

Perseverance (Part 1)

We Stumble, but through Loving Discipline, We're Upheld

2 Pt 1:3-11; WCF 17.1 & 17.3

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 27 October 2019, 10:30
(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

This coming Thursday it will be the 31st October!

What does that mean?

Well, it means that from this Thursday, counting back 502 years, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses against the church door of the castle in Wittenberg, Germany!

It is this event which Protestant Christians have taken as the start of the Reformation!

And it has become a tradition in many Protestant churches to yearly celebrate the Sunday before the 31st October as Reformation Sunday.

Now, I know that the major theme of the Reformation is about how we are *saved* from our sin (i.e. by *grace* alone, through *faith* alone, in *Christ* alone, as revealed by *Scripture* alone)!

However, because we have in the past year had quite a few sermons on this doctrine, I have decided to preach today's two sermons on the doctrine of the *Perseverance of the Saints* – a doctrine which, as you may know, was much debated and shaped at the Synod of Dort,² one hundred years after the Reformation proper! Then in the mid 1600's the Westminster Assembly also summed it up in Article 17 of the WCF.

Well, some have summarised the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints by the words, "once in grace, always in grace." Some others have summarised it as: "If you have it, you never lose it, and if you lose it, you never had it."³

Of course, these words are very comforting for God's true loved ones (His elect), because it assures them that once they have, by God's grace, received Christ as their Saviour, they will never fall away from Him.

However, this doctrine is also scary, for have we not all seen (or heard about) someone who has made a profession of faith in Christ (and was even enthusiastic about it), but then, some years later, left the church and rejected Christ!?

How do we explain this?

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. 2: *Salvation and the Christian Life* (Chapters 9-22 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 279p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

² The Synod of Dort (also known as the Synod of Dordt or the Synod of Dordrecht) was an international Synod held in Dordrecht in 1618–1619, by the Dutch Reformed Church, to settle a divisive controversy initiated by the rise of Arminianism. The first meeting was on 13 November 1618 and the final meeting, the 180th, was on 29 May 1619. Voting representatives from eight foreign Reformed churches were also invited. Dort was a contemporary English term for the town of Dordrecht (and it remains the local colloquial pronunciation) (cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synod_of_Dort).

³ Cf. Sproul (ibid:198)

I mean, can a person really lose his salvation?

Well, the Apostle John gives us a clear answer in 1 Jn 2:19 where he says about those who have left Christ that, "***They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us...***"⁴

My brother & sister, going by what the Bible says, it is certainly possible that some people might make a false profession of faith in the first place.

Yes, they are very much like the sower's seed which fell in shallow soil on the rocks. In other words, they are people who receive the Word with joy when they hear it, but the seed of the Word cannot make deep roots in their hearts. So, they believe for a while, but in time of testing they fall away! Or they are like the seed that fell among the thorns. For they receive the seed of the Word, but then, as they go on their way, they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures.⁵

Indeed, they are like those people about whom Jesus said (in Mt 15:8), "***These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.***"⁶

And so, it's certainly possible that people can make a *profession* of faith without *possessing* real faith!

See why we speak of the perseverance of the *saints* and not of the perseverance of *all who profess faith*?

What do we mean by *saints*?

Well, not what the Roman Catholic Church has made it to mean, but what the Bible means by it, i.e. *everyone who has been born again by the Holy Spirit of God*⁷ – yes, everyone whom the Father has drawn to faith in Jesus Christ!⁸

⁴ 1 Jn 2:19 ***They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.***

⁵ Lk 8:13-14 ***Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. ¹⁴ The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.***

⁶ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Mt 15:8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ Cf. Jn 3:5-7, ***Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again'..."***

⁸ Cf. Jn 6:44, ***"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day."***

Also cf. Eph 6:16-18 (especially v.18), ***"In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; ¹⁷ and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, ¹⁸ praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints..."*** (Emphasis mine). For the Greek word for saints, cf. *hagioi* (ἅγιοι): "...persons who belong to God, and as such constitute a religious entity—'God's people.' κλητοῖς ἁγίοις 'to the ones called to be God's people' 1 Cor 1:2.

In rendering οἱ ἅγιοι it is important to avoid an expression which means 'sanctified,' for the focus is not upon a particular state of holiness, but upon a special relationship with God. Those who are spoken of as οἱ ἅγιοι may also be admonished to become sanctified.

In a number of respects, οἱ ἅγιοι is similar in meaning to λαός^b 'people of God' (11.12) and to ἀδελφός^b 'fellow believer' (11.23)" (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 124). New York: United Bible Societies).

My brother & sister, it's about such as these (about the saints) that our Lord Jesus says (in Jn 10:28), "***I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.***"⁹

Did you hear that – "... ***no one can snatch them out of My hand!***"?

See where the saying comes from – the saying which says, "If you have it, you never lose it, and if you lose it, you never had it"?

Well, by now many (if not all) of us might be wondering about ourselves. I mean, does it not often happen that even *we* have sinful thoughts – not just sinful thoughts, but even sinful actions!? So, do these sins in us indicate that we are necessarily not really God's elect?

And from this nail-biting question flows the following question – and this is the question which forms the theme of this morning's sermon: "Can the persevering saint (the born-again person) still sin?" "If so, how does God deal with His saints who sin?"

Well, the WCF 17.3 has neatly summarised for us what the Bible says about these worrying questions. And our sermon has three points:

- Stumble
- Loving Discipline
- The Means of Perseverance

Stumble

Beloved of our Lord Jesus Christ,

In many verses, the Bible teaches us that, even though the saint's final destiny is secure (and secure because of God's preservation), the saint can nevertheless stumble and have serious and radical falls along life's pathway!

And these falls don't happen because of some weakness in God! No, they happen because of some weakness in us as we fall for the temptations put out to us by the evil one – i.e. satan!

My brother & sister, remember what satan did to two of our Lord's disciples on the night before He was crucified.

The one disciple was not one of God's elect, but the other one was one of God's elect. And here's the stunning thing: satan lured them into very similar sins! Yes, he lured Judas into betraying Jesus, and he lured Peter into denying Jesus!

See how satan uses the same tactic against non-elect and elect?

But here's the greatest comfort: Christ dealt differently with sinning Judas as with sinning Peter!

Yes, remember what Christ told Judas before Judas sinned? Christ said, "Judas, what you are about to do, do quickly!"¹⁰ Then Christ dismissed Judas from the table!

But here's what Christ told Peter before Peter sinned. With great affection, Christ repeated Peter's name and said, "Simon, Simon, satan would have you and sift you like wheat."¹¹ In other words, "Simon, as strong as you think you are, and as bold and courageous as you may feel, and as sanctified as you presume to be, you will be an easy prey for the tempter when he comes to you tonight!"¹²

⁹ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (Jn 10:28). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁰ Cf. Jn 13:27-28, ***As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. "What you are about to do, do quickly," Jesus told him, "but no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him.***

¹¹ Cf. Lk 22:31-32 ***"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. "But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."***

¹² Adaptation from the words of Sproul (ibid:212)

My brother & sister, can you see why we have the following warnings in Scripture...?

- (1 Cor 10:12) **Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.**¹³
- (1 Pt 5:8) **Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.**¹⁴

And are these verses not true?

I mean, on the eve of our Lord's crucifixion, satan did not just tempt non-elect *Judas*; no, he also tempted elect *Peter*!

Indeed, satan does not limit his temptations to pagans! He works overtime to attack God's loved ones – you & me!

And let's remember: satan attacks us from three angles – i.e.

- from the sinful world around us
- from our sinful old nature still clinging onto us – a nature that makes war against the Spirit of God¹⁵
- from himself – the devil!

Well, here's a real scary part: the longer the saint, i.e. you & I, continue in sin, the more our hearts become hardened!

That's why Jeremiah was able to say to God's sinning people (in Jer 3:3), "**Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame.**"¹⁶

In other words, "You have lost your capacity to blush!" "You can even say and do seriously sinful things and no longer get red in the face!" "You are not even embarrassed!"

As RC Sproul says, "*That is where we are today in our culture. People will speak openly, without embarrassment, about behavior that no one would have dared to speak about thirty or forty years ago. People did things then, but they would not talk about them. Some claim that there is just less hypocrisy today, but in reality we have become hardened in our hearts. Our consciences have been seared....*"¹⁷

Wow!

What is the result of such a sinful state which even the saint could find himself in?

Well, the result is that he/she incurs the displeasure of God and grieves His Holy Spirit!

You see, as Paul tells the Ephesians, even sins which you & I might think are insignificant – sins like unwholesome talk from your mouth, or bitterness or rage or anger, or brawling, and slander and every form of malice – by such sins you & I are grieving the Holy Spirit!¹⁸

¹³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Co 10:12). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

¹⁴ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (1 Pt 5:8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁵ Gal 5:17 **For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.**

Rm 7:23 ... **but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.**

Rm 8:5–7 **For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.**

¹⁶ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (Je 3:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁷ Sproul (ibid:215)

¹⁸ Cf. Eph 3:29–31 **Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.** ³⁰ **And do not grieve the**

What's more, our sins have consequences not just for *ourselves*, but also for *those around us*! You see, when David had sinned against God (and so had grieved God), his sin had consequences, not just for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, who was killed by David's sin, but also for David & Bathsheba's son born in adultery. That's why the Prophet Nathan, by God's instruction, gave David the message: "...***because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt, the son born to you will die.***"¹⁹

My brother & sister, what we have heard so far is sad news – that even the born-again child of God (even the saint) can still sin – and (scary thought) sin grievously!

But here is good news: i.e. that the fall of regenerate child of God into grievous sin (and his continuing in it) will only be for a time!

Why?

Well, because the sinning saint is/remains God's loved one, God will discipline him/her even if it takes severe discipline – which brings us to point 2...

Loving Discipline

My brother & sister, is it so that, after someone has been born again (regenerated) by the Holy Spirit – yes, after that person's sins have been washed away by Christ's blood, and that person has been justified (made right) with God – is it so that God's wrath/anger can never again burn at that person? In other words, can God get angry with His saints?

You see, a certain preacher once said that God is never angry with His loved ones.²⁰

Well, you & I must remember that there's a difference between God's *punitive* anger and His *corrective* anger. God's *punitive* anger burned against those who perished in the Flood in Noah's days, and against Sodom & Gomorrah. But God's *corrective* anger comes against His saints who have (as the WCF 17 says) *hardened their hearts and who have wounded their consciences*.

Just as a parent will rebuke his/her child to correct the child, so will God have a heavy hand upon us to correct us. And that does not go against God's love for us!

Remember Heb 12:6, "...***For the Lord disciplines²¹ the one he loves, and chastises²² every son whom he receives.***"²³

The Bible teaches us that a parent who neglects to discipline a child, hates that child! God uses His holy anger (a loving anger) to correct His wayward children. This is *corrective* wrath/anger which differs from *punitive* wrath/anger!

The WCF 17.3 says that God's loved *ones incur God's displeasure*.

How much of God's *corrective* anger/discipline will it take to bring His sinning child to tears of repentance?

Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

¹⁹ Cf 2 Sm 12:13-14 ***Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord."***

Nathan replied, "The Lord has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. ¹⁴ But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt, the son born to you will die."

²⁰ Sproul (ibid:214) refers to this preacher

²¹ From *paideuō* (παιδεύω): "...to punish for the purpose of improved behavior..." (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 489). New York: United Bible Societies).

²² From *mastigoō* (μαστιγώω): to punish severely, implying whipping—'to punish, to punish severely (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 490). New York: United Bible Societies).

²³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Heb 12:6). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Well, it will differ from sinner to sinner, and it also depends on how much/little the sinner's conscience has been numbed/seared/wounded.

You see, when God disciplined David for his sins with Bathsheba, it took serious discipline – even the death of David & Bathsheba's baby – to bring David to tears of repentance. But do you remember how much discipline it took to bring Peter to repentance for denying his Lord three times and that to the point of cursing & swearing?²⁴ Not a single word! Just one look in which Jesus' eyes met the eyes of Peter! Then Peter went out and wept bitterly!²⁵

My brother & sister, perhaps you have experienced this corrective discipline of God. Or, perhaps you have seen it at work on one of your children.

I have tasted it in my own life. And it took some serious discipline to break down the pride and self-reliance I had built up over the seventeen years that I climbed from junior lecturer to doctor and senior lecturer at university!

But, looking back, I can clearly see how I needed all the hard discipline which God gave me through migration, for it stripped me of everything by which my ego was supported – things like job status and extended family and pride – and brought me to a position of total dependence on God for even the smallest things I used to take for granted! So, God's discipline brought me back into a warm relationship with the Lord in whom I professed my faith once as a 17-year old!

Dear young person (brother & sister), how will the Christian (the born-again child of God) persevere in his/her Christian walk? What will be the means by which you/I will persevere?

Well, that brings us to point 3...

Means of Perseverance

Our NT passage says (2 Pt 1:10), “...*be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble.*”²⁶

“...make certain about His calling and choosing of you” – what do these words mean?

I mean, it's not up to any human being to choose or call him/herself to God! Neither can someone who is not one of God's chosen ones, by sheer good living, make sure about something which is not there! After all, if you're not a child of God, you cannot make sure that you are a child of God!

Well, all that Peter is saying in this verse is he is urging/exhorting saints to live out what they are!

How does Peter want them to live?

He wants them/us to *make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.*²⁷

²⁴ Cf. Mt 26:74 *Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.” And immediately the rooster crowed.*

Also Mk 14:71 *He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, “I don't know this man you're talking about.”*

²⁵ Cf. Lk 22:61-62, *The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.”*⁶² *And he went outside and wept bitterly.*

²⁶ NASB

²⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (2 Pt 1:5–7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

This way, we will, as it were, take possession of our God-granted election/choosing! It's the same message Paul gave to the Philippians (in Phil 2:12-13), "...*continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,*¹³ *for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*"²⁸

You say, "But what will help me – yes, what will be the tools/means I can use – in persevering in my God-given faith?"

Well, your/my tools/means will be all instruments of grace God has given us. They are...

- faithful Bible reading
- observing and participating in the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper
- listening to the preaching of God's Word
- prayer
- worship
- Christian fellowship (i.e. on Sundays at church; in the week at Bible-study groups; at catechism, etc.)
- service, i.e. practical Christ-like deeds of compassion to someone in need
- telling others about Christ

Dear young people, I have said it, and I'll say it again: you must have regular personal devotions! Read your Bible and pray!

RC Sproul tells how he once taught in Bible college. He wanted his students to get involved in prayer. So, he had them come to his home three or four nights per week to have Bible study and prayer. They started to pray at eight o'clock, and many times they would pray till midnight or later. One time, they even prayed until seven o'clock in the morning!²⁹

Well, it was not rare for our Lord Jesus to pray! And we know that even He, at least once, prayed through the night!³⁰

It's said that also Martin Luther used to faithfully spend two hours in prayer every day. When he was once asked, "What would you do if you were really busy?" he answered, "If I had a full day ahead of me, then I would make it three hours of praying!"³¹

So, the greater the burden, the more time Luther spent in prayer, seeking strength from the Lord!

And prayer is one way by which you & I can resist the devil. James says (Js 4:7), "...*Resist the devil and he will flee from you!*"³²

And Peter says (1 Pt 5:8), "*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*"³³

Beloved of our Lord Jesus,

²⁸ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Php 2:12–13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²⁹ Cf. Sproul (ibid:213)

³⁰ Cf. Lk 6:12-16, *In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.*¹³ *And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles:*

¹⁴ *Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew,*¹⁵ *and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot,*¹⁶ *and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.*

³¹ Cf. Sproul (ibid:213)

³² Js 4:7 *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

³³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (1 Pe 5:8). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Sadly, it is a painful reality: The born-again child of God can fall into sin – even serious sin! But thanks be to God, the saint can never totally fall away from God. Yes, God’s elect can never become God’s non-elect.

On what grounds can we be so sure of that?

Well, come to this afternoon’s service, for, you see, here’s the title of this afternoon’s sermon: “The Perseverance of His Saints Depends on the Actions of God Triune.”

AMEN (2851 words excluding footnotes)