

**Theology for Life**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church**  
Lesson 11: Perseverance, Assurance

**Opening Discussion:**

- Our confession teaches that a person may be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed. (18:1). And yet, the confession further states that a “a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it.”(18:3) Why do you think that this is true? What factors could make it difficult for a true believer to have Christian assurance?
- What does “false assurance” look like? What leads to it?

**Perseverance**

Perseverance is the understanding that all true Christians’ faith will endure to the end of their life.

*WCF 17.1 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.*

Based on this section: Who does the work of salvation? When did it begin? How will it be completed?

*WCF 17.2 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.*

On what does perseverance depend?

Last time we noted that justification is God’s “Last Judgement verdict” based completely on Christ’s righteousness imputed to us. If God’s verdict is already rendered, that verdict will not be overturned.

Christian perseverance is a reflection of God’s work in salvation, not a reflection of the quality of our faith or our obedience.

- Philippians 1:6 *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 Timothy 1:12 *which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.*

God accomplishes what he decrees. He pronounces us righteous when we receive the gospel by faith.

If it were up to us, we would surely fall away from Christ.

Jude 24 *Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy,*

### **Does Apostasy (falling away from the faith) Happen?**

What about those who do exhibit faith and then fall away? How do we reconcile these passages with the reality that some Christians who appear godly later reject Christ?

Scripture makes it clear that some who appear to have faith do actually and ultimately fall away.

**Romans 11:21–22** “For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. [22] Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.”

**John 15:2** “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”

**1 John 2:19** “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.”

### **How should we understand the passages warning about apostasy?**

Do these nullify grace? Do they indicate that we are saved by grace but persevere by works?

Hebrews 6:4–6

*[4] For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, [5] and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, [6] and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.*

1. He is speaking to the covenant community. These are Christians who have understood the faith, “*who have once been enlightened*”

- Remember from our lesson on faith: saving faith consists not just of “accepting” but also “receiving” and “resting” on Christ alone.

2. These were people who have been admitted to the Lord’s Supper, “*tasted the heavenly gift.*”

- But have not actually fed upon Christ, Cf. 1 Corinthians 11

3. They have benefited from the Spirit’s ministry: “*shared in the Holy Spirit*”

- Members can benefit from the Spirit’s ministry, even if merely formal or external

4. Participating in the covenant community “ordinarily” leads to salvation, but being around the gospel with a hard heart can bring a curse.
  - *“It is impossible...to restore them”*
5. What happened? What caused them to ‘fall away’? Was it bad behavior or a weak faith?
  - They are rejecting Christ by turning to another way of salvation (shadows of the law): “crucifying once again the Son of God.”
  - The warnings are do dire because these members have misplaced outward signs with what the gospel it represents.
6. The passage ends not by shaking our confidence but by pointing it back to God.
  - Hebrews 6:17–19 *So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. [19] We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain”*

### **Is there an unpardonable sin?**

Mark 3:28–30 *“Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, [29] but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—[30] for they were saying, “He has an unclean spirit.”*

- Mark makes it clear that the sin of blaspheme of the Holy Spirit is not a “slip of the tongue” or an outburst of frustration with God. Instead, it is an outright denial of Christ’s identity as savior, claiming he is a demon.
- To blaspheme the Spirit, therefore, is to reject the gospel.

### **Once Saved Always Saved: Eternal Security**

The modern “once saved always saved” teaching is not the same as perseverance of the saints. This view places security in our making a “decision for Christ.” True perseverance understands that it is God’s work that he begins and will complete. If he has begun it, he will complete it to the end.

### **Discerning Apostasy**

Is the presence of grievous sin a sign of apostasy? Is suffering a wounded conscience? How about having a hard heart?

WCF 17.3 *Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.*

Corruption, a hard heart, and a stricken conscience might be an indication of not being saved, but it might also be a temporary low point in a believer's life. We should resist making ultimate judgments, but seek a better way to find assurance.

## Chapter 18, Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation

How can we tell if we or others are saved? What should we do when we experience serious doubts?

WCF 18.1. *Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.*

Assurance of salvation is a good thing. God wants us to be assured of our salvation. The litany of promises in scripture testify to the fact that God wants us to be assured. If you lack assurance, it will adversely affect your life.

*Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives. Many have so light an apprehension of God's holiness and of the extent and guilt of their sin, that consciously they see little need for justification. Below the surface, however, they are deeply guilt-ridden and insecure. Many others have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for justification ... drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity ... their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. Few start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther's platform: you are accepted, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude.*

Richard Lovelace

What is the ground of our assurance?

Two common Reformed answers (both believe we are justified by faith in Christ alone)

1. Our works determine our assurance: Some say we discern our assurance by examining the fruit of our lives.

- James 2:24 "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone."
- James 2:18 "But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."
- 1 John 1:6-7 "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. [7] But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

2. God's redemptive love determines our assurance: Others say works play a secondary role. We should not examine our works to determine our assurance.

- Galatians 3:11 "Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith."
- 2 Corinthians 13:5 "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!"
- Ephesians 2:8–9 "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

### **Finding Assurance**

Shall we determine our standing with God subjectively or objectively? What difference would each make?

How does 18.2 answer that question?

*WCF 18.2. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.*

If we understand assurance subjectively, we could never attain "infallible assurance." Our confidence in looking at ourselves (our work, our fruit, the quality of our faith) will give every true believer doubts. We know our actions are filled with sin and mixed motives.

"For every look at self, take ten looks at Christ" Robert Murray M'Cheyne

**WCF 18.3.** *This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.*

**WCF 18.4.** *True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and*

*conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair.*

Can a person lose their assurance of salvation? Does that mean they are no longer a Christian?

According to 18.3 how does a Christian strengthen assurance (i.e. “make his calling and election sure”)?

What does all this have to do with the Lord's Supper? If a person falls into some grievous sin, should he/she partake of the Lord's Supper that week? What is the basis of our assurance? What exactly do we “examine” relative to the basis of our assurance—and how does the Lord's Supper assist us in this?