

8. THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.¹³ But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.¹⁴ For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.¹⁵ As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” —Hebrews 3:12–15

8.1 Will You Endure in Faith?

Events of upheaval and turmoil around the world should serve as a warning to us that the day will come, sooner or later, when the hostility of man will not be containable by human force. It will burst the dam of restraint and

flood to your very door. And the most urgent question for all the followers of Jesus Christ will be: “Will our faith in Jesus endure? Or will we give way to fear and unbelief and anger and vengeance?”

The prophet Daniel describes a time when one of the rulers of the last days “will speak words against the Most High, and shall *wear out* the saints of the Most High” (Daniel 7:25). And in the Book of Revelation, the apostle John describes the time like this: “If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the *endurance* and faith of the saints” (Revelation 13:10).

The crucial question for you in these days—and those days—is “will you endure?” Will your faith bear up under the assaults that are coming? Or will you be “worn out” and give up the faith and join the unbelieving illusion of safety? This is the question of perseverance. The question of eternal security, the topic of this sermon.

The doctrine we are talking about today goes by different names and has an urgent and practical application to our life together. Some call it the doctrine of eternal security. Some call it the doctrine of perseverance. And the practical application is that, whichever you call it, the process is a community project. That is, you and I are essential in helping each other persevere to the end in faith, and not make shipwreck of our souls.

8.2 A Theological Overview on Perseverance

The signature text that we have returned to many times over these decades is Hebrews 3:12–15. So I think it would be helpful to sketch a three-point theology of perseverance on the basis of these four verses, and their implications for your life. And then, I will show the wider basis for this in Scripture, its relation to the cross of our Lord Jesus, and close with some practical applications to your life in families and small groups.

1. The call to endure is real.

Hebrews 3:12, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” This is a clear call to all believers (“brothers”) to persevere in faith. Not to give way to unbelief. Not to “wear out.” It’s a call to endure. To last. To keep the faith to the end. “Don’t let your heart become evil, and unbelieving. Don’t fall away from the living God.” This is a real danger spoken to the church. Those who blow it off because your doctrine of eternal security won’t allow it are in the most danger.

2. We each are a means for one another’s endurance.

Hebrews 3:13, “But [in contrast to giving way to a heart of unbelief] exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Then in verse 15 he does what he

tells us to do. He gives such an exhortation from Psalm 95:7, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

So point #2 is that one of the essential means of not becoming hardened—the protection against an evil heart of unbelief—is the other believers around you speaking faith-sustaining words into your life. Your family, your friends, your small group. “Exhort one another every day.” That is, speak words of faith-sustaining truth into each other’s lives. Paul said in Ephesians 4:29, “Only let out of your mouth what is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

So the second point of this theology of perseverance is that God has designed his church so that its members endure to the end in faith *by means of* giving and receiving faith-sustaining words from each other. You and I are the instruments by which God preserves the faith of his children. Perseverance is a community project. Just like God is not going to evangelize the world without human, faith-awakening voices, neither is he going to preserve his church without human faith-sustaining voices. And clearly from the words, “exhort one another” (verse 13), it means all of us, not just preachers. We depend on each other to endure in faith to the end.

3. Persevering in faith is evidence that we are in Christ.

Verse 14: Exhort each other, and help each other hold onto your confidence, “For [because] we *have come* to share in Christ, if indeed we *hold* our original confidence firm to the end.” This is one of the most important verses in the book of Hebrews, because it establishes that if a person *has come* to share in Christ, that person will most certainly persevere to the end in faith. Look at the logic and the verb tenses carefully. Everything hangs on this.

Verse 14: “We *have come* to share in Christ, if indeed we *hold* our original confidence firm to the end.” Notice, he does not say, “if we hold our confidence to the end.” Which means that enduring to the end doesn’t get you a share in Christ. It proves you already had a share in Christ. Perseverance is the evidence of being born again in Christ, not the means to it.

Or to put the same point negatively: If you don’t hold your confidence in Christ to the end, what would it show? It would show that you “*had not come* to share in Christ.” So the negative of verse 14 would read, “We *have not come* to share in Christ, if indeed we *do not hold* our original confidence firm to the end.”

So you see what this implies about eternal security? It says: if you have come to share in Christ—that is, if you are born again, if you are truly converted, if you are justified and forgiven through saving faith—you cannot fail to persevere. You *will* hold your confidence in Christ to the end.

The logic is identical with 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” (1 John 2:19). “If they had been of us, they would have continued with us,” is the same as “If you truly share in Christ, you will hold your confidence to the end.”

So here’s the summary of our three-point theology of perseverance.

1. Don’t let your heart become evil and unbelieving, because if you do, you will fall away from the living God and perish forever.
2. As a means to protecting each other from such an evil heart of unbelief speak sin-defeating, faith-sustaining words into each other’s lives every day.
3. This warning and this exhortation is not because a person who truly belongs to Christ can be lost, but because perseverance is the evidence that you truly belong to Christ. If you fall away, you show that you never truly shared in Christ. And God will never let this happen to those who have shared in Christ.

8.3 God’s Unbreakable Faithfulness

“Those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he

justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:30). Which means: Between eternity past in God’s predestination, and eternity future in God’s glorification, none is lost. No one who is predestined for sonship fails to be called. And no one who is called fails to be justified. And no one who is justified fails to be glorified. This is an unbreakable steel chain of divine covenant faithfulness.

And so Paul says, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). “He will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:8–9). These are the promises of our God who cannot lie. Those who are born again are as secure as God is faithful.

8.4 How Is Our Perseverance Connected to the Cross of Christ?

What is the connection between this security—this promised perseverance—and the cross of our Lord Jesus? Just before Jesus shed his blood for sinners, he lifted up the cup at the last supper and said in Luke 22:20, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” What that means is that the new covenant, promised most explicitly in Jeremiah 31 and 32, was secured and sealed by the blood of Jesus. The new covenant comes true because Jesus died to establish it.

And what does the new covenant secure for all who belong to Christ? *Perseverance in faith to the end*. Listen to Jeremiah 32:40, “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 everlasting covenant—the new covenant—includes the unbreakable promise: “*I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.*” They may not. They will not. Christ sealed this covenant with his blood. He purchased your perseverance.

If you are persevering in faith today, you owe it to the blood of Jesus. The Holy Spirit, who is working in you to preserve your faith, honors the purchase of Jesus. God the Spirit works in us what God the Son obtained for us. The Father planned it. Jesus bought it. The Spirit applies it—all of them—infallibly. God is totally committed to the eternal security of his blood-bought children.

8.5 The Necessity of Community in the Certainty of Security

This leads us now to this one point of application. God has united the certainty of security with the necessity of community. Hebrews 3:13, “Exhort *one another* every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Eternal security is a community project. Or we can now say blood-bought eternal security is a blood-bought community project.

That may sound as though it were fragile, since our communal life is always imperfect. But it is not fragile. It is no more fragile than the sovereign ability of God to bring others into your life and to send you into theirs. God will sovereignly preserve all who belong to Christ. And he will do it through the faith-sustaining ministry of other believers.

If you are married it means that God—not man (“what God has joined together”)—has already put you in households designed for this very thing—the daily faith-sustaining, sin-defeating ministry of the word to each other. Husbands and wives. Parents and children.

Let me give you some examples of what this means for husbands and wives.

For husbands:

- › Love your wife sacrificially and cherish her as a reflection of the love of Christ for the church (Ephesians 5:25, 29). It will sustain her faith to see this.
- › Be alert to and discern your wife’s spiritual, emotional, relational, and physical needs, and make the effort to meet those needs—directly or indirectly (Hebrews 3:12–13; 1 Peter 3:7).
- › Seek to build up your wife with biblical knowledge, through your own words, and by your encouragement and help in connecting her with the teaching ministries provided by the church (John 8:32; Ephesians 4:25–30).

- › Encourage and help your wife engage in ministry at church and in the world (Proverbs 31:20; Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Timothy 5:9-10).

For wives:

- › Be alert to your husband's spiritual condition and pray earnestly for him (1 Samuel 25:1-35; Hebrews 3:12-13).
- › Encourage your husband by affirming evidences of grace in his life (Romans 15:2; Ephesians 4:29; Hebrews 10:24-25). It will sustain his faith to hear this.
- › Support him in all his leadership efforts, and be responsive to every effort he makes to lead spiritually (Ephesians 5:21-24; 1 Peter 3:1-6).
- › Share from your life and your meditation the things God is teaching you about Christ and his ways (Romans 15:13-14; 1 Thessalonians 4:18).
- › Join him in serious conversation with respect and wisdom (Proverbs 31:26; Romans 15:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:11).
- › Suggest to him people and resources that may be of help to him (Genesis 2:18; Proverbs 31:12; Acts 20:32). No one knows him like you know him.
- › Humbly and hopefully help him be aware of unhelpful habits or sins you may see in his life (Hebrews 3:12-13; James 5:16). We are seeking to do Hebrews 3:13 for each other.

I know this assumes that you are both believers, and that you are both willing. And I know that's not true of every married couple. But it is what God calls us to pray toward and move toward for the sake of our spouses and our children's perseverance in faith. Eternal security is a family project.

8.6 There Is No Substitute for the Church

Here's a final word to all of us, to the single and the married. God did not design marriage to replace the church. He didn't design families to replace friendships. Every married man needs believing men in his life. Every married woman needs other believing women in her life. The young people need other young people. And single people need married people and single people in their lives. Families are not substitutes for any of these relationships.

The blood-bought church of Christ is the new, supernatural family. Single people, married people, old and young, rich and poor, every ethnicity find brothers and sisters here. Marriage is temporary. Parenting is temporary. But the church—the new family—is eternal.

H. MORE ABOUT PERSEVERANCE

Settling Our Security in God Alone

One obstacle to enjoying the security we have in Christ is the hard texts in the New Testament that seem to contradict it. Just when we start to feel that we are eternally secure in his love, along comes a passage of Scripture that threatens us and seems to rob us of security. And I don't think there will be any deep, abiding sense of security in God until we own up to these passages of Scripture and see how they relate to the assurance of God's love and power.

For example, consider this sampling from nine New Testament books.

1. Romans 11:20–21, “Unbelieving Israelites were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast only through faith. So do not become proud but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you.”
2. 1 Corinthians 10:12, “Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.” Also 1 Corinthians 15:2, “I preached to you the gospel ... by which you are saved if you hold it fast—unless you believed in vain.”
3. 2 Corinthians 13:5, “Examine yourself to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you—unless you fail to meet the test!”

4. Galatians 6:9, “Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart.”
5. Philippians 2:12, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”
6. Colossians 1:21–23, “You who were estranged... Christ has reconciled... in order to present you holy and blameless... provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel.”
7. Hebrews 12:14, “Strive for peace and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”
8. 1 Peter 1:17, “If you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.”
9. Revelation 2:10, “Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.”

Threatening Our Shallow Security

All of these passages above teach that the test of genuineness for the Christian is perseverance in faith and holiness of life. They warn us that the attempt to offer security apart from lasting faith and loving lives is perilous. To offer security without these indispensable realities is to offer security at the price of destruction.

But it would be a terrible misunderstanding if we

thought that these Scriptures were written to threaten our security in God. Exactly the opposite is the case. *They are written to threaten our security in everything but God.* If you find your security in health, the Bible is a threat to you. If you find your security in your family or job or money or education, the Bible is a threat to you. And in threatening all these utterly inadequate foundations of security, the Bible drives us relentlessly and lovingly back to the one and only eternal and unshakable foundation for security—God. All the threats and warnings of the Bible declare with one voice: sin is an effort to feel secure in anything other than God.

Therefore, when God demands on the one hand, “Turn from sinning or you will die,” and on the other hand, “Feel eternally secure in my love and you will live,” he is not demanding two different things. Sin is what you do when you replace security in God with other things. So when God threatens our feelings of security in the world, it’s because he wants us to feel secure in his love and power. The threats and promises of Scripture have one message: *seek your security in God alone.*

Security in God Alone

Ephesians 1:11–14 is one of the clearest statements in the Bible about God’s desire that his people find their security in him alone, that we feel secure in his love and power.

¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

The first and most important thing to see in these three verses is that they begin and end with God's ultimate purpose to glorify himself. Verse 12: "We were destined and appointed to live *for the praise of his glory.*" Verse 14: he has guaranteed our inheritance *to the praise of his glory.* The most basic fact you can say about the righteousness of God is that he has an unwavering commitment to his own glory. Everything he does, he does to heighten the intensity with which his people praise him for his glory.

The second thing to see is that the people whose inheritance God guarantees are the people who *believe* the gospel (verse 13). ("You who have believed were sealed.") There is a direct connection between believing God's Word and living for the praise of his glory. One of the greatest ways to honor people is to trust them. And since God is committed to his own honor above all things, therefore he is utterly committed to those who trust him.

Therefore, the third thing to see from this text is just what you would expect. Since God does all things for the praise of his glory, and since believing his word magnifies that glory, therefore God takes decisive steps to secure for himself the magnification of his glory forever: he *seals* the believer with the Holy Spirit, and *guarantees* that we will come to our inheritance praising his glory. God is so passionately committed to having a people for his own possession who live forever for the praise of his glory that he is not about to let our eternal destiny depend on our native powers of willing or doing. He commissions his Holy Spirit to enter our lives and to make us secure forever.

Sealed and Guaranteed, Forever

There are two great words here that aim to help us feel secure in God's love and power: the word "*sealed*," and the word "*guarantee*."

Let's see if we can unseal this word "sealed" and look inside. What does it mean that believers have been *sealed by the Holy Spirit* (verse 13)? The word is used at least three different ways in the New Testament.

1. In Matthew 27:66 the tomb of Jesus was secured by *sealing* it and putting guards around it. In Revelation 20:3 God throws Satan into a pit and *seals* it over so he can't escape. So one meaning is locking something up, closing it in.

2. Another way the word is used is found in Romans 4:11 where Abraham's circumcision is called the sign and *seal* of the righteousness he had by faith. And in 1 Corinthians 9:2 Paul says that his converts are the *seal* of his apostleship. So a second meaning of sealing is giving a sign of authenticity.
3. A third meaning of the word is found in Revelation 7:3 where the *seal* of God is put on the forehead of God's servants to protect them from the wrath coming upon the world.

So what did Paul mean in Ephesians 1:13 when he said that believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit? No matter which of these meanings you use the basic truth is the same.

1. If the Spirit *seals shut*, the point must be that he seals in faith and seals out unbelief and apostasy.
2. If the Spirit seals us as a *sign of authenticity*, then he is that sign and it is the Spirit's work in our life which is God's trademark. Our eternal sonship is real and authentic if we have the Spirit. He is the sign of divine reality in our lives.
3. Or if the Spirit *marks us with God's seal*, he protects us from evil forces which won't dare to enter a person bearing the mark of God's own possession.

However you come at this message contained in this word "sealed," it is a message of safety and security in

God's love and power. God sends the Holy Spirit as a preserving seal to lock in our faith, as an authenticating seal to validate our sonship, and as a protecting seal to keep out destructive forces. The point is that God wants us to feel secure and safe in his love and power.

The other word Paul uses to drive this home is the word "guarantee" in verse 14. "You were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit which is the *guarantee* of our inheritance." Noël and I ran out of gas recently at the intersection of 66th Street and Penn Avenue. I ran up the street to a nearby service station and borrowed a can with two dollars' worth of gas. I said I would be right back and buy 15 dollars' worth. But I had to leave my driver's license. Why? Because it was a *guarantee* I would come back and finish my business. They knew that my driver's license was valuable enough to me to give them a sense of security that I would come back with their can and pay for my gas.

So then, what is God saying to us when he gives us his Holy Spirit and calls him a guarantee or a down-payment?

He is saying, "My great desire for those who believe in me is that you feel secure in my love. I have chosen you before the foundation of the world. I have predestined you to be my children forever. I have redeemed you by the blood of my Son. And I have put my Spirit in you as a seal and a guarantee. Therefore, you will receive the inheritance and praise the glory of my grace forever and ever. And I tell you this here in Ephesians 1 because I want you to feel secure in my love and my power. I don't promise

you an easy life. In fact, through many tribulations you must enter the kingdom. I don't promise always to speak in soft tones of approval, but to warn you in love whenever you begin to seek security in anything but me.

“Let me say it again: I have chosen you,” says the Lord. “I have predestined you; I have redeemed you; I have sealed you by my Spirit. Your inheritance is sure, because I am passionately committed to magnify the glory of my grace in your salvation.” God says to us:

*When peace like a river attendeth your way,
 When sorrows like sea billows roll,
 Whatever your lot—I have taught you to say,
 It is well, it is well, with your soul.*