

PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS¹

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Peter's life exemplifies what the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints means in the life of a faltering believer. Christ's present intercessory prayers assure that genuine believers will be saved to the uttermost. This is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Those with true faith will not lead perfect lives, though some have attributed such a claim to proponents of working-faith salvation. The teaching of "once saved, always saved" may carry the false implication that after "accepting Christ" a person may live any kind of life and still be saved. That leaves out the doctrine of perseverance, which carries with it the need for a holy life. Peter in his first epistle furnishes six means through which God causes every Christian to persevere: by regenerating them to a living hope, by keeping them through His power, by strengthening them through tests of faith, by preserving them for ultimate glory, by motivating them with love for the Savior, and by saving them through a working faith. Quantification of how much failure the doctrine of perseverance allows is impossible, but Jesus did prescribe a way for the church to deal with a professing believer whose life sin had seemingly come to dominate.

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In order to place the doctrine of perseverance in proper light we need to know what it is not. It does not mean that every one who professes faith in Christ and who is accepted as a believer in the fellowship of the saints is secure for eternity and may entertain the assurance of eternal salvation. Our Lord himself warned his followers in the days of his flesh when he said to those Jews who

¹This essay is adapted from chapter 11 of John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1993).

believed on him, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye truly my disciples, and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31, 32). He set up a criterion by which true disciples might be distinguished, and that criterion is continuance in Jesus' Word.²

²John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) 151-52.

The above explanation by Murray of the doctrine of perseverance is an elaboration of what Peter meant by his words "protected by the power of God" when he wrote his first epistle (1 Pet 1:5).³ If any biblical character was ever prone to failure, it was Simon Peter. Judging from the biblical record, none of the Lord's disciples`excluding Judas the betrayer`stumbled more often or more miserably than he. Peter was the disciple with the foot-shaped mouth. He seemed to have a knack for saying the worst possible thing at the most inappropriate time. He was impetuous, erratic, vacillating`sometimes cowardly, sometimes weak, sometimes hotheaded. On several occasions he merited strong rebukes from the Lord, none more severe than that recorded in Matt 16:23: "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." That occurred almost immediately after the high point in Peter's experience with Christ, when Peter confessed, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16).

Peter's life is proof that a true believer's spiritual experience is often filled with ups and downs, but Peter illustrates another biblical truth, a more significant one: the keeping power of God. On the night Jesus was betrayed, He gave Peter an insight into the behind-the-scenes spiritual battle over Peter's soul: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but *I have prayed for you*, that your faith may not fail" (Luke 22:31-32, emphasis added).

Peter was confident of his willingness to stand with Jesus, whatever the cost. He told the Lord, "Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). Yet Jesus knew the truth and sadly told Peter, "The cock will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me" (Luke 22:34).

Did Peter fail? Yes, miserably. Was his faith overthrown? Never. Jesus Himself was interceding on Peter's behalf, and His prayers did not go unanswered.

The Lord intercedes for all genuine believers that way. John 17:11 gives a glimpse of how He prays for them: "I am no more in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to Thee. Holy Father, *keep them in Thy name*, the name which Thou has given Me, that they may be one, even as We are" (emphasis added).

He continues:

I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to *keep them from the evil one*. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

³All Scripture quotations in this article are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth. As Thou didst send Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in the truth. I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. And the glory which Thou has given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me (John 17:15-23, emphasis added).

Notice what the Lord was praying for: that believers would be kept from the power of evil; that they would be sanctified by the Word; that they would share His sanctification and glory; and that they would be perfected in their union with Christ and one another. He was praying that they would persevere in the faith.

Was the Lord praying for the eleven faithful disciples only? No. He explicitly includes every believer in all succeeding generations: "I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word" (v. 20). That includes all true Christians, even in the present day!

Moreover, the Lord Himself is continuing His intercessory ministry for believers right now. "He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb 7:25). The King James Version translates Heb 7:25 thus: "He is able also to *save them to the uttermost* that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (emphasis added).

SAVED TO THE UTTERMOST

All true believers will be saved to the uttermost. Christ's High Priestly ministry guarantees it. They have been justified, they are being sanctified, and they will be glorified. Not one of them will miss out on any stage of the process, though in this life they all find themselves at different points along the way. The truth has been known historically as *the perseverance of the saints*.

No doctrine has been more savaged by the system of theology that advocates merely intellectual faith as the condition of salvation,⁴ because the doctrine of perseverance is antithetical to the entire system that is so oriented. In fact, what proponents of this system have pejoratively labeled "lordship salvation" is nothing other than the doctrine of perseverance!

Perseverance means that "those who have true faith can lose that faith neither totally nor finally."⁵ It echoes God's promise through Jeremiah: "I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; *and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me*" (32:40, emphasis added).

That flatly contradicts the notion entertained by some who teach that faith can evaporate, leaving "believers" who no longer believe.⁶ It opposes the radical easy-believism teaching that genuine Christians can choose to "drop out" of the spiritual growth process⁷

⁴Those who follow the system of merely intellectual faith for salvation have pejoratively assigned the label "lordship salvation" to the system that insists on a faith that works as the condition for salvation. They invented the title "lordship salvation" to convey the impression that the system so labeled contradicts the doctrine of justification by faith alone, because it adds another condition for salvation. That does not accurately represent the working faith position which clings to the justification-by-faith doctrine while noting that a submissive heart is not extraneous to saving faith. Though elsewhere I have employed the expression "lordship salvation" for the sake of argument, here I am using the more accurate expression "working-faith salvation" (cf. Jas 2:17). A faith that is void of submission is a merely intellectual faith, sometimes appropriately called "easy believism." "Easy believism" is the view that saving faith is a solely human act. Those who adopt such a view must then scale back the definition of faith so that believing is something that even depraved sinners are capable of.

⁵Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 234.

⁶Cf. Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1989) 141.

⁷Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free!* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 79-89.

and "cease to confess Christianity."⁸ It is the polar opposite of the brand of theology that makes faith a "historic moment," a one-time "act" that secures heaven, but offers no guarantee the "believer's" earthly life will be changed.⁹

The Westminster Confession of Faith has defined perseverance as follows:

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 (chap. 17, sec. 1).

This definition does not deny the possibility of miserable failings in one's Christian experience, because the Confession also said,

Nevertheless [believers] 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 (sec. 3).

Sin is a reality in the believer's experience, so it is clear that insistence on the salvific necessity of a working faith does not include the idea of perfectionism. Nevertheless, people steeped in the merely-intellectual-faith teaching often misunderstand the issue with regard to perseverance.

A Christian layman who has embraced easy-believism teaching wrote me a very graciously worded seventeen-page letter explaining why he rejects the working-faith doctrine. His complaint is that the latter theology "does not seem to allow for anything but highly successful Christian living."

Hodges makes a similar charge:

The belief that every Christian will live a basically successful life until the end is an illusion. It is not supported by the instruction and warnings of the New Testament. . . . It is not surprising that those who do not perceive this aspect of New Testament revelation have impoverished their ability to motivate both themselves and other

⁸Ibid., 111.

⁹Ibid., 63-64.

believers. Tragically, they often fall back on the technique of questioning the salvation of those whose lives seem not to meet Biblical standards. But in the process they undermine the grounds for a believer's assurance and take part however unwittingly in the siege of the Gospel.¹⁰

No advocate of working-faith salvation I am aware of teaches that "every Christian will live a basically successful life until the end." Hodges is quite right in saying the NT does not support such a view.

Murray, defending the doctrine of perseverance, acknowledged the difficulties it poses:

Experience, observation, biblical history, and certain Scripture passages would appear to provide very strong arguments against the doctrine. . . .

Is not the biblical record as well as the history of the church strewn with examples of those who have made shipwreck of the faith?¹¹

Certainly Scripture is filled with warnings to people in the church lest they should fall away (cf. Heb 6:4-8; 1 Tim 1:18-19; 2 Tim 2:16-19). Hodges suggests such warnings prove Christians can fall away: "If anyone supposes that no true Christian could quit, or would quit, they have not been paying attention to the Bible. They need to reread their New Testament, this time, with their eyes open."¹²

But God does not contradict Himself. The warning passages do not negate the many promises that believers will persevere:

Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him *shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life* (John 4:14).¹³

I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst (John 6:35).

You are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, *who shall also confirm you in the end, blameless in the day*

¹⁰Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1981) 113.

¹¹Murray, *Redemption* 151.

¹²Hodges, *Absolutely Free!* 83.

¹³Ironically, Hodges continually cites Jesus' words to the woman at the well in John 4 as support for his system, but he neglects the truth of perseverance that is included in this promise.

of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor 1:7-9).

May the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely: and *may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame* at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and *He also will bring it to pass* (1 Thess 5:23-24).

They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for *if they had been of us, they would have remained with us*; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us (1 John 2:19).

Now unto *him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy*, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and for ever. Amen (Jude 24-25, KJV, emphasis added in all citations).

Horne observed,

It is noteworthy that when Jude exhorts us to keep ourselves in the love of God (v. 21) he concludes with a doxology for Him who is able to keep us from falling and who will present us without blemish before the presence of His glory (v. 24). The warning passages are *means* which God uses in our life to accomplish His purpose in grace.¹⁴

And, it could be added, the warning passages like Jude 21 reveal that the writers of Scripture were very keen to alert those whose hope of salvation might be grounded in a spurious faith. Obviously the apostolic authors were not laboring under the illusion that every person in the churches to whom they were writing was genuinely converted.¹⁵

ONCE SAVED, ALWAYS SAVED?

It is crucial to understand what the biblical doctrine of perseverance does *not* mean. It does not mean that people who "accept Christ" can then live any way they please without fear of hell. The expression "eternal security" is often used in this sense, as is "once saved, always saved." Kendall, arguing for the latter phrase, defines its meaning thus:

¹⁴Charles Horne, *Salvation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971) 95.

¹⁵Cf. Hodges, *Absolutely Free!* 98.

*"Whoever once truly believes that Jesus was raised from the dead, and confesses that Jesus is Lord, will go to heaven when he dies. But I will not stop there. Such a person will go to heaven when he dies no matter what work (or lack of work) may accompany such faith."*¹⁶

Kendall also writes, "I hope no one will take this as an attack on the Westminster Confession. It is not that."¹⁷ But is *precisely* that! Kendall expressly argues against Westminster's assertion that faith cannot fail. He believes faith is best characterized as a single look: "one need only see the Sin Bearer once to be saved."¹⁸ This is a full-scale assault against the doctrine of perseverance affirmed in the Westminster Confession. Worse, it subverts Scripture itself. Unfortunately, it is a view that has come to be widely believed by Christians today.

Murray, noting this trend nearly forty years ago, defended the expression "perseverance of the saints":

It is not in the best interests of the doctrine involved to substitute the designation, "The Security of the Believer," not because the latter is wrong in itself but because the other formula is much more carefully and inclusively framed. . . . It is not true that the believer is secure however much he may fall into sin and unfaithfulness. Why is this not true? It is not true because it sets up an impossible combination. It is true that a believer sins; he may fall into grievous sin and backslide for lengthy periods. But it is also true that a believer cannot abandon himself to sin; he cannot come under the dominion of sin; he cannot be guilty of certain kinds of unfaithfulness. The truth is that the faith of Jesus Christ is *always* *respective* of the life of holiness and fidelity. And so it is never proper to think of a believer irrespective of the fruits in faith and holiness. To say that a believer is secure whatever may be the extent of his addiction to sin in his subsequent life is to abstract faith in Christ from its very definition and it ministers to that abuse which turns the

¹⁶R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody, 1983) 19 (emphasis in original). Kendall later expands on this: "I therefore state categorically that the person who is saved`who confesses that Jesus is Lord and believes in his heart that God raised Him from the dead`will go to heaven when he dies no matter what work (or lack of work) may accompany such faith. In other words, no matter what sin (or absence of Christian obedience) may accompany such faith" (ibid., 52-53).

¹⁷Ibid., 22.

¹⁸Ibid., 23. Hodges' similar rhetoric on this same issue is patently offensive: "People are not saved by staring at Christ. They are saved by looking at Him in faith" (*Absolutely Free!* 107).

grace of God into lasciviousness. The doctrine of perseverance is the doctrine that believers *persevere*. . . . It is not at all that they will be saved irrespective of their perseverance or their continuance, but that they will assuredly persevere. Consequently the security that is theirs is inseparable from their perseverance. Is this not what Jesus said? "He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved."

Let us not then take refuge in our sloth or encouragement in our lust from the abused doctrine of the security of the believer. But let us appreciate the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and recognize that we may entertain the faith of our security in Christ only as we persevere in faith and holiness to the end.¹⁹

Any doctrine of eternal security that leaves out perseverance distorts the doctrine of salvation itself. Heaven without holiness ignores the whole purpose for which God chose and redeemed His people:

God elected us for this very purpose. "He chose us in him [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph. 1:4). We were predestinated to be conformed to the image of Christ in all His spotless purity (*Rom. 8:29*). This divine choice makes it certain that we shall be like Him when He appears (*I John 3:2*). From this fact, John deduces that everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself just as Christ is pure (*I John 3:3*). His use of the word "everyone" makes it quite certain that those who do not purify themselves will not see Christ, nor be like Him. By their lack of holiness they prove that they were not so predestinated. The apostle thus deals a crushing blow to Antinomianism.²⁰

God's own holiness thus *requires* perseverance. "God's grace insures our persevering`but this does not make it any less *our* persevering."²¹ Believers cannot acquire "the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" unless they "press on toward the goal" (Phil 3:14). But as they "work out [their] salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12), they find that "it is God who is at work in [them], both to will and work for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

"THE OUTCOME OF YOUR FAITH"

¹⁹Murray, *Redemption* 154-55.

²⁰Richard Alderson, *No Holiness, No Heaven!* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986) 88.

²¹Horne, *Salvation* 95.

Perhaps no apostle understood better than Peter the keeping power of God in the life of an inconsistent believer. God had preserved him and matured him through every kind of faux pas and failure, including severe sin and compromise—even repeated denials of the Lord accompanied by cursing and swearing! (Matt 26:69-75). Yet the power of God kept Peter in faith despite his own failures. It is therefore appropriate that he become the instrument of the Holy Spirit used to pen the following glorious promise:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls (1 Pet 1:3-9).

Peter was writing to scattered believers living in Asia Minor. They were facing a horrible persecution that had begun at Rome and was spreading through the Roman Empire. After the city of Rome burned, Nero had blamed Christians for the disaster. Gradually believers everywhere were becoming targets of tremendous persecution. These people feared for their lives, and they feared they would fail if put to the test for their faith.

Peter wrote this epistle to encourage them. He reminded them that they were aliens in this world, citizens of heaven, a royal aristocracy, children of God, residents of an unearthly kingdom, living stones, a holy priesthood, and a people for God's own possession. Peter told them they were not to fear the threats, they were not to be intimidated, they were not to be troubled by the world's animosity, and they were not to be afraid when they suffered.

Why? Because Christians are "protected by the power of God through faith." Instead of giving them doses of sympathy and commiseration, Peter pointed them to their absolute security as believers: He knew they might be losing all their earthly possessions and even their lives, but he wanted them to know they would never lose what they had in Christ. (1) Their heavenly inheritance was

guaranteed. (2) They were being kept by divine power. (3) Their faith would endure through anything. (4) They would persevere through their trials and be found worthy at the end. (5) Their love for Christ would remain intact. (6) Even now, in the midst of their difficulties, God would provide the spiritual deliverance they needed, according to His eternal plan. An explanation of those six means of perseverance will sum up how God sustains every Christian.

Christians are born again to a living hope. "God . . . has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you" (vv. 3-4). Every Christian is born again to a *living hope* that is, a hope that is perpetually alive, a hope that cannot die. Peter seems to be making a contrast to mere human hope, which is always a dying or a dead hope. Human hopes and dreams inevitably fade and ultimately disappoint. That is why Paul told the Corinthians, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15:19). This living hope in Christ cannot die. God guarantees that it will finally come to a complete and total, glorious eternal fulfillment. "This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast" (Heb 6:19).

That has clear implications beyond the normal concept of eternal security. Again, the point is not only that Christians are saved forever and safe from hell, no matter what. It means more than that: Christian *hope* does not die. Christian *faith* will not fail. That is the heart of the doctrine of perseverance.

But this passage *does* teach eternal security as well. Christians are guaranteed "an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven" (v. 4). Unlike everything in this life, which may be corrupted, decay, grow old, rust, corrode, be stolen, or lose its value, an inheritance is reserved for Christians in heaven where it remains incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading. A full inheritance will one day be the culmination of the living hope of Christians. It is "reserved in heaven"—"not like a hotel reservation which may be unexpectedly cancelled, but permanently and unchangeably."²²

Christians still alive have already received part of that inheritance. Ephesians 1:13-14 says, "[Having] believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory" (cf. 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5). "Pledge" in

²²Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* 244.

v. 14 comes from the Greek word *ἀρραβών* (*arrabōn*), which means "down payment." When a person first believes, the Holy Spirit Himself moves into that person's heart. He is the security deposit on eternal salvation for Christians. He is an advance on the Christian's inheritance. He is the guarantee that God will finish the work He has started. "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God by whom you were *sealed for the day of redemption*" (Eph 4:30, emphasis added).

Christians are kept by God's own power. "[We are] protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (v. 5). That is a rich statement, guaranteeing the consummation of every believer's eternal salvation. The phrase, "a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time," speaks of full and final salvation from the curse of the law, the power and presence of sin, all decay, every stain of iniquity, all temptation, all grief, all pain, all death, all punishment, all judgment, and all wrath. God has begun this work in Christians already, and He will thoroughly complete it (cf. Phil 1:6).

Earlier in the sentence is this phrase: "you . . . are protected by the power of God through faith." Christians are *protected* by the power of a supreme, omnipotent, sovereign, omniscient, almighty God. The verb tense speaks of continuous action. Even now believers are *being protected*. "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom 8:31, KJV). "[He] is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy" (Jude 24).

Furthermore, Christians are protected *through faith*. Continued faith in Christ is the instrument of God's sustaining work. God did not save Christians apart from faith, and He does not keep them apart from faith. Our faith is God's gift, and through His protecting power He preserves it and nurtures it. The maintenance of a Christian's faith is as much His work as every other aspect of salvation. Faith is kindled and driven and maintained and fortified by God's grace.

But to say that faith is God's gracious gift, which He maintains, is not to say that faith operates apart from the human will. It is the faith *of Christians*. They believe. They remain steadfast. They are not passive in the process. The means by which God maintains their faith involves their full participation. They cannot persevere apart from faith, only *through* faith.

Christians are strengthened by the testing of their faith. "In this you

greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:5-6). This statement tells the chief means by which God maintains the faith of Christians: He subjects it to trials.

The little phrase "you greatly rejoice" may catch the unsuspecting reader off guard. Remember the recipients of this epistle were facing life-threatening persecutions. They were fearful of the future. Yet Peter says, "You greatly rejoice." How could they be rejoicing?

Trials produce joy because the testing establishes the faith of Christians. James said exactly the same thing: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance" (Jas 1:2-3). Temptations (same word as for "trials" in the Greek) and tests do not weaken or shatter real faith—just the opposite. They strengthen it. People who lose their faith in a trial only show that they never had real faith to begin with. Real faith emerges from trials stronger than ever.

Trials themselves are anything but joyful, and Peter recognizes this: "though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials" (v. 6). They come like fire to burn the dross off metal. But that is the point. The faith that emerges is that much more glorious. When the fire has done its burning, what is left is purer, brighter, stronger faith.

For whom does God test the faith of Christians? For His own sake? Is He wanting to find out whether their faith is real? Of course not. He knows. He tests them for their own benefit, so that they will know if their faith is genuine. He tests their faith in order to refine it, strengthen it, bring it to maturity. What emerges from the crucible is "more precious than gold" (v. 7). Unlike gold, proven faith has eternal value. Gold may survive the refiner's fire, but it does not pass the test of eternity.

Peter was not giving these Christians empty platitudes. He had tasted the joy that accrues from a trial of persecution. Acts 5:41 says the apostles "went on their way from the presence of the Council [i.e., the Sanhedrin], *rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name*" (emphasis added). They probably went on their way with a stronger faith too. They had suffered, but their faith had passed the test. The great confidence of the believer is to know that his faith is real. Thus trials produce that mature faith by which God preserves Christians.

Christians are preserved by God for ultimate glory. "The proof of your faith . . . may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (v. 7). Here is an astonishing promise. The ultimate result of proven faith will be praise, glory, and honor at Christ's appearing. The direction of this praise is from God to the believer, not vice versa! Peter is not talking about Christians' praising, glorifying, and honoring God, but His approval directed to them.

First Peter 2:20 says, "If when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God." Like the master of the faithful servant, God will say, "Well done, good and faithful slave, . . . enter into the joy of your master" (Matt 25:21). Romans 2:29 says, "He is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; *and his praise is not from men, but from God*" (emphasis added). True faith, tested and proved, receives praise from God.

Notice 1 Pet 1:13 where Peter writes, "Therefore, gird your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." What is that grace? "Praise and glory and honor." In 4:13 he says, "To the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation." Paul says, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom 8:18).

Some people misunderstand 1 Pet 1:7 and think it is saying that faith has to wait for the Second Coming to be found genuine. "That the proof of your faith . . . may be found [worthy] *at the revelation of Jesus Christ*" as if the outcome were uncertain until that day. But the verse actually says that faith, already tested and proved genuine, is awaiting its eternal reward. There is no insecurity in this. In fact, the opposite is true. Christians can be certain of the final outcome, because God Himself is preserving them through faith until that day.

Christians are motivated by love for the Savior. "Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory" (v. 8). That is a profound statement about the character of genuine faith. Without doubt, two key factors that guarantee perseverance from the human side are love for and trust in the Savior. Peter knew this better than anyone.

After he denied Christ, Peter had to face Jesus Christ and have his love questioned. Jesus asked him three times, "Do you love Me?" and Peter was deeply grieved (John 21:17). Of course, he *did* love Christ, and that is why he returned to Him and was restored. Peter's

own faith was purified by that trial. Peter portrays a beautiful humility here. Peter commends these suffering believers and says to them, "You've never seen Him and you love Him, and you don't see Him now but you believe in Him." He must have been remembering that when he denied Christ, he was standing close enough for their eyes to meet (Luke 22:60-61). Surely the pain of his own failure was still very real in his heart, after these many years.

A normal relationship involves love and trust for someone you can know face-to-face. But Christians love Someone they cannot see, hear, or touch. It is a supernatural, God-given love. "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19, KJV).

There is no such thing as a Christian who lacks this love. Peter is saying categorically that the essence of what it means to be a Christian is to love Jesus Christ. In fact, perhaps no better way exists to describe the essential expression of the new nature than to say it is *continual love for Christ*. The King James Version translates 1 Pet 2:7 thus: "Unto you therefore which believe he is precious." Note what Paul said in the last verse of Ephesians: "Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with a love incorruptible" (6:24). Paul makes his strongest statement on this matter in 1 Cor 16:22: "If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed."

Easy-believism theology ignores this vital truth. Consequently, many people who utterly lack any love for the Lord Jesus Christ are being given a false hope of heaven. True Christians love Christ. His love for them, producing their love for Him (1 John 4:19), is one of the guarantees that they will persevere to the end (Rom 8:33-39). Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:23). "He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me" (John 14:21). Conversely, "He who does not love Me does not keep My words" (John 14:24).

Those who are devoted to Christ long to promote His glory. They long to serve Him with heart and soul and mind and strength. They delight in His beauty. They love to talk about Him, read about Him, fellowship with Him. They desire to know Him better and to know Him deeper. They are compelled in their hearts to want to be like Him. Like Peter, they may stumble frequently and fail in pathetic ways as sinful flesh assaults holy longings. But like Peter, all true believers *will* persevere until the goal is ultimately reached.²³ "Beloved, now we are the children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be

²³This is not to suggest that all believers will experience the same degree of spiritual success, only that none of them will turn away from Christ by giving in to settled unbelief.

like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2).

Leighton, writing in 1853 in a wonderful commentary on 1 Peter, said this:

*Believe, and you shall love; believe much, and you shall love much; labor for strong and deep persuasion of the glorious things which are spoken of Christ, and this will command love. Certainly, did men indeed believe his worth, they would accordingly love him; for the reasonable creature cannot but affect that most which it firmly believes to be the worthiest of affection. Oh! this mischievous unbelief is that which makes the heart cold and dead towards God. Seek then to believe Christ's excellency in himself and his love to us, and our interest in him, and this will kindle such a fire in the heart, as will make it ascend in a sacrifice of love to him.*²⁴

So love for Christ is another of the means God uses to assure our perseverance. That love and the faith that accompanies it are a source of inexpressible joy, full of glory (1 Pet 1:8).

Christians are saved by a working faith. "[You are] obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls" (1:9). In this phrase Peter speaks of a present deliverance. "Obtaining" is a present-tense verb, middle voice. The word could be literally translated, "Presently receiving for yourselves. . . ." This present salvation is "the outcome" of a Christian's faith—a working faith. In practical terms, it means a present-tense deliverance from sin, guilt, condemnation, wrath, ignorance, distress, confusion, hopelessness, everything that defiles. This does not speak of the future perfect consummation of salvation mentioned in v. 5.

The salvation in view in v. 9 is a constant, present-tense salvation. Sin no longer has dominion over Christians (Rom 6:14). They can in no way fail to persevere. They will certainly fail at times and will not always be successful. In fact, some people may seem to experience more failure than success. But no true believer can fall into settled unbelief or permanent reprobation. To allow for such a possibility is a disastrous misunderstanding of God's keeping power in the lives of His chosen ones.

Thus Peter opens his first epistle. At the end of this same epistle he returns to the theme of perseverance: "After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His

²⁴Robert Leighton, *Commentary on First Peter* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972 reprint of 1953 ed.) 55.

eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you" (5:10).

The magnitude of that promise is overwhelming! *God Himself* perfects, confirms, strengthens, and establishes His children. Though His purposes for the future involve some pain in the present, He will nevertheless give Christians grace to endure and persevere. Even while they are being personally attacked by the enemy, they are being personally perfected by God. He Himself is doing it. He will accomplish His purposes in them, bringing them to wholeness, setting them on solid ground, making them strong, and establishing them on a firm foundation. All those terms speak of strength and resoluteness.

THE PROBLEM OF QUANTIFICATION

Inevitably, the question is raised, "How faithfully must one persevere?" Ryrie has written,

So we read a statement like this: "A moment of failure does not invalidate a disciple's credentials." My immediate reaction to such a statement is to want to ask if two moments would? Or a week of defection, or a month, or a year? Or two? How serious a failure and for how long before we must conclude that such a person was in fact not saved? Lordship teaching recognizes that "no one will obey perfectly," but the crucial question is simply how imperfectly can one obey and yet be sure that he "believed"? . . .

. . . A moment of defection, we have been told, is not an invalidation. Or "the true disciple will never turn away completely." Could he turn away almost completely? Or ninety percent? Or fifty percent and still be sure he was saved? . . .

Frankly, all this relativity would leave me in confusion and uncertainty. Every defection, especially if it continued, would make me unsure of my salvation. Any serious sin or unwillingness would do the same. If I come to a fork in the road of my Christian experience and choose the wrong branch and continue on it, does that mean I was never on the Christian road to begin with? For how long can I be fruitless without having a lordship advocate conclude that I was never really saved?²⁵

Ryrie suggests that if we cannot state precisely *how much* failure is possible for a Christian, true assurance becomes impossible. He wants the terms to be quantified: "Could he turn away almost completely? Or ninety percent? Or fifty percent?" To put it another way, Ryrie is suggesting that the doctrines of perseverance and assurance are incompatible. Astonishingly, he wants a doctrine of assurance that

²⁵Ryrie, *So Great Salvation* 48-49, emphasis added.

allows those who have defected from Christ to be confident of their salvation.

No quantifiable answers to the questions Ryrie raises are available. Indeed, some Christians persist in sin for extended periods of time. But those who do, forfeit their right to genuine assurance. "Serious sin or unwillingness" certainly *should* cause someone to contemplate carefully the question of whether he or she really loves the Lord. Those who turn away completely (not *almost* completely, or ninety percent, or fifty percent) demonstrate that they never had true faith.

Quantification poses a dilemma for merely-intellectual-faith teaching too. Hodges speaks of faith as a "historical moment." How brief may that moment be? Someone listening to a debate between a Christian and an atheist might believe for an instant while the Christian is speaking, but immediately be led back into doubt or agnosticism by the atheist's arguments. Would such a person be classified as a believer? One suspects some easy-believism advocates would answer yes, although that view goes against everything God's word teaches about faith.

Jesus never quantified the terms of salvation; He always made them *absolute*. "So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33); "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt 10:37); "He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal" (John 12:25). Those conditions are *impossible* in human terms (Matt 19:26).²⁶ That does not alter or mitigate the truth of the gospel. It certainly is no excuse for going to the other extreme and doing away with any necessity for commitment to Christ.

Ryrie's comments raise another issue that is worth considering. It is the question of whether working-faith teaching is inherently judgmental: "How long can I be fruitless without having a lordship advocate conclude that I was never really saved?" Hodges has made a similar comment: "Lordship teaching reserves to itself the right to strip professing Christians of their claims to faith and to consign such people to the ranks of the lost."²⁷

Certainly no individual can judge another's heart. It is one thing to challenge people to examine themselves (2 Cor 13:5); it is entirely another matter to set oneself up as another Christian's judge

²⁶Even those who want to apply these statements of Christ to a post-conversion step of discipleship do not solve the dilemma of their absoluteness.

²⁷Hodges, *Absolutely Free!* 19.

(Rom 14:4, 13; Jas 4:11).

But though individual Christians must never be judgmental, the church body as a whole very definitely has a responsibility to maintain purity by exposing and excommunicating those who live in continual sin or defection from the faith. The Lord gave very explicit instructions on how to handle a fellow believer who falls into such sin.

Christians are to go to the brother (or sister) privately first (Matt 18:15). If he or she refuses to hear, they are to go again with one or two more people (Matt 18:16). Then if he or she refuses to hear, they are to "tell it to the church" (Matt 18:17). If the one sinning still fails to repent, "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer" (Matt 18:17).

In other words, pursue that person for Christ evangelistically as if he or she were utterly unsaved.

This process of discipline is how Christ mediates His rule in the church. He added, "Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven" (Matt 18:18-19). The context shows this is not talking about "binding Satan" or about praying in general. The Lord was dealing with the matter of sin and forgiveness among Christians (cf. Matt 18:21 ff.) The verb tenses in v. 18 literally mean, "Whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." The Lord said that He Himself works personally in the discipline process: "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst" (Matt 18:20).

Thus the process of church discipline, properly followed, answers all of Ryrie's questions. How long can a person continue in sin before fellow Christians "conclude that [he or she] was never really saved?" All the way through the discipline process. Once the matter has been told to the church, if the person still refuses to repent, Christians have instructions from the Lord Himself to regard the sinning one "as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer."

The church discipline process outlined in Matthew 18 is predicated on the doctrine of perseverance. Those who remain hardened in sin only demonstrate their lack of true faith. Those who respond to the rebuke and return to the Lord give the best possible evidence of genuine salvation. They can be sure that if their faith is real, it will endure to the end because God Himself guarantees it.

"I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6). "I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day" (2 Tim 1:12).