



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 - III”

[Message] The general theme of our series of messages has been “Once Saved or Always Saved; or the Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints.” This is the third of four messages on this general theme. I hope you have the Bible before you and one of the texts that we will be looking at today is 1 Corinthians chapter 11, verse 29 and verse 30. Open your Bibles and turn there and later on we will come to a discussion of aspects of this passage. Once saved, or always saved?

In our last two studies we’ve been dealing with the question of the true meaning of the words “eternal life.” And we have contended that if a believer in the Lord Jesus may be said scripturally to have eternal life, then he possesses spiritual life eternally. He is saved forever, if saved at all. John chapter 10, verse 27 through verse 29 says it more plainly than any Bible teacher could possibly say it. Our Lord himself asserted,

“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. And no man shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father has given them to me and he is greater than all and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”

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That’s positive, plain, and very comforting. Now I think perhaps we should make a point here that I have overlooked at this point. I received a nice letter from someone out west of the city of Dallas this past week and in the course of the nice letter to me the writer of the letter said that he would like to say, among other things, that he believed that we do have eternal life that we have eternal life and that that eternal life can be in either hell or heaven. Well, I think that there is a sense in which one may speak of eternal life in that sense, but we are talking about eternal life in the sense of the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is true that everyone has eternal existence, but eternal existence is not the same as eternal life. Eternal life is life eternally in the knowledge and in the enjoyment of life with the Lord God. As the Lord Jesus himself said in John chapter 17 in his high priestly prayer, “And this is life eternal that they might know Thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.” In the biblical sense, eternal life belongs only to those who believe. Eternal existence does belong to all men and eternal existence may be in either hell or heaven.

When we, to comfort the doubting and to challenge the gainsayers, gave six more biblical reasons for the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, or the doctrine of eternal life, besides the statement of the Lord in John 10:27-29. There actually are others, which for the sake of time and brevity I’ll pass by, thinking to use a phrase from Justin Martyr, a 2nd and 3rd Century church apologist, that right minded Christians would have seen the truth at this point. Riding to a preaching engagement in my automobile early one Sunday morning, I heard a rural preacher on the radio announcing his topic for the message. It was “Seven Reasons Why a Saint Can’t Break Into Hell.” Well I’ve never known a saint who wanted to break into hell, to use his striking phrase, but I’m sure the Bible categorically says that he cannot.

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To add to the testimony in the last study we began a theological or logical defense of the doctrine. We sought to show that one can argue the security of the believer from the doctrine of election. Election is election to salvation. And to suppose that any saint may fail to arrive in glory is to nullify the election of God. An election without a keeping power is no real election, and it's unworthy of our majestic and adorable triune God. We also argued our case from the nature of God's plan of salvation. It is a finished work, as Jesus said when making the atoning sacrifice. We do not have to finish the work that he did not complete with our keeping of ourselves.

Now we want to turn to another argument, the argument for the believer's perseverance from union with Christ. We're going to continue now with our theological argument for eternal security or eternal life. And our third argument is this argument from the doctrine of union with the Lord Jesus. He is our federal or covenantal head and surety and consequently he stands for all the saints in his saving work. Paul expresses the root of the matter when he says, “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and verse 22. He, the substitute for his people bears their sins and for them, having successfully paid their debt to the holy justice of God, now is seated at God's right hand to secure for his people all the rights, privileges, and blessings he has at such great cost won. Thus he stands for his people forever, for he lives forever. We abide in him spiritually and we live because he lives. Speaking to his apostles and for all in him Jesus said, “Because I live you will live also.” In fact, to express the closeness of the union with Christ, the Apostle Paul uses words that express a union that is almost indescribably intimate. He says, “But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit.”

Another argument that we might use for the perseverance of the saints is the argument from the ordinances. The two indisputable ordinances or sacraments of the church are water baptism and the Lord's Supper. Water baptism is designed to represent

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our entrance into the Christian life, while the Lord’s Supper represents our continuation in that life. For that reason the Christian church has generally observed the ordinance of baptism once in the believer’s life, while the Lord’s Supper has been observed frequently. The early church and some churches today, following their example, observe the Lord’s Supper every Sunday. The reason that baptism has been observed only once in believer’s lives is simple and clear. That very universal practice implies that one enters the Christian life only once, and not many times as if one could lose one’s salvation. In churches which have as their doctrine that one may lose his or her salvation still the ordinance is practiced only once. It is almost as if what we teach in word, we deny in practice.

In fact, churches which do not teach the doctrine of eternal life or the perseverance of the saints often feel it necessary to explain why they do not baptize again when a believer, having lost his salvation by sin, supposedly, is restored to fellowship with God. To meet this problem of rebaptism posed by the doctrine of losable grace, one large professing church contends that the ordinance of baptism imprints an inerasable character, the Latin term is character *indelibelus*, upon the person and may not be repeated. But why, no satisfactory reason is given or can be given. In fact, the matter is only worsened, for to support an insupportable doctrine, losable grace, another insupportable doctrine is formulated, the doctrine of the inerasable character of the act. In other words, the act of baptism is inerasable but the reality which it represents is not, strange teaching. Even others among professing Christian churches speak of repeatable regeneration, and repeatable justification. Phrases nowhere found in the Bible or in its teaching. To explain the puzzling doctrine it is often further said that the regenerated ones may fall totally and finally, but the elect can only fail totally, not finally. In other words, some believers are elect believers and some believers are non elect believers, at least for a time. What results is a religion of uncertainty.

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I often am asked by persons when the marvelous doctrine of divine election has been mentioned, how they can know whether they belong to the company of the elect. Some people are quite disturbed about divine election. Of course if the person is an unbeliever, I cannot offer any sense of certainty concerning their election. I encourage them to believe in Christ and I remind them that if they have, they are among the elect and possess eternal life. Thus it is simple to settle the question, am I among God's elect, as Paul said to the Philippian jailor, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”

But now suppose that having made the decision that brings life, the decision to cast oneself on Christ and his merits, won by Christ for believers through his blood and cross, I should then be told that my regeneration and faith is losable, if I am not one of the elect. What a blow to comfort and assurance and joy that would be. I am saved, but I may not be one of the elect. One can see why believers taught that teaching have no joy and assurance and make poor workers for Christ. Instead of building upon a solid foundation in his saving grace they're always worrying about the foundation.

To sum up, losable grace, or losable salvation, is not a biblical doctrine and the fact that the New Testament has made no provision for rebaptism for individuals who have purportedly lost their salvation, confirms the fact. The questionable teachings propounded by some churches to answer the problem of the absence of rebaptism in the New Testament only compound the problem. We conclude then that the believer in Jesus Christ is eternally secure in Christ and that the absence of provision for rebaptism of lapsed professors of the faith indicates it.

Still another argument for the perseverance of the saints comes from the nature of biblical discipline. In the New Testament there is set out for failing believers a fatherly discipline that is exercised by God. It is fatherly, for the ones who are disciplined are not removed from the family of believers. Of course if individuals are in the church meetings

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are not believers in the Lord, they should not be encouraged to observe the ordinances of the church. The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper are for believers. For believers who have been overtaken in sin, there is a procedure for discipline taught in the New Testament. First, the brother or sister should be contacted by the individual who first learns of the situation, and that individual should seek with the Lord's help to be an agent in the sinning believer's restoration to fellowship. Paul refers to the procedure in Galatians chapter 6 and verse 1, “Brethren” he writes, “if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself lest thou also be tempted.” The other steps of discipline are given by our Lord in the important section in Matthew 18, including the initial step, when one is sinned against by a brother, leading on to the final one of exclusion from the fellowship of believers. I suggest that you read Matthew chapter 18, verse 15 through verse 17. Our Lord's words are capable of different interpretations, but it is my opinion that the council, “let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” means that he shall be treated as an unbeliever and excluded from the Lord's table, which is designed to be a visible representation of the body of Christ in fellowship with the Lord and with one another. Paul's words in 2 Thessalonians chapter 3 and verse 6, and verses 14 and 15, where he commands withdrawal from the disorderly and disobedient brethren, conclude with these words, “yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

Thus disorderliness and disobedience by the saints does not bring loss of salvation but loss of communion and exposure to divine discipline. The Lord's family is like an earthly family. And in fact, the earthly family has been designed by divine providence to illustrate the spiritual family of God. A disobedient son may come under the discipline and displeasure of his earthly father, and even be disowned by an earthly father, but the son still remains the father's son, so in the heavenly family. A believing son of God, or daughter of God, may fall into sin for a time and suffer divine discipline, yet he or she

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remains within the family of God. In truth, the disobedient believer may persist in sin for a time, as the Corinthians did in their sin at the Lord's table observances.

The divine discipline is in stages. Paul explains it in 1 Corinthians 11, verse 29 and verse 30. And I suggest that if you have your New Testaments handy you turn to that passage, “For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body, for this cause many are weak and sickly among you and many sleep.” Let me just say this, the word translated damnation is the word that means judgment. There is another word, a much stronger word, related to this word judgment that means damnation. Paul uses that word in Romans chapter 8, but here “eateth and drinketh judgment to himself not discerning the Lord's body.” And Paul continues “for this cause many are weak and sickly among you and many sleep.” The stages of discipline are clearly set forth by Paul here. Sinning believers in Corinth first suffered weakness, then sickliness, and finally physical death. Notice that the death was not eternal death but physical death. The term that Paul metaphorically uses, the term sleep, is never used of the death of unbelievers. It is the special New Testament word for the death of believers. And it is very appropriate, since sleep, just as natural sleep in our lives, in our physical lives, sleep suggests rest, life, and an awakening. What Paul is talking about then is sin unto physical death, the final stage of a believer's discipline. A believer, strange as it may be, as it may seem to us, may be qualified for life in heaven by the merits of Christ, which have been imputed to him through his faith, but nevertheless he has by virtue of his disobedience, become disqualified for life on earth. In order to prevent further reproach on the name of God the believer is taken home, just as Ananias and Sapphira were. No wonder, as Luke says in Acts chapter 5, “Great fear came upon all the church and as many has heard these things.”

The serious and final stage of God's discipline is very significant and solemn. Divine discipline is a gracious blessing. Who desires a father who refuses to discipline?

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Even the children of such a father may live to regret such a man. We believers should be grateful for a Father who disciplines, and we should fear such discipline too, and seek to please him, the Lord God, in our lives. I'm so grateful in my case for my father, who didn't hesitate to discipline me when I needed discipline. And now, I am so grateful that I was brought up in a home where discipline was carried out by a loving father. I certainly needed a lot of it and he didn't hesitate to give it to me, and I am grateful for the memory of him as a father who loved enough to discipline.

One final word should be said here. Divine discipline has as its goal restoration, and not condemnation. That is the lesson learned from the situation in Corinth. A study of the passages will reveal this. We don't have time to look at it. I suggest that you do look at 1 Corinthians chapter 5, verse 1 through verse 14 and 2 Corinthians chapter 2, verse 5 through verse 11. To conclude then this argument, the nature of divine discipline reveals quite plainly that genuine believers, although they may suffer severe discipline for sin, do not ever lose their salvation.

Another argument for the perseverance of the saints comes from the doctrine of sin itself. Very few, if any, of those who hold to the possibility of the loss of salvation would hold to such a loss from any sin. Distinction in sins is made by all who hold that one may lose eternal life. We have referred to such distinctions as made by certain churches, but others also make such distinctions. This however is unscriptural. While there is a genuine difference in degrees of sins, as our Lord taught, nevertheless all sin brings guilt. It should be noted in the parable of the wise steward in Luke 12, while some servants are beaten with many stripes and some with only a few stripes, both types of disobedient stewards are beaten. The fact is then, in so far as guilt is concerned, all sin brings guilt and judgment. In Galatians chapter 5, verse 19 through verse 21 Paul states that all who practice the sins mentioned there shall not inherit the Kingdom of God, but in the midst of the more flagrant sins, such as idolatry, murders, adultery and witchcraft,

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one finds inveighings, thought to be relatively mild by many believers today. In John’s words, “Whosoever committeth sin, transgresseth the law, for sin is the transgression of the law, or literally, sin is lawlessness.” Loss of salvation for every sin would make a farce of salvation, for we are all sinners. As Luther said, “We are *simul justus et peccator*” or at the same time justified and yet a sinner. It is the work of sanctification to bring us from our low moral state at salvation to holiness, a holiness never achieved totally in this life. When David sinned his great sin he did not lose his salvation, as is clear from his prayer when he prayed when he was seeking restoration. It was not “restore unto me Thy salvation” but “restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation.” Look at Psalm 51, verse 12. What David had lost was not salvation but the joy of it, because of his lost communion with God. When Peter sinned in denying the Lord he did not lose his salvation, he lost the joy of it. And as the Scriptures say “he went out and wept bitterly.” Time would fail me to advance other theological and logical arguments for the perseverance of the saints, such as divine son ship, and our deliverance from the law.

All of this adds up, in conclusion, to an immense argument from the free, eternal, and immutable love of God expressed in that classic text, “He that spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things.” Carefully note the logic of Paul’s statement. It adds up to this, if he has done the greater will he not do the less. If he gave even his own Son, will he not give us faith to receive and constancy to persevere even unto the end, a love so great as the love of God to his people cannot fail of its design and object.

George Henderson in one of his books comments, “The Lord Jesus describes two marks which will be found on all his sheep. The mark on the ear, they hear the shepherd’s voice. The mark on the foot, they follow him. If these marks characterize those of us who belong to Christ” he goes on to say, “we are entitled to all the wealth of comfort which the heart establishing words of John 10:28 convey, ‘I give unto them

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eternal life.” Henderson was right, and it’s only proper to ask, have we the two marks. These marks identify us as the Lord’s people. And if they are really ours, the mark of the ear and the mark of the foot, then the Lord Jesus’ great promise is our forever,

“My sheep hear my voice (that’s the mark of the ear) and I know them and they follow me (that’s the mark of the foot) and I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father which gave them me is greater than all and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand.”

What a magnificent passage. As Berkouwer has said, “There is no more adequate way to confess the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints than to affirm that Christ is the shepherd of the sheep. That settles their safety, for it depends upon his shepherding skills, and they are not only necessary for the sheep’s safety, but hallelujah, sufficient.” As Luther said, and we add our voice to his, “If we perish, Christ perisheth with us, for he’s our shepherd and he keeps us.” If we perish then so do the saints, the apostles, and the martyrs. But we are persuaded, as Paul was, “that he’s able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.”

So, I conclude with a simple appeal. Hear his voice, and give yourself to him for the forgiveness of sins by his blood and cross. The Lord Jesus has paid the penalty through the atoning work on the cross and through faith in him and faith in him alone, apart from works, one may receive as a free gift from God, forgiveness of sins.

If you are listening today and you do not have the sense of the assurance of the forgiveness of sins we invite you to come to Christ for that. And then demonstrate your sincerity in coming to him by following him. May God grant his grace to you to that end.

I know that some of you are thinking, “Well what about all of those texts that seem to be problems with regard to this great doctrine of the perseverance of the saints?”

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We'll listen next week. We're going to deal with the problem texts and I think, if you'll listen carefully and study your Bible closely, you'll agree with me and with the statement of the Lord Jesus Christ, “I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish.”