

The “P” in TULIP- Perseverance of the Saints

In Dr. Ben Lacy Rose’s sermon on “Perseverance of the Saints” he says that Christian people understand their relationship with God in one of two ways.

First, some of us understand our salvation to be like that of a mother cat and the way she carries her baby kittens. When the mother wants to move her babies she picks them up by the scruff of their necks, in her mouth, and she moves them. She clamps down on them with her jaw and she will not let go of them until they arrive safely to their destination. If you’ve ever had kittens then you know what I am talking about.

In this illustration the mother cat can be likened to God and the kittens to those of us who are in Jesus Christ. The Lord will not let us go. God will bring us through many “dangers, toils, and snares” until he “leads us home.” Our salvation will be accomplished. It will not be lost because it rests tightly in the grip of God, just like kittens do in the mouths of their mother.

Other people view salvation to be like that of a mother monkey and her little babies. In this case, the mother does not pick up her children with her mouth. Instead she lets the children hold on to her as she swings them through the trees. It is up to the children to hold on to mom “for dear life.”

In this illustration, just like in the other one, the mother monkey is likened to God and the babies to what I would call, in this case, “potential Christians.” I use that term because in this illustration a person’s salvation is totally dependant upon his or her ability to hold on to mom. In other words, it remains to be seen. If they can hold on then they are a Christian. But if they can’t they are not. But since there is always the possibility that the baby will let go then the possibility of death is always very real, since mama does not have a grip on her children. Should they ever let go they will fall. The “dangers, toils, and snares” of life will wipe them out.

The Reformed Understanding of Salvation. The Cat and Her Kittens

The position of John Calvin and the reformed tradition of the Presbyterian Church has always been that of the cat and her children, not the monkey.

Those who have been chosen in Jesus Christ for salvation- from before the very foundations of the world- will be saved and not lost, ever. The saints will persevere not because of their ability to persevere, but only because of God’s ability to preserve and keep them in the faith. The saints persevere because of God’s preserving grace. That is what we mean by the fifth acronym.

Its is important to get that right because “Perseverance of the Saints” can be misunderstood to mean that it is something that we do in our own strength. We persevere! Someone might say. No, that is not right. It is God who perseveres and preserves us! Our salvation is safe and secure because it rests completely in the hands of God. It has to be that way because of sinful man’s inability (apart from God’s divine intervention in his life) to chose God and save himself. God does the saving and when God does the saving, God does the saving! It is only then that our wills

and spirits are quickened and enabled to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and that can't be lost because God did the converting.

Those who understand salvation more from the perspective of the monkey do not have that same kind of assurance.

Who might those people be? You may ask. Before I name them let me say that I do not do so to be derogatory, for they are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and also there is something to be learned from their perspective on salvation. But I name them so that you may know and so that you may have something to contrast the reformed/Presbyterian understanding against. Contrast, always brings clarity. These people would be some of our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic tradition, and they would also be some of our Protestant friends in the Methodist and holiness/Pentecostal traditions. Not all of them but some of them.

In fact, the further you move away from the reformed/Calvinist understanding of predestination the closer you get to those who believe that a Christian's salvation can be lost. The perseverance of the saints is not guaranteed. Why? Because in their view just as man has the moral power to freely chose Jesus Christ of his own free will, so too does he have the capacity to freely mess it up to the point that he actually loses his salvation. That is the weakness of those who "rave on" so much about the free will understanding of salvation.

But back to the two illustrations of the cat and the monkey. There is one thing we need to be very clear on. Human beings will let go of God. All Christians know this. All Christians have experienced this. I said this last week, but our order of worship in the Presbyterian Church presumes that you have let go of Christ in your life, in some kind of way, every week. That's why we offer a prayer of confession in our service. It is not designed for ritual; it is there to give us an opportunity to corporately confess to Jesus that we have let go of him in our lives by our sin and rebellion against God.

The question is what happens to us when we let go of God? Do we fall? Or does God hold on to us because God has chosen to save us in Christ from before the foundations of the world? As Presbyterians we would say our salvation is secure because it is in God's hand and once it is there nothing can it away, especially not our sins and shortcomings. God is too powerful. God is sovereign over our fickle failures and sins. As Paul says in our text from Romans, "For those God foreknew he also predestined... And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." (v.29-30)

The "glorified" part of that verse is our final destination- heaven, the place where we will be ushered into the presence of our Heavenly Father and we will be perfected from all our sins and brokenness. We will be glorified! What Paul is saying here is that once we are chosen in Christ we will reach that final destination, no matter what. God's amazing grace will lead us home!

What About Those Who Fall Away? Were They Once Saved?

But what about those who fall away from the faith? We know this happens. There are scores of people who make some type of commitment to Jesus Christ and join the church, but later fall

way. If our salvation is so secure and it can not be lost, then why do people fall away? Why do they not persevere? Did God let them go?

There are two things that need to be said here concerning this dilemma.

One is that until that person is dead there is always the possibility for repentance. Sometimes Christians do lapse, or as the Baptists like to say, “backslide,” but later they return to the fold. So just because a person has lapsed it does not necessarily mean they are eternally lost. We might remember here the parable of the Prodigal Son

The second thing is this: if a person confesses Christ, joins the church, gets connected to the faith, but then renounces his or her faith, either implicitly or explicitly, either by his words or actions, never to return, then we Presbyterians who hold to the “kitten view of salvation” would simply say that that person was never genuinely converted to Christ to begin with.

There are many people in our world, who make faith commitments without counting the cost, or they do it based upon their emotions, or because of manipulation from some high pressure evangelist, or because professing your faith before the church after confirmation is “the thing to do,” and then they slip away. The reformed view of such a situation would be that that person’s conversion was never genuine to begin with and it was not the work of the Holy Spirit that led them to that supposed conversion. If one is going to hold to a doctrine of eternal security then one can not conclude anything else.

In I John 2:19, John the beloved apostle says something to this effect in speaking about those who were supposedly once in the faith but then later left it. He says, “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.” The point John is making here is that they were never really Christian to begin with. Their conversion was a counterfeit conversion.

That is how the reformed faith (in our lovers quarrel with those Christians who believe that a person can lose his salvation) has always answered the question about those people who fall away from the faith. Our answer is they were never saved to begin with.

Now that we have considered the two basic views on whether or not our salvation can be lost, and now that we have dealt with the difficult question of those who do fall away from the faith, let us now briefly consider why John Calvin and the reformed family of faith believed so strongly in the doctrine of eternal security, the perseverance of the saints.

How We Be Assured that Our Salvation is Secure? The Intercession of Jesus

It can be summed up by one word that comes to us from our text in the book of Romans. It is the word intercession. The text tells us in v.35 that Jesus Christ is in heaven, right now, and he is interceding for us.

Did you know that the ministry of Jesus is not over? Sometimes we miss this, but after he was resurrected he ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father so that he might intercede for us. Jesus Christ is hard at work on behalf of those whom the Father has given to him for salvation. He is the one who is sustaining us and keeping us in the faith by his intercession.

What is intercession? Well, first, it is prayer and it is pleading on our behalf, and Jesus is doing that right now for us, in the ear and heart of the Father. The Father delights in the intercession of his Son and he takes the prayers of Jesus made on our behalf and God honors them. Because whatever the Son asks the Father for, he will grant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Here we must remember that the relationship of the Trinity is one of perfect submission and obedience between the Father and Son. The Son not only obeys the Father, but the Father also obeys the Son. He answers the prayers of Christ with a yes.

It is an amazing thought to think that Jesus Christ intercedes perfectly for us with his prayers.

Jesus' prayers on our behalf never miss the mark because Jesus can not do any thing in his prayers other than perfectly pray the will of God for us. And because this is the case, "no one can snatch us out of his hand or the Father's hand," just as Jesus said in John 10:29. Our salvation is safe and secure in the grip of God.

But it is not just Jesus' prayers that are keeping us in the faith, it is his life, death, and resurrection too. In actuality it is this more than it is anything else.

In Jesus' intercession for us he is mediating to God the Father his perfect sinless life and his perfect sacrifice on the cross for our sins, so that we might be forgiven and restored.

He brings to the Father his perfect life and he says to God accept my perfect life as a substitute for my people's imperfect, sinful lives and declare them to be righteous in your sight Father, not because of anything in them, but because of my righteous. The Father then accepts Jesus' life as a replacement for ours and He declares us to be righteous.

Jesus then takes his death on the cross to the Father and he says to God receive my perfect innocent death on the cross as the perfect payment for my imperfect people's sins so that they do not have to make an ineffective, imperfect, weak payment with their own blood. God the Father receives the atoning sacrifice given by the Son as an acceptable payment for our sins, thus satisfying God's divine justice, and God grants us eternal life, not eternal death. This gift of the cross Jesus is constantly mediating and giving to the Father. That's what a mediator does, he functions as a go between, and Jesus is the perfect go between us and God. He bridges the gap and he accomplishes our salvation for us. Because of this wonderful intercessory work of our savior our salvation can not be lost. Jesus Christ has put those whom he has chosen in the hands of God for all eternity.

Conclusion

That is why Paul can say in the eighth chapter of Romans that no one can bring any charge against God's elect. It will not stand. Christ died for us, Christ was raised for us, and he ascended to the right hand of the Father so that he might do his mighty, unstoppable work of intercession for us. So because of that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Death can't do it. Demons can't do it. Nothing in all of creation can do it. Nothing will ever separate us from God's love. The saints will persevere, all because of the ministry and intercession of Jesus. Christ will not fail us. He will not let us go, even though we let go of him.

Dear church live your Christian life with this firm assurance in your heart and make sure to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling," and "make your calling and election sure" by following and loving the Lord Jesus Christ with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Thanks be to God for his persevering grace.

Amen.