

CONTINUING IN THE FAITH

We are believers now. Shall we continue to believe and finally receive the crown of life? The most important thing to say is that God keeps us in the faith. As God gave us our natural lives and preserves them, it is He who has worked faith in us, and who preserves faith: Peter wrote: "You are protected by God's power through faith, until you come to salvation," and Paul wrote, "He who has begun a good work in you will carry it on to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus." and "He will also make you firm until the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" God does not merely act as if He winds up a clock and leaves it to run by itself. He "strengthens and-preserved us steadfast in His Word and faith until the end."

Our good works and our efforts do not contribute to our preservation in the faith. The exhortations, "Be faithful until death", and "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" do not mean that a Christian perseveres in the faith by his own efforts, as little as the command to believe implies that a person can produce faith. After the second of these verses above Paul goes right on to say, "It is God who continues to work in you both to be willing and to be doing according to his good purpose."

God uses the same means by which He created faith to nourish it and to preserve it, the Gospel, the continuing power of baptism, and the repeated assurance of the Lord's Supper. Paul calls the Gospel "the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes." He wrote to the Thessalonians that the Word of God was effectually working in those who believed.

Therefore it is crucial for believers to continue to hear the Word, and to be strengthened through the Gospel in the Lord's Supper. It is not true that once a person becomes a Christian he cannot fall away. Repentance is not something only at the time of conversion. Christian faith goes together with ongoing repentance. For God operates through means, and people have the awful ability to resist the working of the Holy Spirit when God works through means. As God preserves our physical lives through certain means, such as food and drink, and human beings have the ability to refuse these means and die of hunger or thirst, there are warning examples in the Scriptures of people, such as Saul, Judas, and Demas, who were once men of God, and then fell away. Christians must continue to "search the Scriptures", to "hear the Word of God and keep it", and to "have the Word of Christ dwell in them richly." God wants His people to delight in His instruction, and meditate on it day and night. Of course God could, if He wanted to, preserve people in the faith without the use of any means at all, but He has not promised to do so. It has pleased Him to deal with us only through His Word. Therefore, if we wish faith to be preserved in us, we must be nourished by His Word, ponder it, and keep it in our hearts. Neglecting the Word of God means spiritual starvation, spiritual suicide. The light of faith continues to burn as long as the Word of God supplies oil for our lamps.

Therefore we must keep in mind the end of our faith, the salvation of our souls. The one important thing for each of us is that we shall be among those on Jesus' right on the Day of Judgment, through faith in Him. We must also take seriously the warnings in the Scriptures against falling away. Paul wrote, about many Jews in his time, "They have been broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid." After he reminded the Corinthians that, though all the Israelites ate the spiritual food and drink God provided in the wilderness, God was not pleased with many of them. Paul warned the Corinthians, "Therefore the one who thinks that he is standing firm should beware that he does not fall." Such warnings are not aimed at confidence, but at self-confidence and carnal security. Christians' awareness of their own weakness should go together with trust in God's mighty and gracious power to keep them in the faith. In spite of our weakness and our many difficulties, God wants us to trust that nothing can separate us from His love or pluck us out of Jesus' hands.

Therefore, it is logically correct to say that if someone knows that he could become a castaway, he cannot have the assurance that he will not become a castaway. However, it is theologically false to say that. There is a mystery here, as there is always a mystery when we talk about God's relationship with human beings, and particularly when we talk about God's grace. This difficulty cannot be solved by logic, but only by distinguishing Law and Gospel. The conviction that the Law produces must not be allowed to eliminate the conviction that the Gospel produces, but to serve it.

Several statements can sum up the whole doctrine of grace. Salvation is exclusively a work of God's grace. God seriously wants to save all people. Yet not all people will be saved. "Many are called, but few are chosen." Sadly, that means that more will be lost than saved.

That produces a difficulty for our human way of thinking. There is no difference among people, because they are all equally unworthy to be converted and saved, equally incompetent to convert themselves, and equally unwilling to be converted. Again, there is no difference in God's attitude to sinners, He earnestly wants to convert

and save all people, and He alone can convert them. So it would seem to follow that the same factors would produce the same results, either that all would be converted by the same powerful grace of God, or that all would be lost.

Scripture teaches that some will be saved, and some will be lost. It is not permissible to use human logic, either to say that those who are saved may take some of the credit, because they did not resist God's grace as much, or to say that if anyone is lost, the reason is to be attributed to God. The Scriptures teach that those who are lost are lost entirely by their own fault, and that those who are elected, called, justified, preserved in the faith, and glorified are so entirely by the grace of God in Christ.

If anyone is turned to God in conversion, and if anyone continues in the faith, these are exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit. If any person remains unconverted, and if any person has been a believer and falls away, either is exclusively his own fault. Beyond that we must know how to tell our reason to go no further, and put our hands over our mouths. We have no right to develop doctrines on the basis of rational deductions, but must bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. We must give God the credit of being wiser than we are if we cannot understand His mind or His ways.