

# What We Believe – 11. Perseverance

We believe in: *“The final perseverance of the saints.”*

## A) Introduction

The doctrine of perseverance is one of the most precious truths to comfort a Christian. And yet it is easily misunderstood or caricatured, especially in light of the (sadly many) examples of those who make a profession of faith, then renounce the Lord Jesus. In this study we will seek to carefully define the doctrine, correct common misunderstandings, address some opposing views and consider the practical benefit to God’s people.

## B) Perseverance: What is it?

The doctrine of perseverance teaches that everyone who truly repents of sin and trusts in Jesus Christ will never ultimately abandon the faith and will certainly persevere until the end. This is commonly objected to on the grounds that many people appear to live as Christians for a while, then walk fully and finally away. Consequently, it is important to carefully articulate what the doctrine is teaching. It isn’t concerned with the question, “am I capable of renouncing Jesus and abandoning the faith?”, but rather with the question, “will God keep His children by His grace?” Therefore, it is common for this doctrine to also be referred to as “The Preservation of the saints” – emphasising God’s role in preserving us.

Whilst we shouldn’t abandon the term “perseverance”, “preservation” is a helpful starting point because it moves the focus of our study to the character of God, and to ask the following questions:

1. Has God promised in His Word to keep His people?
2. Is God trustworthy so that He won’t break His promise?
3. Is God sufficiently powerful so that He can’t be prevented from keeping His promise?

The teaching of the Scriptures is clearly “yes” to all the above. As Paul summarises it, “*he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion*” (Philippians 1:6).

God has a people, chosen and predestined before the foundation of the world and precious to Him (Ephesians 1:3-5, 18). The Father has given these people to His Son, and the Son lays down His life for His sheep and now intercedes for them in heaven (John 6:37-40, 10:14-15, 17:9; Romans 8:34). The Spirit indwells and seals these same people, marking them out as the Lord’s until Christ returns (Romans 8:9, Ephesians 1:13-14).

Jesus emphatically says of His people, “*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 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 10:28-29) Two aspects of this are worth highlighting: firstly, that Jesus gives life that is eternal – if this life could be lost, by definition it is not eternal; secondly, that there is an unbreakable clasp of Father and Son that keeps God’s people. Some argue that although nothing can force us to leave, we can still choose to be “un-kept” by this clasp. Aside from this rendering Jesus’ words devoid of much comfort, Paul will not allow this by stating that nothing “else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:37-38, see also Romans 8:30 – all the justified will be glorified).

The teaching of Scripture is clear – God keeps His own until the end.

### C) Perseverance: What is it not?

Now we consider a common misunderstanding of the doctrine. Some understand the phrase “once saved, always saved” to imply that, as long as someone has made a profession of faith, they are guaranteed glory and life in the new creation, regardless of how they spend their lives. In other words, this doctrine becomes little more than an

insurance policy against hell, enabling professing Christians to live as they please.

This is false reasoning. Here's where we need to retain the word "perseverance" – those whom the Father preserves will persevere. This isn't to say that Christians can't backslide, even severely (consider David's adultery and murder, and Peter's public denials of Christ), but that they will surely and necessarily return to obedience. As John writes of certain false teachers, "*If they had been of us, they would have continued with us.*" (1 John 2:19).

The Bible is clear about the sad reality of false faith (e.g. **Matthew 7:21-23**). It isn't the profession of faith that saves; it is faith in Jesus Christ that saves. True saints will persevere and strive for holiness.

#### D) Perseverance: But what about...?

The strongest arguments raised in opposition to this teaching come from specific passages in the Bible that appear to teach the reality of falling away. Space permits to only consider one such passage which is among the best known examples, **Hebrews 6:4-6** (though see also **Ezekiel 18:24**, **Hebrews 10:26-27**, **2 Peter 2:1**). There are (at least) four ways of approaching these verses (and similar passages):

1. These verses teach that it is possible for a genuine Christian to fall away. In other words, God won't hold onto us, we can become unadopted, unregenerated and unredeemed.
2. These verses describe non-Christians inside the church community. They may have "*tasted*" the benefits of salvation, but they've never received Jesus. If they now reject Him, there's no other salvation so they are utterly lost.
3. These verses describe a purely hypothetical situation – if a Christian did decide to abandon the faith they could not return. However, in reality that never happens.
4. These verses are a real warning to real Christians, and this is part of God's means to preserve us. Just as the gospel calls us to

repent and believe (not regenerate and adopt yourselves – only God can do that), so it also calls us to persevere to the end and not stray (not be preserved – only God can do that).

Option 1 must be rejected as it flies in the face of the New Testament's teaching. Option 3 is also unlikely as it seems to "take the teeth out" of these passages. Options 2 and 4 are best in general with these passages, and in the case of **Hebrews 6** I personally favour option 4.

### E) Perseverance: How does it help?

This doctrine is a precious comfort and we will consider two powerful applications. Firstly, it has a clear link to our assurance of salvation. God wants His people to know that they "*have eternal life*" (**1 John 5:13**). No other worldview can grant the assurance that comes from knowing Christ. If at any point of any day I had the capacity to reverse my redemption and place myself out of God's Kingdom, life would be too frightening to live. What if we did that in the dying moments of our lives? By contrast, the knowledge that God keeps His own to the end enables us to live with daily hope.

Secondly, this doctrine is a great motivator for holiness. Far from being a license to sin (see Section C), the knowledge of God's preserving grace is an enabling force to strive to please Him (see **1 John 3:2-3**). Knowing that God will keep me running the race until the end doesn't mean I stop running, but urges me to press on.

### F) Conclusion

The sovereign grace of God in saving His people is good news indeed. That grace began before we existed, and it will continue long after our lives on this earth have ended. The Father, Son and Spirit are working to keep us to the end, and nothing and no-one will ever get in the way.

### Recommended Reading

Ferguson, Sinclair, "The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction"