

Preserved By Grace

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[0:00] So, let's return again to the 17th chapter of the 1689 Baptist Confession.! We're continuing our study of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

! The Confession says, those whom God has accepted in the beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, and given the precious faith of his elect, can neither totally nor finally fall from the state of grace. They shall certainly persevere in it to the end and be eternally saved. This is because the gifts and callings of God are without repentance. Therefore, he continues to beget and nourish in them faith, repentance, love, joy, hope, and all the graces of the Spirit that lead to immortality. And we'll stop right there.

A few years ago, Danae and I, we purchased a play kitchen set for Nora as a Christmas present, but I made two mistakes. The first was that I waited until late Christmas Eve to put the thing together. And the second was that we bought it from Ikea. If you've ever bought anything from Ikea, you know where I'm going with this. They give you all the parts. You know what it's supposed to be once all the parts are assembled, but the instruction manual always leaves something to be desired.

It's always filled with these crudely drawn sketches without any labels, without any text instructions. So as I was trying to put this kitchen set together at the last minute, looking at the manual, I'm thinking, is this a drawing of this part or that part? Which screw am I supposed to use here? There are 12 different screws in the box. How am I supposed to know which one is which from this tiny, nondescript illustration? It's the equivalent of, say, wanting to bake a cake. You know what cake you want, so you look up a recipe, and that recipe gives you a list of ingredients. Great, but then you realize maybe that the recipe doesn't give you any instructions for putting those ingredients together.

You don't know what gets mixed first. You don't know how long to bake the cake or what to set the temperature in the oven to. You're kind of at a loss. You have the parts. You have the ingredients, but how do you get from point A to point B? How do you turn those parts into a kitchen set? How do you turn those ingredients into a cake? Well, up to this point in the confession, in this chapter anyway, we've learned something about the basic building blocks of perseverance. We've learned that certain things are essential to the perseverance of the saints, namely, God must accept us in the beloved, that is, in Christ, effectually call us, sanctify us, and grant us the faith of his elect. As we've seen, no one perseveres apart from these things. So, we might think of these things as the parts in the box or the ingredients to bake the cake, but how do we get from our union to Christ, being effectually called, sanctified, and so on, to salvation in the end? How is it that the saints who are accepted, who are called and sanctified and given the faith, will, as the confession says, certainly persevere to the end and be eternally saved? Well, we saw a hint of this last time. The confession says the saints can neither totally nor finally fall from the state of grace. They shall certainly persevere in it, that is, in the state of God's grace, to the end and be eternally saved. As it happens, we not only begin the Christian life by God's grace, but we also continue in the Christian life only by God's grace.

[4:21] In Galatians chapter 3, Paul confronts the churches in the region of Galatia because they have come under the influence of false teachers who are trying to persuade them that faith in Christ isn't enough to be saved. They've argued that certain works of the law must be done to actually be saved, and Paul says absolutely not. In the first chapter, he writes, I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel. Not that there is another one, but there are some who would trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. Notice the parallel there. To distort the gospel of Christ is to abandon the grace of Christ.

And that's because the gospel or the good news of Christ is that salvation is a free gift based on God's unmerited favor. We cannot earn it, we do not deserve it, and yet God gives it freely.

And that's supremely good news for a fallen people who could not possibly earn salvation for themselves. Well, in chapter 3, Paul continues his argument, and he says, O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this, did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? I'll admit I can't help but chuckle when I read J.B. Phillips' paraphrase of this passage. I'll read it for you. O you dear idiots of Galatia, who saw Jesus Christ the crucified so plainly, who has been casting a spell over you? I will ask you one simple question. Did you receive the Spirit of God by trying to keep the law or by believing the message of the gospel? Surely you can't be so idiotic as to think that a man begins his spiritual life in the Spirit and then completes it by reverting to outward observances. It's true. If we are utterly unable to save ourselves and entirely dependent upon the grace of God, why would we ever think that we must depend on ourselves to remain saved? Furthermore, what makes us think that God would allow that? Look back at Jeremiah 32 and consider

God's promise to his people within the new covenant in Christ. In verse 40 he says, I will make with them an everlasting covenant that I will not turn away from doing good to them, and I will put the fear of me in their hearts that they may not turn from me. The Lord promised, I will not turn from them and they will not turn from me. I won't let that happen.

So to suggest that one of God's redeemed people could somehow be lost is to attack the very character of God. It's to call him a liar. It's to call him weak or uncaring. It's to say he's unfaithful.

[8:06] We see an echo of Jeremiah 32 in Hebrews chapter 13. Verses 20 and 21 say, Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. So on the basis of Christ's atoning work, God made an eternal covenant with his elect people. And part of that covenant, as we see in Hebrews 13, is equipping his people with everything they need to persevere. Yes, the one who endures to the end will be saved, as Jesus said. We must endure, but the Christian will endure because God is faithful. Because God keeps his promises, because he fulfills his covenant, because he is gracious toward us, we will persevere.

So again, we not only begin the Christian life by God's grace, but we also continue in the Christian life by God's grace. But what does that look like? How exactly does God equip us for perseverance?

We know the essential ingredients. We know what the cake is made of, but how do we get the cake out of those ingredients? How do we move from being accepted in the beloved all the way to total and final salvation?

Well, once again, we look not to the saints who persevere, but to the God who preserves. The confession says this is because the gifts and callings of God are without repentance.

Now, if you're using a modern English version of the confession, it probably doesn't say repentance. It likely uses the word irrevocable. And by the way, I only recently learned that I do not pronounce that word the American way. I don't know why, but I never learned to say irrevocable.

[10:39] It always comes out irrevocable, which I think is the British pronunciation. One of our resident Englishmen helped me confirm that. What can I say? I was raised in the South. We played pretty fast and loose with the English language, and yet sometimes we got it right. So...

Anyhow, modern editions of the confession have updated the word repentance to alleviate misunderstandings. In the Christian context, we tend to think of repentance as turning away from sin, but that's not what the framers of the confession had in mind. God is not regretting something here.

This simply means that he is not changing his mind about it. He is not going back on his word. When preaching about the perseverance of the saints, Charles Spurgeon said, whatever gifts the Lord gives, he never repents of having given them so as to take them back again.

And whatever calling he makes of any man, he never retracts it. There is no playing fast and loose in divine mercy. His gifts and calling are without repentance.

In short, his gifts and callings are irrevocable. He will not take them back. I've said before that the confession is saturated with Scripture, even though there are relatively few footnotes that would indicate that. And this is a good example. The framers are borrowing directly from Romans chapter 11, verse 29, which in the King James Version says, for the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.

[12:25] But let me back up and read the fuller passage, starting at verse 25. You're welcome to turn to Romans 11 and follow along. Romans 11, 25. Paul writes, lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers.

A partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way, all Israel will be saved as it is written, the deliverer will come from Zion.

He will banish ungodliness from Jacob. And this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins. As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

For just as you were at one time disobedient to God, but now have received mercy because of their disobedience. So they too now have been disobedient in order that by mercy shown to you, they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all.

So if we go back to Romans chapter 9, we see Paul explain God's sovereign election of his people. For he says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion. So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy.

[14:10] Then he talks about the unbelief of the Jews in Israel. Then he moves into how God has brought in and saved the Gentiles. And here in chapter 11, as he's addressing primarily Gentile believers, he does not want them to become arrogant. He doesn't want them to think, oh, look how much better we are than the Jews. God rejected the Jews. And he points out that God isn't finished with the Jews. First, their unbelief is only partial. There are some believing Jews. Paul's an example of that.

He said back in verse 5, even in Paul's day, there was a remnant chosen by grace. And second, their mass unbelief, if you will, is only temporary. Paul seems to indicate that a day will come when many more Jews will believe and be saved, not simply because they're Jews, but because God chooses to show them mercy according to his covenant with them. He says, as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers who received the covenant promises, for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. If God makes a promise, he will not and cannot break that promise.

And I say he cannot break that promise because doing so would undermine his own character. God is unchangeable. This is what we mean when we talk about God being immutable.

In fact, going back to the second chapter of the confession, we read, God is a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions. He is immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, every way infinite, most holy, most wise, most free, most absolute. He works all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will for his own glory. God and his will are unchanging and unable to be changed. So he will not change and no one can force him to change. He is immutable. So even though the confession doesn't explicitly make this claim, it is in fact rooting our perseverance in the character of God.

God, we might put it this way, Christians will persevere because God will not change. If he has chosen us, if he has called us, sanctified us, and joined us to Christ who died for us, God will not revoke any of those gifts or privileges and he will not abandon us. Better yet, he cannot because he is unchanging. He is immutable. James Montgomery Boyce writes, immutability means that being perfect, God cannot and does not change. In order to change, a moral being must change in either of two ways. Either he must change for the better or he must change for the worse. God cannot get better because that would mean he was less than perfect earlier, in which case he would not have been God.

[17:42] But God cannot get worse either because in that case he would become imperfect, which he cannot be. God is and must remain perfect in all his attributes.

In Malachi 3.6, God says, Hebrews 6 says, So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, God and his purpose, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. The thing is, the promise of salvation really wouldn't mean all that much if God weren't immutable. If God could change, if God were fickle or fleeting, what hope could we really have? But since God is unchanging, if he saves a sinner, that sinner will be saved.

And for those tempted to argue, yes, but only if that sinner continues in the faith, precisely. And that's why Romans 11 reminds us, for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.

God will not take away what is necessary for our salvation. He will not let us totally or finally fall away. Now, what are the gifts and callings of God?

What is it that God will not take away? Well, it's everything God has provided for us to be saved in the first place. Those whom God has accepted in the beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his spirit and given the precious faith of his elect.

[19:46] These are the elements of grace, if you will, and we can neither totally nor finally fall from the state of grace because the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.

Having begun by the spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Of course not. The same gifts and calling that brought us into new life in Christ will keep us in this new life in Christ.

If someone likes the expression, once saved, always saved, I'm fine with that, but let's add to that. Once chosen, always chosen. Once accepted, always accepted.

Once called, always called. Once sanctified, always sanctified. We are always saved because God does not change.

And he will neither undo what he's done nor leave incomplete what he has started. I'm not sure who wrote this, but I found this quote in a commentary on God's grace and salvation.

- [20:56] The author says, It is not a grace that invites a sinner to a hypothetical salvation, but a grace that delivers from certain death, who hath delivered us from the power of darkness and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear son.

Colossians 1.13 And this translation is not tentative or conditional. It is definitive. For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.

He who raises the dead does not return them to the grave. He who draws effectually will lose none. All that the Father giveth me shall come to me, and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

John 6.37 How do we know the saints will persevere? Well, the short answer is our immutable God has decreed it.

He's made that promise, that guarantee. Therefore, the confession says, He continues to beget and nourish them in faith, repentance, love, joy, hope, and all the graces of the Spirit that lead to immortality.

- [22:13] This is where the how of perseverance comes into focus. We know the why, and here we better understand the how. Notice the word therefore.

Because God is unchanging, because His will and purpose are unchanging, He will continually beget and nourish in the saints all the graces of the Spirit that lead to immortality.

The Founders version of the confession, which many of you have, says, therefore, He still brings about and nourishes in them faith, repentance, love, joy, hope, and all the graces of the Spirit that lead to immortality.

By beget, the framers are referring to the birth or the beginning of something. It's similar to the phrase used by James when he writes, of His own will, He brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures.

In fact, the King James Version uses the word beget there. By nourish, the framers are talking about feeding or sustaining something.

- [23:33] It's the means by which a living thing grows. So think of a baby. First the baby is born or beget, then the baby is fed and nourished throughout his or her life.

And this is what God does for His people. He not only gives us what is needed to persevere, but He also continues to sustain those things throughout our lives.

Otherwise, we might fall away. But as we've seen, the saints cannot totally nor finally fall from that state of grace. This would compromise the very character of God.

So, He begets what we need, and He continually nourishes what we need. In Philippians 1.6, Paul said it this way.

We've quoted this throughout. He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 12.2, Jesus is described as both the founder and perfecter of our faith.

- [24:40] The author and the finisher of our faith. From beginning to end, God gives and sustains these gifts within His people. Now, the confession lists five specific gifts, and we'll go through these one at a time, but this is not an exhaustive list.

And we see that with the final phrase, The framers essentially say, here are some of those gifts, but we're really talking about any and every grace God gives by His Spirit.

In fact, if you compare this list with Galatians 5, verses 22 and 23, you'll see that Paul names a few graces. The confession doesn't. He says, The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

So, the confession doesn't list peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, or self-control. And Paul doesn't mention hope in that passage, as the confession does.

He doesn't use the word repentance either, but he does go on to write, And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

[26 : 06] I suppose repentance is implied there. So, this is not an exhaustive list, but it is a good one for helping us understand the kinds of gifts and graces that God gives to ensure our perseverance.

And we'll look at them one at a time. First, the confession names faith. This is trusting in God and relying on Christ for salvation.

We talked about this last time. Even when our feelings fail us, even when our actions sometimes fail us, God will preserve that underlying trust we have in Him that first joined us to Christ.

Last time I offered the example of Peter. Yes, he denied Christ in a moment of great weakness, but he was also the first to confess, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

When others, in John 6, walked away from Jesus, and Jesus asked His disciples, Do you want to go away as well? It was Peter who spoke up and said, Lord, to whom shall we go?

[27 : 25] You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed. And after he denied Christ, he wept bitterly, and he repented.

Before he denied Christ, Jesus said to him, I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and when, not if, but when, you have turned again. You see, despite Peter's terrible failure, Jesus would not let his faith fail completely.

Second, the confession names repentance. This refers to the hearts turning away from sin. According to Acts 11.18, not only is faith a gift of God, but repentance is also a gift of God.

Acts 11 says, To the Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life. He gave it. He bestowed it. Romans 2.4 says, It is God's kindness that leads to repentance.

And he continues to nourish repentance by convicting us of sin, and humbling our hearts, and giving us a renewed earnestness to forsake our sin.

[28 : 46] We're going to talk about repentance more next time. Third, we have love. This includes love for God and love for others, the two great commandments of God's law.

Romans 5.5 says, God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. 1 John 4.7 says, Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

Well, let's go back to Peter again. Do you remember what Jesus asked and made him answer three times after his denial? Do you love me?

It's almost as if Jesus was rekindling that love, that affection for him. He's fanning the flame. You know, he might have said to Peter, I know you love me, but I want you to remember how much you love me.

And if you need proof of how much Peter truly loved him, Jesus went on to describe the way that Peter would die for Christ's sake. Yes, he stumbled, but that love remained by God's grace.

[30 : 09] Fourth, the confession names joy. And I find this one to be very insightful. I mean, look at the list again. Look at the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.

Love is listed there as well. Most of us can readily understand why God would require and therefore supply everything on these lists, right?

He wants us to depend on him. He wants us to obey him. He has a design for our lives that we have fallen short of, and he is bringing us back into alignment with that design.

But what about joy? That almost feels like it should be, I don't know, secondary. It feels like it should be maybe a cherry on top. Do we really need joy?

Well, yes, we do. Consider Romans 15, 13, where Paul writes, You'll often find that joy and hope are tied very tightly together in Scripture.

[31 : 29] And this stands to reason, if you think about it. How much hope can we really have if we have no delight or no excitement about our salvation or the prospect of dwelling with God for all eternity?

What kind of hope would that be? More to the point, though, notice how it is God who fills us with joy. It's the power of the Spirit that causes us to experience joy and consequently abound in hope.

That's what the confession is telling us. It is God who gives and nourishes joy within us. In John 15, as Jesus is addressing His disciples just before His arrest and crucifixion, He reminds them to abide in Him.

And part of that abiding in Him is keeping His commandments. Then He says in verse 11, I say this particular grace is insightful because it shows us something very important about the heart and character of God.

It destroys any notion that God is some hard taskmaster who just wants human beings to be submissive to Him. No, He loves us. He cares deeply about us, deeply enough, in fact, to die for us.

[33 : 04] But even more than that, He wants us to be more than obedient. He wants us to enjoy Him. He wants our joy to be full.

And He doesn't stop at that. He doesn't stop at, well, I hope you will experience joy. I mean, that would be nice. No, He supplies that joy.

He grants us that joy. He works that joy into our hearts and continues to nourish it. Think about David after he fell into sin with Bathsheba.

In Psalm 51, he cries out to God for mercy. And in that prayer, he says, Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from Your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

[34 : 07] Evidently, David knew something was wrong, in part because he lost his joy in the Lord. You see, joy is a grace God gives to all genuine Christians.

Now, it may, like the other graces, ebb and flow. Like David, we may lose a sense of that joy when we sin, and God disciplines us, but God will never take it away completely.

He will renew it, as He did with David. He wants us to be full of joy, and we need this joy to persevere. We need it.

Well, fifth and final, the confession mentions hope. This is our confident expectation that God will do just as He has promised. Listen to what Peter says in 1 Peter 1.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation to be revealed in the last time.

[35 : 37] So first of all, notice the begetting here. We are born again, and when we are born again, we are born again to hope.

That hope is immediate. This is something that God grants us from the very beginning of our Christian life, and that hope looks forward in particular to our inheritance in Christ, which is guarded or kept until Christ returns.

In short, we persevere because God gives us hope. And on the flip side of that, God preserves us through this hope. And all of these things, along with all the graces of the Spirit, says the confession, leads to immortality, which refers to what Peter described as an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.

In short, eternal life. Proverbs 4.18 says, The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.

The King James Version renders it perfect day. And I think that's a great way to help us understand what the confession is telling us here. As we inch our way toward immortality, God's work in us is continual and progressive.

[37 : 21] And its end is definitive. The immutable God who began this work in us will not stop short of its consummation.

The full or perfect day is undoubtedly coming. Not because we're strong enough to endure to the end, but because we're standing on the unchanging promise of a faithful God.

Because He promised to preserve us, He will give us all the gifts and all the graces necessary to persevere.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, we praise You for Your unchanging character and for the certainty of Your promises.

We thank You that our perseverance rests on Your grace, Your covenant, Your faithfulness. You have begun a good work in us and You will bring it to completion in Christ.

[38 : 25] We're confident of that. So continue, Lord, to beget and nourish in us every grace of the Spirit that leads to immortality. Guard us from falling.

Sustain us when we stumble. Give us endurance to run the race with our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. May our lives bear witness to Your preserving power until that day when we see You face to face.

And it's in Christ's name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.