

SAVED FOR SURE?!
ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

SMBS SERIES
6/12, 6/19, 7/31, 8/7



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Pastor Keith Lewis

Lesson 3 — *Eternal Security: Perseverance of Believers*

INTRODUCTION

Relevance

- All of us have personal challenges that tempt us to give in or give up in our Christian lives, at least to one degree or another. How big of a deal is that? Does it really matter if we continue to sin more often than not, as long as we confess it and move on? Is spiritual growth all that necessary, as long as I have a profession of faith?
- In America, religious freedom is increasingly eroding and religious tolerance is swiftly diminishing (e.g., Houston pastors [<https://goo.gl/FvsbrH>], Iowa lawsuits [<https://goo.gl/TeRwVY>], LGBT lawsuits). Christians now face mounting pressure and growing persecution. Real suffering for our faith (fines and imprisonments) is on the horizon now, and we can actually imagine facing it. So now, a new question confronts us: As pressure mounts, will we persevere? As persecution builds, will we stand firm?
- Even more personally stated: If I face real persecution for my faith, will I endure? What assurance do I have that I won't cave in and give up? And, how big of a deal is it if I do?
- These are the questions and considerations that we seek to address in this final lesson in our series on eternal security and assurance of salvation.

Review

Eternal security holds both God's preservation and our perseverance in complementary balance.

Eternal Security

Preservation by God

From God's viewpoint
God saves and secures

Perseverance of Believers

From man's viewpoint
The believer grows and endures

...unto the day of redemption.

We see this complementary balance, for example, clearly expressed in 2 Timothy 2:9 — "But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.'"

"God's Firm Foundation Stands": Eternal Security

Seal #1: Preservation

"The Lord knows those
who are His."

Seal #2: Perseverance

"Let everyone who names the name
of the Lord depart from iniquity."

We see the same complementary balance in 1 Peter 5:8-9 (our perseverance) and 1 Peter 5:10-11 (God's preservation) and again in 2 Peter 1:3-4 (God's preservation) and 2 Peter 1:5-11 (our perseverance).

We never need question God's preservation, for it is a key tenant of the New Covenant (cf. Jeremiah 31:31; 32:40). But especially within convenient, complacent, cold, calloused American Christianity, we need to renew the challenge to ourselves to persevere in our faith!

THE DEFINITION OF PERSEVERANCE

1. *Theological Definition*

- The Westminster Confession — "They whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally [contra Lutheranism] or finally [contra Arminianism] fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved" (McCune, p. 181).

2. Interpretational Definition — “The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again” (Grudem, p. 788).

- Question: What happens when someone doesn’t persevere?
- Answer: He has not lost his salvation. Instead, he is either backsliding (a believer) or apostatizing (unbeliever).

3. Applicational Definition — “A simple summary statement of the doctrine would be that if it is true that a believer will persevere, then it is equally true that he must persevere. As in other doctrinal truth, the indicative carries an imperative” (McCune, p. 181).

You may have noticed that in our insistence upon this biblical doctrine and our understanding of work-less “dead faith” (to be no true saving faith) in James 2:14-26, that we have directly undermined the concept of “easy-believism.”

THE NATURE OF PERSEVERANCE

The nature of perseverance can be explained by considering three balancing statements.

1. *The believer can still backslide.*

Progress should be discernible, but perfection is unattainable (until glorification)—these are two complementary realities in the Christian life, and both are important to recognize. We’ll consider the first statement more fully in our second point. For now, we understand that “blemishes cling to even the best works of God’s people” and even believers can commit “monstrous sins” that “greatly offend God” (Canons of Dort, main point 5; e.g., Abraham, David, Lot, Peter). So, believers can and will continue to sin (1 John 1:8-10); and when they do:

- They can reap consequences (Hebrews 12:5-11; 1 John 5:16-17—“sin unto death” [Hebrews 12:9; James 5:19-20]).
- They can know God’s displeasure.
- They can forfeit assurance.

- They cannot be abandoned by God (Romans 8:31-39; 2 Peter 2:7-9; Jeremiah 1 & 20) — God’s preservation remains in effect. If we could lose it, we would. “We who have been converted could not remain in grace left to our own resources. That’s the bad news. The good news: God is faithful to powerfully preserve his elect to the end” (<http://wp.me/p5FX8d-1AF>).
- They cannot continue indefinitely in sin (1 John 1:5-7; 3:4-10; 5:18).

2. *The believer will endeavor not to backslide.*

“Persevering faith is a condition that must be met in order for us to finally be glorified” (<http://bit.ly/1YzAr7H>). And, as we considered in Lesson 1, conditionality does not mean uncertainty, for God’s preservation guarantees the fulfillment of the condition.

What exactly will true believers persevere in? In stating that they will persevere in their salvation, at least three ideas are suggested:

- Perseverance in personal faith (1 John 5:1, 4)
- Perseverance in sound doctrine (Colossians 1:22-23)
- Perseverance in putting off sin and putting on righteousness/good works (Ephesians 4:20-24; John 10:27; Ephesians 2:8-10; James 2:14-26).

The following verses teach the reality of perseverance (as a doctrine and practice):

- Mark 13:13 — “But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”
- John 8:31-32 — “Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’” (cf. the need to “abide/remain” in Jesus, John 15:1-5, 8, 16).
- 1 Corinthians 9:27 (cf. 2 Corinthians 13:5) — “But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”
- 1 Corinthians 15:1-2 — “I remind you of the gospel in which you stand, by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preach to you, unless you believed in vain.”

THE MEANS OF PERSEVRANCE

- Colossians 1:22 — “God has reconciled you by his death in order to present you holy and blameless above reproach, if, indeed, you continue in the faith stable and steadfast.”
- 2 Timothy 2:12 — “We endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us.”
- Jude 21, 24 — “keep yourselves in the love of God ... 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.”
- Hebrews 3:6, 14 — “And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. ... For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.”
- Hebrews 6:11-12 — “And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”
- Revelation 2:10 — “Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life.”
- “Believed in vain” or “ministered in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:2; 2 Corinthians 6:1; Galatians 4:11; Philippians 2:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:5).

Clearly, then, there is a lot at stake here! Entering or forfeiting eternity is on the line (cf. 2 Peter 1:8-11)! This is why the writer of Hebrews exhorts us to “go on to maturity” (Hebrews 6:1) and to “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

Simply put, genuine believers will endeavor to grow (1 Peter 2:1-3; 2 Peter 3:18) and the trajectory of his life will be upward “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18). This is the perseverance of the believer.

Illustration: Living things grow and reproduce—if they don’t, something is gravely wrong.

3. ***The believer will persevere to the end.***

They will be saved, their perseverance evidencing that their faith was genuine and proving God’s ability to sustain and secure (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:13).

1 Peter 1:5 says that we are “kept [guarded] by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (KJV). This verse shows us what is the instrumentality or means of our perseverance—it is our “faith.” When we are regenerated, God gives us saving faith (Philippians 1:29), and unlike other kinds of faith, this is a persevering faith (cf. Hebrews 6:9; 10:39—which complements James’ argument that true saving faith is a working faith). So, the quality of faith that God gives is of such a nature that it will endure unto the end. This is why the New Testament often exhorts us to examine ourselves to make sure we are in the faith, possessing this kind of God-given, persevering faith.

This verse shows the complementary nature of divine preservation and faith’s perseverance. MacArthur explains:

Not only is the inheritance divinely guarded, those who possess it are also protected by the power of God from doing anything to forfeit it or be severed from it. God’s power is His sovereign omnipotence that continuously protects His elect. If God is for believers, no one can successfully oppose them (Rom. 8:31-39; Jude 24). All the details of this promise are to provide the believer with an undying hope of heaven, so as to provide joy and endurance.

The Christian’s continued faith in God is evidence of His keeping and protecting work (John 8:31; Col. 1:21–23; Heb. 3:6, 14; James 2:17, 20–26; 1 John 5:4, 11–13). At conversion, God energizes faith in believers’ hearts, and as He keeps them He continues to energize their faith (Ps. 37:24; John 10:28; Phil. 1:6). By His grace, God’s omnipotent, protecting power and the believer’s perseverance of faith always work hand in hand (cf. Dan. 6:1–23).¹

According to MacArthur’s comments on 1 Peter 1:5, God’s keeping power “energizes” our faith to persevere. How does God energize our faith to persevere? How does He keep the perseverance batteries charged? There are at least four “means or ministries of grace”:

1. ***The meditation on the gospel (Titus 2:11-14; Ephesians 6:10-18; Romans 5:20-21)***

2. *The ministry of God's Word (Acts 20:32; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Hebrews 4:12-13 [this passage follows a warning passage])*

- **Exhortations** — “Go on.”
- **Threats** — “If you don't, then...”

Hebrews, in particular, is a book written to provoke professing Christians to persevere in their faith. Complementing its rich exhortations are five warning passages (2:1-4; 3:6-4:13 [esp. 6, 12, 14; 4:1, 11]; 5:11-6:20 [esp. 6:4-9]; 10:26-39; 12:15-29), in which the author uses striking languages to explain the danger of “apostasy” or failing to persevere and falling away from Christ. There are four offered interpretations of these warning passages (especially Hebrews 6:4-8):

- 1) Born-again believers who lose their salvation (Arminians)
- 2) Born-again believers who backslide (Ryrie)
- 3) Born-again believers who hypothetically apostatize (Erickson, Kent) — They could, but they won't.
- 4) Seemingly born-again believers who apostatize (Grudem, MacArthur, McCune, Murray [Calvin, but with the nuance that they were given temporary faith, thus underlining our absolute dependence on God to sustain our faith²])

From what we considered in our first lesson, the first option is errant, and the second option is clearly an imposition on the text. While the third option is certainly orthodox and held by many Christians, I take the fourth option, understanding the language of the warning passages to be purposefully intense and yet not requiring actual rebirth. These people really looked the part, and yet they were fake—they were professors only, and not possessors (Matthew 7:21-23; 13:20-21).

So, “threats and exhortations do not undermine perseverance; they help to complete it” (<http://wp.me/p5FX8d-1AF>).

- **Promises** — “If you do, then...”

3. *The practice of prayer (Hebrews 4:14-16 [this passage follows a warning passage])*

4. *The community of believers (Ephesians 4:29; Hebrews 3:13; 10:24-25) — in “one another” ministry, public preaching, ordinances*

CONCLUSION

The life of real faith is a continual balance between restful confidence (i.e., “I'm okay!”) and committed responsibility (i.e., “I must press on!”). May the God who gives real faith grace us to continue in it!

ENDNOTE

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *1 Peter*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 37.

² “Thus we dispose of the objection, that if God truly displays his grace, it must endure for ever. There is nothing inconsistent in this with the fact of his enlightening some with a present sense of grace, which afterwards proves evanescent.” Calvin, John. *The John Calvin Collection: 12 Classic Works* (Kindle Locations 9300-9302). Kindle Edition.

“It hence appears that the faith of some, though not true faith, is not mere pretence.” Calvin, John. *The John Calvin Collection: 12 Classic Works* (Kindle Location 9324). Kindle Edition.

“Faith is the special gift of God in both ways,— in purifying the mind so as to give it a relish for divine truth, and afterwards in establishing it therein.” Calvin, John. *The John Calvin Collection: 12 Classic Works* (Kindle Locations 9718-9719). Kindle Edition.