

PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

Most of us know people who have made a profession of faith in Christ and who have perhaps even made a strong display of faith, involving themselves deeply in the life and ministry of the church, only to later repudiate that faith and become spiritual dropouts. Such evidence always raises the question, can a person once saved lose his salvation? Is apostasy a clear and present danger for the believer?

The Roman Catholic church teaches that people can and do lose their salvation. If a person commits a mortal sin, such sin kills the grace of justification that inhabits his soul. If he dies before being restored to a state of grace via the sacrament of penance, he will go to hell.

Many Protestants also believe that it is possible to lose one's salvation. The warnings of Hebrews 6 and Paul's concern about becoming "disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:27), as well as the examples of King Saul and others, have led some to conclude that people can fall fully and finally from grace. On the other hand, Reformed theology teaches the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. This doctrine is sometimes called "eternal security." In essence the doctrine teaches that if you have saving faith you will never lose it, and if you lose it, you never had it. As John writes, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19).

We know it is possible for people to be enamored by certain elements of Christianity without ever embracing Christ Himself. Such a person may be like those pictured in the parable of the sower:

A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold. (Luke 8:5-8)

The parable may refer to those who believed at first, but afterwards fell away, or it may mean that those who "believed" had a false or spurious faith, as Reformed theology maintains. Only the seed that falls on the good ground yields the fruit of obedience. Jesus describes these as ones who hear the word with "an honest and good heart" (Luke 8:15). Their faith proceeds from a truly regenerate heart.

The doctrine of perseverance does not rest on our ability to persevere, even if we are regenerate. Rather, it rests on the promise of God to preserve us. Paul writes to the Philippians, "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). It is by grace and grace alone that Christians persevere. God finishes what He begins. He insures that His purposes in election are not frustrated.

The golden chain of Romans 8 gives further testimony to this hope. "And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Romans 8:30). Paul goes on to declare that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

We have security because salvation is of the Lord and we are His craftsmanship. He gives the Holy Spirit to every believer as a promise that He will fulfill what He begins. He has likewise sealed every believer by the Holy Spirit. He has marked us with an indelible mark and given His personal down payment that guarantees He will finish the transaction.

A final basis of confidence is found in the high-priestly work of Christ, who intercedes for us. Just as Jesus prayed for the restoration of Peter (and not for Judas), so He prays for our restoration when we stumble and fall. We may fall for a season but never fully or finally fall away. Jesus prayed in the upper room, "While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled" (John 17:12). Only Judas, who was a son of perdition from the beginning, whose profession of faith was spurious, was lost. Those who are truly believers cannot be snatched from God's hand (John 10:27-30).