

## **Perseverance: An Act of Man or an Act of God?**

**Abstract.** There is no shortage of controversy surrounding the assignment of responsibility to the task of maintaining a believer's state of salvation. Modern theological camps tend to assemble around two exclusive theses: salvation is maintained by the believer and can be lost through a work of disobedience, or salvation is maintained by God and once attained by grace, cannot be lost by any work of man. This article will present a summary of the arguments and a biblical defense of the second of these two. We will see that the first century church and its leaders believed and documented that their salvation was secure, and were free to live a life that was free of the fear of losing so precious a gift.

## **Perseverance: An Act of Man or an Act of God?**

**“Though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand (Psalm 37:24, NIV.)”**

**“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. <sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. <sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD, your God (Isaiah 43:1-3, NIV.)”**

A very basic truth concerning biblical content is that all scripture is without error and/or contradiction. In today's society the adherents to such a thesis seem to be few in number. “A common failing of men in every era is their naïve belief that their own time constitutes a qualitatively different situation from all others, thereby rendering the biblical Word somehow irrelevant for them.”<sup>1</sup> With such a thesis, it is common to rationalize away basic doctrines of scripture, supporting variant interpretations of scripture with little or no exegetical examination. In this environment, a shallow research of scripture results in apparent controversies or inconsistencies in the text.

When one encounters what appears to be an error or inconsistency in scripture, it becomes a necessary, though sometimes ardent task to resolve the apparent controversy by conducting an in-depth study of the material from a perspective that includes the historical context of the described events and the first-century use of the original languages encountered. Numerous examples of these apparent controversies exist, and no shortage of dialogue has been generated to address these conflicts. Oftentimes, firmly held opinions on both sides of such an issue create considerable disagreement and strife in the church body. One example of such stratification even exists in our Christian seminaries as students who share the common bond of Christ will choose to separate

themselves into theological camps based upon their views on soteriology and eschatology.

One such apparent controversy exists when comparing Paul's encouraging words in 2 Timothy 1:12, and the seemingly less encouraging words of warning that are found in Hebrews 6:4-6.

*“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 (2 Tim. 1:12, KJV).”*

*“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 shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; (Hebrews. 6:4-6, KJV);”*

The 2 Timothy text appears to be words of joy and confidence expressed by Paul as he testifies to the security of his salvation because it is kept by God, relieving him of what he perceives is the impossible task of maintaining that security on his own. The Hebrews text sounds like a warning that one who has been saved can fall away and, thus, lose their salvation, implying that the individual must maintain that security. The apparent conflict between these verses differs from many others in scripture in that, unlike perceived discrepancies that are of little theological impact, this one strikes at the very fabric of the most basic theological truths: who is responsible for the maintenance of the salvation of a believer? Is there a work of unrighteousness that can cause the believer to lose their salvation? Can the salvation of the believer be given away by choice? The answers to these questions have shaped denominationalism over the centuries, dividing the Christian community into two camps of belief, one who experiences the joy of a secure salvation, and another that practices a vigilance toward

Christian behavior that carries with it a warning of eternal damnation for those who err. Some take the above Hebrews passage to such an extreme that a single error committed by a Christian can cause their salvation to irrevocably be taken away, necessitating a new act of atonement.

Do the two positions on these scriptures indicate either a possible inconsistency in theology or an error on the part of the understanding of the reader? Those who would seek to emphasize the fallibility of scriptures will point out the former viewpoint as an inconsistency on the part of the biblical writers. Those who seek to defend the infallibility of the scriptures will place the responsibility of understanding the correct and consistent context on the reader.

One's stand on this diametric thesis defines the very nature of the conduct of the Christian life. If one follows the aforementioned Hebrew thesis, life is like walking a tightrope: as long as one walks the straight and narrow, salvation is assured; if one falls off the tightrope, it is impossible for that person to be restored and they fall to their inevitable and irrevocable death. Such a system of theology can thrust the believer into a guilt-ridden works-based lifestyle, one that always has the thread of fear that one day a foot will slip and salvation will be lost. This can also bond the believer to the church organization, systematically and periodically returning to it for acts of contrition and confession, seeking forgiveness, or to conduct an act of atonement that will provide that sought for restoration.

This is quite a contrast to the aforementioned 2 Timothy thesis that once a believer receives the gift of salvation by grace, that gift will never be taken back by God because it is He who keeps the integrity of the original commitment, not the believer.

This leaves Paul free of guilt and fear. Paul never teaches that he is living in fear of losing his salvation through his own sinful acts, though he does express his vigilance in maintaining his Christian walk as he seeks to live a life of obedience. His opinion concerning the sin in his own life is quite exposed in his letter to the Romans:

*<sup>18</sup>I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. <sup>19</sup>For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup>Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it (Rom. 7:18-20, NIV.)”*

Paul teaches that the sinful nature is not nullified by salvation, but is in conflict with it, and he deals with that conflict on a daily basis. Salvation has changed Paul’s desires, and in this passage he plainly states that he no longer wants to succumb to the sinful nature, but rather seeks to follow the Holy Spirit. Herein Paul confesses to all of his readers that like all Christians, he too cannot live a life that is free of sin.

Where did these two mutually exclusive doctrines come from, and how do we resolve the conflict that these doctrines characterize? The answer to this question should serve to establish a consistent soteriology that encompasses the truth of each of these texts without the apparent conflict. We will find that when an apparent controversy exists, the antagonistic position (a position that appears to be in conflict with the remainder of scriptural truths), in this case the Hebrew reference, must be subjected to a scrupulous, inductive analysis. When this is done, it is often possible to uncover a more accurate rendition of the writer’s intended thesis, one that is indeed consistent with the infallible scriptural context, and when taken with its counterpart, creates a level of understanding that is broader than either of the two positions previously provided..

### **Calvinism versus Arminianism.**

Perhaps the best starting point to observe the modern genesis of this conflict is in the historical period of the reformation rather than that of the period of the first-century church which has no record of this conflict. We will see that this point of contention did not significantly surface until some time after the Institutes of the Christian Religion was first published in 1536 by John Calvin (1509 - 1564) stating that none of the elect will be lost. This doctrine is commonly called the “Perseverance of the Saints,” a label that was placed on this doctrine about 100 years after his death. Actually, this label is a bit unfortunate since it still implies that it is the Christian who is doing the persevering, and the maintenance of salvation is then implied to be somewhat the task of the believer. That is not Calvin's position at all, so a better label might be the “Eternal Security” of the believer, or the “Perseverance of the Lord.” John Calvin argued that “The precise ones God has elected and drawn to Himself through the Holy Spirit will persevere in faith. None whom God has elected will be lost; they are eternally secure.”<sup>2</sup> This, one of the primary points of Calvinism, has become a foundational doctrine in most modern Christian churches.

However, Calvinism has not been without its critics. Jacobus Arminius (1559 - 1609, born Jacob Harmenszoom) lost his family as a young man, and spent his career moving from university to university espousing and developing the doctrines of his early teachers who were in contention with Calvin's doctrine of grace. His career was characterized by a continued conflict with the established reformed theology, creating no little controversy. As he became influential both in academia and in society through marriage, his views were the center of much debate. Arminius departed from the

reformed faith in his teaching concerning five important points. He taught conditional election on the ground of foreseen faith, universal atonement, partial depravity, resistible grace, and the possibility of a lapse from grace. The Arminian believes that man has received his salvation as an act of his own free will and he may at any time forfeit his salvation as an act of that will, or through the committing of specific sins.

*"In his attempt to give the human will a more active role in salvation than orthodox Calvinism conceded, Arminius came to teach a conditional election in which a person's free will might or might not affect the divine offer of salvation. ... Arminius's views were never systematically worked out until the year after his death, when his followers issued a declaration called the Remonstrance (1610), which dissented in several points from orthodox Calvinism. It held, among other things, that God's predestination was conditioned by human choice, that the gospel could be freely accepted or rejected, and that a person who had become a Christian could "fall from grace" or lose salvation."<sup>3</sup>*

Following this established position by members of the Remonstrance, the Reformed Synod of Dort (1618-1619) adopted the Five Articles Against the Remonstrance, also called the Canons of Dort. Concerning the subject of eternal security, the Synod adopted the following statement:

*"Because of these remains of indwelling sin and also because of the temptations of the world and of Satan, those who have been converted could not persevere in that grace if left to their own strength. But God is faithful, who mercifully confirms them in the grace once conferred upon them and powerfully preserves them in that grace to the end."<sup>4</sup>*

Today, adherents to the two sides of this issue are often pigeonholed into one of these two camps, the Calvinists and Arminians, and often entire Christian denominations will identify with one of these.

### **The work of apostasy.**

One does not need to search very far to find examples of people who profess or had at one time professed the Christian faith, but have wandered far from its practice, demonstrating little or no fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23, James 3:14-16.) Has this person entered a state of apostasy where repentance is impossible? If the Hebrews 6 passage is literally applied in this circumstance, one can argue that they have left the faith, have lost their salvation, and no act of repentance can restore them. However, if it is impossible for one who has left the faith to be restored, how do we explain the common circumstance of those who have made egregious departures from the faith and, following a period of grievous apostasy, returned to the faith and in some cases returned with a vibrant evangelistic faith that drew upon their apostate experience as a profitable resource with which to share the gospel? Obviously, both sides of this paradox cannot be true.

The Hebrews 6 passage is not unique in its description of people who cannot be brought back to repentance. Consider Mark 3:28 - 29. Here recorded are the words of Jesus who stated, ***“I tell you the truth, all the sins and blasphemies of men will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin (NIV).”*** This passage referred to a group of people who refused to believe the work of the Holy Spirit, preferring to acclaim it as a work of the devil. They were speaking from a position of a heart that was hardened against anything that Jesus would teach. Many people rejected Jesus’ teaching, and when such rejection was professed, Jesus simply went on to teach others. (This is a practice that some modern evangelists could profit from.) These people had the opportunity to respond to the Holy

Spirit through the person of Jesus Christ and rejected Him. They rejected Him and the Holy Spirit who indwelled in Him.

What does it mean to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit? Salvation itself is a work of the Holy Spirit and scripture teaches that none can be saved unless the Holy Spirit draws that person (John 6:44.) If one consistently refuses to submit to the draw of the Holy Spirit to God, there is simply no other way for salvation, and the person will forever remain in their apostasy. The people to whom Jesus was referring to in this Mark passage refused to believe the saving work of the Holy Spirit and, consequently, until they do, they cannot be saved. “There is much to be said for the view that the mortal sin must be connected up with the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit or else deliberate apostasy from Christ. The sin would in this case be a state of hardened impenitence.”<sup>5</sup> Hardened impenitence will motivate an individual to fight against the Holy Spirit, and in doing so, commit the form of blasphemy that is herein described.

Another similarly applied verse is 1 John 5:16-17.

*“If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death (1 John 5:16-17, NIV.)”*

What is the sin that leads to death? What sin is there that will eternally separate one from God? In this passage, the concept of eternity enters the argument for apostasy. Certainly, as with the Mark passage, if one refuses to yield to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and accept the salvation through Jesus Christ, he/she cannot be saved; it is the sin that leads to death. Actually, this passage refers to Christians who have succumbed to the sinful nature that Paul mentioned in the Romans 7 passage. We are to continue to pray for that

brother in sin to come to repentance so that the joy of their salvation and their personal relationship with God can be properly restored. Through prayer, agape love, and active communication, a brother in Christ who has wandered from the faith can be encouraged to see their error and repent, returning to God's original plan for their lives.

To apply this scripture in defense of losing one's salvation through an act of sin, one has to ignore the surrounding verses. Verse 18 states, ***“We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him (1 John 5:18, NIV.)”*** This refers to Jesus (the one who was born of God) keeping him (the Christian) safe from the evil one. Another encouraging verse that frames this argument is from verse 13 that states, ***“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13, NIV.)”*** This letter was written to Christians to encourage them and to drive home the point that, contrary to the false teaching they had been hearing concerning the loss of salvation by works, they can be confident and assured that their salvation is safe. The issue that is addressed in the 1 John 5:17 text is not whether God would forgive sinners if they repented, but whether there is any way to bring them to repent at all because of their rejection of the gospel. People have the ability to so harden themselves against the gospel that there is no opportunity for them to come to repentance, and nothing can save them from eternal separation from God.

The Hebrews 6 passage also refers to those who have ***“tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come (verse 5).”*** Some interpret this to mean that they have received salvation. In F.F. Bruce's excursus on this text, he states that “so long as people are following Christ they are supremely confident about them. If their readers

turn back to the world, rejecting the rule of Christ, then the New Testament authors never express any hope that without repentance such people will enter heaven.”<sup>6</sup> That’s a strong statement in light of all of the scripture that speaks of eternal salvation. Much is based upon the concept of the metaphor of tasting that is in verse five. Consider for a moment the use of the Koine Greek word “*gneumai*”, that is rendered as the English word, *taste*. In Matthew 24:34, Jesus was given gall to drink, and after *tasting* it, he rejected it.

I have tasted liver. I have tried it with bacon, with onions, and with a variety of other seasonings. I have tasted it unseasoned, baked, and broiled. I absolutely abhor liver. No matter what form it takes, almost as soon as I place it in my mouth I experience spasms of the throat and stomach. In nearly 50 years, my reaction to liver has not changed. It is foreseeable that in the future, my detestation for liver will never change. If a love for liver was a requirement for salvation I would be in serious trouble. If I do swallow the liver, I would still gain from its nutritional value, but would do so only by force. In my experience I have attempted to communicate the gospel to many people who reject it in the same way I reject liver. They tasted of the gospel message of peace, security, and eternal life, some even spending time in the church fellowship. They ultimately rejected the authority of Biblical scripture, and by doing so harden their hearts to the message of salvation. In such a state of apostasy, one cannot be saved. This liver metaphor cannot be taken too far. The word *geuomai* is used in 14 other New Testament passages, including the tasting of death (Heb. 2:9), not something that can be rejected too easily. Because of this range of meaning, the veracity of this metaphor can be brought into question.

Further, the text describes the apostate as “partakers” of the Holy Spirit. “The question here is the exact meaning of the word, *metoxos*, which here is translated ‘partaker.’ It is not always clear to English-speaking readers that this term has a range of meaning, and may imply very close participation and attachment, or may only imply a loose association with the other person or persons named.”<sup>7</sup> The same word is translated “partners” in Luke 5:7 when the disciples’ nets were breaking under the weight of the catch of fish. They called to their partners, *metoxos*, on other boats to help them bring it in. The Hebrews passages that use the word refer to very close and intimate association. Christians are often misled by scriptural interpretation that relies only on English translation. When different translations use different words for the same Greek (or Hebrew) word, this is an indication that more exegesis is required. One must go back and investigate the original language and its contextual usage. When this is done, a clearer understanding of the text be attained. Much modern conflict in Christian doctrines is due to this lack of exegesis.

Paul often uses athletic metaphors when describing the Christian life. In 1 Cor 9:26-27) he appears to be in a contest whereby he could lose the prize. If one interprets the prize of which he speaks to be his eternal security, then we re-enter the exegetical conflict.

*“Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize (1 Cor. 9:26-27, NIV.)”*

Ladd states that “when Paul contemplates the possibility that if he should ‘run aimlessly’ he would be ‘disqualified’ (*adokimos*), it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that he is

thinking of the possible failure to reach the goal of the Christian life.”<sup>8</sup> Ladd leans toward an Arminian position when he also adds that “Eternal life is a free gift of God (Rom. 6:23), but it is at the same time a reward bestowed on those who have manifested steadfast loyalty in persecutions and afflictions (2 Thess, 1:4ff.)”<sup>9</sup> The work of steadfast loyalty is added to the requisite for God’s grace. Certainly, it is evident that “the writer of Hebrews seriously believed that some in his congregation were in danger of abandoning their profession of Christian faith, and he wanted to warn them against it.”<sup>10</sup> However, to add a human work of maintenance to God’s work of grace is a position that presupposes man’s authority over that of God, one that no believer truly intends. Rather, we might consider Paul’s purpose for stating his theses in the ways he does.

Much of what we see in Paul’s writings forms a continual tension that encourages the believer to live a life of obedience. The scripture provides an “assurance from the divine side; but it is entirely consistent with a conditioning fidelity on the human side.”<sup>11</sup> Paul firmly held that Christians should emulate him in their attempt to live a life that is devoted to Jesus Christ, and herein describes that effort in the metaphor of a race. Much like one is inspired to be obedient to an individual that is honored, respected, and loved, Christians should be inspired to be obedient to God through faithfulness and obedience. The prize that Paul refers to in these race metaphors is not entirely clear. A realistic prize might be as simple as Jesus’ statement, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.” (Matt. 25:21, 23; Luke 19:17.) To prescribe that the prize of 1 Cor. 9:27 is eternal life may be an overly narrow interpretation. Also, for Paul to lose the metaphorical race, he would not be living a Christ-centered life, and for Paul, such a life is an indication of original apostasy. “Paul holds that the hope of Christians regarding the future is relevant for their

present behavior. Allusion to the coming judgement warns the believers of false security and emphasizes the responsibility of the individual.”<sup>12</sup> The Christian will never be free of the commitment of sin in their lives on this earth. However, through the power of the Holy Spirit, such stumbling in the metaphorical race does not relinquish our position as God’s adopted children; our righteousness before God is still assured. “God is a righteous or just Judge. We are accused and convicted of unrighteousness. Justification means that the Judge declares us to be just or righteous in the eyes of the law.”<sup>13</sup> Stumbling on our way will not cause God to declare us unrighteous, as our commitment to Jesus as Lord assigns Him the noble task as our advocate and paraclete. “While it is possible for the professing Christian, the member of the covenant community to fall away, it is not possible for those who are truly elect and redeemed ever to do so. The warnings are real, and should be preached, however, since no pastor has access to what truly happens in the heart of any parishioner.”<sup>14</sup>

### **The work of grace.**

John’s statement of encouragement is clear. Salvation is eternal. Salvation is secure, and secured by the power of the Holy Spirit. “This doctrine does not suggest that the believer will never backslide or sin. It means, however, that when a person has genuinely believed in Christ as His Savior from sin he is forever secured by God by His keeping power.”<sup>15</sup> Man maintains his sinful nature, and by so doing, is not able to adhere to any set of law or practice that would, if violated, be punished by eternal apostasy. Consequently, because of God’s grace, “the basis for the security of salvation does not rest with man, but with God. The security of the believer is based on the work of the

Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”<sup>16</sup> Though salvation is a work of God through his grace, it also engages a singular, positive, and complete response on the part of the person. “Conversion is both the work of God and the work of man. God must convert us, and yet we must turn to him; both are true. We should not jettison either side of this paradox.”<sup>17</sup>

As with many controversial interpretations of scripture, even the aforementioned Hebrews 6 passage becomes better contextualized when the surrounding text is examined. Where the hypothesis engendered in Hebrews 6:4 ff. might be used to try to convince one of the insecurity of their salvation, one needs to read only a few more verses to find a clear remonstrance.

*“Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. <sup>18</sup>God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. <sup>19</sup>We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure (Heb. 6:17-19, NIV.)”*

When every Christian has to deal with the sinful nature on a daily basis, it is encouraging to know that God has provided a solid, immovable, anchor that is His promise, His oath of His unchanging grace.

The doctrine of eternal security is “taught explicitly in the word of God, which sets it forth as due to the purpose and power of God and the grace which He bestows, and not to any excellence or power in the believer.”<sup>18</sup> Certainly, the believer because of his/her sin nature is incapable of the power needed to maintain God’s covenant. “In this life believers often groan and suffer because they sense their incompleteness. Yet they

have a sure hope. The doctrine of perseverance guarantees that the salvation they possess will never be lost.”<sup>19</sup>

When practicing the doctrine of eternal security, the decision to follow Christ should not be taken lightly. With such grace comes grave responsibility. The true nature of salvation must be clearly stated when the gospel is presented. It is insufficient to teach, “Believe in God, and you will be saved.” Even the demons believe in God, (James 2:19.) The scriptures do not teach, “Believe in Jesus and you will be saved.” It is written, “Believe on the *name* of Jesus and you will be saved.” Jesus is to be confessed for who he is, Savior and Lord (Romans 8:28-29.) It is through surrendering the throne of one’s life to Jesus that He is declared Lord, and only through that Lordship is salvation assured. “In some evangelical churches, instead of teaching the full and balanced presentation of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, pastors have sometimes taught a watered-down version, which in effect tells people that all who have once made a profession of faith and been baptized are eternally secure.”<sup>20</sup> Consequently, many come forward to make verbal professions of faith and may even follow in baptism, and yet never actually accept Jesus as the Lord of their life. They have not responded to the draw of the Holy Spirit in faith, but rather responded to the draw of a logical and convincing argument placed before them by a motivational evangelist. When this happens, there is no change in the life of the proselyte as a result of their profession, and no fruit of the Spirit is evident in their lives after the point of decision. “In this way people are given false assurance and are being cruelly deceived into thinking they are going to heaven when in fact they are not.”<sup>21</sup> It may be likely that our Christian churches are filled with people who think that they are eternally secure on the basis of their church membership, or on

the basis of their belief in God. Such an incomplete basis for belief can make it very difficult for those in this state to listen to the true gospel message. The full gospel must be preached.

“The eternal security of the believer by the grace of God is the completion and crowning glory of God’s plan of salvation.”<sup>22</sup> It is the foundation of peace and joy in the Christian life. When the Christian no longer has to be concerned with losing their salvation over the commitment of an error, he/she is free to grow in the faith without the cloud of fear. “*For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship* (Romans 8:15, NIV.)” An adopted child may act like a child and even come into conflict with his/her father. However, that does not diminish their status as the child of the father. As we deviate from the plan that God has for us, Christ intercedes for us with prayers. “The present ministry of Christ in glory has to do with the eternal security of those on earth who are saved. Christ both intercedes and serves as our advocate. As intercessor, He has in view the weakness, ignorance, and immaturity of the believer—things concerning which there is no guilt. In this ministry Christ not only prays for His own who are in the world and at every point of their need (Lk. 22:31, 32; Jn. 17:9, 15, 20; Rom. 8:34), but on the grounds of His own sufficiency in His unchanging priesthood, He guarantees that they will be kept saved forever (Jn. 14:19; Rom. 5:10; Heb. 7:25).”<sup>23</sup>

As Christians, we must celebrate the gift of eternal life by (1) living a life worthy of the high calling that is in Jesus Christ, a life that seeks obedience to Christ through a steadfast desire to follow God’s will, a will that is revealed to every Christian through the scriptures, through prayer, through circumstances, and through the testimony of other

Christians. We must also endeavor to share the complete, full gospel of Jesus Christ without watering down the truth of Jesus' Lordship.

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