



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 – I”

[Message] The general theme of our new series of messages, beginning today, is “Once Saved, Always Saved; or the Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints.” This is the first of four messages on the theme. I hope you have your Bible before you and if you do we will be looking at Romans 8:28-30, 1 Peter chapter 1 and verse 5, and John 10:28 and 29 in our study today. Sometimes the term the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer is used of the teaching, but the term historically used has been the perseverance of the saints.

As for me, while I do not seriously object to the two terms, I still prefer a third designation, namely, the doctrine of eternal life. The two preceding designations have the disadvantage of being non biblical expressions, while the term I like is a simple biblical term. All are acquainted with the biblical term eternal life. So I will try to concentrate on that expression. Although I’m afraid it’s impossible for anyone to change the common usage at this late date.

Perhaps it will help in the beginning to focus on the doctrine historically. The doctrine of eternal life, or as it has been called historically, the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, is one of the five points of Calvinism, or more accurately, of the reformed doctrine of salvation. The five points were responses to the Remonstrants,

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antecedents of Arminianism, who objected to aspects of reformed theology in the 17th Century. The Remonstrants were members of the reformed church in the Netherlands. They objected to the prevailing doctrine of their church regarding predestination, the human will, and some other matters. The issues led to the Synod of Dort in the years 1618 and 1619, where the contra Remonstrants, or the Calvinists, prevailed. The canons of the Synod of Dort summarize the orthodox position and affirm the doctrine of total depravity, unconditional election, particular redemption, commonly and erroneously called limited atonement, since both Arminians and Calvinists limit the atonement, the former, the Arminians, limiting its efficacy, the latter, the Calvinists, limiting its design, irresistible, or effectual grace, and the perseverance of the saints. This orthodox teaching is represented in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Westminster Confession, as well as such Baptists creedal statements as the London and Philadelphia Confessions of Faith. The Remonstrants, the followers of Arminius, believe that man was depraved but not totally, that God elects on the basis of foreseen faith, that Christ died with the intent of saving all men, that divine grace may be effectually resisted, and that the perseverance of the saved was not clearly taught.

Before we begin our defense of the doctrine of eternal life, or the perseverance of the saints, we need to clarify the issue a bit. In the first place, many believers have echoed the sentiments of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who said that he believed not so much in perseverance of the saints as in the perseverance of the Savior. That squares with Professor Louis Berkoff's contention, “It is strictly speaking, not man but God who perseveres.” I think that is true and I think that we need to keep that in mind as we go along. The popular attitude is often represented by the statements of rural believers, both white and black, who speak lyrically, “I am sometimes up and sometimes down, but still my soul am heavenly bound.”

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Let me now make a clarifying distinction and then give a definition, an important distinction. We must properly distinguish the assurance of salvation from perseverance in salvation. The doctrine of assurance has to do with our certainty of the possession of salvation now. The doctrine of perseverance, or of eternal life, has to do with our certainty of the possession of salvation now and forever. And now, a definition of the doctrine, it's extremely important for us to define the doctrine accurately, for much of the misunderstanding that surrounds it is the product of the failure to really understand the doctrinal teaching itself. Let's first set out a negative caveat. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, or of eternal life, is not a teaching that a professed believer in the Lord Jesus Christ is saved no matter what his practices in life may be. Unfortunately, this is the view that many have of the doctrine, and since they have it, they have some sensible objections to it. The Scriptures make it very plain that a genuine believer in the Lord Jesus Christ must produce spiritual fruit, either before God or before man. That is the divine design of salvation. One can see that in the familiar passages, Ephesians 2:8-10 and Titus chapter 3 and verse 8, where in both of these passages the Apostle Paul makes it plain that God saves men with, one of the primary purposes, the doing of works that are fruitful and can be called good. Therefore, the Bible teaches that a truly regenerate man possesses a renewed nature and cannot live as he lived before his saving experience.

I once heard Alfred Gibbs, a faithful worker, now with the Lord, tell a story of a banker friend of his from Scotland who was saved in a small gospel hall there. The banker's friends, learning that he had been converted in the gospel hall and knowing something of the views of those who worshiped there, said to him, “Ah, now you believe once saved always saved.” The banker replied, “Yes.” They then said, “Then you believe that you can do what you like.” He replied wisely, “Yes I do, but I've got different likes now.” That puts it very well I think.

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A further point that ought to be made is that a believer, if he falls into sin, brings himself under the spiritual discipline of his heavenly Father. For this reason too, he cannot persist in moral disobedience without suffering the heavy hand of spiritual and physical discipline from a caring Father. One only has to remember the passages that the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:29-30 and 1 Corinthians chapter 5, where he warns the Corinthians that persistence in continual sin leads to discipline and ultimately even to the possibility of physical death. The idea that once saved we can live as we please because we believe in our perseverance in the possession of eternal life, also overlooks the biblical teaching on the spiritual rewards of a believer for faithful service. Look at such passages as 2 Timothy, chapter 4 and verse 8, 1 Peter chapter 5 and verse 4, and Revelation chapters 2 and 3 have a number of references to this.

Now let's define the doctrine positively. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints teaches that God secures in grace the salvation of true believers, keeping them from sinning as a practice, and preserving them from apostasy for life eternal. He preserves, we persevere as the result. May I cite that definition again, the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints teaches that God secures in grace the salvation of true believers, keeping them from sinning as a practice, and preserving them from apostasy for life eternal. He preserves, we persevere as the result. The Apostle John, referring to the false professors who had left the fellowship of the believers and the assembly writes, “They went out from us, but they were not really of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us, but they went out in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us,” 1 John 2 and verse 19. The text plainly teaches the perseverance of the saints, but it is not designed to lull us into a false sense of security. The evidence of the possession of eternal life includes continuance in the good work that God has begun. As Jonathan Edwards once said, “The sure pure proof of election is that one perseveres to the end.”

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We turn now to a biblical defense of the doctrine. In the final analysis it's what the Bible says that really counts, is it not. And first of all, let me state it this way. The believer is secure because of the purpose of the Father. There are numerous passages that support this, but we shall concentrate on only a few. Our first passage is Romans 8:28-30 where Paul writes,

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God to them who are the called according to his purpose, for whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren, moreover, whom he did predestinate them he also called, and whom he called them he also justified, and whom he justified them he also glorified.”

The purpose of God mentioned in verse 28 is the cause of the divine continuing providence mentioned in the verse. While the loving of God is the human condition, for the enjoyment of the providence, the divine purpose is expounded in verses 29 and 30, and it involves five sovereign acts. The first two mentioned in verse 28, God's foreknowledge and predestination, represent pre temporal acts, while the three mentioned in verse 30, God's calling, justification and glorification, are temporal acts. All are grounded in him alone. The final act, seen in the word glorified, is put by Paul in past time, although it's a future act, simply because it's so certain to take place.

Now I want you to notice the apostle's use of his pronouns in verse 30. This marvelous verse we want to keep before us for a few moments, “moreover whom he did predestinate them he also called and whom he called them he also justified, and whom he justified, them he also glorified.” Now that marvelous text has an interesting teaching. Notice the pronouns then, “whom he called, them he justified.” Now in the previous statement he has said, “moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called.” Was

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anyone lost in the process of moving from predestination to calling? Then there follows the text, “whom he called, them he justified” which I just cited. Was anyone lost in the process of calling and justification? And finally, Paul concludes with, “and whom he justified, them he also glorified.” A glorification so certain that Paul writes, “glorified” not will glorify, but “glorified,” so certain that he puts it in past time. Is anyone lost in the process then, “whom he justified, them he also glorified.” In other words, the divine purpose accomplished in five great sovereign acts is certain to reach its goal for every believer foreknown in ages past by God. Not a single one is lost, nor can be lost.

How can we then say that it is possible for a called and justified believer in Christ to lose his salvation? It is an impossibility, for our salvation is grounded in the eternal purpose of God. The apostle reiterates the thought in 2 Timothy chapter 1 and verse 9, a text that I’ll just read, “Who hath saved us and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.” And our Lord too emphasizes the certain accomplishment of the will of the Father expressed to him in pre temporal times. He says, “And this is the Father’s will, which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. All of God’s elect shall finally be raised by the Lord Jesus Christ,” that’s John 6, verse 39. Standing behind the certainty of our salvation is God’s faithfulness to his calling, to his eternal love, to his providential care over us, and his immutability. Speaking of God’s election before time, Spurgeon used to say exultingly, “I’m so glad that he chose me before he saw me because if he had waited until he saw me, he might not have wanted me.”

Now secondly, the believer is secure because of the power of the Father. The infinite power of the Father at work for our safety stands behind each believer to keep them in union with him by virtue of the finished work of our representative mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is seen in 1 Peter 1 and verse 5 where the apostle writes, “who are

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kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” The word rendered in the Authorized Version by “are kept,” in the New English Bible “under the protection of,” in the NIV “are shielded,” is a word often used of military garrisoning. One of the commentators makes this comment, “Here faith is the garrison which keeps the soul or the church safe till its Lord comes and raises the siege. Here, as generally in Peter, faith is very close to hope and has the future in view. That prospect is given, and supported by God himself, through his omnipotent power until that future salvation upon which faith rests is our personal possession.”

There comes to my mind the great incident in which our Lord and Peter, let us not forget that, Peter walked on the water too, in the days of his flesh. We know the story well. After Peter’s fear and awe had abated at seeing our Lord walking on the water, he like the others in the little boat, thought they had seen a ghost. He asked, “Lord, if it be Thou, bid me come unto Thee on the water,” Matthew 14 and verse 28. When Jesus replied, “Come” marvel of marvels, Peter clamored out of the boat and walked on the water toward our Lord. In fact, he walked up so close to our Lord that Jesus was able to stretch out his hand and catch him. Evidently, Peter had walked quite a distance on that water. As he walked, Peter seeing the wind boisterous became afraid and began to sink in the liquid ferocity of the lake as he reached our Lord. His faith began to fail him as he took his eyes off of our Lord and rested them upon the angry billows. Now what was our Lord’s response? Was it, “Too bad Peter, you took your eyes off me, so long, good bye.” Well hardly, in fact, the sense of the almighty greatness of our Lord prompted Peter as he sank to utter the prayer of desperate faith, “Lord, save me.” Quite a different prayer from the way our preachers pray the pastoral prayers on Sunday morning. But this one our Lord heard. Our Lord immediately caught him, saved him and chided him for his weakness, “Oh thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?” Matthew 14, verse 31.

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The incident reminds us of our Lord’s faithful commitment to us. We are safe in him through the mighty power of God and we respond as the stanza of the hymn states it, “For through the strain and stress of life, my thread of faith may break, the cable of his faithfulness no storm can ever shake.” I think I read that wrong. It’s, “for though the strain and stress of life my thread of faith may break, the cable of his faithfulness no storm can ever shake.”

Now secondly, the believer is secured because of the promise of the Son. I say secondly, I think that’s the third of the reasons that we are giving this time. The believer’s secure because of the promise of the Son. For our final text in this first study we turn to John 10:27-30 where our Lord says, “My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me. And I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.” It is quite plain that this statement represents no proviso on the part of the Lord, but a majestic and unconditional promise, “I give unto them eternal life.” What more can be said concerning the certainty of eternal life for his sheep? And the promise includes the mountain tops and the valleys of life, the tempests and the calms of life, time and eternity.

We notice only a few things. First, take a careful look at the term “eternal life.” Jesus does not say, “I give unto them six months life” nor “five years life” nor “eternal life until one sins.” The life he gives is eternal. If it can be lost, it’s not eternal life that believer’s receive.

And second, in order to emphasize the point our Lord adds, “and they shall never perish.” The construction in the original text is the strongest way that one can express an emphatic negation. In fact, it would not be wrong to render the clause, “and they shall by no means ever perish.” Again, if the eternal life given by our Lord can be lost, then this statement cannot be true, and our Lord is proven guilty of uttering a falsehood, God

forbid. Our Lord continues his marvelous promise with “neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.”

Many years ago I was one of the speakers at a Bible conference in New Jersey. Following one of the meetings a lady approached me after I had spoke on the meaning of Paul’s reference to falling from grace in Galatians 5:4. I had pointed out that the expression “fallen from grace” in the context of Galatians meant fallen from the grace principle of salvation into legalism by adding the requirement of the right of circumcision to faith in Christ. She said to me, “Many point to the ‘any man’ of John 10:29 and say that Satan can pluck us out of his hand. What about that?” Well, it was a simple matter to point her to the Greek text, which I had in my hands, which has the word *tis*, which means any one. The word includes human beings, Satan, and even ourselves. “No one,” not simply no man, “no one,” the Greek text says, “can pluck us out of his hand.”

And finally, to labor the text no more, notice the words of verse 29, “my Father which gave them me, is greater than all and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand.” Thus, we have two sources of comfort, the shepherd’s hands and the Father’s hands. This double protection from the infinite and omnipotent Father and Son faintly illustrated by money, not only in a bank but also in the bank’s vault, is beyond our comprehension, inviolable protection indeed.

A few words by way of conclusion. Let me close with a word for believers and a word for unbelievers. For believers, let me point out that Jesus says in verse 28, “they shall never perish.” Spurgeon has a telling word here, “See then Christian, you may be deprived of a thousand things without any violation of the promise. The promise is not that the ship shall not go to the bottom, but that the passengers shall get to the shore. The promise is not that the house shall not be burned. The pledge is that those who are in the house shall escape. They never perish.” That’s a marvelous few sentences. How beautifully practical this marvelous doctrine is for our lives. Berkouwer has written, “It’s

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not a matter of chance that when the cannons” he refers to the cannons of the Synod of Dort “defend the perseverance of the saints, they speak of Christ, the shepherd of the sheep.” There is no more adequate way to confess the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. The doctrine of eternal life is simply the teaching that Christ performs perfectly his work as the good and great shepherd of the sheep.

A final word for those of you who may belong still to the company of the unbelievers, the lost, Jesus says, “I give unto them eternal life.” That can only mean that we cannot earn or deserve the life. He gives it. In other words, as Paul would also put it, God justifies the ungodly. Why not acknowledge your lost condition and take the gift of eternal life that Jesus freely offers sinners. You may do that right now, within your heart, and receive the gift of eternal life.

The second of the series on this theme of “Once Save Always Saved” will follow next week at this time. I hope you’ll be listening then.