



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

TRANSCRIPT

The Perseverance of the Saints

“Once Saved, Always Saved; or the Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints - IV”

[Message] The general theme of this series of messages is, “Once Saved, Always Saved; or the Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints.” This is the final message of four messages on the theme. I hope you have your Bibles before you and among the passages to which I will be referring are these; Hebrews chapter 6, verse 4 through 6, and Galatians chapter 5 and verse 4 where the apostle speaks of falling from grace. Once saved, always saved?

Our subject over the past three studies has been the perseverance of the saints. We have defined the doctrine as teaching that every individual who has been regenerated and effectually called to salvation by grace in Christ through the gospel can neither totally nor finally fall away from that state. He shall certainly persevere in salvation to the end and be saved eternally. He is saved forever if he is saved at all. And we have contended that John 10:27-29 says it more plainly than any Bible teacher could possibly say it,

“My sheep hear my voice (Jesus himself said) and I know them and they follow me, and I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father which gave them me is greater than all and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand.”

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That is positive, clear, and exceedingly comforting for failing saints. We distinguished the doctrine of assurance of salvation from the doctrine of eternal life, or the perseverance of the saints in the following way; the doctrine of assurance is the teaching that believers have salvation as a present possession. The doctrine of perseverance is the teaching that believers have salvation as a permanent possession. We have given at least seven biblical reasons for believing that God’s word teaches the doctrine of perseverance and we have given six additional reasons of a theological or logical nature in support of the teaching. That should be enough for the most demanding of persons, and it usually is.

There are however, a number of texts in the Bible that appear to teach the contrary of the doctrine. And it is reasonable to give attention to them to see if reality underlies the appearances. Is Christian salvation after all a losable salvation? Arminian theology answers in the affirmative, while the theology of sovereign grace affirms the opposite. I propose in this study to consider the objections, the biblical ones and the theological or logical ones, and then to conclude on the note of the purpose of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

So we turn now to the biblical objections to the doctrine of perseverance. And the first of these has to do with objections from passages dealing with mere profession. It is indeed possible to apostatize from profession of the faith, but it is impossible to apostatize from possession of the faith. One thinks of 1 John 2:19 where John speaks of the false teachers in this way, “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.” In that text John plainly states that the true believer would have remained with the believers. The statement is absolute. But what of

such passages as Hebrews chapter 6, verse 4 through verse 6, a doubter might reasonably ask. In this passage, that is so puzzling to many, the author of Hebrew writes,

“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh and put him to an open shame.”

It is, of course, not possible to discuss in detail each phrase of the text in this message. The key is to recognize the character of the addressees and the meaning of the terms used of them. They are professing Hebrew Christians, the majority undoubtedly genuine, a minority doubtful. Of the latter there is the possibility of apostasy from their profession, as passages in chapter 3 and chapter 10 indicate. The warning is a warning against apostasy, confirmed by the fact that it is not said that the ones in view have the clear evidences of salvation, such as justification by faith, eternal life, the indwelling of the Spirit, and salvation. In fact, in the 9th verse and following it is specifically stated that they do not have salvation. The expression “partakers of the Holy Ghost,” which has puzzled some, refers to the acquaintance and experience of miraculous sign gifts that characterize the ministry of the apostles in the early days of the church, as chapter 2, verses 3 and 4 clearly show. In that sense they had been partakers of the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Some years ago I was preaching in Nacogdoches, Texas on the topic of “Once Saved, Always Saved” and a young preacher at the conclusion of the service asked to have an appointment with me the next morning after the meeting of that night. When he came he came laden with Matthew Henry on Hebrews 6 and asked me to justify my

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interpretation. He informed me that he believed the passage taught that one could lose one's salvation. He was not conversant with the fine points of the original text, so I thought a simpler approach might be better for him. Pointing to the statement, the principal statement of the verses, “for it's impossible to renew them to repentance” I asked him in the light of the text if his doctrine then was not once saved always saved, but once lost always lost. Well seeing the light, he quickly said, “No.” And then without further discussion of that passage he asked me, “Well what about 2 Peter 2, verse 20 through 22?” That passage too has to do with apostates, as verses 1 through 3 of chapter 2 clearly indicate. It reads,

“For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning, for it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness then after they have known it to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it has happened unto them according to the true proverb the dog is turned to his own vomit again and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.”

They are men who have turned from paganism to Christendom, but not to genuine Christianity. Put very simply, they have been white washed but are not washed white. They are dogs and swine, and Peter uses those figures of them. Christ's own are sheep.

Other objections arise from passages that deal with legalism. The leading passage of this type is Galatians chapter 5 and verse 4 where Paul writes, “Christ has become of no effect unto you whosoever of you are justified by the law, you are fallen from grace.” Now one might say, “Does that not say that we may lose our salvation?” Not at all, the

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text has to do with grace, which is not salvation but the principle by which we receive salvation, or the method by which we come to Christ. We may fall from grace by allowing ourselves to be confused by those who affirm salvation by works, by circumcision as the Galatians were in danger of believing, or by baptism, or any other sacramental work. In other words, we fall from grace when we fall into law. We fall from grace when we fall into legal, or works, method of salvation.

Some years ago a long time member of a local church listened to the preaching in the church that I was serving. He responded to the gospel, saying that for the first time Christ had become a personal savior to him. Shortly after, he fell into the hands of a confused fellow office worker who convinced him that he should be baptized in order to be truly saved. That was a mistake, and by the act he fell from grace, the grace method of salvation. Baptism is an important act, and all believers ought to be baptized upon faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is an act by which we symbolize our identification with the Lord in his death, burial and resurrection for us. But to elevate the act to the status of a saving instrumentality is to fall from grace, but not from salvation. We cannot fall from a genuine experience of salvation and lose eternal life. Please remember, we are talking about eternal life, not six months life, not life until we sin, but eternal life.

Other objections arise from passages that deal with Christian fellowship. Such a passage as 2 Peter 1, verse 10 where the apostle writes, “Wherefore the rather brethren give diligence to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things ye shall never fall.” One might think that this verse, read in isolation from its context, says a saved individual may fall out of his saved status. The verb however is one that basically means to stumble. And the context indicates that Peter is thinking of a fruitful life and fellowship with God. Take a look at verse 8 in order to see that. One may by careless Christian living fall from the life of fruitful communion with God, but he cannot fall from the Father's family. Falling and falling away are two different things.

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A few decades ago we crossed the Atlantic Ocean most commonly on steamers, often cargo steamers with a limited number of accommodations for passengers. Small children accompanied their parents and played on the ship's decks. When the cargo shifted in unseasonable seas it was difficult for the children and some adults to keep their feet. They often fell, sometimes even slipping into the scuppers to their discomfiture, but they did not fall overboard for the side of the ship prevented that. So the Lord shepherds his flock, seeing that they never perish. Although with no guarantee that they will never fall, especially if they, like Peter, become self-confident and abandon trust in their great shepherd.

There are other types of passages, such as those dealing with biblical discipline with biblical rewards and with physical deliverance, but there is no convincing reason that they involve Christian loss of salvation. We have insufficient time and space to cover them, but let me assure you they could be covered quite easily.

Now we look at the theological or logical objections to the doctrine of perseverance. And the first problem that faces us is the problem of license. This may be the most common problem that those who believe in losable salvation, or the Arminians, have with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. “That kind of teaching leads to license in sin,” they frequently say. In fact, it's sometimes claimed that one who believes this doctrine will go out and live like the Devil because he has a false sense of security. Of course the reverse is really the case for the one who is assured of successfully reaching the presence of the Lord has the best possible stimulus to ever greater exertion. But there are specific reasons why this claim is weak.

First, there is the presence of the new heart and life in the believer, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 17. The new life that the Christian has received is from God and of course the new life desires to please God. William Host, the faithful missionary statesman of the China Inland Mission once said pointedly, “The one enjoying

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most of Christ will seek most to please him.” But further, there is the answer of family discipline to the claim that security leads to license. We have a Father, as we pointed out earlier studies, who disciplines his children when they stray from the life of communion. As the writer of Hebrews has it,

“And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, my son despised not thou that chastening of the Lord nor faint when thou are rebuked of him, for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endured chastening God dealeth with you as with sons, for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?”

Hebrews 12:5-7. I'm reminded of the black Nigerian preacher who was expounding Romans 6 to his audience. The text of the first verse is, “What shall we say then, shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?” The audience was composed almost entirely of people who had never worn shoes in their lives. Nigeria is and was, or was and perhaps still is in many parts, a country of many thorns, and every person has been pierced at one time or another. One of their great desires was and probably still is, to have a type of steel prod that is useful for dislodging thorns and splinters. The preacher spoke of a man who longed for a prod and finally having saved his money was able to buy one. “Did he then cry out,” the preacher said, “now I can run in thorny paths without worry, it makes no difference now, I have a prod to remove the thorns.” The evangelist concluded, “What then, shall we continue to walk freely among thorns in order that we may use a steel prod to remove the ones piercing us? God forbid.” Well, he made his point very clearly, for a thorn wound might become infected leaving a scar and lameness. So the individual who reasons, “I've been saved forever, I can live as I please” he's forgotten the fact of family discipline. And 1 Corinthians chapter 11, verse 29 and

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verse 30 makes it plain that, as we have said previously, family discipline leads ultimately, if sin is persisted in, to physical death.

A third thing we must not forget, such thinking that we may now live as we please because we're sure we have eternal life overlooks the fact that biblical rewards that are given to fruitful believers. Look at 2 John and verse 8 in connection with this.

And finally there is the danger of doubt, which in the spiritual life always produces insecurity and instability and lack of diligence in the Christian life. In fact, to be in doubt of one's eternal security is the true hindrance in Christian living. Let me illustrate. Suppose a person were to seek to lease a property in poor condition for use as a place of business. It is the hope of the lessee to renovate the premises to give a greater chance of success in his endeavor. But suppose the leaser drew up the lease in such a way that he was permitted by the lease to take over the property at any time that he wanted to. The lessee would be foolish to sign such a lease and then spend large sums of money to improve the property only to face the possibility of losing what he had spent at any moment. “Nothing dampens the spirit of initiative and enterprise like uncertainty of tenure” someone has said. That pertains to the spiritual life. If we are unsure that we have life for eternity, we'll spend less of our time in cultivating it and be less diligent in seeking the face of the Lord God. So the believer who lives in constant uncertainty over his salvation is not likely to really enjoy the liberty of divine son ship nor will he have a persevering heart to please the Lord in his Christian work. That's why those who have believed in eternal security have always been the more stable types of Christians.

Another problem is the problem of the admonitions of the Bible and the contingent statements. The admonitions of Scripture and the “if” statements pose problems for many who are earnest students of the word of God. Does not Paul say, “and through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish for whom Christ died” 1 Corinthians 8:11. Does not that suggest loss of salvation by a brother, due to the



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overindulgence of another brother? And does not Hebrews say “for we are made partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end,” “if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end” what shall we say to these things? Well two things.

In the first place such passages are God’s appeal to the mere professor of faith, challenging him to go on to a true possession of life. In the second place they’re God’s means to secure the end of perseverance for the believer. The Canons of Dort put it well; “and as it hath pleased God by the preaching of the gospel to begin this work of grace in us so he preserves, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of his word, by meditation thereon and by the exhortations, threatenings and promises thereof, as well as by use of the sacraments. Admonition points out the way of error and impels us in the true way. Let us never forget that. And let us be thankful for those admonitions in the word of God in those “if” statements, which remind us of the necessity to be faithful in our devotion to the Lord and in our service of him.

Another problem of a theological or logical nature is what I have called the problem of experience. Finally someone will say, “I know a person who was saved. He gave every evidence of being saved, but today he has no interest at all in the things of the Lord. He’s living in sin and surely you’re not going to say that he is still a Christian are you?” Well, truth is settled by the word of God not by our views of a person’s experience. Our knowledge is so limited that we cannot know of a certainty that one was saved and lost. We do know these things; first, no Bible character was ever saved and then lost. That is, there is no text of Scripture that states that. Second, there is no record of a person baptized again after losing his or her salvation. Judas, to whom some appeal, never repented. The text in Matthew chapter 27 and verse 3 says that he regretted, but not repented. He was remorseful after the betrayal of our Lord, but remorse is as different from repentance as death is from life.

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Finally, why do we have the doctrine of perseverance taught in Scripture? What is its design? I'd like to suggest to you first of all that it is an incentive to worship. Any biblical doctrine should lead to the biblical experience of the knowledge and love and service of God. Does perseverance meet the challenge? It immanently does. It is first an incentive to worship. In the Scriptures it is frequently related to the praise and worship of God. Listen to Jude's final verses, so often used in our benedictions, “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 savior be glory and majesty, dominion and power both now and ever, amen.” Jude expresses praise and thanksgiving for the glory, majesty, and dominion of, and power of the God who is able to keep us from stumbling. It's an incentive to holy living.

Dr. Alva McClain, in some notes on theology, calls the life to which security leads “a strong even flowing one.” Paul's words in Ephesians 4:30 hinted this, “and grieve not the Holy Spirit of God whereby you are sealed unto the day of redemption.” It is an incentive to service, thirdly. That perseverance is an incentive is seen in Paul's words to Timothy, “for the which cause I also suffer these things, nevertheless I am not ashamed for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day.” Paul's suffering in the ministry to the Gentiles is undergirded by the sense of God's power to keep him on to the day of entrance into God's presence. Perseverance is an incentive to godly service.

I have a good friend who was for many years a pilot flying over the Andes in South America. I encouraged him to buy a set of systematic theology to read on his trips, which often took as long as four days. He did that and some years ago when I was living in Scotland I received a letter from him in which were the following words, “I've almost finished Dr. Chafer's volume on soteriology. And I'm telling you it has been a terrific blessing to my old sinful being. I absolutely wallow in it. Particularly do I thrill at his

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discourses on the eternal security of the believer. I only read these volumes at the hotel in Lima on my trips, so I go rather slowly. This is the third volume of the set, as you well know. Almighty God certainly outfitted Dr. Chafer with tremendous abilities and I am so tickled to think the Spirit of God caused me to buy that set of books in order that my dim eyes could receive more of his glorious light. Actually Lewis, I have to lay the book down at times as the richness of it is more than I can take at once. These have taught me in a small way what a terrific privilege it is to be a Christian and the untold vastness of riches and blessings we have for now and eternity. How glad I am that I have nothing to do with it. I can even praise him that he generated the very action in my heart that caused me to believe, for I know that if I had even the slightest bit to do with it the whole thing would be contaminated. What a God, what a creator, yea what a savior.” That’s, I say, the genuine product of an embracing of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. My friend wrote that in 1960, and I’m glad to report that his faith is still grounded in Christ and the word and that he is still extending a hand to the lost, being responsible for the radio ministry of Believers Chapel and Believers Bible Hour in Watkins Glenn, an upstate New York community.

The impelling constraint of the word is then, “Cast thy burden upon the Lord and he shall sustain thee, he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved.” May God help you to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and have the assurance of eternal life.