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THE PRESERVATION OF THE BELIEVER

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By the "preservation of the believer" we understand that all whoever were saved, or are, or will be, are saved by the free grace of God, which prevails over the free will of the believer; that is, the indwelling Holy Spirit perseveres in His continued ministry of making operative the grace of God by enlisting the human will to respond to the will of God; and that the preservation of the believer is contingent upon the continued relationship to the Lord and not merely upon the remembrance of the initial experience of grace.

In this statement we shall briefly consider the preservation of the believer under the following heads: (1) the preservation of the believer in relation to God; (2) in relation to the new life of the believer; and (3) a summary statement.

I. THE PRESERVATION OF THE BELIEVER IN RELATION TO GOD.

1. The sovereignty of God.

By the sovereignty of God we understand His absolute supremacy over heaven and earth, that His sovereignty is infinite, that God is sovereign in His whole Being. Being sovereign in His relationship to man, He is sovereign in salvation, from beginning to end, assuring the believer that his salvation is of God, absolutely divine, and of grace alone.

2. The foreknowledge of God.

From man's standpoint God's knowledge of the future is foreknowledge, but His foreknowledge is not itself causative of the believer's salvation. God knew who would believe in Christ unto the salvation of their souls. He foreknew this before the foundation of the world; but His foreknowledge did not render their salvation certain. The foreknowledge of God, however, is the basis of the election of the believer.

3. Election.

"Election," says H. C. Thiessen in his "Lectures in Systematic Theology" (page 344), "is that sovereign act of God in grace whereby He chose in Christ Jesus for salvation all those whom He foreknew would accept Him." Scripture speaks of "whom He foreknew, He did also predestinate," "elect according to the foreknowledge of God." (See Rom. 8:29 and I Pet. 1:2, respectively.) The election of the believer is not caused by Divine foreknowledge; though it is based upon it. Election is God's sovereign act of grace, whereby He chose unto salvation those who were utterly undeserving of salvation.

4. Predestination.

The term "predestination" is to be distinguished from "foreknowledge" and "election", in that foreknowledge has special reference to the persons foreknown by God; "election" has reference to God's choosing those whom He foreknew would accept Christ unto their salvation; and "predestination" has reference to the defining of the boundaries of His will, determining His election of the believer. In the Mind of God, these acts of God all occurred at the same time; that is to say, there is no chronological arrangement of these divine acts. Predestination, therefore, is the determination of God of making effective the election of those whom He foreknew in Christ.

II. THE PRESERVATION OF THE BELIEVER IN RELATION TO THE NEW LIFE.

1. The initial experience of grace.

The initial experience of grace has been variously termed as "regeneration," "justification," "initial sanctification," "conversion," etc.; all of which take place at the same instant, though there is a logical sequence. By regeneration, the believing sinner receives a new nature (2 Peter 1:4), a new life (John 3:18, 36), and becomes a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10). By conversion, the sinner turns to God in repentance and faith. In justification, he obtains a new standing before God and is declared righteous through Christ. By the initial sanctification, the child of God is set apart unto God from sin, to be wholly His and for Him alone. The new life is made possible through the efficacy of the Atonement, preserved through the present ministry of Christ's High Priesthood, constantly sanctified by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, all of which exclude human merits and works.

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2. Freedom of the will.

If a sinner is to be saved at all, God must take the initiative and furnish to him the divine means whereby he can be saved. Common grace, known also as prevenient grace, retore to the sinner the enablement to make a favorable response to God. But the sinner is free to respond to the proffer of grace and pardon. It is evident, from the Scriptures, that the natural man (unsaved man), in his totally depraved condition, cannot exercise the will to a free choice of grace, unless God motivates him by the convicting power of the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that the sinner is held accountable before God.

The sinner, having responded favorably to the proffer of grace and pardon, becomes a child of God by repentance of sin and faith in Christ, and being a believer in Christ, his will is surrendered to the will of God and is motivated by God "both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).

3. Growing response to the grace of God.

The initial experience of salvation is fundamental to the beginning of the Christian life. But the remembrance of the experience of the new birth is not the evidence of the new life. The decisive evidence of the new birth rests "in the vitality of the life of Christ within our souls at this moment" (Walter Barlow, GOD SO LOVED, page 129). This is to say that the Christian life is one of conscious, growing relationship to Christ and to grace of God in Christ. It is the believer who continues "to do the will of God that abideth forever." (I John 2:17; John 6:40)

4. Means of grace.

Every instrumentality which God places at the disposal of the believer as the means of spiritual edification and growth should be utilized. Of these means of grace for Christian growth we hold to the Word of God, both with its assurances and warnings, the fellowship of the saints, the Lord's Supper, and prayer. When a believer cultivates his spiritual life in the aforementioned, there will be an evident growth, vitality of life, holy living, and effective service for God.

III. SUMMARY STATEMENT

To the believer, whose relationship with the Lord is one of vitality and of a growing response to the grace of God, the teaching on the preservation of the saints is one of great value. It magnifies the grace of God. It deepens his love to God. It humbles the believer. It quickens gratitude to God for His mercy and grace. And it affords to him a sense of safety, comfort in sorrow, strength and assurance in times of trials, and peace of heart and mind.

On the other hand, the many warning, examples of apostasy, sharp rebukes and exhortations are given to those who grow cold and indifferent in their spiritual life and rest their case in the initial experience of salvation, not realizing that the evidence of the new life is the continuous response to the grace of God and the vitality of that life in a growing relationship to the Lord.

We will find the true doctrine of perseverance by combining both groups of teachings on this subject, which have been used in isolation of each other to support contradictory views. It is hard not to exaggerate one truth at the expense of the other. The New Testament teaching and Christian experience are completely one in keeping the divine and human aspects properly related to each other. In both there is clear recognition of God's initiative. It is just as wrong to ignore the divine power and provision on the one hand, as it is to overlook the human response on the other. Also, we should remember that God's method of keeping His children is a moral, not a physical or mechanical one. He does not override our wills by irresistible grace, but by constraining grace which enlists our wills. Although the result may not be uncertain, yet the certainty is not that of a mechanical law working through natural forces. Instead of God building walls so that we can not fall down the cliff, He builds up wills so that we won't go near the brink. To point out the dangers (which are real) and to warn us against them, is the divine method of prevention.