

The Preservation of the Saints

Intro: An issue of huge pastoral significance

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.

Matthew 7.21-23

John Calvin's theology of salvation has been summarised by the acronym 'TULIP'

Total depravity	all humans are slaves to sin, unable to save themselves
Unconditional election	God chose in eternity those whom He would save by grace
Limited atonement	Jesus' death was effective in saving His elect
Irresistible grace	If God wants to save someone, they will surely be saved
Perseverance of the saints	When God saves someone, they remain Christian to the end

But many find it more helpful to speak of the **preservation of the saints**, because in modern English it takes the focus off *our efforts to stay Christian* & puts it on *God's power to keep His people until the end*.

A) Definition

Those who enter into saving union with Christ cannot lose their salvation

NB This does not say that every church member or professing Christian will necessarily be in the new creation, but that every child of God will be.

I. They, whom God has 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.

II. 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 arises also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

III. 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.

Westminster Confession of Faith, XVII

B) Starting points

i) God 'guards' His people all the way to heaven

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Peter 1.3-5

ii) God commands His people to persevere all the way to heaven

¹⁰ Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. ¹¹ For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 1.10-11

C) Biblical evidence for the preservation of the saints

i) Each member of the Trinity is involved in keeping God's people to the end

a) The work of the Father – because the Father is greater than all, He can keep us

²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

John 10.27-29

b) The mission of the Son – the Father sent the Son to save all who believe in Him

³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

John 6.38-40

See also Romans 8.32, 34, 38-39

c) The guarantee of the Spirit – God is contractually obliged to give His people heaven

¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1.13-14

ii) The nature of God's work in our life guarantees that He will keep us to the end

- * **Regeneration** If God has given new birth, who can take it away?
- * **Present eternal life** If God has given new life (John 5.24), who can take it away?
- * **New creation** If God has made us new (2 Cor 5.17), who can undo His work?

D) Objections that are raised to this doctrine

i) *What about the 'IF' passages?*

He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, ²³ **if** indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard...

Colossians 1.22-23

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "**If** you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

John 8.31-32

Answer: All true believers will persevere

ii) *What about the 'falling away' passages?*

And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.

Matthew 24.10

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons...

1 Timothy 4.1

For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.

2 Timothy 4.10

If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

John 15.6

Answer: * Some faith is 'temporary faith' (e.g. John 6.60-71; Mark 4.16-17)

*** 1 John 2.19 is a useful control for these passages (cf. Heb 6.4-8)**

*** BUT: Spiritual presumption is a grave danger (Matthew 7.21-23)**

iii) What about the 'warning' passages? Are they empty of all meaning?

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ² For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³ how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

Hebrews 2.1-3

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

Hebrews 3.12-14

²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

Hebrews 10.26-27

Answer: God uses the warning passages as one way to keep all His people to the end

e.g. This is like when I tell my children, 'If you play in the road, you will get run over.' It does not mean that any of them will ever get run over; I warn them so that none of them will get run over.

E) Applications**1. Confidence without presumption**

We can be 100% confident that every Christian will be kept by God all the way to heaven. As Paul writes, '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' (Philippians 1.6).

This does not mean that true Christians cannot backslide for a time, sometimes grievously, but it does mean that they will always return to Christ before the end.

2. Effort without insecurity

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and ever-increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so near-sighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 1.5-11