



## The perseverance of the saints

Another fundamental doctrine of the Reformed faith is the perseverance of the saints. Briefly stated, this doctrine teaches that all who are chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and renewed by the Holy Spirit, cannot fall from grace but will reach heaven.

All who are united to Christ by the bond of true, saving faith are eternally secure in Him. Nothing can separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is not to say, however, that all who profess faith in Christ will be saved. The saints who persevere until the end, not the nominal believer, will be saved. There are many who first profess to believe in Christ and who later fall away. Yet, they do not fall from grace, for they never were in a state of grace. As John says in his First Epistle, chapter 2:19, *They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us.*

Only the saints persevere. What actually is a saint? We often have wrong ideas about this. We say of a man or woman, he or she is a saint. We mean by that a particularly pious or holy person. But the apostle Paul did not use the term saint in such a restricted sense. Many of his epistles begin like this: *to the saints in Rome, to the saints in Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi*, and so on. By using this term, Paul did not imply that all these people were perfectly holy persons. Not at all! If you read the two epistles to the Corinthians for example, you will find out that some of those saints were not behaving themselves very saintly at all.

According to Scripture, the word saint refers to a regenerated person, that is someone who is born again. Going to church alone does not make a saint. Becoming a member of the visible church won't do it either. Calling yourself a saint does not mean you are one. No, only if you are born again, you are, in the true sense of the word, a saint. You have been regenerated; God has worked a miracle in your heart. He has made you to be a new creature in Christ Jesus.

We now turn to the term perseverance. According to the dictionary, "to persevere" means to go on resolutely in spite of opposition. That is a fairly good definition of the Christian life — To go on resolutely in spite of opposition. The saint, in spite of the opposition of his own sinful nature, the devil, and the world, resolutely goes on; on in the life, on in the faith, on in the service of God. This is what is meant by the perseverance of the saints.

Let us understand clearly, however that such persevering is not something for which the saint can take credit. It is all God's work. In His high priestly prayer, recorded in John 17, the Lord Jesus prayed:

*Holy Father, keep through (or in) thine own name those whom thou hast given me ... While I was with them in the world, I kept them in my name ... and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition: that the scripture might be fulfilled.*

(John 17:11-12)

In this prayer we learn three important truths. First, God has given to Christ a certain number of people. These are the elect, sometimes referred to by Jesus as His sheep. Second, Jesus reports here that none of these has perished and that none shall ever perish. In John, chapter 10, we find Christ saying the same thing. In speaking of His sheep, He says

*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.*

(John 10:28-30)

Third, Jesus says that they have not perished because He has kept, or literally guarded, them. Satan has tried to snatch them from His hand, and continues to try this all through the centuries. But the devil cannot succeed, because the Father Who is greater than all will not allow this to happen.

Do you hear this? God is greater than all. That means greater than my sinful nature, greater than the world and all its temptations, yes, greater than Satan and all his demons. That is why no one can or shall snatch you out of God's hand, saints of the Lord! Your perseverance is due only to the sovereign power of Almighty God.

There are many who teach that the saint has to keep himself on the way, and that it is by his own efforts that he will reach heaven. But we believe with the apostle to the Hebrews (12:2), that Christ is not only the author, but also the finisher or perfecter of our faith. Yes, with the Psalmist of 138 we rejoice that the work he has in us begun, shall by his grace be fully done.

Robert L. Dabney, the great Presbyterian theologian of the southern United States in the nineteenth century, has put it this way:

*The sovereign and unmerited love of God is the cause of the believer's effectual calling. Now as the cause is unchangeable, the effect is also unchangeable. That effect is, the constant communication of grace to the believer in whom God had begun a good work.*

When the Lord first began that saving work in the heart of the sinner, He was not motivated by anything attractive in him. He knew that the sinner was totally depraved, an enemy of grace. Therefore any subsequent sinfulness in the backsliding saint could not be a new motive for God to withdraw His grace. God knows what to expect. He is not surprised when he sees His people falling into sin. That does not mean that He condones it! On the contrary, He chastises His people for their sins by temporarily withdrawing His Holy Spirit. But as Dabney says: *if God has not intended from the first to bear with it, and to forgive it in Christ, he would not have called the sinner by His grace at first.*

To say it in other words, the causes for which God determined to bestow His electing love on the sinner are wholly in God, and not at all in the believer; and hence, nothing in the believer's heart or conduct can finally change that loving purpose. Martin Luther says:

*God's decree of predestination is firm and certain; and the necessity resulting from it is, in like manner, immovable, and cannot but take place. For we ourselves are so feeble, that if the matter were left in our hands, very few, or rather none, would be saved; but Satan would overcome us all.*

From this we learn that Christians do fall into sin at times. Indeed, it is a common occurrence. Even the best of men backslide temporarily. As long as the saints are in this world, their state is one of continuous warfare. They often lose the battle. Yet, they are never completely defeated. It may seem for a time that there is no faith left at all, yet, where there is a true work of the Holy Spirit, there can be no final falling away.

When the backslider comes to himself, he confesses his sins and asks forgiveness, which is then freely granted. Everyone of God's elect is like the prodigal son in this respect, that for a while he is deluded by the world and led astray by his sinful lusts and passions. He tries to feed on the husks, but they do not satisfy. Sooner or later he will cry out:

*I will arise and go to my Father, and will say: Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee. And he meets with the same wonderful reception: tokens of unchanging love and a Father's voice that melts the backslider's heart. This my son was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.*

The Bible is full of examples to show that God forgives His backslidden saints. David's sin of adultery and murder, and Peter's denial of His Master have been recorded to illustrate that where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.

But be careful not to pervert this wonderful truth. Don't say, all is well with my soul, if your life is not in harmony with God's law. Don't comfort yourself by saying: I may live in sin and still be saved in the end. There is something more important in the life of David than adultery, and that was his repentance. There was something more important in Peter's life than his denial of Christ, and that was his bitter weeping.

How do we know that both David and Peter were true saints? Because we not only catch them in the act of sinning, but we also find them on their knees repenting. When we hear David crying: *against thee, thee only, have I sinned*, and Peter weeping bitterly, when the Saviour, his Saviour, looks him straight in the eye, then we know that they are children of God, and not before. For here we have the mark of a true saint. He may fall into sin many times, but he cannot live in it; he cannot be happy in his sin. He will come back to the Lord with tears, confessing his sins and pleading on His mercy.

Are you a saint? A persevering saint? How can I know, you ask? Have you ever wept for your sin? Have you ever cried for mercy? Are you striving, or as Jesus literally says, "agonizing," to enter in at the narrow gate? That is the gate of repentance, self-denial and crucifixion of the flesh.

This is what it means to be a persevering saint, fighting the good fight of faith, running the race that is set before us. Yet, in such a way, that we are wholly dependent on the Lord for strength to fight and to run.

*He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.* Therefore we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

*I've found a friend, oh such a friend! He loved me ere I knew Him;  
He drew me with the cords of love, and thus He bound me to Him.  
And round my heart still closely twine those ties which nought can sever,  
For I am His, and He is mine, forever and forever.*

*I've found a friend, oh such a friend! He bled, He died to save me;  
And not alone the gift of love, but His own self He gave me.  
Nought that I have I call my own, I hold it for the Giver:  
My heart, my strength, my life, my all are His, and His forever.*

*I've found a friend, oh such a friend! So kind and true and tender;  
So wise a counsellor and guide, so mighty a defender!  
From Him Who loves me now so well, what power my soul can sever?  
Shall life or death, or earth or hell?*

*No, I am His forever!*

Cornelis Pronk

© 2015  
[www.christianstudylibrary.org](http://www.christianstudylibrary.org)