

12: Perseverance – keeping going as a Christian

Introduction

Today we're thinking about Perseverance – or to give this topic its traditional title "the perseverance of the saints." We're talking about the business of staying Christian. It's a massively important and practical question for us all.

As we begin let's **pray** and **read Romans 8:16-39**.

- **"Saints"?**

When we talk about "saints" in this session we're NOT talking about St Patrick or St George – not talking about "special people" that the church decided ought to get a special title. That's not how the Bible uses the word. "Saints" simply means "set-apart-ones" or "holy" ones – and that's true of every single Christian. If you trust in Christ, then you're a saint!

- **Questions about perseverance**

Have you ever asked a question like this:

"CAN real believers fall away?"

"Can I fall away and lose my salvation?"

"Once saved always saved – is that true?"

Why might we ask questions like that?

Perhaps because of our personal experience. Maybe we know folk who seemed to be going great as Christians, but who completely ditched the faith. Once you'd have said they were Christians. Now you'd say they're *not* Christians. Or perhaps we worry concerning ourselves: it seems that we have only a pretty fragile hold on the gospel. We don't seem to have much faith. We have doubts. We struggle with sin. Will I persevere in trusting Jesus?

Also, certain texts of Scripture might also lead us to ask those question. In various places the Bible warns against stopping believing. And it records the example of people who seem to have fallen away.

Our headline this morning is this: real Christians persevere because God keeps them going. Real Christians will not lose their salvation. But there's quite a lot of important Bible ground we need to cover to understand that properly.

1. "Falling away" is a reality: not everyone who says they believe will persevere

(a) The reality of "falling away" or apostasy

What we're talking about here is "apostasy" or "falling away." Someone who apparently believes in Jesus... and then stops believing in Jesus. Someone who doesn't make it through to final glorification – what we're going to be thinking about in our session next week.

There are plenty of Bible texts making the point that "falling away" or apostasy is a reality:

Matthew 13:20-21, "The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away."

Matthew 24:10-12, "At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other,¹¹ and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people.¹² Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold,"

John 15:1-2,6, "'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful...⁶ If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."

1 Timothy 1:19, "... holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith."

1 Timothy 4:1, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons."

2 Timothy 4:10, "for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia."

We're going to see that real Christians cannot fall away. There is a true Bible doctrine called "the perseverance of the saints." But we see from these verses that there is a person who stops believing in Jesus.

As John Murray writes: "The perseverance of the saints ... 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 eternal salvation." (John Murray, *Redemption accomplished and applied*, p151)

John Murray goes on: "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."" (John Murray, *Redemption accomplished and applied*, pp151,152)

(b) Understanding apostasy

There does seem to be a phenomenon that we might call "temporary faith." We find that in Scripture and we observe it in our experience. This is one of the hardest and most distressing things about the reality of apostasy. Apostates *can* look very much like the real deal.

- **Apostates can experience much of God**

How can we understand this better? There are a few other Bible texts that are helpful for us here. Let's look these up together:

Hebrews 6:4-6, "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit,⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age,⁶ if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace."

Hebrews 10:29, "How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?"

2 Peter 2:20-22, "If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning.²¹ It would have been better for them not to have known the way of

righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them.²² Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud."

Those are staggering verses. We mustn't pretend they're not there. According to these verses it is possible NOT to be real Christian AND YET to:

- have some share in the Holy Spirit
- taste God's goodness
- profane the blood of the covenant which set you apart
- have some kind of knowledge Christ and of the way of righteousness

It's possible to come very, very close to the supernatural power of God.¹ And yet not to experience his personal and saving power.

We see that in John's Gospel (where we're preaching at the moment on Sundays; some start off as disciples yet fall away). We see that in Exodus (where we're at in our Fellowship Group bible studies; an entire generation saw the works of God, ate of his holy food, were baptized in the Red Sea, yet perished in unbelief).

- **Apostates were never born again**

For a while the church may be deceived. And for a while that person may be deceived. But the Bible insists that the apostate – the one who falls away – was never actually born again. Apostates were never born again.

It's not that a real Christian fell away. It's that the one who falls away was never a real Christian. People with temporary faith were never God's elect. They were never regenerated. And so they were never true believers. See:

1 John 2:19, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us."

Why do we need to know this? Because in thinking about the perseverance of the saints we need to remember that not everyone who appears to be a saint is a saint.

2. Real saints show they're real saints by persevering

What we're going to see is this: that those who persevere to the end will be saved. But what does that mean? Where do we find that in the Bible?

Let's look at several Bible texts. We'll see what perseverance is. And we'll see that perseverance is necessary and it is commanded of us.

Matthew 24:13, "but he who stands firm to the end will be saved." (Also Matt 10:22)

John 8:31, "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples."

¹ The Westminster Confession (10.4) speaks of those who "never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved" and yet "may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit." By this last phrase is meant an experience of the Spirit which is "in common", ie. experienced potentially by all men without exception. It is not a saving experience, but a feature of common grace.

John 15:6, "If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."

1 Corinthians 9:27, "No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."

1 Corinthians 15:1-2, "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain."

Colossians 1:22-23, "But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation--²³ if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant."

Hebrews 10:36-39, "You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.³⁷ For in just a very little while, "He who is coming will come and will not delay."³⁸ But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him."³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved."

Also Hebrews 3:6,14, 2 Peter 1:10-11, 1 John 2:19

So what is "persevering"? From these texts we see that it is

- standing firm to the end
- holding to Jesus' teaching
- remaining (or abiding) in Jesus
- beating and enslaving my body
- holding firmly to the Gospel Paul preached
- continuing in the faith
- living by faith, not shrinking back.

And we can see from all those verses that **perseverance is necessary**. Or to put it another way, the application for us at this point is this: "persevere" – keep going. Christian, you must persevere.

It's essential that we continue to trust. That we fight sin. Stand firm. Hold to the gospel. Or put it the other way around: there can be no security about our eternal salvation if we're not trusting, fighting, standing, holding to the Gospel.

So, from our perspective we're called to devote ourselves to those means which God has ordained to keep us going. Like Paul in Philippians we're actively and energetically to press on towards the goal.²

But here's the problem. How will we ever persevere? Left to ourselves we will undoubtedly fall and fail. Every single one of us. We are so weak. One great theologian put it like this: "believers in themselves...not only can fail, but could not help failing if left to themselves."³ Wonderfully, God does not leave us to persevere on our own. Real saints persevere because they are PRESERVED BY GOD.

² Philippians 3:13-14, "Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

³ Francis Turretin writes: "No one denies that believers in themselves as to the mutability and weakness of their nature, not only can fail, but could not help failing if left to themselves." (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, IV, 2:594).

3. Real saints persevere because they are preserved by God

Real Christians do face sin within and Satan and the world without. Corruption remains in us. We may fall into serious sin and remain in serious sin for a time. This grieves the Holy Spirit. This incurs God's discipline. This hurts us and may hurt others too. But real Christians cannot ultimately fall away.

(a) God has planned an unbreakable chain of salvation

This is the point Paul makes in Roman 8:28-30. Let's open up our Bibles there:

Romans 8:28-30, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

There is an unbreakable chain of events from predestination in the past to glorification in the future. If someone is in that chain, they cannot fall out of it. Verse 30 is emphatic: it's the same people at every stage in the chain – i.e. "these ones" who were called are also justified and glorified

Notice that this is the Bible logic that's contained within TULIP. Remember that?

- total depravity: we are unable to save ourselves.
- unconditional election: God freely chooses who he's going to save.
- limited atonement: those God chooses to save are those for whom Christ dies.
- irresistible grace: no-one can resist God's powerful summons to life
- the perseverance of the saints: real Christians persevere – and will do so because God keeps them.

If, by God's grace, you find yourself in this golden chain of salvation, then you will not fall out of that chain. Or to put it another way: T.U.L. & I. will inexorably lead to → P

Notice how this fits with the whole of God's great scheme of salvation. It's God's work all the way down the line. He is the sovereign, all-powerful saviour. And it's no different when it comes to staying saved. God *doesn't* say, "I've predestined you, sacrificed my son for you, drawn you to eternal life - now, Christian, it's over to you to stay Christian!" Rather, if God has chosen someone, called him irresistibly, regenerated him... then of course that person will stay saved.

(b) God will keep his people

The reason real Christians persevere is nothing within us. The reason is God. We've seen we're not passive. But it is God's preserving work that keeps us persevering. In fact, it would almost be better for us to call our topic today the *preservation* of the saints.

Psalm 37:23-24, "If the LORD delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm;²⁴ though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand."

Psalm 73:1-2,23, "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.² But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold...²³ Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand."

Also: Romans 5:8-10, 1 Cor 3:15, 1 Peter 1:5

(c) Each person of the Trinity works to keep us

Firstly, God the Father

John 10:28-29, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand."

The Father is powerful to keep the sheep who follow Jesus.

1 Corinthians 1:8-9, "He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful."

Philippians 1:6, "... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Secondly, God the Son

John 6:37-40, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. ⁴⁰ For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

The Son's mission is to do the Father's will. The Father's will is that none of Jesus' people are lost. And the Son is seriously committed to doing his Father's will. So of course all who believe in Jesus will be saved.

Romans 8:31-39, "What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Let's look up these verses together. Notice that if the Son was sent to die, then of course all things will follow.(v32). Notice that NOTHING can separate us from the love of God in Christ (v35). That includes ourselves – we cannot separate ourselves from the love of God in Christ. Notice the intercession of Jesus Christ in v34. Jesus is interceding for his people. And the prayers of the Son cannot fail.⁴

Hebrews 7:25, "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."

Thirdly, God the Holy Spirit

Ephesians 1:13-14, "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy

⁴ See Luke 22:31-32 where Jesus implies this to Peter: "But I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail."

Spirit,¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession-- to the praise of his glory."

If we have the Holy Spirit, then we MUST receive the inheritance – we must keep on going to the end. Or else God has broken a legal promise. (The word for "seal – *arrabon* – is a legal term with obligations.)

(d) Questions and summary

We're all probably got lots of unanswered questions. For example...

- What about the warning passages in Scripture? Doesn't the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints nullify the warning passages?
- What about specific friends of ours who have turned their backs on Jesus? Were they ever converted in the first place?
- What about me? I have doubts and worries about whether I'm a real Christian.

For now, here's a really helpful summary from the Westminster Confession (17.1-2):

"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.

"This perseverance of the saints depends 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."

A hymn: A debtor to mercy alone

1. A debtor to mercy alone,
of covenant mercy I sing;
I come with your righteousness on,
my humble offering to bring.
The judgements of your holy law,
with me can have nothing to do,
My saviour's obedience and blood
hide all my transgressions from view.

2. The work which your goodness began,
the arm of your strength will complete.
Your promise is yes and amen,
and never was forfeited yet.
The future or things that are now,

no power below or above,
can make you your purpose forego,
or sever my soul from your love.

3. My name from the palms of your hands,
eternity will not erase.
Impressed on your heart it remains
in marks of indelible grace.
Yes I, to the end, will endure,
until I bow down at your throne.
Forever and always secure,
a debtor to mercy, alone.
(Augustus Toplady; Bob Kauflin)

Homework for next week:

Questions for personal reflection:

- In the light of what we've learned today how am I warned? How am I encouraged?

Bible reading for next week:

- Next week we think about final glorification and the new creation. Please read Revelation 20-22 in preparation for this.