

Theology for Life
Faith Presbyterian Church
Lesson 21: Perseverance

Last time: By adopting us, God covers our shame and gives us a new identity. One of the great struggles of the Christian life is grasping the full significance of being a son or daughter of God.

- 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?

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.

Connecting the Dots: Where Theology meets Life

Summary: Perseverance is a work of God that enables his elect to remain faithful to the end. From a human perspective, some may appear to fall away from genuine faith, but God encourages true Christians to find their confidence in him and his promises.