

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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9/13/26

**Sermon Title:** Preservation of the Saints: He Will Hold me Fast

**Sermon Text:** Romans 9:23b

**Rom. 9:22** What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,

**Rom. 9:23** in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—

**Rom. 9:24** even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

**Main Point:** God will sovereignly preserve and protect His vessels of mercy so that their faith will endure to the very end.

## **Outline:**

1. The Pursuit of Endurance
2. The Power That Sustains
3. The Promises that Fortify

## **Introduction**

In the past few weeks we have been looking at the subject of the Doctrines of Grace through the lens of Paul's argument here in Romans 9. His argument in Romans 9 has been centered around explaining just why it is that God's promises have not failed and do not fail, even if many (but not all) of the Jewish people have

come to faith. And in fact, in light of the fact that most (at least by the time of Paul) had not come to faith.

And he answered it by telling us that God's word has not failed because His saving promises were never made to the external nation of Israel according to physical descent, but they were directed solely to the children of the promise whom He sovereignly chose before the foundation of the world.

To make sense of this, Paul appealed to the doctrine of election, in which Paul has argued, the promises haven't failed because God accomplishes all of his plans in salvation. He has argued for the freedom of God in doing what he does, and saving who he chooses to save, and so we've seen this claim by Paul in verse 18, "So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." His point there was to emphasize the freedom of God in how he works.

This is why not all physical descendants of Israel are saved, but it's also why that doesn't mean that God's purposes have failed.

Now, next week my plan is for us to jump head first into the question of election, and the freedom of God to choose whom he shows mercy to and whom he passes over. So next week we're going to focus on this question that so many have: questions of the fairness of God in choosing to save some, and in passing over others and allowing them to receive justice instead of mercy. "He has mercy on whomever he wills." But that is next week.

But I felt it was important for us to focus on one of the other doctrines of grace this week on the tail of last week's message. Because if you remember, last week we saw the doctrine of God's irresistible grace. Or as I called it, "Grace that Works." Some might call it efficacious grace. But whatever you call it, the teaching of Scripture is that in our total depravity, we need God to be the one to change our hearts and give us a delight in Christ if we are ever to come to him. And we saw from Scripture so many examples of people who did not love God having their heart changed by God and drawn to him so that they later did love God.

We didn't get to Lydia in the course of the sermon, but in Acts 16 we were told that God "opened Lydia's heart" (Acts 16:14). You may have heard that passage in the book of Revelation where Jesus says,

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20).

And Lydia’s faith shows us why someone would ever do that. Before Lydia was willing to open the door to Christ, he had to open her heart.

And if anyone is even to “see the kingdom of God,” says Jesus, we must be born again. And we were told this is not something that we can accomplish for ourselves. It has to be the Spirit who does this. And he is the same Spirit who blows wherever he will.

And I mentioned a few ways that this doctrine of irresistible grace matters for us. I mentioned that it humbles us, that it feeds our love for unbelievers, and it gives us boldness in our witness. But I failed to mention another application, which is what I want to dwell on today, and this application is also another of what we call the doctrines of grace.

Sometimes this doctrine is called “Perseverance of the Saints.” R.C. Sproul said that he preferred “Preservation of the Saints,” and I agree with Sproul on this. Calling the doctrine “Preservation” of the saints puts the emphasis on God who causes believers to be preserved in their faith. Perseverance makes it seem like something that you have to do from your own strength. “Preservation” says, it is God who holds me fast.

Here is how this connects to last week. If God changed your heart and caused you to love him, he is also able to keep his promises in Scripture that He will *keep* you believing and loving him.

Christians are not saved by a faith in Christ that happens one time like a blink of lightning and then goes away. Instead, we are saved by a God who continues to give us a sustained and enduring love for Christ.

## **1. The Pursuit of Endurance**

First today, consider the pursuit of endurance.

Endurance is important in Scripture. It’s an expression of true faith that it keeps going and doesn’t happen the way lightning strikes the ground.

If you're as old as me, you may remember a famous TV preacher named Charles Stanley. Charles Stanley (who is now with the Lord) taught a mistaken version of what I would call "once saved always saved." And I don't like that term for the reasons I think you'll soon see. But Stanley did teach it. Here is what he said in his book *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?*:

"... God's love for His people is of such magnitude that *even those who walk away from the faith* have not the slightest chance of slipping from His hand." (pg. 74).

Then he said this even more clearly:

"Consequently, God does not require a constant attitude of faith in order to be saved—only an act of faith... *Even if a believer for all practical purposes becomes an unbeliever, his salvation is not in jeopardy.*" (Pg. 80)

So think of what Charles Stanley was very self-consciously telling people. He was saying, even if someone ceases to believe, it truly doesn't matter. For him, salvation was like a tattoo. Even if you repudiate the tattoo, you still have it.

What the Bible teaches is not this sort of "blink once and you're saved" faith that doesn't necessarily continue.

Christians are not saved by their perseverance. But we are saved by the instrument of faith which is of such a quality that it continues on through our lives. A faith that by God's grace we persevere in. Let me show you this from Scripture.

Look at Colossians 1:21-23. Paul writes to the church,

"And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, *if indeed you continue in the faith*, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister."

So there is that language: "If indeed you *continue in the faith*..." Paul is telling us that true faith is ongoing. It's not just a past-tense transaction or a box that we check. It is a vital and ongoing part of the life of the believer. Faith is the daily

breath of the believer. The fact that we keep doing it is evidence that we're alive! The same thing with faith. We might struggle to breathe at times, but the breaths keep coming, even if we have to fight hard for them at times.

How do we do that? How does God expect us to have a vital ongoing faith? Do we play any kind of role in it? Well if we look at Hebrews 3:12(-14) we see that we have a *responsibility to believe by using God's means of grace*. Listen to what the author to the Hebrews say:

"Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. 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. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end."

You notice here in Hebrews 3 how the author doesn't let us off the hook, but instead emphasizes that we are called to keep believing "firm to the end." Again, this is like saying, "a living person breathes."

One way that God plans for believers to fight unbelief in this passage is, he says, "exhort one another every day, as long as it is called today,"

When we exhort, we're encouraging, teaching, and even preaching. God's plan is to use the weakness of the word to build us up. And it's God's means that he uses to keep us believing. One of the most obvious examples of doing this is exactly what we're doing right now. You came to hear the word of God preached. You're being exhorted against the deceitfulness of sin. God takes this and he uses it to help your faith remain vital, thoughtful, living... God has not abandoned you to keep up your own faith.

Now, we've seen that Scripture says, we are saved by a faith that continues on... that perseveres. That this happens by God's grace.

But what about when things don't seem to work out? How do we make sense of those who *don't* persevere (or who at least currently seem not to be persevering)? This is where we have to address the *reality of apostasy*. Apostasy means to abandon the faith. And perhaps you have known people like that. They at least

seemed to be walking with Jesus... perhaps for a long time. And then seemingly out of nowhere, they stopped.

Listen to what the Apostle John tells us about this in his first letter (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.”

People who profess faith in Christ do leave the church, and sometimes never return. What John does here is he points to these people who did profess faith, and who abandoned the faith. And John’s point is, you shouldn’t think of those who commit apostasy as having been united to Christ and then losing it. What he says is, if they abandon Christ, it is actually revealing what was true of their hearts all that time: they professed with their mouths, but didn’t believe in their hearts.

God preserves his saints in the faith, but if someone does not persevere in faith, we shouldn’t think of them as believers whom God just gave up on or abandoned. John says, as sad as it is to say, “they *are* not of us, and they *were* not of us.”

Let me give a caution. Sometimes we jump the gun when someone seems to abandon the faith. Someone stops coming to church for a long time, or they maybe make a big pronouncement on Facebook... even then, let me encourage you to take the long view. Here is what our confession (17.3) says about this:

“Nevertheless, [believers] may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve His Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.”

True believers in Christ may *seem* to fall away for a season and then return to Christ. And we as observers of these things are finite people and can’t really know how their story will end. And so when we hear about apostasy, from a human perspective, we should pray that the Lord would reclaim this person. Our instinct should not be to give them up for good. We should still follow Scripture’s teaching

about what to do regarding those who abandon the faith, but we should also never give up hope and prayer for those who seem to have committed apostasy.

This is why if people ask me, “Oh, you’re Reformed. That means you believe in ‘once-saved, always-saved,’” I deny it and say that this is not what the Bible teaches, nor is this what Reformed theology teaches. “Once saved always saved” is too confusing, and implies that faith doesn’t matter as long as it happens once. Instead, we are saved by a faith that perseveres.

I hope you can also see: Christians are not saved *by* their perseverance. We are saved by the finished work of Jesus Christ, applied to our hearts by the Spirit, using the instrument of faith.

**We are not saved by perseverance... but we are saved by the kind of faith that *does* persevere.**

The book of James says, a faith that doesn’t produce works is dead. And in the same way, a faith that doesn’t persevere is also dead. It is evidence of a vital and living faith the keeps believing.

## **2. The Power That Sustains**

Second this morning, I want us to consider the power that sustains us.

Yes, we are responsible, but God is the one that Scripture credits not just with our first breath of faith, but every breath of faith after it. We are kept believing by the power of God. But look at how God guards our faith from 1 Peter 1(:3-5):

“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 ready to be revealed in the last time.”

Peter uses a military term for “guarded” here. If you are a believer, then it’s like Peter is saying that God has posted a garrison of guards around your heart.

How do you know you'll keep believing? The answer isn't you: it's Christ who is guarding you, looking out for you, surrounding you with His grace!

Let me see if I can increase your confidence even more. Jesus Christ loves his people so much that he even personally intercedes for our faith. Romans 8:34 says that Jesus is at the father's right hand "interceding for us." He prays for us. Hebrews 7:25 says the same thing.

This is what he did for Simon Peter in Luke 22(:31-32). Speaking directly to Peter, this is what Jesus says:

"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers."

Peter was about to commit a massive, public act of denial—a temporary apostasy. Why didn't Peter end up like Judas? Why did Peter "turn again" and persevere? Not because Peter was stronger, braver, or better than Judas. It was entirely because Jesus prayed a specific, sovereign prayer for him: that your *faith* may not fail. He cares that Peter *keeps* believing. And that on his own, he won't!

Jesus "always lives to make intercession" for us. When we are too weak to pray for ourselves, Christ is praying us through the storm.

I want to show you one more passage that shows us that it is *God who saves and keeps us*. This comes from the book of Jude, verses 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."

He is able to keep you. Not only can he, but he will. He will hold you fast.

The ultimate goal of God's power and Christ's prayer is our final, joyful presentation before Him. Jude calls him our "savior" and says that he is able to "keep" us from stumbling.

### **3. The Promises that Fortify**

Third, I want you to be encouraged by God's promises that fortify us.

Consider the unbreakable grip of our shepherd in John 10(:27-29). This is Jesus speaking:

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 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.”

Think about this: Jesus doesn't just promise life, he promises *eternal* life that can't perish. This is the foundation of our assurance. But the basis of our confidence is not our strength: in Jesus' mind, the reason we can't be snatched... the reason we won't perish is because of *who* has us! Jesus Christ, the great shepherd has us in his hand. His Heavenly Father, who is greater than all holds us in his hand.

Think of this. Believers are not just secure. We are held in the nail-scarred hands of the Son and enclosed within the all-powerful hand of the Father. The only way that a believer could possibly fall away is if there was an enemy who was strong enough to pry open the hands of Christ and the Father.

And Paul shuts down that possibility in Philippians 1:6, where he says,

“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”

You and I are all works in progress. That's what Romans 7 was all about, wasn't it? We are not finished. We are still sinners. Our faith is still weak. We haven't been glorified. We feel so far from the finish line. But think of what Paul is saying here: God began your faith, and he is saying that God never leaves the project that is our life of faith half-finished.

For some of us, our faith is new and fresh. For others of us, our faith is a long-running project. Maybe you are in a season where your own faith in Christ does feel a bit sluggish or weak. You may need an encouragement that the same God who first gave you that faith is the same God who promises to finish it.

Paul says, for the believer there is coming a day where we will be able to say, by God's grace,

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

God is the reason for this confidence. God is the reason Paul finished the race. God is the reason he kept the faith. God is the one who did everything from beginning to end. Paul could say this, and all of his people will be able to say this.

The power, love, and grace of Christ keeps us. His love sustains us. His word feeds us. His Spirit carries us. And nothing can separate us from the God who does these things for us. And so because of that, just as Paul was sure that he would carry that work to completion in ourselves, he’s sure that we’ll experience it too. That’s why he can say, not just of himself, but of all of us [in Rom. 8:38-39],

“I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

*Let’s pray.*