The Perseverance of the Saints

Today's study is on the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints or as R.C. Sproul prefers to call it the Preservation of the Saints. That those whom God saves, He preserves. Years ago, I went on a cruise to Alaska and the salmon were spawning, where the adult salmon would swim upstream to release and fertilize their eggs. This is an analogy to the doctrine of the Perseverance of the saints. The Christian is persevering into the kingdom of God against the world the flesh and the devil. The apostle Paul writes in Phil 3:13-14, *"Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [14] I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."* The writer to the Hebrews defines it as a *"run with endurance the race that is set before us, [2] looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God"* (Heb 1-2). Those who are saved will persevere because they are looking to Jesus who is seated at the right hand of the Father making intercession for his people. It's not a works righteousness way of living, but we're always to *"look to Jesus, as the author and perfector of our faith."* Tim quotes often pastor Robert Murray McCheyne, *"For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ."*

> Here is a little more of the context, McCheyne writes, "*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" Jer. 17:9. Learn much of the Lord Jesus. For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and all for sinners, even the chief! Live much in the smiles of God. Bask in his beams. Feel his all-seeing eye settled on you in love, and repose in his almighty arms. . . . Let your soul be filled with a heart-ravishing sense of the sweetness and excellency of Christ and all that is in Him. Let the Holy Spirit fill every chamber of your heart; and so there will be no room for folly, or the world, or Satan, or the flesh.*
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> For McCheyne, communion with Christ is the key to sanctification. He reminds us of the words of the apostle Paul, "2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV, "*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."*

The Grounds of our Perseverance

In the Westminster Confession of Faith on the Perseverance of the Saints we read:

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..."

1. **The unchangeable love of God the Father:** You also often hear Tim quote from the Prince of Puritans, John Owen who writes, *"The greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can to him is not to believe that he loves you."* You see, the assurance of your perseverance comes from who God is, God is *Immutable!* Once God sets His love upon you, He will not change his mind.

> *God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Numbers 23:19 ESV)*

Sometimes you will hear people call this doctrine, "once saved, always saved." It is true that when God gifts us faith in Christ, He gives us a faith that will keep on believing until the end. But there is a caricature of this doctrine, that places one's assurance on the decision of man, rather than the grace of God. Perseverance is not based upon your faithfulness, but the faithfulness of God. Philippians 1:6 ESV, *"And 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.*

2. **The merit and intercession of Christ:** Once we are united to Christ through faith, our union with Him cannot be dissolved. Christ's intercession as our high priest is the second ground of our perseverance. Hebrews 4:14-15 ESV, "*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."*

3. **The Indwelling Holy Spirit:** the third ground of our perseverance is closely connected to the means of grace (Word, sacrament and prayer). The Holy Spirit ordinarily works through the means of grace. Richard Sibbes said*, "There are none that hold out but those that have the Spirit of God to be their teacher and persuader."* We read in Galatians 5:25 ESV, *"If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit."* John Calvin writes,

   "If we live in the Spirit. According to his usual custom, the apostle draws from the doctrine a practical exhortation. The death of the flesh is the life of the Spirit. If the Spirit of God lives in us, let him govern our actions. There will always be many persons daring enough to make a false boast of living in the Spirit, but the apostle challenges them to a proof of the fact. As the soul does not remain idle in the body, but gives motion and rigour to every member and part, so the Spirit of God cannot dwell in us without manifesting himself by the outward effects. By the life is here meant the inward power, and by the walk the outward actions. The metaphorical use of the word walk, which frequently occurs, describes works as evidences of the spiritual life."

The Dangers of Quietism and Activism

In Phil 2:12-13 we read, *"Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, [13] for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*." There is a friendly debate in Reformed Theology concerning our role in our sanctification. Is sanctification or being transformed into the image of Christ *monergistic* or *synergistic*. Monergism is "*one working*" and Synergistic is *man's cooperation* with God. I think that the apostle Paul got it right when he wrote that we are *working out what God is working within by the Holy Spirit.*

In the Westminster Confession of Faith on Good Works we read:

> *Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they may be enabled thereunto, beside the graces they have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will, and to do, of his good pleasure: yet are they not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them. (WCF 16:3).*

Let go and let God

There was a form of perfectionism that started in the 19th century call the Higher Life theology, also known as the Keswick theology. This form of sanctification said if Christians can simply "*let go and let God,"* they can be free from the struggle with sin and brought into a higher level of spiritual life or perfectionism. This is a form of "*quietism*" that the believer is to just get out of the way of God. That there is nothing that you can do to move your sanctification along, it is God who does all the work for you and you are passive in the process. I can understand that this is an overreaction to those who say, "*do more, try harder*" in the Christian life. This is the opposite error called *activism*. This is the view that

not only should you not be passive in the Christian life, but that your progress in sanctification is all about you, that it is up to you to be working all the time for holiness. The begs the question, are you more of a quietist or an activist? Paul rules out both as He writes, *"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"* This sounds like a lot of activism, that it's all up to me, but don't be so quick to pull this verse out of context, the apostle continues, *"for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Phil 2:12-13).* Verse 13 sounds a lot like *quietism,* that it's all God's work.

> Barry Cooper, from Ligonier Ministries writes, *"Scripture gives us a much more "wholistic" view of how we're to understand the Christian life. We are to work, and work hard, for holiness, but as we do that, we do it in the knowledge that it is God who is working in us to make us more like Christ. And actually, according to Paul, the very reason that we keep striving for holiness is precisely because we know that God is working in us when we do so. If you knew that God would be at work in you when you are at work, wouldn't that motivate you to work all the more?"*

I remember from my time in the charismatic church this teaching of the "*second blessing"* or what was referred to as the baptism of the Holy Spirit that was accompanied in the *speaking in tongues (ecstatic utterances in the spirit).* I never received this gift of the *second blessing,* so I felt like a second-class Christian. I then read a book by B.B. Warfield, *Studies in Perfectionism.* Warfield was the greatest opponent of *higher life* movement during his time. Warfield writes,

> *It forces from us the astonished cry, Is Christ divided? And it compels us to point afresh to the primary truth that we do not obtain the benefits of Christ apart from, but only in and with His Person; and that when we have Him we have all. . . . Of course we have both justification and sanctification only in Jesus, and of course we have Jesus only by faith. But we cannot divide Jesus and have Him as our righteousness while not at the same time having Him as our sanctification.*

This is the teaching of the apostle Paul in Romans 6:4, *"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."* That we're not only united to Christ in his death, but also in Hos resurrection. Christ rose from the dead! And we too rose with Him that we *"might walk in newness of life."* There is no first-class, second-class Christians. We may be at various degrees of our sanctification in Christ, but we are all one in Christ.

> John 15:4-5, *"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."*

The Trials of Perseverance

In application of this doctrine, I want to focus our attention on the life of Martin Luther. The Augustinian monk, who God used to bring the light of the gospel back into the life of the church during the Reformation. Luther faced numerous trial and tribulations but he never gave up since God preserved him by His grace. In August of 1527, was Luther's greatest depression, the Black Plague spread throughout Wittenberg and many died. Steven Lawson writes:

> *"Weighty trials rested heavily upon Luther's shoulders. Death surrounded him on every side. He watched people die in his house and in the streets. He chose to transform his spacious house into a hospital to care for those suffering from the plague. Hans became desperately ill, and Luther became so heavily burdened that he could not eat for eleven days. He was deeply concerned for Katie's safety and grew weak with despair."*

In a letter to His trusted friend Philip Melanchthon, Luther acknowledged his increasing bouts of depression:

> *"I spent more than a week in death and in hell. My entire body was in pain, and I still tremble. Completely abandoned by Christ, I labored under the vacillations and storms of desperation and blasphemy against God. But through the prayers of the saints God began to have mercy on me and pulled my soul from the inferno below.*

During difficulties of controversy, death and trials, Luther would find himself struggling with depression and would turn to his friend Philip Melanchthon, *"Come, Philipp, let us sing the forty-sixth Psalm."* From Psalm 46, Luther wrote the Hymn, *"A Mighty Fortress is Our God."* They sung it in the original version:

> *A sure stronghold our God is He, A timely shield and weapon:*
> *Our help He'll be and set us free From every ill can happen.*

Luther wrote of this favorite Psalm that comforted his soul by bringing the brightest light of confidence in God.

> *"We sing this psalm to the praise of God, because God is with us and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends His church and His word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, and against all the assaults of the world, the flesh and sin."*

The church historian, Philip Schaff writes of Luther's confidence in God arose during his deepest trials and depression where many times, *"The deepest griefs and highest faith often meet."*

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