

GRACE ESSENTIALS

CHRISTIANS ARE FOREVER!

THE DOCTRINE OF THE
SAINTS' PERSEVERANCE
EXPLAINED AND CONFIRMED

Both theologically rich and readable, this short book covers a lot of ground. In eleven brief chapters the glories of an unchangeable God, and His unchangeable word are put forth for the encouragement, assurance and joy of the follower of Christ. For any who are unclear about the doctrine of the Christian's perseverance, this work is a great introduction that will bring clarity and cultivate worship.

Reuben Hunter

Pastor, Trinity West Church, London

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JOHN OWEN

PREPARED BY H. LAWRENCE

CHRISTIAN
HERITAGE

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1 This is chapter 17 in Owen's work. Chapters 11-16 of Owen are omitted here, since they are specifically concerned with a controversy of his day and therefore not so relevant to us. — Ed.

Chapter 1. The Truth Stated

Very different views are held of the doctrine of the perseverance of saints. To some, the strong hope and encouragement which God gives to His people (Heb. 6:17, 18) are based on it. To others, the doctrine forms no part of gospel teaching and is only an invention of men. They see it, even, as a powerful encouragement to sin. A right understanding of this doctrine is, therefore, of great importance. It will influence our walk with God. The glory of God, the honour of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the welfare of the souls of believers are bound up with it.

The fact that many who claim to be Christians fall away from the faith has always been an obstacle to God's people. Jesus foretold that some professing Christians would fall away (Matt. 24:11,12). He comforted His disciples by assuring them that, nevertheless, God's elect would not be deceived or fall away. The apostle Paul spoke of the apostasy, in his time, of Hymenaeus and Philetus. The faith of those who followed their evil teaching was destroyed. But here is a solid foundation for the comfort of true believers — 'The Lord knows those who are his' (2 Tim. 2:19). The apostle John wrote similarly about the anti-Christ and apostates of his time. 'They went out from us,' he said, 'but they did not really belong to us' (1 John 2:19). The fact that some give up the ways of the Lord ought not to shake the faith of true believers. Nevertheless, it should cause them to examine themselves to

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know whether Christ is in them or not. 'If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!' (1 Cor. 10:12).

Some have argued this way: 'If you insist that those who fall away to perdition never were true believers, no-one can be sure whether he has a true faith or not'. In answer we may say that God tests believers by these instances. Through such testings they grow in grace and are strengthened in their faith. By the grace of our faithful God we shall be more than conquerors (Rom. 8:37). Here we can surely rest. The falling away of some should never be allowed to rob us of that inexpressible and glorious joy in believing which was so evident in the early Christians (1 Pet. 1:8).

It has been claimed that the only ground of assurance is the testimony of a man's own heart that he is walking uprightly with God. Certainly many believers receive the Spirit of adoption by which the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:16). Other Christians never reach that full joy in believing which the early church knew. The assurance of our salvation needs to be built on a firmer foundation than even the testimony of our conscience. Such testimony is often weakened by our own failures.

What do we mean by the word 'saints'? We could simply say 'holy ones', but the word 'holy' is used in the scriptures in several senses. In His essential being only God is the 'Holy One'. The holiness of created beings is different from God's holiness. Adam, when he was created, had an original holiness but lost it by sin. So had the angels that fell. True believers have holiness given to them even though they have sinned and come short of the glory of God. This is 'imparted' holiness.

In the Old Testament especially, the word 'holy' often has the meaning: 'separated to God and his service'. Not

only are sacred articles like the ark said to be holy, but also the whole people of Israel, even though there were wicked persons among them. Perseverance is not claimed for these. In the New Testament the word 'holy' is more often used to mean 'having an inward purity'. There are many who think of themselves as holy, or who are thought to be so by others, who were never truly converted. In others the gift of common grace by the Spirit so affects their conduct that they seem to have been born again though Christ does not live in them.

How then are the saints, or true believers, to be distinguished?

1. Though they were once spiritually dead, God has given them faith which brings salvation. Their holiness is the result of God's eternal purpose in their election by His grace (Eph. 1:4).
2. The Holy Spirit has raised them from their death in sin to newness of life. They obtain the precious gift of faith through the work of the Spirit when they are made alive with Christ (Eph. 2:5).
3. The Holy Spirit is given in order that He may stay with them for ever (John 14:16) because of the death and intercession of Christ.
4. By reason of the Spirit's work in them they cease to be God's enemies and become His loving and obedient people.

The Holy Spirit uses many expressions to illustrate what perseverance is. Examples are:

1. to walk with Christ as we have received Him (Col. 2:6);
2. to be faithful to death (Rev. 2:10);

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3. to hold fast our confidence and faith to the end (Heb. 3:6);
4. to be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation (1 Pet. 1:5).

Let us examine the claim which is sometimes made that believers may completely fall away. Everyone agrees that believers have the Holy Spirit in them and that they bring forth the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). If this is so, what could possibly cause believers to lose the Holy Spirit totally? What could cause the utter failure of the outworking of His grace in them? Could sin? Certainly sin, if cherished, will weaken our ability to live the Christian life. The Holy Spirit is provoked and grieved by sin in the believer but it is unthinkable that sin should prove victorious over the Spirit. The grace which believers have results from their being new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is not obtained by their own efforts. The root is first made good and then the fruit is good. Grace is planted in them by that same mighty power which God showed when He raised Jesus Christ from the dead (Eph. 1:19, 20). Continuance in sin on our part certainly deserves that God should take away His Spirit and grace from us, but will our heavenly Father allow sin to have the final victory over His sons and daughters? Will He not rather come to their aid? He may chastise them but He will not cast them away for ever.

It has often been argued by those who oppose the doctrine of the perseverance of saints that such teaching encourages people to sin. They say that it assures people of the love of God and of salvation itself, no matter how sinful their lives may be. This is quite false. Believers who have tasted the love and pardoning mercy of God value it above all the world. They want to do the good things which God has prepared in

advance for them. Through His Spirit God will grant them continual supplies of grace so that they are able to bring forth the fruit of holiness in good works, to the glory of God. This grace 'teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age' (Titus 2:11,12).

A further argument against perseverance asserts that though there is a possibility of believers totally falling away, it is no greater than that of a sane man taking his own life. People will naturally avoid doing anything that could endanger their physical lives. In a similar way, it has been suggested, God has given to the saints the wisdom and prudence to keep from the sin which could destroy their souls. This ignores the forces of evil massed against the believer. One such enemy is indwelling sin (Rom. 7:17,20). Paul calls this enemy 'your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires' (Eph. 4:22). All who have known anything of the strength of indwelling sin know that we need a greater power than common prudence to keep us from falling away eternally. We need the intercession of Christ. We 'through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed' (1 Pet. 1:5).

Isaiah chapter 4 proves a source of great encouragement to God's people. Here, as in other scriptures, the glorious Branch of the Lord spoken of is the Lord Jesus Christ. Those to whom the promises are given are 'those who are left in Zion' (v. 3). Who are they? They are the remnant chosen by grace (Rom. 11:5), whose names are in the Lamb's book of life from the creation of the world (Eph. 1:4; Rev. 13:8). They have been rescued from the perishing mass of mankind, like a piece of wood snatched from a blaze that threatens to burn it up. Isaiah also describes them as the 'daughter of Zion' — elect,

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redeemed and called of God. Justification, sanctification and perseverance are promised to them.

1. *Justification.* The Lord, our righteousness, covers them with the glorious robe of His own righteousness to hide their deformities and make them acceptable in His Father's sight.
2. *Sanctification.* Those who are called to be holy He makes holy by the work of Christ in them.
3. *Perseverance.* The pillar of cloud and of fire were a protection to the children of Israel in the wilderness. Isaiah refers to this when he says: 'Upon all the glory shall be a defence (a covering)' (v. 5, KJV). The glory of Israel was the ark, a type of Christ. There are two parts to our spiritual glory. The first is outside of us. It is the love and favour of God toward us, by which He freely accepts us in Christ. The second is our sanctification, which is produced within us by the Spirit of holiness. He will never be completely dislodged from that believer's soul where He has once dwelt. The Holy Spirit will not allow the spirit of the world to take over His dwelling place. Believers' acceptance with God, their holiness from God, and His defence over them, freely given in Christ, make up the covenant of grace which cannot be broken.

We are not saying that believers can never sin. We are saying that they cannot sin away the Holy Spirit so as to become again children of the devil. This they were before they were born again (Eph. 2:2,3).

God's relationship with His people is expressed by the prophet Jeremiah (31:33,34; 32:38-40). God promises to be their God. They will be His people.

1. *God accepts them freely.* 'I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more' (Jer. 31:34).
2. *Both their sanctification and holiness must come from God.* 'I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts' (Jer. 31:33).
3. *The fear of God will never totally leave them.* 'I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me' (Jer. 32:40). 'I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me' (Jer. 32:39).

Chapter 2. God is Unchangeable

God reveals the unchangeableness of His love towards His people by five ways in which He cannot change. They are:

1. His nature
2. His purposes
3. His covenant
4. His promises
5. His oath

The perseverance of the saints rests on each of these. We shall deal with these five ways in the next few chapters. In this chapter we consider God's own unchangeable nature. In Malachi 3:6, God says: 'I the LORD do not change'. Then, as a consequence of this, He goes on to say: 'So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed'. Who are the descendants of Jacob that God speaks of? They are certainly not all the physical descendants of Jacob, but they are those who share His faith. As Paul says: 'For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel' (Rom. 9:6). There were those who prided themselves on their descent from Abraham who were threatened by God with swift judgment because of their evil ways (Mal. 3:5). Christ was sent 'to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept' (Isa. 49:6). Jacob's true sons are those who are born again 'not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God' (John 1:13). God will

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never change His mind about His gift of effectual calling. Paul says in Romans 11:29: 'God's gifts and his call are irrevocable'.

Jacob's true descendants are those who possess the faith of Jacob. These are God's new elect Israel. God has entered into a new covenant with them in place of the earlier covenant which their forefathers broke (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:24-28; Heb. 8:8-12). Those who enjoy the benefits of the new covenant do not deserve them. What was their spiritual state when God called them? It was one of death, darkness, ignorance and separation from God. There was nothing in them to cause God to show them His grace. Their sanctification and justification come from God alone.

One of the Lord's greatest consolations to His people is that they shall never be eternally separated from Him. In Isaiah 40:27-31 Jacob and Israel declare their fear of being separated from God. How does God answer them? He asks them whether they have really understood the true nature of their God. He reminds them of His eternal nature, the greatness of His power, His unchangeableness and His infinite wisdom. This is what He will do for those who hope in the Lord. He will give them fresh strength; they will soar up as on eagles' wings; they will run without growing weary and they will walk and not faint. In answer to His people's fears, God says: 'Jacob, my servant, don't be afraid. I have chosen you from eternity. You feel you are barren and unprofitable, parched and withered. I will change all that by giving you my Spirit. You will know that you belong to me and that I am your Lord and King, your Redeemer from everlasting'. When God assures us of His everlasting love for us on the grounds of His unchangeableness, it is not presumption to believe that He means what He says.

We should make a distinction between God's favour to a nation, such as the Jews, and His acts of saving grace to individuals. God dealt with His national people, the Jews, in outward blessings and punishments which distinguished them from the rest of the world. Their obedience to God as a nation affected His dealings with them. At times, therefore, He pulled down what He had built up. At other times He set up what He had earlier pulled down. Yet even these hinges in His outward dealings with His national people still fulfilled His overall unchangeable purposes for them.

We may be sure that because God is unchangeable in His nature He will never forsake those whom He has freely accepted in Christ. Those so accepted can never become impenitent apostates.