Last time we looked at an Arminian perspective on the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. We saw that in Arminian theology election is regarded as primarily corporate and only secondarily individual, insofar as the individual chooses to align himself with that elect corporate body. Accordingly the elect corporately are secure. God’s church will be brought to sanctification, glorification, and eternal life; but individually salvation, sanctification, and glorification is not guaranteed. That depends upon the individual believer’s maintaining his faith in Christ and continuing to be part of that elect body. Should the believer apostatize or reject Christ or cease to believe, he falls away from grace and accordingly forfeits salvation and is no longer a part of that elect body which is secure through faith.

Today I would like to come to some assessment of the competing views that we’ve looked at (namely, Calvinism and Arminianism) with respect to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. We’ve seen that there is an apparent conflict between various texts in the New Testament on this subject. There are certainly texts that speak of the security of the individual believer – that he will persevere to the end and that he cannot fall away from salvation. On the other hand, we have these equally clear texts that warn seriously about the dangers of apostasy and falling from grace and forfeiting salvation. So the question is: how do you best integrate these two streams of biblical teaching?

One could just say that the biblical authors disagreed about this subject. That John, for example, who often writes about the eternal security of the believer in Christ, disagreed with (or would disagree with, if he could speak with him) the author of the book of Hebrews, who clearly thought that Christians could apostatize and fall away from grace and be lost. So these biblical authors simply disagreed on the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

But apart from the theological problems of saying that the Bible contains contradictory teaching on this subject, the problem with this solution is that these conflicting texts are not found simply between different authors in the New Testament, they are found within the same author on this subject in the New Testament. For example, some of the most important texts about the security and perseverance of the believer are written by Paul, but at the same time we also saw the many warnings that Paul issues, for example, concerning the branches that could be broken off of the olive tree that represented the elect body of believers if they failed to persevere in faith in Christ. So this conflict is probably more apparent than real, since Paul would not likely be in conflict with himself.
I suspect that we have a situation here rather like the apparent conflict that exists between Paul and James on the subject of justification by faith alone. There seems to be a conflict between Paul and James, but in fact if you probe deeper it is very likely that if Paul and James were to sit down together and discuss this they would agree – that a faith which does not issue in good works is a dead, sterile faith that will not save and that genuine saving faith is inevitably accompanied by good works which are evidence of genuine faith. So there is no real conflict between Paul and James on this subject. I could imagine a similar dialogue taking place between the author of the Gospel of John and the author of the book of Hebrews in settling their apparent differences on the subject of perseverance.

As I look at their respective texts and what they have to say about this subject, it seems to me that it is much more likely that John would say, “Well, I didn’t mean that no one could ever apostatize when I said that ‘no one is able to snatch them out of my hand’ or that ‘all that the Father gives me will come to me.’ I wasn’t thinking about apostasy when I wrote that. I wouldn’t disagree with you.” I think that it is more likely that John would say that than that the author of the book of Hebrews would say, “Well, I didn’t really imagine that Christians could apostatize. I wasn’t really talking about Christians when I said that these people who have been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, and the power of the age to come could fall away.” It seems to me that the warnings in the book of Hebrews are so clear and so unambiguous that they simply can’t be explained away by saying that the persons to whom the author wrote or the persons he is talking about aren’t genuine Christians.

I read some time ago a very interesting article on perseverance which was given to me by someone in the class by a contemporary Calvinist theologian, Thomas Schreiner, who teaches at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.1 It was striking that Schreiner, who is himself a Calvinist, agrees that these warnings in the New Testament are so clear and so unambiguous that they can’t be explained away in that way. He says that he would in fact himself be an Arminian if he did not already believe in the doctrine of unconditional election. This is what he writes on page 58 of his article “Perseverance and Assurance:”

If I were not convinced of unconditional election, I would surely be an Arminian. The warning passages are so strong that I can understand why many think that believers can lose their salvation. What is interesting to me is that there are so many believers who reject unconditional election and yet they hold on to eternal security.

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Obviously, he is thinking there of many of his Baptist brethren who reject the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election and yet want to continue to hold to eternal security. Schreiner says that sort of position just doesn’t make sense because these warning passages are so clear and unambiguous that if you take them at face value they indicate that falling away is possible, unless you are already committed to a Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election. Of course, then, that is to simply throw the issue back onto another subject, and we already discussed the doctrine of election in a previous class. You may remember that I gave a Molinist perspective on that doctrine that I think makes good sense of the doctrine of election. So not being committed to the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election, I find myself agreeing with Schreiner that these warnings are so clear that one really ought to be an Arminian and think that apostasy is possible.

Schreiner himself adopts the view that the warnings are the means by which God guarantees perseverance. You’ll remember we saw that some Calvinist theologians think that these warnings are the very means by which God ensures that the elect will persevere. But it seems to me that here the Calvinist, and Schreiner in particular, is confusing two quite distinct questions:

1. *Will* any elect person fall away?
2. *Can* an elect person fall away?

These are two very distinct questions that are often conflated by the Calvinist. The first question is a *de facto* question – is it in fact the case that any elect people *will* fall from grace and lose salvation? Will that happen? That is a *de facto* question. The second question is a modal question. That is to say, it is about what can or cannot happen. Is it *possible* for an elect person to fall away? Not that any will; perhaps no one will. But nevertheless is it possible? *Can* an elect person lose his salvation?

These two questions are very distinct and can be answered differently by the theologian. Schreiner confuses these two questions. On page 52 of his article, he asks, “How can an individual, though, at the same time be assured that he will never apostatize, and also believe that he may commit apostasy?” That is very easy to explain because one is a modal question and the other is a *de facto* question. To give an illustration, let’s suppose that Thomas Schreiner *will* never commit adultery. He will go to his grave a chaste and pure man. He will never commit adultery. Does it therefore follow that he *cannot* commit the sin of adultery? Obviously not! In fact, God could assure Schreiner that he will never commit adultery. We can imagine God giving him a prophetic word that, “You will not commit adultery. You will stay true to me and chaste until the end.” Does that mean that Schreiner will therefore be incapable of committing adultery? Obviously not! He *can* commit adultery, but he *won’t*. He is able to – that’s the modal question – but the answer to the *de facto* question is that he won’t.
Perhaps what you are seeing here is that beneath the surface is this old debate between divine foreknowledge and human freedom, the fatalistic idea that if God knows what will happen, then everything happens necessarily. We dealt with this question in our treatment of divine omniscience, where we saw that this inference is simply logically fallacious. Even if God knows that you will not apostatize, it doesn’t follow that you cannot apostatize. You could apostatize but you won’t. So God’s assuring you that you will not is in no way incompatible with your ability to fall away.

In this light, consider the interpretation that the Calvinist gives of the warnings against apostasy as the means by which God guarantees the perseverance of the elect. I submit that all this gives us is that the elect will not fall away, but it does not show that they cannot fall away. In fact, quite the contrary, what this view presupposes is that the person can fall away, but by giving him these warnings God ensures that he will in fact persevere. So the warnings view – that is to say, interpreting the warnings as the means by which God brings about the perseverance of the saints – actually presupposes that the elect can fall away. Otherwise, why give them the warnings? If it is impossible for the elect to fall away, why give them warnings? The warnings are superfluous on such a view. But if you say that the warnings are the means by which God ensures perseverance, then what you are saying is that the elect can fall away – they can apostatize – but God gave these warnings to them so that, sobered by the stark warnings that they hear, they will in fact endure to the end and be saved.

So on this view God knows that if he were to give these warnings, then the elect would heed them and persevere. The elect can fall away, but they won’t because God knows that if they were to receive these warnings, then they would heed the warnings and so persevere. Now, that’s not Calvinism, is it? What view is that? It’s Molinism! So this view of the warnings as the means of guaranteeing perseverance is really a Molinist perspective on perseverance, not a Calvinistic perspective. What the Molinist could say is that God knows what gifts of grace, what warnings, what Scriptural admonitions, would ensure the free perseverance of the elect and their ultimate salvation. So it seems to me that this view is actually not a Calvinistic view at all. It is really a hidden Molinist view disguised as a Calvinistic view.

I would say, therefore, that I think the Scripture teaches that an elect person can fall away. I think that is the import of these warnings. Whether or not you think that any elect person will fall away is probably going to depend, not on those warning passages but on how you regard the examples in Scripture of people like Judas Iscariot, or Demas (whom Paul says “has left me, he’s in love with the world, and he’s gone back”), or Hymenaeus
and Alexander (who “had made shipwreck of their faith”).⁴ There are a number of people who are apparent apostates in the New Testament. Whether or not you think that these people actually are elect people who fell away will determine how you judge issues of that sort.

So, in my view, it seems to me that the view that makes the best sense of both of these streams of scriptural teaching is to say that the elect can fall away, they can apostatize and lose their salvation, but that God will do what lies within his power to give them warnings and admonitions and gifts of grace so as to ensure that they will, in fact, persevere to the end and be saved.

Let me, in our waning moments, share a few words of practical application of this lesson that I think will be applicable to all of us, whether you are Calvinist, Arminian, or just plain confused.

1. **This is an exhortation to all of us to self-examination.** We need to examine ourselves to see if we are holding to the faith, if we are persevering and being true. Hebrews 3:12 says, “Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” We need to keep short accounts with God, to not let unconfessed sin accumulate in our lives, to check our hearts to see if it is growing unbelieving and cold toward God. Paul will often say “test yourself to see if you are holding to your faith.”

2. **This underlines the importance of meeting together for mutual encouragement.** In the third chapter of Hebrews, Hebrews 3:13, the author goes on to say, “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Then in Hebrews 10:23-25, he says,

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

I tremble, frankly, when I hear young Christians say, “I don’t like church, therefore, I don’t attend church. I just sort of try to do things on my own.” That is a dangerous, dangerous path to tread. We need one another. Therefore he says we should not neglect to meet together as is the habit of some but all the more meet together, stir one another up, encourage one another, and help one another to make sure you are holding to the faith. I think a class like Defenders is a prime example of where we can do just that to encourage and support one another in our Christian walk.

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⁴ cf. 1 Timothy 1:19-20
3. When we see someone who is a backslidden Christian, we should always assume that he hasn’t crossed the line of no return and try to bring him back. We can’t know if that person is apostate or not. Only God knows his heart. Look at James 5:19-20. James says, My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Here James is talking about one of the brethren – a genuine believer – who wanders away from the truth and then some other Christian brings him back to faith. He says you will save his soul from death. He was on a slippery slide to perdition, and God managed through your ministry in his life to bring him back and to save his soul and cover a multitude of sins. So don’t ever give up on a backslidden or apparently apostate Christian because we never really know. We see only the externals. I think in line with what James says, we should always assume that it is possible for that person to come back to Christ and so try to bring him back.

That is the practical application of what we’ve seen. No matter what you think about perseverance, all of us should agree that we need to engage in self-examination to test our hearts periodically, to mutually encourage one another in the faith and try to help one another to love and good works, and finally to help a brother or sister who is wandering from the truth and seek to bring them back and encourage them in their walk with God.

That brings us to the end of our locus on the doctrine of salvation. Next time we’ll commence a new locus on the doctrine of the church.5

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5 Total Running Time: 24:17 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)