

## Perseverance Versus Preservation

The concept of The Perseverance of the Saints has been a part of various Christian theological systems from early Christianity. Simply stated, this teaching says that a true Christian will persevere in faith and good works to the end of life and so proves he or she is eternally saved. If a professed Christian does not persevere to the end of life, it proves that person was not a true Christian after all.

While perseverance emphasizes the Christian enduring through God's power, *preservation* emphasizes the Christian secured by God's promise. Preservation means that when God promises eternal life to believers in Jesus Christ, He will keep them secure with no possibility of ever losing their salvation.

Preservation of believers, not perseverance of the saints, is the view taught by God's Word and is consistent with the gospel of salvation by grace.

### The argument for perseverance

Perseverance is taught by differing theological systems. The Reformed Calvinist position (It is the P in their TULIP) argues that since man is totally unable to respond, individuals must be unconditionally elected and they alone receive the benefits of Christ's atonement through God's irresistible grace. The faith that must be given to man as divine enablement to believe also becomes the power to keep one in the faith to the end of life. At the other end of the theological spectrum, the Arminian system argues that a person is saved only as long as he perseveres.

In both systems, works are necessary to prove and validate one's salvation. Without enduring good works, no one is finally saved. In both systems, assurance is temporary, that is, one can be sure of salvation only as long as he perseveres. Many in both systems admit that absolute assurance is impossible because no one can predict the future.

### The arguments against perseverance

Perseverance depends on faith as a special power given to man, but the Scripture does not accommodate this thought at all. Faith is our response to God's promise of eternal life. In Ephesians 2:8, the gift is not faith but salvation by grace (See GraceNotes No. 48).

In spite of Ephesians 2:9 that says we are saved "*not by works,*" perseverance makes works a necessary proof, and thus a condition of salvation. This is inconsistent with being saved by grace. Romans 4:4-5 makes the contrast clearly, "*Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness*" (See also Rom. 11:6; Titus 3:5). There is only one condition for salvation by grace, and that is to believe (Rom. 3:22).

When a person believes, he is convinced of God's promise to give eternal life, to justify, or redeem (There are a number of terms used for eternal salvation). Assurance can be absolute because God's promise is absolute: "*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.*" (John 5:24). Romans 4:16 makes it clear that our assurance of receiving God's promise has to be through faith in God's grace (not our performance). Abraham was credited with righteousness because he was "*fully convinced that what [God] had promised, He was also able to perform*" (Rom. 4:21).

If eternal salvation was dependent on our performance enduring to the end of life, then no one could

be sure about salvation until life has ended. Yet the Bible has clear indications of genuine believers who did not endure in faith and works to the end of their lives (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 11:30; 1 John 5:16). In 2 Timothy 2:12-13 it is implied that it is possible for believers not to endure: “*If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.*” Endurance is rewarded with reigning, but denial of the Lord is met with denial of that reward. Even if we are faithless (from Greek *apistēō*, literally, “be without faith” or “disbelieve”) God will be faithful to His promise of making us alive with Him (verse 11).

## **The preferred term, *preservation***

Preservation is a term that speaks of our security of salvation. Unlike perseverance that emphasizes *our* performance, preservation emphasizes *God’s promise* to give us eternal life (John 3:16), *God’s purpose* to see us conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29), and *God’s power* to let nothing separate us from His love (Rom. 8:31-39). If God preserves us in our salvation, we can be absolutely sure we are saved forever, something that is impossible in perseverance.

Preservation does not negate the true biblical concept of perseverance, which understands that perseverance is not for salvation but for rewards, as seen above in 2 Timothy 2:11-13. In 1 Corinthians 9:27 Paul was expressing the possibility of losing not his salvation, but his reward, when he wrote: “*But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified*” (from Greek *adokimos*, which never refers to hell or loss of salvation in the New Testament). A major theme of Hebrews is the importance of the *Christian* to endure, or persevere (Heb. 6:11-12; 10:36; 12:1).

## **The practical applications**

When we separate perseverance from salvation by grace through faith, the New Testament has many rich applications for Christians:

- 1) We are exhorted to persevere in faithful living and service (1 Tim. 6:11; Heb. 10:36; 12:1; 2 Peter 1:6).
- 2) We are rewarded for persevering not with salvation, but with temporal and eternal blessings (Rom. 5:3-4; Col. 1:21-23; 2 Tim. 4:7-8; Heb. 11; James 1:12; 5:11; 2 Peter 1:8-11).
- 3) We can be absolutely sure of our salvation since it does not depend on our performance but on God who preserves us (Rom. 8:28-39; 1 John 5:11-13).
- 4) We are motivated to serve God and remain faithful by His forgiving grace and His unconditional love (Rom. 12:1; Titus 2:11-12).
- 5) We can counsel other believers on the basis of who they are (true Christians), not on the basis of whether they are saved or not.

## **Conclusion**

Preservation, not perseverance, is the promise of the gospel. If this is misunderstood, the gospel of grace is nullified. Salvation is not based on our persevering performance, but on God’s preserving promise, purpose, and power.