

Perseverance of the Saints

(by Bob Pulliam)

The fifth tenet of Calvinism is the "Perseverance of the Saints". This is more commonly known as "once saved, always saved", or, "once in grace, always in grace". It is a natural conclusion to draw if one has already accepted the errors of Calvinism that we have already studied. Such a conclusion must begin at the point of accepting the doctrine of original sin. If we can in no way choose salvation, and God must choose it for us, then He must see it through to the end or no one would ever be saved. Let us begin our study by noting what the Calvinist teaches, and quote from some of their literature.

The Doctrine Identified...

This doctrine is well stated in the following affirmation:

"Those whom God hath accepted in the Beloved,... can neither totally nor finally fall from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved, seeing the gifts and calling of God are without repentance..." (Philadelphia Confession of Faith, Article XVII, No. 1)

Once saved, always saved is the point. Such may also be seen in this quotation:

"All those who are spiritually united to Christ through regeneration are eternally secure in Him. Nothing can separate them from the eternal and unchangeable love of God. They have been predestined unto eternal glory and are therefore assured of heaven." (Steele & Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 1963, p56)

But what of those who fall back into the world after they seem to be saved? There are two answers given to this. The less common answer states that the sins of the flesh do not cling to their soul, and so they are still saved. This would certainly conflict with the idea of God keeping these people by the power of His Spirit unto everlasting day. However, such an answer does seem to be implied by the confessions of faith that profess Calvinism. For example:

"God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure..." (Philadelphia Confession of Faith, Article XI, No. 5)

Another answer that is commonly given, and is in line with the system of Calvinism as widely taught, goes like this:

"Many who profess to believe fall away, but they do not fall from grace for they were never in grace." (Steele & Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 1963, p56)

The idea is, if you fall away, you were never actually saved to begin with. But here, they have a problem, for who among them can claim perfection? They have all sinned since their supposed salvation, and now they must explain how their salvation has persevered. In groping with this problem, the above quote goes on to say...

"True believers do fall into temptations, and they do commit grievous sins, but these sins do not cause them to lose their salvation or separate them from Christ." (ibid, p56)

But at what point does one's sins count? The Bible teaches that sin is sin! There is an obvious reasoning process here that cannot be reconciled with the Bible. The Bible teaches that the lusts of the flesh wage war against the soul (I Pt 2:11). You cannot be sinning and still have a clean soul before God. Sins of the flesh affect the soul, damning it to hell if not remedied.

Proof Texts...

The proof texts utilized to defend this doctrine are all pretty similar. We will consider a few of them, allowing them to represent the whole. To begin with, there are those passages that seem to speak of salvation as a present possession. The assumption is, if you have salvation now, then it is eternal salvation and cannot be taken away. To strengthen this view, we have the language used by John in his gospel and epistles. John very commonly wrote of salvation as "eternal life", where other Bible writers simply spoke of life or salvation. But John often used the words chosen to make a point. The point can be taken too far, as the Calvinist has done in making John say that the saved cannot be lost. Instead, the gift ultimately to be received is brought forward to be rejoiced in now. We do not now have eternal life in that it cannot be forfeited. The eternal life we have now is in the promise of God, and the hope we have in Christ (examples of such passages - Jn 3:15f; 3:36; 4:14; 5:24; 6:47).

But what of these passages saying that we have eternal life? Has God never spoken of having given something before he gave it? God told Joshua, "I have given unto thy hand Jericho" (Josh 6:2). There was still a lot of marching to do, but God had given it! In promising land to Abraham, God said on several occasions that he had already given the land, and then on other occasions that He would give it (Gen 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8). It was not yet given, for later God told Jacob that He was still to give it (Gen 28:13). The actual gift of the land would be four hundred years later, and would require faith and obedience on the part of the Israelites. God does not always speak as men would want Him to speak, and we must understand His words in the overall context of the Scriptures.

One of the most commonly used passages on this topic is Jesus' statements regarding the sheep (Jn 10:27ff). There, Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone 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 My Father's hand." If no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand, then they cannot be lost, can they? But there is one person missing in Jesus' assurance. It is that sheep in the hand. Jesus is telling us that no one can snatch, but can't the sheep stray and become lost? To deny such would deny one of the most beloved parables of the scriptures, the parable of the lost sheep (Mt 18:12-14). In that parable, Jesus used a very interesting word in speaking of the shepherds search. Jesus said, "and if he should find it". God has not removed the free will of the individual, and John 10 does not take such into account. John 10 deals with the safety of the fold, rather than the certainty of the sheep wanting to be there and remaining.

Another text used is, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out." (Jn 6:37) Not being "cast out" can be explained just as the sheep in the Father's hand are. Some will not want to be there, and will leave. But what of "all that the Father gives Me will come to Me"? How does the Father obtain these that

they might get to Jesus? Parallel to this is, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." (Jn 6:44) But how does the Father draw him? The answer is in the next verse: "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me." (Jn 6:45) This is not a mystical voice. This is in accordance with, "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom 10:17). Does this passage teach that no one can apostatize? Or does it teach the principle, "whosoever will, may come"?

In I John 3:9, John wrote, "Whoever is begotten of God doeth no sin, Because His seed abideth in him; and he cannot sin, because he is begotten of God." Since one who is begotten of God "cannot sin", then they must be eternally saved. There are two insurmountable problems with this interpretation. The first should be obvious to any thorough student of the Bible. I will present it to you in the form of a question: Why, if Christians are incapable of sinning, does the Bible spend so much time warning them not to sin?! If we are evaluating I John 3:9 correctly by saying that a Christian cannot sin because they are born of God, then why does the same author warn of such in I John 2:1?!! But more than that, he presents the possibility that one might sin ("if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father", see also 1:7 - 9)!!! Is John saying that such is, or is not possible?

The second problem with this interpretation is found in the original language from which I John 3:9 is translated (Greek). "Doeth no sin" in this passage is in the present tense. The Greek present tense is different from ours in that it not only refers to "right now", but also to a continuation from this point forward. The statement "doeth no sin" would then hold the meaning "doth not continue to live a life of sin". This is reflected by the King James use of "eth" on the end of verbs. "Eth" could not be added to the phrase "cannot sin", although the word sin here is also in the present tense. It would then be translated, "cannot continue to live a life of sin". The point of the verse may be seen by reading verses seven and eight. One who practices righteousness is righteous, and one who sins is of the devil. What you practice will reflect the fact of who you follow. One who is born of God (follows God's will) cannot sin as long as he is following God's will. If he does sin, then has ceased to follow God's will.

This passage, then, deals with the allegiance of the heart and the fruit that loyalty will bear. It does not teach that a child of God will never sin once they have become a child. It does teach that in being a child of God, they have given up a life of sin and lawlessness.

And then there is the Unborn Child argument. Once we are children of God we cannot be unborn, so we must be irreversibly saved! This argument, although quite transparent, still trips up many people. It is true that we are saved when we become children of God. It is also true that we cannot be "unborn". But it is also true that a father's blessings only goes to the children who fulfill their responsibilities in his family. God's family is no different. He only provides His blessings to those children who remain faithful and fulfill their responsibilities. Jesus used this as an illustration in Luke 15:11 - 32. The point of the parable was the necessity of receiving the penitent back, and thus the elder brother becomes the main point. But in the course of events, we find a son who leaves home. He is still his father's son, and yet he no longer has the father's blessings. The son has not been "unborn", as some would scoff. He also does not need to be "born again again" as others would ridicule. He simply needs to come back to the father (repent) and beg his forgiveness (see Acts 8:18 - 22).

It is now important that we establish what the scriptures really do teach about apostasy. Can one be saved, and then fall away to be eternally lost?...

The Scriptures...

What does the Bible teach about apostasy? It actually teaches that one may fall from grace, and in those very terms. Paul wrote, "You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." (Gal 5:4) How could they have fallen from something they had never been in? They obviously had been saved, and now were separating themselves from God. Paul's wording in this text presents grave problems for the Calvinist. They believe that one can profess faith and fall away, but that they were never actually in "grace". But Paul says that these are "fallen from grace". Note this quote: "Many who profess to believe fall away, but they do not fall from grace for they were never in grace." (Steele & Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 1963, p56).

The apostle Peter wrote, "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 in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning." (II Pt 2:20) Now it is Peter who tells us that they had actually escaped the pollutions of the world. But then we find them entangled again, and not only that, their later state is worse than the first? According to Calvinism, there is nothing worse than the initial depraved state, for it forbids man's entrance into eternal life. But the Bible speaks of a worse state. Peter goes on to describe it as the return of a sow to her wallowing in the mire after having washed. (II Pt 2:22). The illustration makes no sense if we are dealing with the unwashed worldling who only seems to be saved. But Peter is dealing with the saved who have returned to the world.

Jesus spoke in terms like these. He offered the parable of the sheep who had wandered. Wandered from where? If not from the fold of safety, why does the shepherd of that fold seek it? Jesus gave the parable of the prodigal son. Here was one in his father's good grace, and then leaves home to waste his inheritance on riotous living. Was he lost? The father in the parable said he was (Lk 15:32). Was he alive after he had been dead? The father said he was. From saved to lost to saved again. This is our great hope for every apostate sinner; that they may come home again.

A good study of this matter must involve the subject of hope. For what do we hope in this life? If we already have eternal life, then we cannot be hoping for eternal life, for why would we hope for what we have received? (Rom 8:24f) But we have not received eternal life, except in the hope and promise established in God's almighty word. Above, we noted how God many times affirms His promises by wording them as already fulfilled. Our hope is sure and steadfast in the promise of God that "whosoever will may come".

What are we to make of Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8. He believed and was baptized (Acts 8:13). Peter gives no indication that he had not been saved. Are we to believe that his subsequent sin never threatened his soul? Peter's words certainly cannot be taken to mean he was still saved. The prescription was to repent and pray for forgiveness. His sin required his condemnation if not removed. And this is clearly what Peter refers to in this passage. Simon was lost, then saved, then lost because of his sin. If he followed Peter's command he was then saved. Some ridicule this as a yo-yo syndrome, but it is a part of being human and making mistakes. Our great hope is in doing our very best in this life, and making ourselves right when we go wrong. All dependent on the grace of God and the blood of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion...

There are many passages in the New Testament that can be used as "proof texts" for the doctrine of "once saved, always saved". When used in this way, however, they violate the overall context of the scriptures on the subject of salvation. In many cases, the immediate context of each passage shows the author's intentions to be far removed from saying that one is forever saved once he has been saved.

The New Testament presents a constant stream of warnings about falling away. Falling away from what? The Calvinist tells us that they were never in a position to fall. But the Bible tells us we can fall, just the same. And how can we depart from the living God, if we have never been in fellowship with Him? With that in view, let us keep these words forever upon our minds:

"Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."
(Hebrews 3:12f)