

Perseverance, Limited Atonement

Perseverance of the Saints

Introduction: We've been looking at salvation underneath the hood. Christians are agreed that we are saved by grace, through faith in Christ. *But what is going on behind the scenes, on God's side, that brings people to faith in Christ?* That launched us into exploring things like divine election, saving grace, predestination.

Today I want to complete a thought about salvation that we touched on briefly last week, and introduce another doctrine we have not yet discussed.

The Perseverance of the Saints

Is there anything more wonderful than being saved? The answer is—yes, there is! It is being saved and knowing that you saved.

Is there anything more wonderful than being saved and knowing it? The answer is—yes again! It is being saved and knowing that you're saved, and realizing that you can never lose it!

Since divine election is unconditional, and since eternal life is a free gift of God's irresistible grace, and since we have the guarantee/seal of the Holy Spirit, it is not possible to lose your salvation. You didn't do anything to get it, and you can't do anything to lose it. Jesus said:

ESV **John 10:28-29** I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

Example: Noah's ark is a type (picture) of our salvation in Christ. The flood represents God's wrath (judgement). Notice what God did not say. "Noah, build an ark, and drive wooden pegs on the outside of it; pegs for you, Mrs. Noah, and the family. When the flood comes, climb up a ladder, and grab hold of those slimy pegs. If you can just hold on until the water goes down, you'll be saved." I can hear Noah now, beseeching his wife: "Honey, pray for me that I can hold out till the end!" He never would have made it! We don't hold onto Jesus; He holds onto us! We are in his hands. God told Noah to go into the ark, and sealed the door behind him. God shut the water out, and shut Noah in. The ark went through some rough seas. Noah fell in the ark, but he never fell out of it! Just as Noah was in the ark, and we are in Christ.

ESV **Psalms 37:24** though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the LORD upholds his hand.

Objection: We've all known of people who started out professing faith in Christ, perhaps with tears and great emotion, who baptized, and were active in church. They went out evangelizing. They may even have gone to Bible college or seminary. And yet, they eventually fell away, denying Christ. They de-converted. The Reformed view is that such people were never truly saved in the first place; they were not born again. The faith that fizzles before the finish had a flaw from the first!

******How does 1 John 2:19 indicate that those who fall away were never saved in the first place?**

ESV **1 John 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.

John made it clear that those who left were never really “of” us, else they would have continued with us.

******What did Jesus say that indicates some professing Christians were never saved in the first place? This is on judgement day:**

ESV **Matthew 7:23** I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.

Jesus said that he “never knew” them. It is not that he used to know them, but they broke off the relationship. Rather, he never knew them.

Objection: Some protest that the doctrine of eternal security leads people to be lax in their obedience. However, it shouldn't when all of Scripture is taken into consideration:

ESV **2 Corinthians 5:10** ... we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

Another reason some protest that the doctrine of eternal security will lead to lax obedience is in reaction to a truncated version of the doctrine called “once saved, always saved. This perversion implies that you can live like the devil, and still go to heaven. I heard about a man who lived his life in opposition to God; he was a known womanizer and drunkard. When he finally died, it was said that he'd be in heaven, because when he was 9 years old prayed to receive Christ at a revival, and “once saved, always saved”!¹

The original doctrine is rightly called the perseverance of the saints, not once saved always saved. It means that a true believer will persevere in faith and obedience:

Fellowship of Independent Reformed Evangelicals: “We believe that all who are regenerated, called and justified shall persevere in holiness and never finally fall away.”² (underlining mine)

¹ Conversation with elderly deacon at Brookhaven Baptist Church, 1980s.

² “Beliefs”, firefellowship.org. Accessed April 16, 2024.

Westminster Confession: “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.”

Perhaps it would be better called the Perseverance of the Holy Spirit since it is God’s Spirit within the saints Who keeps us on track for the Lord.

******According to Ephesians 2:8-9, what is the relationship between salvation and obedience?**

ESV **Ephesians 2:8-10** ... by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We are saved by grace, through faith (not works) for good works. Your works do not save you; they are evidence that you really are saved.

******James, Jesus’ brother, asked some relevant questions on this topic. What are the answers to these questions asked by James?**

ESV **James 2:14** What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?

The answer is clearly, no. A faith that does not result in good works is not a saving faith:

ESV **James 2:17** ... faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

ESV **James 2:26** ... as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

It is not that we are not saved by faith plus works. We are saved by a faith that works.

Grace + faith = salvation + good works. Putting works on the wrong side of the equal mark becomes a false gospel. Removing works altogether gives false assurance of salvation.

Martin Luther (Mr Sola Fide): “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.”³

******Titus 2:14 tells us why Jesus died on the cross. According to Titus 2:14, why did Jesus redeem us?**

³ Martin Luther, goodreads.com/quotes. Accessed April 17, 2024.

ESV **Titus 2:14** [Jesus] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

It was to purify for himself a people who are zealous for good works. If you are not zealous for good works, you have reason to doubt that you've been redeemed. "Don't get the idea that Jesus died to save you from hell. He died to save you from sin. And if He can't save you from sin, He can't save you from hell."⁴

******According to Jesus, which professing believers will enter the kingdom of heaven?**

ESV **Matthew 7:21** Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Faith is the root. Obedience is the fruit.

ESV **John 14:15** [Jesus] If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

ESV **1 John 4:20** If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

Saving faith produces love for God and love for the brethren.

Caveat: None of us have perfect obedience. The need for the **Matthew 18** church discipline restoration process shows that it is possible to get really caught up in sin for a season. The **WFC** states that true believers, "may, through the temptations of Satan ... fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein ..." ⁵ (underlining mine). Noah fell down in the ark, but he didn't fall out of it.

First London Baptist Confession (1646): "All those that have ... faith wrought in them by the Spirit, can never finally nor totally fall away ... God ... begets and nourisheth in them faith, repentance, love, joy, hope, and all the graces of the Spirit unto immortality ..." ⁶

A promise is stated in Philippians 1:6. What's the promise of Philippians 1:6?

ESV **Philippians 1:6** ... he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

It is God who began the good work of salvation in us, and it is God will bring it to completion.

ESV **Philippians 2:13** ... it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

⁴ Adrian Roger, *Adrianism* (Collierville: Innovo Publishing: 2015), 334.

⁵ Chapter 17.

⁶ Article XXIII.

Here's a good summary blessing related to eternal security:

ESV Jude 1:24-25 Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

“The Doctrines of Grace”

There is a smoke detector in this room. How much authority does it have over us? None; however, it does us a great service in alerting us to trouble. It could be a false alarm, or a defective detector, or there might be a real fire in the kitchen (which has happened on several occasions). Over the past 2,000 years, the believers who lived before us struggled with many false teachers. They fought many fights of the faith.

Jesus said it was to our advantage that He go away. Why? He sent the Holy Spirit to guide the apostles (and by extension, the church) in all truth. The past 2000 years of church history is not just a bunch of stuff that happened; it is the history of the Spirit's work in the church.

We shouldn't pretend the last 2,000 didn't exist. If you have one computer computing, it can do a lot of work. But if you link thousands of computers together, a tremendous amount of computing can be done. So too with church history. A single person could spend his whole life thinking about a biblical doctrine, but you'll never live long enough to think of everything that thousands of other believers have thought of about that doctrine over the past 2000 years.

Over time, various creeds and confessions were drawn up by our ancestors in the faith. Our final authority is Scripture; but these creeds do us a great service in alerting us to potential problems in error (just like a smoke alarm). Now, let's learn from history, and compare it to Scripture:

In the year was **1517**, an Augustinian monk in **Germany** named Martin Luther accidentally ignited the Protestant Reformation. All the original Reformers associated with Luther agreed with Augustine's understanding of irresistible grace, with the total inability of fallen man to respond to the gospel, and with unconditional election. This included such men as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Knox. Thus, it is called Reformed soteriology. Major denominations that subsequently grew of the Reformed tradition were the Presbyterians, early Baptists, the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, the Church of Ireland, Dutch Reformed Churches, the Swiss Reformed Churches, the Waldensians (France & Italy), Congregational churches, the French Huguenots, plus Jason and the Argonauts (joke), etc.

In **1610**, a group of next-gen Protestant pastors convened in a Dutch city called The Hague (**Holland**). These pastors had been greatly influenced by the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius (who had died the year previous in 1609). They drew up a document called the **Remonstrance**. **What does “remonstrance” mean?** It is defined as “an earnest presentation of reasons in opposition to something”.⁷

What was the remonstrance drawn up in opposition to? It was drawn up in opposition to Reformed soteriology. Same gospel on man’s side, but a different understanding of what was going on under the hood (Reformers said it was a gasoline engine, and the Arminians said it was an electric motor). The Remonstrance had five points:

1. **Conditional Election:** God’s election is conditional. It is based upon foreseen faith in Christ; God elects to salvation those He knew beforehand would have faith in Him.
2. **Unlimited Atonement:** Christ died for all people without exception. Paid for everyone’s sins. However, only those who believe in Christ will be saved. Salvation is potential for everyone, but not guaranteed for anyone. It is like a store stocked with goods; it is totally up to the customers whether or not they buy any of it.

Lewis Sperry Chafer (founder of Dallas Theological Seminary): “The death of Christ upon the cross does not save anybody—either actually or potentially. It makes all men savable.”⁸

3. **Total depravity (with a twist):** Although people are unable to respond to the gospel, they are supernaturally enabled to do so by “prevenient” grace. **What does prevenient mean?** It means antecedent or before. This belief essentially puts fallen man into the same position that the French Semi-Pelagian monks had advocated back in the A.D. 400s. (that fallen man can respond to the gospel).
4. **Prevenient grace:** Although God’s prevenient grace enables people to believe (partial regeneration), people can resist God’s saving grace by exercising their free will not to do so.
5. **Conditional preservation (uncertain):** A true believer is capable of falling away from the Faith, and perishing eternally as an unbeliever. In other words, you can lose your salvation.

In a remonstrance to the Remonstrance, an international gathering of Reformed church leaders gathered in **1618-19** at the **Synod of Dort** (Holland). The so-called Five Points of Calvinism, or the “Doctrines of Grace, were drawn up in response to five points of the Remonstrance. They can be remembered by the word “TULIP” (nothing to do with the fact that they were drawn up in Holland!). To get the acrostic you have to rearrange the order though (this is where the “doctrines of grace” come from:

T—Total Depravity. In this, Arminians and Augustinians are agreed. The difference is that the Reformed camp rejects the doctrine of prevenient grace. *We spent a whole session on this.*
U—Unconditional Election. God’s election (choice) of certain people for salvation was not based on any foreseen saving response by the person chosen, because there was nothing to see! *We spent a whole session on this.*
L—Limited Atonement. *We’ll deal with this in today’s session.*

⁷ “Remonstrance”, Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed April 16, 2024.

⁸ Horton, *Accomplished*, 168.

I—Irresistible Grace. You either believe in prevenient grace or irresistible grace. *We spent a whole session on this.*

P—Perseverance of the Saints. *We just dealt with this.*

Limited Atonement

The idea that Jesus' death on the cross was in any way limited sounds terrible, doesn't it?

Why did Jesus die on the cross? It was to pay for sins.

How many of our sins did Jesus pay for? He died for all of our sins.

If Jesus paid for the sins of all men, then why will all men not be in heaven? Arminians will respond that people must accept Jesus, or believe in Him.

Is it a sin to reject (or not believe in) Jesus? Yes.

Did Jesus pay for the sin of unbelief? Arminians would say, no.

If not, then Jesus did not pay for all sins, did He? Arminians would have to say no.

Truth: Everyone (except heretics) limits the atonement in some way.

Arminian: Jesus died for all men, but not all sin. Thus, they limit the sins that Jesus paid for. They say there is one sin Jesus did not die for: unbelief.

Augustinian: Jesus died for all sins but not all people. He died to pay for all sins, but not for all people (only the elect).

Arminian: Jesus died for everybody in general, making them potentially savable.

Augustinian: Jesus died specifically for the elect, to guarantee their salvation. The idea is that *He got what He paid for.*

ESV **Matthew 1:21** ... you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

ESV **Matthew 26:28** ... this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

ESV **John 10:15** ... I lay down my life for the sheep.

ESV **Ephesians 5:25** ... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ...

In sum, it could be said Christ's atonement is sufficient for all, but efficient only for the elect. Some call this limited atonement but perhaps it is better to think of it as particular redemption.

F.I.R.E.: “We believe that God’s Son died at Calvary to effect propitiation, reconciliation, redemption and atonement for His elect people.” To clarify, Jesus’ atoning death was limited in that it paid only for the sins of God’s elect.

Who can think of texts that seem to go against the doctrine of particular redemption?

1). **ESV 2 Peter 2:1** ... there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

In what sense had the Master (Jesus) “bought” these false teachers? These false teachers publicly but falsely claimed Jesus as their Savior. However, through their false teachings they denied the Master who they claimed bought them.

2). **ESV John 3:16** ... God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever⁹ believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.¹⁰

In what sense did God give His only Son for the world? The word world (*kosmos*) is used several different ways, otherwise God Himself violated **1 John 2:15**.

ESV 1 John 2:15 Do not love the world ...

ESV John 17:9b I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.

The seven lexical definitions of *kosmos* include: adornment (“cosmetics”), the planet earth, mankind (ethnic universalism¹¹), and that which is hostile to God (lost in sin).¹² The Jews tended to think of salvation in nationalistic terms (excluding Gentiles). However, God had love for the whole world of mankind (not just the Jews). Thus, “world” here refers to all mankind without distinction (no matter whether Jew or Gentile). It does not mean all mankind without exception (universalism). For example:

ESV John 1:11-13, 29 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.... The next day he [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

ESV Revelation 5:9 ... by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation

⁹ “Whoever” is from *pas ho pisteuon* (present active participle, singular), and truly means “whoever”. Bill Mounce, “Does John 3:16 Say ‘Whoever?’” billmounce.com. Accessed April 10, 2024.

¹⁰ In light of what Jesus just said about being born again, the only ones who will believe are those who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

¹¹ John Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2006), 154.

¹² Bauer, *Lexicon*, 445-447.

3). **ESV 1 John 2:2** He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

That is, not just Israelites! The “general epistles” are often understood to be written to a largely Jewish audience. If so, the word “our” in 1 John 2:2 refers to Hebrew believers, and the “whole world” refers to non-Jewish believers. He died for the sins of elect Jews and also the elect Gentiles throughout the world. The gospel is offered to be whole world of mankind.¹³

Summary: I think we could all agree that Jesus’ death was sufficient for all, but efficient only for the Elect. **Was Jesus’ sacrifice an attempt to save everybody? Or was it a success in saving His people from their sins?**¹⁴ (*Rhetorical*). Zechariah gave us the answer:

ESV Luke 1:68 “Blessed be the Lord God ... for he has ... redeemed his people ...”

It was mission accomplished!

Conclusion

At the end of the section on predestination in Romans, Paul wrote:

ESV Romans 11:33-34 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"

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¹³ Dennis & Grudem, *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2431.

¹⁴ Michael Horton, *Mission Accomplished* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 81.

Extra Study for Depth

All Men Saved: From context, to whom does “all” (2:4) refer in 1 Timothy 2:1-4? See *Revelation 5:9*. God desires for all types of men to be saved, even some kings and some of those in authority (for whom we are to pray). Again, God loves all men without distinction (even kings), but not necessarily all men without exception.

ESV **1 Timothy 2:1-4** ... I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved ...

Everyone: In 2 Peter 3:9, to whom does “you” and “any” and “all” refer? “Any” and “all” of “you” refers to the recipients of Peter's letter. See *2 Pe 1:1,10 and 1Pe 1:1-2*.

ESV **2 Peter 3:9** The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

ESV **2 Peter 1:1** Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ ...

ESV **2 Peter 1:10** ... brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure ...

ESV **1 Peter 1:1** Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect ...

“All”

In John 12:32, to whom does “all” (12:32) refer? The context will help determine this (John 12:20-21).

ESV **John 12:32** ~ When I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

ESV **John 12:20-21** Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

“All” refers to both Jew and Greek (Gentile), just as it does in Romans 3:9.

ESV **Romans 3:9** ... have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin ...

Jesus will draw “all” men without distinction ethnically, but not all men without exception (universalism).

Double Predestination

If God predestines certain people for salvation, does He also predestine certain people to damnation? Why?

- 1) Whenever Scripture speaks of predestination or election, it is always unto salvation or sanctification, never unto damnation. Predestination is based on God's love, God's favor. To speak of predestination to hell is like calling a nice fragrance an odor!
- 2) God does not need to prevent people from believing since we are all inclined toward rejecting God anyway.

ESV 1 Corinthians 2:14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

- 3) However, there are some texts that could be taken to mean that God sends judgment on some people, hardening them in their sin:

ESV Romans 9:22 God ... has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction ...

ESV Romans 11:7-10 Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day." And David says, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever."

ESV 1 Peter 2:8 They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

What happens to babies who die in infancy or are aborted? The Scriptures are essentially silent at this point. Hopefully all such babies are among the elect and will serve to help fulfill Ro 5, Re 5:9. Cp. 2Sa 12:13-23.

Since Ezekiel 18:32 is true, why doesn't God predestine all men to salvation?

ESV Ezekiel 18:32 ... I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD ...

Nowhere in Scripture is it indicated what caused God to give certain men to Christ and not others. We do know that it was not an arbitrary decision, but was based on God's will, God's pleasure and God's purpose and that it was not based on man's will or man's effort. This is simply a mystery beyond our ability to understand; Romans 11:33-36.

ESV Romans 9:19-21 You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?