

TULIP – PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

By reason of these remains of indwelling sin, and the temptations of sin and of the world, those who are converted could not persevere in a state of grace if left to their own strength. But God is faithful, who having conferred grace, mercifully confirms and powerfully preserves them therein, even to the end. – THE CANONS OF DORT, “Fifth Head of Doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints,” Article 3.¹

This is the final teaching (of TULIP) that is built upon the absolute sovereignty of God in the matter of salvation through His *unconditional election* and *irresistible grace*. This doctrine is known as the *perseverance of the saints* (as in the Canons of Dort; pointing to the individual’s *responsibility* to remain steadfast in the faith), the *preservation of the saints* (emphasizing God’s sovereignty and grace as the keeping agents), and *eternal security* (the *comfort* that is received by the individual from this doctrine).² It is admitted that some, who call themselves Calvinists, have some doubts about this teaching (and others who outrightly reject it), nevertheless it fits very well with the other four *petals* of this *flower*; if one accepts that salvation is *all* of God, then God’s preservation of those whom He has *unconditionally elected* seems fitting. However, if one’s relationship with the Savior is at all dynamic (rather than robotic), then all of the teachings of the TULIP are called into question, including this one.

The Westminster Confession states: “They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.”³ They are speaking of those whom they believe God has *unconditionally elected* to salvation after having drawn them by His *irresistible grace* – they shall *persevere therein to the end*, and so they will be *eternally saved*. After laying their foundation of *total depravity*, the Calvinists work tirelessly to explain their other doctrines that are *entirely* of God, being careful to show how they are totally interconnected. *Unconditional election* is necessary because of the *total inability* of humanity, *irresistible grace* is the means by which those who are chosen by God for salvation become the *elect*, and finally, the *perseverance of the saints* explains how God will keep the *elect* to the end and for eternity; *limited atonement* is added so that it is understood that Christ only died for the *elect*. Truly, Calvinism is a maze of interwoven threads but, alas, too frequently those threads have lost any connection with the truth of Scripture, and find their source in the theological musings of men. “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1); *false prophets* are those who profess to speak the truth of God, and we must examine their words and lives against the standard of the Word of God – there is no other acceptable measure, and we must do it for our own spiritual welfare.

Let’s consider how they use the words of the Lord Jesus in an effort to support this teaching.

¹ <https://prts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Canons-of-Dort-with-Intro.pdf>.

² http://www.reformedspokane.org/Doctrine_pages/Calvinism%20%26%20Sovereign%20Grace/books_folder/Saved%20By%20Grace/Saved_By_Grace6.html.

³ <https://thewestminsterstandard.org/the-westminster-confession/#Chapter%20XVII>.

John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” It is interesting that they begin with this verse; here is how they understand it: “so often quoted by those who believe salvation depends on the choice of man’s own will ... [it] actually teaches the very opposite, that is, that those who believe *shall not perish*, but by virtue of their faith have everlasting life, which we know is a gift of God (Rom. 6:23). Similar passages are John 3:36 and 5:24.”⁴ Let’s consider each of these references very carefully to ensure that we understand them correctly and test their explanation, beginning with John 3:16.

The first part of this text (John 3:16) makes a declaration: God’s love for the world was so great that He did give His only begotten Son (the eternal *Word* made flesh) – this is what God did, and the rest of the verse clarifies for us the reason that He did it. *Believeth* is a participle (in this case, a verb that fills the role of a noun) in the present tense; consequently, the participle is to be taken as an ongoing activity with no anticipated end, and therefore, it is best understood as: *the one who is believing* (this acknowledges both its *noun* role and the continuous action).⁵ The object of this *believing one* is *the Son: the one who is believing in the Son*.⁶ As already noted, the latter half of this verse explains the reason for God’s love and the gift of His Son. *Perish* and *have* are both subjunctive verbs (which normally identifies something that is a possibility but not a certainty); when the subjunctive appears in a *purpose clause* (such as these), they lose their normal “maybe” trait and, instead, explain the reason or result of the given action (in this case, God’s love and gift).⁷ Therefore, we understand that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” *in order that the one who is believing in Him will not be ruined but is having everlasting life*.⁸ Understand that the Calvinist is using this to demonstrate that “the guarantee of scripture and therefore the promise of God is that salvation is forever.”⁹ Jesus said very clearly that the reason for God’s love for humanity and the gift of His Son is so that *the one who is believing in Him is having everlasting life* – the *everlasting life* is forever tied to the one who is continually, unendingly *believing* in the Son! To say it another way: as long as the *believing in Him* continues, then the *everlasting life* continues for the *one who is believing*; this, of course, means that if the *believing* ceases, then so does the *everlasting life*. The writer of Hebrews warned of just such a situation: *understand, brethren, lest there will be in anyone of you an evil heart of unbelief [apistias – no belief; faithless] in having become apostate from the living God* (Hebrews 3:12, literal).¹⁰ This is addressed to *brethren*, who are earlier referred to as being *holy brethren* (Hebrews 3:1); **warnings in Scripture are never framed within hypothetical situations** – this is a warning against a real possibility, and is only one of many within Scripture calling us to remain steadfast in our faith. When faced with such passages that clearly contradict his theology, MacArthur offers this blanket excuse and, thereby, seeks to eliminate every admonition to remain firm in the faith:

⁴ http://www.reformedspokane.org/Doctrine_pages/Calvinism%20%26%20Sovereign%20Grace/books_folder/Saved%20By%20Grace/Saved_By_Grace6.html.

⁵ <https://www.morechristlike.com/koine-greek-present-tense-present-participle/>.

⁶ Stephanus 1550 NT, *Bibleworks 8*.

⁷ https://www.ntgreek.org/learn_nt_greek/subj-purpose.htm.

⁸ Stephanus 1550 NT; Friberg Lexicon, *Bibleworks 8*.

⁹ <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/90-271/~/about>.

¹⁰ Stephanus 1550 NT; Gingrich Lexicon, *Bibleworks 8*.

“... those are warnings to **false believers**. Those are warnings to people who are uncommitted. Those are warnings to people who have come close to the gospel and made a superficial acknowledgement of the gospel but not a real one” (emphasis added).¹¹ *Holy brethren are false believers?* Really? What are *false believers* anyway? That’s an amazing oxymoron: *believers* identifies those who are persuaded of the truth of the Lord Jesus and all that He has done, and *false* means incorrect, untrue or wrong – these concepts simply do not fit together! Clearly, there are those who might *claim* to believe (the Ecumenical crowd is filled with them) and may even sound like a Christian, but making such a claim does not make them *believers* – not even *false believers* (Matthew 7:22-23). It seems that when the Scriptures contradict their theology, Calvinists will unashamedly resort to unsubstantiated sweeping statements that expose their inability to Biblically defend their position!

John 3:36 – “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.” This is the testimony of John the Baptist regarding the Lord Jesus Christ. Once again, *believeth* (*pisteuon*) is a present-tense participle describing a continuous action: *the one who is believing*; so our discussion for John 3:16 also applies here.¹² Here, too, the *believeth*-participle is in the active voice – *he* is doing the believing, and a proper understanding of this word (*believing*) clarifies that this is **not** because of God’s *irresistible grace*: *he* has been persuaded and is believing! However, as above, unless that active *believing* continues, all else fails. Before we move on, let’s consider the phrase *believeth not* for a moment. The Greek word is *apeithon* (also a present-tense participle) and, within this context, it means to be disobedient to God; it is the one who is not living in obedience to the Lord who will not (future tense) *see life*, but God’s wrath (*orge*) is presently abiding on him.¹³

John 5:24 – “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.” In the Greek, *heareth* and *believeth* are two present-tense participles, and identify the *he* as being someone who is continually hearing the words of Christ and continually believing on Him. These participles are acting as adjectives telling us something about *he*; so when we read the main clause, *he ... hath everlasting life*, we understand immediately that *he* is continually and actively (these participles are also in the active voice) hearing the Word of the Lord and is believing on Him, and that is why *he* is having *everlasting life*. Such a one as this is not coming into condemnation but has moved from death unto life.¹⁴ However, the moment that the hearing and believing are in jeopardy of failing, the many warnings of Scripture about remaining steadfast in the faith come into play (like Hebrews 3:12 that we looked at earlier) – no, I do not buy the argument that these warnings are meant for *false believers*.

From what we have just looked at, MacArthur declares: “If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you will never perish”; a little later he declares: “We are secured by the same supernatural

¹¹ <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/90-270>.

¹² Stephanus 1550 NT.

¹³ Stephanus 1550 NT; Friberg Lexicon.

¹⁴ Stephanus 1550 NT; Gingrich Lexicon.

faith that was given to us **to cause us to believe** savingly ...” (emphasis added).¹⁵ It’s amazing! As careful as he will be in some areas to be sure that we understand the sense of the underlying text, is as careless as he is when to do so would be to undermine his Calvinistic theology. In each of the *believeth*-texts that we have just considered, *believeth* is always in the active voice, which means that the action of believing is being carried out by the subject (*whosoever* or *he*). If we are given faith by God to *cause us to believe* (as MacArthur suggests), that would require the passive voice – we are then being acted upon by someone or something else, i.e., we are the recipients of the action. Furthermore, MacArthur’s suggestion eliminates any possibility of evaluation and persuasion prior to our *believing* – something that the Greek word so translated requires.¹⁶

Let’s consider a few more of their favored passages to ensure that we have not missed anything.

1 Peter 1:3-5 – “Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” I’m sure that you can easily recognize the *key phrase* for the Calvinists: *who are kept by the power of God*.¹⁷ Within the context of Calvinism, *kept* takes on the added thought of *saved* or *preserved*; in other words, this must mean that God will preserve us by His power – i.e., the *preservation* or *perseverance of the saints*! However, that would be a conclusion that is arrived at all too hastily. MacArthur correctly identifies *kept* as being translated from the Greek word “*phrouroumenous*. A military term. It indicates being guarded by soldiers, present tense, constantly under guard by a powerful, protective force.”¹⁸ This Greek word is a present passive participle, which means that we are the recipients of a continuous protection by God – to this point, we are in agreement.¹⁹ Jesus spoke of this protection, and His words shed some additional light on this matter: “My sheep hear [*are hearing*] my voice, and I know [*am knowing*] them, and they follow [*are following*] me: And I give [*am giving*] unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish [the Greek words *ou* and *me* along with the subjunctive verb make this a very strong negative], neither shall any *man* pluck them [*no one will seize them*] out of my hand. My Father, which gave *them* me [*Who has given to Me*], is greater than all; and no *man* is able to pluck *them* out of [*able to take away from*] my Father’s hand” (John 10:27-29).²⁰ This passage is also frequently used to defend the *perseverance of the saints*, so let’s consider it carefully. Jesus’ sheep are *hearing* and *following* Him, and He is *knowing* them and *giving* them everlasting life so that they will not perish – this is very similar to the passages from John that we have already considered. However, Jesus then goes on to say that no one, or nothing, can remove His sheep from His hand, and that His Father has the same protective grasp. What is too often missed when considering Jesus’ words here, is that this amazing protection is against **external** forces; in other words, this

¹⁵ <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/90-271/~/about>.

¹⁶ Strong’s Online, <https://onlinebible.net/>; Friberg Lexicon.

¹⁷ <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/90-271/~/about>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Stephanus 1550 NT.

²⁰ Strong’s Online; Stephanus 1550 NT; Friberg Lexicon; https://www.ntgreek.org/learn_nt_greek/subj-negation.htm.

protection does not extend to the heart of man. I recognize that many Calvinists discredit the will of man, but the ability to think, to reason, and to choose are those unique qualities that God breathed into the first man: his *soul* – the image of God! The warnings in Scripture to remain steadfast in our faith in the Lord are not intended for *false believers*, they are meant for us as a warning against allowing our hearts to be drawn away from the Lord. The Lord declares: “The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9); that deceitful heart is among what we are to account as having been crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6). In Christ, God has provided us with every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3), He has written His Law upon our minds and placed it on our hearts (Hebrews 10:16), His Spirit is abiding within (John 16:13; Romans 8:9), and both Christ and the Spirit are interceding with the Father on our behalf (Romans 8:26, 34); we have been equipped with everything that we need to live in keeping with what God has prepared for those who are in Christ (Ephesians 2:10). If we accept that God’s many warnings in Scripture against failing to remain steadfast are intended for those who are *in Christ*, then we can properly understand the protection that Christ’s hand offers. We are thoroughly protected against anyone or anything snatching us away from the Lord, but we are able to choose to turn away from the Lord and lose it all. “Wherefore let him that thinketh [*is thinking*] he standeth [perfect tense – a completed action] take heed lest he [should] fall [*fall away*]” (1 Corinthians 10:12);²¹ the warning given here is that if we are of the opinion that our position in Christ is permanent (like the Calvinists), it is then that we are to *take heed* lest we *should fall away*. This is not a hypothetical impossibility, but a warning against a reality; granted, it does not fit within Calvinistic teaching, which is why MacArthur has assigned this warning (along with all of the others) to the scrap heap for *false believers*.

In keeping with Jesus’ words concerning our protection, Paul wrote: “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39). Everything that is listed here is **external** to us – what is not included is our hearts, because if we choose not to remain faithful to the Lord, then we will be separated from His love. The warnings that God has given to us in His Word are there for our attention! Jesus warned His disciples: *you must be taking heed lest anyone should lead you away from the truth* (Matthew 24:4, literal);²² if we choose to ignore God’s many warnings and arrogantly place ourselves above being deceived, then we have become an easy target for the deceptions that Satan will send our way – the warning in 1 Corinthians 10:12 is real!

Titus 1:1-3 – “Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God’s elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness; In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began; But hath in due times manifested his word through preaching, which is committed unto me according to the commandment of God our Saviour” Into the context of our study, the Calvinists bring this passage and say: “Before you ever lived, before there ever was a creation, **God promised eternal life**, and he cannot lie” (emphasis added).²³ Yet the Scriptural phrase is: *hope of eternal life* (an acceptable translation of

²¹ Friberg Lexicon.

²² Stephanus 1550 NT.

²³ <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/90-271/~/about>.

the Greek²⁴); *hope* speaks of an expectation, an anticipation: “hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?” (Romans 8:24). There is a significant difference between having *hope of eternal life* and having *eternal life*; since God *promised hope of eternal life*, it would be foolhardy to twist God’s words and say that He *promised eternal life*. Paul is revealing the basis for his being a slave of God and an Apostle of Jesus Christ: 1) it is in keeping with *the faith of God’s elect (eklekton)*, those who are believing that Jesus is the Son of the living God and, thereby, are made a part of the *ekklesia* that Jesus is building (Matthew 16:16-18), and 2) it is with the *full knowledge (acknowledging) of the truth* according to godliness (John 14:6). Paul, the recipient of the Gospel of the New Covenant and its chief Apostle to the Gentiles, spoke of the *hope of eternal life*! To the Corinthians, Paul said: *I am disciplining and subduing my body lest perhaps after having preached to others, I should be disqualified* (1 Corinthians 9:27, literal); he used the word *disqualified (adokimos)* in keeping with his athletic example of the discipline that is needed in order to obtain the prize in a race. He was exercising personal discipline in his walk with the Lord (guided by the Spirit of God), and he did it so that he might not be *disqualified* when he arrived at the finish line. “For if ye live [*are living*] after [*according to*] the flesh, ye shall [*are beginning to*] die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify [*are putting to death*] the deeds of the body, ye shall [*will, future tense*] live” (Romans 8:13).²⁵ Within the context of our study, we must note two things: 1) Paul did not see himself as being above being *disqualified* – the Apostle to the Gentiles did **not** teach *perseverance of the saints* (Philippians 3:12); 2) Paul taught that *life* (the eternal life of salvation) is future. Jesus, God incarnate, also taught these same precepts: “... he that shall endure [*hupomeno – endure; to remain steadfast in the faith through trials*] unto the end [*of our time on earth*], the same [*this is a demonstrative pronoun meaning: this is the one who*] shall be saved [*will be saved: future tense, passive voice – God does the saving*]” (Matthew 24:13);²⁶ Jesus made it clear that we must follow Him faithfully (obediently: *hupomeno*, with endurance) to the end of our time on earth (our death or His harvest), and **then** we will be saved. The basis for the Calvinists’ doctrine of the *perseverance of the saints* does not rest on the teachings of Scripture, and they contravene the words of the Lord Jesus!

One other thing: the thought process is frequently something like this: “How could anyone be so foolish as to think that a person could lose ‘eternal life?’ If you can lose it, then is it eternal? No!”²⁷ I have faced this in an individual, and no amount of explaining from the Scriptures made one iota of difference. In his case, I think that he clung desperately to the eternal security of a-prayer-for-salvation-uttered because most of his children were not walking with the Lord. Unfortunately, such a position is common among Evangelical teachers today, and the Calvinists’ doctrine of *perseverance*, which is founded upon the absolute predestination (sovereignty) of God, provided the groundwork for the development of the modern *eternal security* teachings.²⁸ Why is it claimed that if you can lose *eternal life*, then it was not *eternal*? It’s not that your *eternal life*

²⁴ Stephanus 1550 NT.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Friberg Lexicon; Strong’s Online.

²⁷ https://www.jesus-is-savior.com/Believer's%20Corner/eternal_security.htm; curiously, this is set down in favor of *eternal security* by someone who discredits *perseverance of the saints* as a system of works and faith in order to retain salvation – obviously, the opinions on this matter vary widely.

²⁸ http://www.eternalsecurity.us/a_historical_examination.htm.

will somehow fall away while you go through life – yet that seems to be how some view it; they think: it's yours without condition (Jesus gave it to you when you asked Him to be your Savior), and then you can lose it? Perhaps they hold an incorrect view of salvation, and they think that when they ask Jesus to be their Savior, He gives them eternal life – it's theirs **now!** Jesus said that for the one who is believing in Him, he will not perish, and he is having everlasting life (John 3:16); what is abundantly evident is that this *eternal life* is only present for the *one who is believing* – if the *believing* is no longer present, then the *eternal life* is also gone, and he will perish. In other words, the *eternal life* is bound up with the continuous *believing* (not the individual), and **cannot** be possessed apart from an active and continuous *believing* in the Lord – the two are inextricably joined. Despite MacArthur's attempt to discredit the warnings of God's Word, Hebrews 3:12 still stands: "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief [*apistias* – no faith (unfaithful)], in departing from [*becoming apostate from*] the living God."²⁹ The *eternal life* of salvation is no longer there for the one who chooses to turn away from his *faith* in the Lord; the *eternal life* is **not lost**, it is forsaken – the one who turns away from the Lord, is also turning away from *eternal life*. Can you see it? The *eternal life* is only *in the Lord*, and if we turn our back on Him then we are also rejecting eternal life.

The Scriptures do not support the *perseverance of the saints* as the Calvinists understand it; what it does call for is a steadfast commitment to the Lord that must not wane. This perseverance is a product of our commitment to the Lord and His Spirit being our guide and strength along the narrow way that leads to life. Yes, we must make a commitment to follow the Lord; Jesus said that unless we are prepared to make Him our highest priority in life (above family, friends, prestige, and exemplified by obedience to His commandments), then we are not worthy to be His disciples (Luke 14:26-33). God will not force us to persevere with Him (as the Calvinists assume), and there are no Scriptures to support such a teaching.

²⁹ Gingrich Lexicon; Strong's Online.