in that remarkable prayer usually called our Lord’s high priestly prayer, Jesus twice prayed that the Father would keep the ones given to him by the Father. His words were, “And now I’m no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to Thee, holy Father keep them in Thine own name which Thou hast given me, that they may be one even as we are one.” verse 15. Now one might ask, “Are the prayers of the Son of God

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answered affirmatively?” In answer to the question, look with me at John 11:41-44 as Jesus stands at the tomb of Lazarus and prays,

“And Jesus lifted up his eyes (the Scriptures say) and said, ‘Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard me. I knew that Thou hearest me always, but I have said this, on account of the people standing by that they may believe that Thou didst send me.’ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out (the Scriptures say).”

That answers the question. Our Lord’s prayers are always answered and he has asked the Father to keep the ones the Father gave to him. We can be sure that we are being kept. Much more however, can be said. The Lord who prayed in the high priestly prayer that we be kept is now at the right hand of the Father, and continually adds his intercession to that end.

One of the leading theologians of the present day has some rather exciting words to say on the point. He writes, “Paul speaks briefly but thoroughly about this intercession in his doxology to the powerful love of God in Jesus Christ, Romans 8:31 and following.” He reminds us, as he continues his words in his work, “He utters the defiant words, ‘Who is he that condemneth?’ He dares to speak these words because of our acquittal in Christ who has died and indeed what is more who has risen again. Then follows suddenly those words whose riches the church has never exhausted, ‘who also maketh intercession for us,’ Romans 8:34. Paul speaks of the exalted Christ and after this his jubilation reaches it’s highest peak, ‘who will separate us from the love of Christ,’ all present and future tribulations, all threats and dangers are summarized, but they fall away or rather, they are covered over by the one great love.” In this doxology it is primarily the intercession of Christ which has commanded attention.

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Many questions may arise about the nature and meaning of this prayer, but the first impression that this passage gives can be summarized by what someone wrote in the year 1742 about the work of the glorified Lord in heaven. He referred to John's statement in his gospel that “If all that which Jesus did on earth had been written down the world could not have contained the books. How much less” he continued “would the world contain the books if all that the glorified Lord had done could be written down.” Apparently, there is an immediate connection between the intercession of Christ in Romans 8 and the statement that nothing shall separate us from the love of God a few verses later on.

And then, another reason for the security of the believer is that he is secure because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. In John chapter 14, verses 16 and 17 in the upper room discourse, the Lord Jesus gave this marvelous promise to the apostles, “And I will pray the Father and he will give you another counselor to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him, but ye know him for he dwells with you and will be in you.” It is quite plain from this astounding promise that the believer and all believers now possess the Holy Spirit. And further, that they are secure in the possession of eternal life. Notice the phrase, “forever.” The Spirit, our Lord affirms, will be with us forever. If that is so, then how can the saints ever lose their salvation? It is impossible. The Spirit may be grieved, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:30, but not grieved away. He may be quenched, but not extinguished.

A final reason for or us, the sixth reason for the believer's security is because of the permanence of the Spirit's sealing work. In Ephesians 1:13-14 Paul writes, “In him you also who have heard the word of truth the gospel of your salvation and have believed in him were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it to the praise of his glory.” The apostle states

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that the sealing ministry of the Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance, which surely indicates that we shall have it. To have him as the guarantee is to have a divine guarantee. There can be nothing more secure.

Sealing is both an ancient and a modern practice. We know it today in many of our legal practices. Since the seal is the guarantee of genuineness and inviolability. In the past it often indicated ownership. It indicated security. It also indicated a finished transaction. All of these illustrations are found in holy Scripture. These ideas are suitable in expressing the meaning of the Spirit's sealing of the believer in Christ. Our security is enormous, dependant ultimately on the word and power of the triune God. There is another text in Ephesians that bears on the doctrine. In a later chapter Paul writes, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” To be sealed for the day of redemption is to be certain of the full possession of that redemption eternally.

And finally, our seventh biblical reason, the believer is secure because of the reconciliation of the believer through Christ. My final biblical defense of the doctrine, although others might be given, is found in Romans 5:10 and 11 where Paul writes,

“For if when 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. Not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have now received our reconciliation.”

The argument is another of Paul's “much more” or *a fortiori* arguments. The reasoning is rather simple, and it goes like this. If when we were God's enemies, he nevertheless moved on our hearts through the death of his Son, applied of course by the Spirit, to transform us from enmity to amity, or friendship, with God, then much more

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certainly will he save us now that we are his friends. Paul means simply that if God acted so favorably to us as enemies it is logically and biblically required that he treat us at least as well since we are now his friends through reconciliation. The apostle calls this a much more argument, and it certainly is that. Added to the necessity of this favorable action toward us is the fact that we now share in his life. The expression in verse 10 of Romans 5 “saved by his life” is literally, “saved in his life” that is, saved in that we share in his life. In other words, if he saved us when we were enemies, now that we are his friends he will surely do the lesser work, and that is, keep us saved. Put in other words, if he did the best thing for us in reconciling us, he will surely do the rest and keep us. If he did the most he could do for us when we were his enemies, he will do the lesser thing and keep us.

One final point, in verse 11 the words “we also rejoice” represent a participle in the original text. It may be rendered literally, “rejoicing.” And it agrees with the subject of the verb “we shall be saved” of verse 10. We might paraphrase verse 11 in this way, “And not only shall we be saved in his life, but also we shall be saved rejoicing in God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have now received our reconciliation.” That’s Paul’s final touch. We’re certain to be saved and furthermore, we shall be saved rejoicing. No entering of heaven with lugubrious woebegone countenances. We shall enter heaven rejoicing in God the author of all grace to us. The hymn writer has described God’s determination to save his saints beautifully, “The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose I will not, I will not dessert to his foes, that soul though all hell should endeavor to shake I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.”

We come now to the third of our major divisions and we’re looking now at the theological defense of the doctrine. And it’s always helpful in matters like this to look at the history of the treatment of doctrines first. And so we’ll now engage in a bit of consideration of history concerning the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. The

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answers to the question of the perseverance of the saints have not of course been uniform. For example, the church of Rome has denied the perseverance of the saints as a teaching of their church. Salvation may be lost, the church affirms, by mortal sin. The council of Trent puts it this way, “All mortal sins render men children of wrath and enemies of God.” In fact, the council of Trent strongly states “If anyone maintains that a man once justified cannot lose grace, and therefore that he who falls in sins never was truly justified, let him be accursed.”

However to meet the problem of rebaptism, which is posed by the doctrine of losable grace and salvation, that is, when a person comes back to faith in Christ, why should he not be baptized again, the church says that three of the seven sacraments baptism, confirmation, and holy orders, imprint an inerasable character, character *indelibelus*, and may not be repeated. “This is a mysterious seal in the sow,” the church says, “in effect; it is lingering life and can be healed with confession and penance, penance without rebaptism.”

Lutherans vary somewhat, but generally speak of repeatable regeneration and repeatable justification. They distinguish as Rome between mortal and venial sins. Some say that regenerated ones may fall totally and finally, but the elect can only fall totally, not finally. In the Lutheran formula of concord are these words, “That false opinion is to be earnestly confuted and rejected which certain fain, that faith and realize justification and salvation itself cannot be lost by any sins or crimes whatsoever. And also,” they write, “we condemn that dogma that faith in Christ is not lost and that the Holy Spirit continues to dwell nonetheless in a man although he knowingly and willingly sins and that the sanctified and elect retain the Holy Spirit although they fall into adulteries or other crimes and persevere in them.” One can see from this of course, some misunderstanding of the kind of doctrine that I have been presenting to you.

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And finally, on the Augsburg Confession it is stated, “Faith cannot coexist with mortal sin.” Arminians are of two types; liberal and evangelical. The latter generally called Wesleyan Arminianism. The liberal Arminians have believed that regenerated men may be saved and lost, but one of the elect cannot. They make the distinction between sins that Lutherans make. James Arminius, the father of Arminianism, who actually died as a member of the reformed church, never wholly abandoned belief in the perseverance of the saints, but his followers did. The Wesleyans and the Pentecostals generally believe that any saved or regenerated man may be lost because of either one of two reasons; any willful sin, and second apostasy from Christ. Reformed Christians generally associated with presbyterian churches and churches of like faith and order, and ordinarily the Baptists, believe that the truly regenerated and saved person will persevere to the end and cannot be lost. In the Westminster Confession of Faith are these sentences, “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 perseverance therein. This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will,” notice that “not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them and the nature of the covenant of grace from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.” It has been said of the Methodist that he knows that he has salvation, but he is afraid that he may lose it. And of the Presbyterian it has been said that he knows that he cannot lose his salvation, but that he is afraid that he may not have it. Perhaps that does express something of the tension of these views.

Now I want to turn to the first of the theological arguments for the perseverance of the saints or for the doctrine of eternal life. And the first argument for perseverance is from the doctrine of election. We have discussed the direct scriptural support of the

doctrine of perseverance. I gave seven scriptural reasons and certainly enough to satisfy me, but now we're turning to consider the theological and biblically logical support for the teaching. This teaching is of a theological type, but just as biblical in its force. The Bible speaks plainly of the election of the people of God from the mass of the world. We will not debate at this point the justification of God's action, but anyone who reads the Bible will surely see that over and over again reference is made to God's electing action. I'll simply sight a few of the passages that clearly affirm the doctrine. For example, Paul writes to the Ephesians, in Ephesians chapter 1 and verse 4, "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love." That is clear and to the point, the Ephesians believers had been chosen, or elected, by God. Using another of the words for divine election, predestination, which stresses the goal for which one is chosen, Paul writes in Romans 8:29, "for whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son that he might be the first born among many brethren."

Finally to simplify the matter, let me sight 2 Thessalonians 2:13, "But we are bound" Paul says, "to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren, the loved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth." Now it should be clear to a reader of God's revelation, the Bible, that election is not simply election to the service of the Lord, surely a facet of the teaching, but election to salvation, as Paul states in 2 Thessalonians 2:13. That's the purpose of election, salvation, growth in holiness, amid service of the Lord, and final glorification and enjoyment of the God of our gracious salvation throughout the ages of eternity. The barriers of sin and the human will are mercifully removed by God and we're given eternal life.

Election then is election to salvation and not simply to privilege or to the enjoyment of the means of salvation, but through these means to salvation itself. If this

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be the doctrine, and it is, then it follows inevitably that all who are elected to salvation shall obtain salvation. To suppose that persons elected to salvation fail to obtain salvation is to render election inconsequential and inoperative, a slander aimed at the glory of the sovereign and omnipotent God.

The argument therefore, for the doctrine of election is also an argument for the doctrine of perseverance. It is clear that these two points of the so-called five points of Calvinism stand together and are reciprocal. Every proof of election is a proof of perseverance. And every proof of eternal life or the perseverance of the saints is ultimately a proof of election. And election then without involving a keeping power would be no real election.

The second of the theological arguments is the argument for perseverance from God's plan of salvation. Evangelicals believe that the work of redemption by the Lord Jesus Christ is a finished work. Did not Jesus say while bearing our sins on the cross, “It is finished” John chapter 19 and verse 30? Well now if my salvation which he has supposed to have purchased with his atoning blood depends upon my keeping myself, then it cannot be said that he finished the work. It is unfinished, and under such circumstances it might be said that I have finished the work, Jesus started it, I finished it, God forbid. To use Paul's words, salvation then would no longer be by grace, but by grace and works. That cannot be, as the Scriptures so plainly state, “For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

May I conclude, for lack of time and space, I reserve the conclusion of the theological defense of the perseverance of the saints for our next study. There I will argue for perseverance from the doctrine of union with Christ, from the ordinances, why is it that no one in Scripture is said to have been baptized twice for salvation, from the nature of discipline and from the doctrine of sin itself.

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May I conclude with a question, applicable to all of us, regardless of how we feel at this point about our continuance in the faith, have we before God acknowledged our sin and Christ's atoning sacrifice on Calvary's cross? Will you ask yourself that question? And have we rested upon the, rested our spirits upon the merits of Christ for eternal life? May we ask ourselves that question. That decision you make at this moment, wherever you may be, in your bedroom, home or automobile, you may, as I say, you may make it right now. The confession of your need and your trust in Christ should be made personally and within your heart to the Lord. I urge you to consider your condition before God, and to believe in Christ and his saving work as the Philippian jailor did in responding to Paul's "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved in thy house" Acts 16:31. And one of the marvelous things about this is that that salvation that God gives in grace to sinners, who come to him through Christ, is eternal life. My prayer is that you decide now.

Next week the third of our series on the theme of once saved always saved will follow at this same time. I hope you'll be listening then.