

# SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

## Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

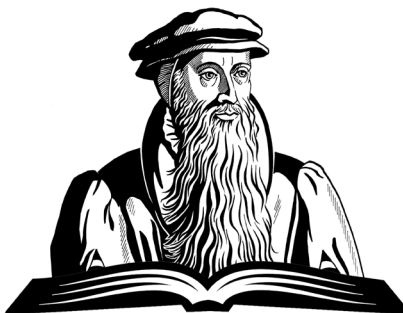
*Module 5:*

**SOTERIOLOGY—**

**THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION**

*Lecture 10*

**THE DOCTRINE OF  
PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS**



**The John Knox Institute**  
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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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## *Module 5 ~ Lecture 10*

# The Doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints

The Apostle Paul compares the believer to a runner, and the Christian life to a race, in a few different places in his epistles. Well, this is a helpful illustration. But what kind of race does the believer run? We know, for example, that a person can run both short distance sprints, and long-distance marathons. A sprint requires short bursts of energy and power, but the physical exertion is over quickly. By contrast, a marathon involves sustained endurance over a long duration. The runner must continue to press forward mile after mile after mile, on various terrain, up and down steep hills and across flat stretches, until at long last, he crosses the finish line.

Well, it should be fairly obvious that the Christian life is more like a marathon than it is a sprint. It's spread over a believer's whole life in Christ, with all the ups and downs that that involves. In other words, it involves perseverance to the end. When Paul reached the end of his own life, he wrote in 2 Timothy, chapter 4, verses 7 and 8, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course"—or race—"I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." Believers are called to persevere in faith, and they are promised that they will be preserved until the end of their life.

This series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. So in this present lecture, we will consider the doctrine of Perseverance. And first of all, we'll begin by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Perseverance.

We read, in John, chapter 10, verses 27 to 28, the Lord Jesus saying these words, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." In this passage, we learn that God preserves all of his elect in the state of grace and salvation, keeping them by his power, and enabling them to persevere to the end. We see that the believer's perseverance is secured in God's divine election, in Christ's definitive atonement for their sins, and Christ's ongoing power as their Shepherd. Notice, first of all, that in the Gospel of John, chapter 10, Jesus reveals himself as the Good Shepherd. Well, the image of a shepherd was a familiar picture of God in the Old Testament. For example, we sing, in Psalm 23, verse 1, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," which then goes on to describe how he leads his people into green pastures and beside still waters. Well, this theme of God, as the shepherd of his people can be traced through the whole Old Testament.

Secondly, in verse 27, we learn that Christ's sheep hear his voice. So they are given spiritual

ears that discern the voice of the true shepherd, and they respond by attentively following him. Well, we see this when God's elect people sit under the gospel. They recognize, and embrace, and believe the good news of salvation. Those who are saved, flee to Christ, obey Christ, and follow Christ, wherever he leads them in the teaching of his Word.

Thirdly, furthermore, we are told that Jesus knows his sheep, and he says that he gives his sheep eternal life. Well, how does he do this? Well, earlier, in verse 15, we read Jesus saying, "and I lay down my life for the sheep," and this refers to him offering himself as a substitutionary sacrifice, and atoning for the sins of his elect people. So the Good Shepherd provides a full salvation for all of his sheep.

Fourthly, that eternal salvation, that eternal life is unalterable—it's permanent; it's secure. Verse 28 says, "And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." In other words, what Christ does cannot be undone. His sheep will never perish. They are unable to ever perish. Well, why? Because no one can pluck Christ's sheep out of his hand. In the next verse, he confirms this by saying that no one can pluck them out of the Father's hand, and that he and the Father are one. Christ keeps his people with divine power. Nothing and no one can match or overthrow God's power. So the eternal salvation of God's people and their safekeeping is guaranteed and preserved by God himself. They will therefore persevere to the end.

And this introduces us to the doctrine of Perseverance. But we need to further open up the details and clarify important distinctions. So in the remainder of this lecture, we'll explore what the Scriptures teach about the place of Perseverance within the doctrines of Salvation. And so, secondly, the second main heading of our address or lecture, we will consider a doctrinal exposition of Perseverance.

Notice several things. First of all, the perseverance of the saints refers to the fact that those who are truly saved and in a state of grace, will continue in that state to the end of life, and will inherit eternal life in the glory to come. This is certain because of the power of God, who will bring to completion all that he has begun in them. So if you look at Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 17, paragraph 1, it says, "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."

Secondly, having defined Perseverance, we need to understand that Perseverance is rooted in the very nature of Salvation. So again, if you read in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 17, paragraph 2, it says, "This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit, and the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof." So notice what Perseverance depends upon. Perseverance does not depend on the power of men, or on the free will of men. It is rooted in the unchangeable election of God.

Now we've considered the doctrine of Election in a previous course within Systematic Theology. God's decrees cannot be frustrated or altered. The Lord's love for his people cannot be broken. At the end of Romans 8, in verses 38 and 39, we read, "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." So those whom God chose to save, in his love, will certainly be saved in the



end. Election provides for all of redemption, from our effectual calling, all the way through to our glorification. Those who are elect will inescapably persevere in faith. So Perseverance depends, first of all, upon the immutability of God's election. It also depends upon the believer's union with Christ. Those who are in Christ, who are savingly united to Christ, by the Spirit, through faith, cannot be severed from him. Christ joins them to himself, and keeps them by his power. Philippians 1, verse 6, says, "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

Thirdly, Christ's death, and the accomplishment of Christ's redemptive work, secures Perseverance. He died to save the elect, and he cannot fail in his purpose to do so. Those, for whom he died, will be saved. John 6, verse 39, says, "And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day."

Fourthly, this is reinforced by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to indwell the believer. We saw this in the lecture on Regeneration—this work where God comes and indwells his people, gives them a new heart, plants the principle of grace in them, and so on. Well, the Holy Spirit is a permanent gift, and a seal and earnest of the believer's inheritance. Ephesians 1, verses 13 and 14, says, "In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory." So the presence and ministry of the Spirit guaranteed perseverance.

Next, we see that it's also reinforced by Christ's High Priestly intercession. Christ's work continues in heaven, where, as the High Priest, we're told that he makes continual intercession for his people. Jesus is constantly praying for his people. Those prayers have power. They have efficacy. Christ's prayers must be heard and accomplished. They can't fail. And so you read at the end of Hebrews 2, and at the end of Hebrews 4, Christ, as a sympathetic and passionate High Priest, he is interceding for his people, and that this secures their spiritual stability. He, by his prayers, is keeping them. Those prayers can't fail. Second Timothy 1, verse 12, says, "For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he"—he—"is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day."

Next, we see that Salvation includes the final completion and consummation of the believer's redemption. So "to be saved" includes the fact that they'll be brought to glory—God's people. Second Timothy 4, verse 18, "And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." Or, you think of 1 Peter, chapter 1, verses 4 and 5, where Peter speaks about us being given "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved"—it's kept—"in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God"—"who are kept by the power of God unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." So the Lord has purchased an inheritance for his people, that can't be lost, and therefore, they'll be kept by his power unto that final salvation. So all of these, all these Biblical truths demand the necessity and inescapability of Perseverance, rooted in the power and purpose of God himself.

Well, thirdly, under this doctrinal exposition, all of this grounds Perseverance in God's work of grace. The question is, what about the place of the believer's responsibility then—the believer's responsibility to persevere in the Christian life? Well, if you look again at the Westminster Confession, chapter 17, and this time, paragraph 3, it says, "Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein:

whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts; have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves."

Now this reminds us that Perseverance, includes both God's sovereignty, which we've been considering earlier, and the believer's responsibility. God both preserves the elect, and the elect must persevere in faith. The former—God's election is the foundation of the latter—the believer's perseverance. But the former—God's preservation cannot be separated from the latter—man's perseverance. So what it does is, it accentuates the fact that the believer lives in dependence, depending upon the Lord Jesus Christ. So the believer has to be walking near to Christ, cultivating fellowship with Christ, resisting sin, fighting the devil, walking in the pursuit of holiness, all while drawing, by faith on the infinite resources of Christ, depending upon him for grace to continue to walk with the Lord. That means we have to watch; we have to be vigilant; we have to continue to seek the Lord's face in prayer and be saturated in his Word. We're not able to say, Well, God preserves the elect, therefore we don't have to worry about anything. He truly preserves the elect, but that's an incentive and an encouragement for us to continue on the path that God has laid out for us.

Well, another question, fourthly, is this: How do we make sense of those who were professing Christians, and who forsook the faith, and for some of them, ultimately perished in their sins? Perhaps you've known people like this. They appear to be vibrant Christians, then something happens, and they leave the Christian faith, they forsake and reject Christ, they deny the gospel, and some of them die in that state. How do we make sense of that? You think of Judas, who was one of the twelve disciples, or Demas, who was a colleague of the Apostle Paul, who forsook him, having loved this present world.

Well, the answer is in recognizing the difference between a person's profession of faith, and the actual possession of personal faith. Not all who profess faith actually have personal faith. Remember the parable of the seeds. There are some who spring up quickly, with great joy, and all looks well at first, but they don't have the root of the matter. Troubles come and they wither and perish. Others spring up, and the cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches choke them out. They didn't have the root of the matter. Then there's the seed that falls on good ground and bears good fruit. So we need to recognize that the apostasy of the non-elect, who are nevertheless professing Christians, is a reality.

So that's why we have these warnings in Scripture. A graphic one is in Hebrews, chapter 6, verses 4 to 6, where the Lord warns about those who have all the outward indicators of being in Christ, and yet who don't, and who perish. He goes on, if you keep reading past verse 6, and it says, However, we expect "better things of you, and things that accompany salvation." So those, in verses 4 to 6, had the look of being saved outwardly, but weren't truly saved—didn't have true faith in Christ, weren't united to Christ.

And so, there's a reality that there will be those who apostacize from the Christian faith, and leave the visible church. And we shouldn't have our faith shaken by that, or be astonished. We know that the Lord has warned us of these things. That's not a denial of Perseverance. It's a display of the fact that all of those who claim to be Christians aren't truly Christians. Those who are truly saved, will truly persevere unto the end.

Well, thirdly, we need to consider this doctrine polemically. We'll note a few things here. First of all, there is what we call Historic Arminianism—a system of doctrine opposed to the Reformed faith, which is Biblical and reflected in all of our lectures. So, historically, the Arminians have said that the believer can fall away—can fall away, finally, and ultimately from the state of grace and be

eternally lost. And the reason is because they believe wrongfully that everything depends upon the exercise of man's free will. That's true in terms of their coming to Christ initially in their conversion, and it's true in terms of their continuing in the faith. Ultimately, man must fulfill Perseverance prior to his decisive justification and election. Well, this distorts the whole doctrine of Salvation, by introducing a works element as a condition of redemption. Salvation ultimately depends not upon what God does and what Christ has secured; it ultimately depends upon what man does and secures for himself. And based on all the other lectures that we've seen prior to this, we have to reject that as against what the Bible says, including this matter of Perseverance. We've noted many passages of Scripture with reference to that, in Jesus' teaching and in Paul's teaching.

Secondly, there's a problem that's arisen within modern evangelicalism. So some have taken the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, and they've replaced it with the doctrine of Eternal Security. They speak about "once saved, always saved"—those who were once saved, are always saved. Well, there's nothing wrong with that language: eternal security—that's good language. It is true that once a person is saved, they will be always saved. So it's not the language that's the problem. The problem is what lies behind it in some of the modern forms. There is this notion of "easy believe-ism," which is affected again by modern Arminianism. And it has at least three problems. The first is that the word "saved"—once saved, always saved—is defined by a human act of decision, rooted in the free will of men. So, consequently, if a person has made a decision and profession to follow Christ, then they're automatically guaranteed security in their eternal estate, regardless of what that means, or whether or not there are fruits of faith, and so on. And it affects things like Assurance, which we'll consider in the next lecture. Assurance becomes something secured by a one-time act, rather than attained and strengthened by the work of the Holy Spirit introducing fruit within the believer. So they think in terms of, well, you respond to an altar call, you say a prayer, you sign a card—a pledge, you do these other things, and now you have, if you will, a hellfire insurance policy that no one can take away from you, no matter what a person does with the rest of their life. And so there's this idea, "Well, I've said a prayer, and so now I can live how I want, and it doesn't matter; I'm free from hell." That's not what the Bible teaches. It ignores, for example, the Biblical reality of apostasy, by those who are professing Christians. So that's a problem.

Thirdly, there are the Lutherans, and the Lutherans attempt to maintain Perseverance apart from the basis of Election, which we've seen from Scripture in an earlier part of this lecture. They contend that believers can lapse into sin, and lose faith, and grace, and the Holy Spirit, and totally fall away. There can be a sincere lapse into unbelief, but the elect will ultimately persevere. But it's not actually rooted in election. So rather than having a continuous perseverance, there is a discontinuous, but eventual perseverance. So election is in part secured through the believer's perseverance, rather than the reverse.

Lastly, we have Roman Catholicism, and it repudiates Perseverance altogether. It asserts that a wholesale defection from God can take place in the believer, and that this can only be recovered through penance, and the other sacraments. So they have no place for, really, the grace of God in preserving his people in a state of grace.

Well lastly, and fourthly, we can now draw some practical applications to ourselves. First of all, the believer's confidence is placed in God's power, in God's love, in God's grace, not in themselves. As Paul says, our sufficiency is not of ourselves, as "to think anything is of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God"—he writes that to the Corinthians. Or you think of Jesus' words, in John 15, "Without me, ye can do nothing." And so, the believer has their confidence in the Lord, and in



his power and grace. And with that confidence, and dependence upon him, the believer faces the responsibility to walk with and before the Lord, in his grace, by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Well, that secures for us a place for keeping our eyes watchful, because backsliding is a threat that genuine Christians must face, as we saw in Westminster Confession 17:3. We need to study both the cause and the cure of various forms of spiritual declension. We are responsible and culpable for our spiritual carelessness, and our spiritual drifting—our backsliding. We must stand on guard against that to address that. The goal of the Christian life is finishing well, not just beginning well. The crown goes to the overcomer who ends the race with triumph, not to those who just begin the race with great zeal and promise—we saw that earlier. Some evangelicals put an emphasis on the start of the Christian life, but are always talking and thinking about what was done in the past, whereas the Bible and the Reformed faith also puts an emphasis on the duration of the Christian life, and on the pursuit of holiness until death. And so, the question is not just where we were at one point in the past in our life, but where are we right now? Are we, by God's grace, through his power, and the ministry of the Spirit, persevering in faith and in grace? Our ardent pursuit of holiness and Christ's likeness is tangibly carried out by our love for God and our pursuit of God's glory. We are constantly nurturing communion with Christ; constantly being at war with sin; constantly pursuing his glory—day to day, hour after hour, year after year.

Well, perseverance is attained by God keeping his people in his own hand, so the believer recognizes that everything regarding their salvation comes from God and his grace. All of the glory, therefore, goes to God alone, and not to us. So the believer perseveres by keeping their eyes fixed on the author and finisher of their faith, the Lord Jesus Christ—the One who has secured their redemption.

Well, in conclusion, in this lecture we've considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about Perseverance. We've noted that Perseverance is indispensable to God's work of Salvation in the soul. Those chosen by God, purchased by Christ, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, will, by God's grace, persevere in faith until the end, and inherit eternal life. Well, here's another question: Can a person be confident that they are actually in a state of grace, and therefore will persevere? Well, in our last lecture, we'll consider that question, with the Lord's help, in addressing the doctrine of Assurance.