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An Exegetical Discussion on Perseverance of the Saints

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## **Introduction**

Theology is often a contentious issue in the Church. Disputes often cause tremendous division and the multiplication of denominations, but they often lead to a greater understanding of orthodoxy (not that the following study claims to suggest a completely novel conclusion). One of the more contentious ongoing discussions concerns soteriology, a topic that is occasionally oversimplified to a debate between determinism and free will. This project does not claim to argue for a specific theological view; instead, it will attempt to remain unbiased as it criticizes (and attempts to harmonize) both sides in their discussion of the doctrine of perseverance of the saints.

The present study is the result of a personal interest in contemplating the doctrine of perseverance of the saints within a biblical context. Most systematic theologies seem to provide rigid answers, whether they affirm or deny the doctrine, by appealing to certain verses as more foundational than others. Upon reading five biblical passages (John 10:22-30, Romans 8:31-39, Hebrews 6:4-12, James 5:19-20, and 2 Peter 2:20-22) it became clear that the plain meaning of some of these texts was being disregarded in favour of a more “doctrinally sound” conclusion. This methodology can be problematic because there is nothing within the context of the passage to influence a reading contrary to the plain one, but because the plain meaning does not support a specific doctrinal conclusion it is explained through the use of another passage that may be from

a different context. On the whole this interpretational method may not seem problematic because Christian theology believes in the divine authorship of Scripture and that what God says in one place can and should enlighten what he says elsewhere. However, problems arise when a passage's plain meaning appears to say one thing but the opposite is claimed through an appeal to another passage. Where many other discussions of the perseverance of the saints attempt to explain passages that disagree with their understanding, this project will attempt to examine each passage in its literary context and consider their contributions to the doctrine.

It may be worth reasserting that I do not claim to argue for a particular theological view of perseverance. Although my theological leanings are in-line with the Reformed tradition more often than not, my doctrinal allegiance ultimately lies with what the Bible reveals instead of what a system determines. I do not find it problematic to appeal to divine mystery when necessary because it should be fairly clear that human understanding will never fully comprehend everything about God (Romans 11:33-35). This study is an attempt to "pierce the mystery" of God concerning perseverance of the saints in order to know him more fully.

A preliminary definition of perseverance of the saints may be stated as follows: "The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God's power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again."<sup>1</sup> When it comes to discussions pertaining to perseverance of the saints, there are three main positions in relation to the definition above: in favour, opposed to, and undecided/ in the middle. As a way of introducing each position, three scholars' views will be briefly discussed: Robert Reymond (in favour), Robert Shank (opposed to), and I. Howard Marshall (in the middle). Each of these authors' specific arguments

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 788.

concerning the passages in question will be noted in the relevant chapters below (alongside other theologians), but they will be introduced here.

In his book, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Reymond affirms the following definition for perseverance of the saints: “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.”<sup>2</sup> He asserts that this perseverance depends fully upon the grace of God because of God’s unchangeable and irresistible love that preserves the salvation of those whom he has drawn to himself.<sup>3</sup> Reymond claims that those who have been effectually called can be temporarily tempted to leave the church but that those who were truly called by God will always return to him.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Reymond makes a distinction between actual children of God and those who profess to be children of God because he argues that profession of faith does not automatically entail a guarantee of perseverance; only those whom God has called can and will persevere to the end.<sup>5</sup> Reymond’s view emphasizes God’s sovereignty and election over free will and claims that every professing Christian who has rejected the faith was not truly saved. Unfortunately, to reach this conclusion Reymond tends to interpret passages that disagree with his position in light of the conclusion he already reached instead of allowing the passages to be interpreted in their own context first. More will be said on this in the following chapters.

Robert Shank, in his book, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance*, articulates a view that posits a conditional view of perseverance of the saints (that ultimately

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<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 781.

<sup>3</sup> Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 781.

<sup>4</sup> Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 781.

<sup>5</sup> Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 782.

disagrees with the definitions given by Reymond and Grudem). His stance may be stated as follows: “contrary to the translations of some and of the opinions of many, the New Testament affirms that eternal life in Christ is our present possession only on the condition of a present living faith, rather than as the irrevocable consequence of a moment’s act of faith sometime in the past.”<sup>6</sup> Based on his added condition of a present living faith, Shank “concludes that, when all pertinent Scriptures are carefully examined and fully considered, the doctrine [of perseverance of the saints] must be rejected.”<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that Shank’s concern is that those who affirm perseverance of the saints are more likely to be guilty of “resting on their laurels.” He claims that “no man who is not listening to [Jesus’] voice and following him has warrant for assuming that he is one of Christ’s sheep.”<sup>8</sup> Although his motivation is pastoral and seeks deeper obedience for his congregation, Shank’s view ultimately misinterprets key passages supporting perseverance of the saints in order to reach his conclusion.

The last main perspective considered in this project is described by I. Howard Marshall in his book, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study in Perseverance*. Marshall’s desire appears to be to reach a biblical conclusion that is not beholden to a theological ideal either for or against the doctrine. He is accurate in stating that “each school of thought has [...] tended to play down the significance of the scriptural teaching on which the other has built its case.”<sup>9</sup> Marshall does not give as rigid a definition as those found in systematic theologies because he claims that the New Testament does not lend itself to such a possibility. In his conclusion he states:

the New Testament is content to hold together the facts of perseverance and apostasy in paradox, and to rest the confidence of the believer not on a logical argument but on the

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1989), 63.

<sup>7</sup> Shank, *Life in the Son*, xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Shank, *Life in the Son*, 300.

<sup>9</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1974), 11.

faithfulness of the God in whom he must continually trust. As he trusts, he finds that God is indeed faithful and that only his own wilfulness and failure to trust can cause him to fall; as he grows in trust, he is able to proclaim with the voice of faith that nothing can separate him from the love of God.<sup>10</sup>

Marshall's study strives to find the biblical middle ground between the two sides of the discussion, and his comments on all five of the passages will be examined below.

In the study that follows, I will exposit and discuss the theological contributions of John 10:22-30, Romans 8:31-39, Hebrews 6:4-12, James 5:19-20, and 2 Peter 2:20-22, each of which is relevant to the discussion of perseverance of the saints. As different theologians interact with the passages it is apparent that some of their conclusions are skewed because of their predetermined conclusions; I will highlight these tensions throughout but address them explicitly in the conclusion. John 10, Romans 8, and Hebrews 6 are each dealt with in many different systematic theologies and topical books (Marshall, Shank, Grudem, Erickson, and Strong) while James 5 and 2 Peter are only discussed sporadically (Marshall and Shank were the only scholars to feature both). Lastly, it will be helpful to keep in mind a brief note concerning terminology as the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints has also been labelled as *preservation* of the saints. The main difference between these two ideas is that perseverance seems to emphasize human effort in retaining salvation while preservation will focus on God's activity in ensuring the continued faithfulness of his people. It is also relevant to point out that Grudem's definition (given above) includes the phrase "kept by God's power," demonstrating that for him preservation fits within the broader concept of perseverance.<sup>11</sup> The passages used to affirm the doctrine of perseverance of the saints below may be more accurately said to affirm preservation, but since most theologians (like Grudem) use the term "perseverance" the rest of the study will

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<sup>10</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 211.

<sup>11</sup> Reymond's definition does not include a similar phrase to Grudem's.



follow this terminology and recognize that preservation is understood in the conversation concerning perseverance. The layout of this study will follow the biblical canon, making John 10:22-30 the first passage to be examined.

## **Chapter 1**

### **John 10:22-30**

The Gospel of John holds a unique place within Christian thought. It is the only non-synoptic Gospel, but it is often cited as a place for new believers to begin reading their Bibles due to its high Christology. In the midst of its rich theological tradition is an inherent tension in that John does not seem concerned with logical categories, and this lack of concern can appear contradictory to modern readers. For example, it is easy to view faith and works as being mutually exclusive, but when Jesus is asked about the work that is required to faithfully follow God, he replies that the work of God is to “believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29).<sup>12</sup> The work of God that Jesus requests of the people is faith! The Gospel of John also contains an important passage used to support the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints: John 10:22-30. This chapter will briefly examine the literary context leading up to 10:22-30, exposit the passage, and describe how this passage contributes to the discussion pertaining to the perseverance of the saints.

#### **Literary Context**

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<sup>12</sup> All Scripture references will be taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

Jesus' relationship to the Father is an important theme of the Gospel of John,<sup>13</sup> and this theme is directly relevant to 10:22-30 since Jesus concludes with the jarring statement that he "and the Father are one" (10:30). Jesus' discourses frequently include authentication of his actions through his relation to God as Father. One of these is in John 3 where Jesus is described as having "all things" because the Father "has given [them] into his hand" (3:35), which describes the understanding that Jesus has tremendous authority because of his relationship with the Father. Jesus also claims to be sustained through his obedience to the Father: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me" (4:34). After healing someone on the Sabbath, Jesus responds to those who claim he is breaking the law by explaining that "[his] Father is working until now, and [he is] working" (5:17). After Jesus miraculously feeds more than five thousand people he begins to explain to them that he is "the bread of life" (6:35) that will sustain them forever and "all that the Father gives [him] will come to [him], and whoever comes to [him he] will never cast out" (6:37ff). When his words and deeds are questioned in John 8, Jesus explains that "it is [his] Father who glorifies [him]" (8:54). Jesus explains another aspect of his relationship with the Father in that the Father loves the Son because he lays down his life for the sheep and takes it up again (10:17), but also that he has been charged by the Father to take up his life after he has laid it down (10:18). Other notable instances describing Jesus' relationship to the Father include the claim that Jesus speaks by the Father's authority (12:49-50), that knowledge of Jesus leads to knowledge of the Father (14:7), and that whoever hates Jesus hates the Father as well (15:23). The concept of God as Jesus' Father is an important theme for understanding the unity of

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<sup>13</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son, and Spirit: the Trinity and John's Gospel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), 112, Paul A. Rainbow, *Johannine Theology: the Gospel, the Epistles and the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 72.

purpose between them and often challenges Jesus' contemporaries on their conception of God and their belief.<sup>14</sup>

Alongside the theme of Jesus' relationship to the Father, the exhortation to believe is important to John 10:22-30 because those who believe in Jesus are said to be secure in the grasp of Jesus and the Father (10:28-9). Earlier in John 3, while he is explaining "heavenly things" to Nicodemus, Jesus claims that belief is linked to eternal life and condemnation (3:16, 18). After healing a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years Jesus claims that anyone who "[hears his] word and believes him who sent [him] has eternal life" (5:24). After feeding the five thousand Jesus explains that in order to do the works that God requires of his people the people must "believe in him whom he has sent" (6:29). When Jesus is confronting his opponents concerning their unbelief, he notes that they do not believe the truth when he tells it to them (8:45). After healing a man who was born blind Jesus reveals that he is the Son of Man and the healed man proclaims his belief in response to being made to see (9:37-38). When Martha questions Jesus during the Lazarus narrative, he responds by explaining to her that if she believed she would see the glory of God (11:40). After Jesus entered Jerusalem he claims that whoever believes in him believes in the Father (12:44). During the High Priestly prayer Jesus prays on behalf of those who believe in him through the work of his disciples (17:20). Belief seems to be an indicator of the proper response to Jesus' ministry but only some appear to be capable of it, a theme that will be explored further in the following exposition of 10:22-30.

#### Exposition<sup>15</sup>

John 10:22-30 begins with a short description of Jesus' location and the time of year. The setting of the passage is Jerusalem in the winter during the Feast of Dedication.<sup>16</sup> The Feast of

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<sup>14</sup> Rainbow, *Johannine Theology*, 84-5.

<sup>15</sup> For the author's translation of John 10:22-30, see Appendix A.

Dedication commemorated the Jewish rededication of the temple in 164 B.C. after it was defiled by Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 B.C.<sup>17</sup> Jesus' location is further specified as he is described as "walking in the temple within the portico of Solomon" (10:23). There are two main views concerning the addition of this detail: he either did it to "teach and invite discussion"<sup>18</sup> or it is a simple narrative detail meant to provide eye-witness accuracy to the account.<sup>19</sup> Either way, Jesus was teaching during the Feast of Dedication.

The Judeans (Ιουδαῖοι) begin by asking him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us openly" (10:24). The Greek of this sentence is notoriously difficult to translate, and many scholars believe that the phrase utilizes an idiomatic understanding of the verb αἶρω.<sup>20</sup> This verb usually carries the connotation of lifting something upwards<sup>21</sup> but may also carry the following meaning: "to keep someone in suspense so that one cannot come to a conclusion in one's thinking."<sup>22</sup> The use of αἶρω in Luke 11:52 may prove useful for this passage where Jesus says, "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away [ἥρατε] the key of knowledge." His statement exemplifies the use of the verb in a context that withholds

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<sup>16</sup> This feast took place for eight days in the month of Kislev/December and is the predecessor of Hanukkah. See J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 594.

<sup>17</sup> Francis J. Moloney, S.B.D., *The Gospel of John*, SP (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 313.

<sup>18</sup> Michaels, *John*, 595.

<sup>19</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: a Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 368; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John (Revised)*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 461.

<sup>20</sup> Michaels, *John*, 596.

<sup>21</sup> T. Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Louvain: Peeters, 2009), 16; Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William F. Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), 28; J. P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 207.

<sup>22</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 354. Also in BDAG, 29.

knowledge<sup>23</sup> so that the question in John 10:24 could be the following: “How long will you keep [knowledge from] us (our souls)?” Of course, this translation carries an implied “knowledge” instead of actually using the word γνῶσις as Luke 11:52 does, but the connection of withholding knowledge (or information) is evident from the demand for Jesus to be open with his Messianic identity.

Jesus’ response begins with the assertion that he had already answered their question but they did not believe (10:25a). Some scholars are quick to recognize that at this point in John Jesus has only explicitly disclosed his identity two times: his encounter with the Samaritan woman (4:26) and the man born blind (9:37).<sup>24</sup> Jesus explains himself in the second half of the verse: “the works which I do in the name of my Father testify on my account” (10:25b). Jesus claims that the works he has already done speak clearly about whether or not he is the Messiah, something he claimed earlier in 5:36. According to Herman Ridderbos, Jesus’ use of works in this context “refers to the content of Jesus’ entire mission, his miracles *and his words*,” meaning that both his words and deeds provide adequate testimony concerning his identity.<sup>25</sup> In John 10:24-25, when asked about who he is, Jesus refers to the works that he has already done in the Father’s name,<sup>26</sup> but the simple fact remains that the Judeans did not believe.

Jesus explains that the reason why they do not believe is that they “are not (of) [his] sheep” (10:26). Jesus is continuing to use the imagery he introduced in John 10:1-20 in

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<sup>23</sup> Joachim Jeremias, “αἶρω, ἐπαίρω,” in *TDNT 1*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 186

<sup>24</sup> Morris, *John*, 462; Michaels, *John*, 597; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1987), 174.

<sup>25</sup> Ridderbos, *John*, 203. Italics original.

<sup>26</sup> Michaels, *John*, 597; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: an Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: Clowes and Sons, 1978), 380.

describing himself as a shepherd and his followers as his sheep.<sup>27</sup> Jesus explains that his sheep are able to recognize his voice and will follow him (10:27). The verb translated as “follow” is ἀκολουθέω and can be used either literally<sup>28</sup> or figuratively as a way of describing discipleship under Christ.<sup>29</sup> The figurative usage of the verb is used predominantly in the Gospel of John, making it likely that Jesus is referring to genuine discipleship in this passage.<sup>30</sup>

As the sheep follow Jesus he will “give eternal life to them and they will never perish into eternity and no one will take them by force from [his] hand” (10:28). The idea of “eternal life” is qualified by the statement that follows in that they “will never perish,” a combination also in John 3:16 (“whoever believes in [the Son] should not perish but have eternal life”). The word translated as “perish” here is ἀπόλλυμι and can convey ideas of destruction, but it can also relate the idea of losing something “that one already has or [being] separated from a normal connection.”<sup>31</sup> In light of this, it may be better to say that Jesus is claiming that his sheep will never be truly lost.<sup>32</sup> The assertion that the sheep will never be lost is made clearer through the statement that “no one will take them by force” from Jesus’ hand. The verb translated as “take by force” is ἀρπάζω and refers to a sudden and violent illegal attempt at seizure of property.<sup>33</sup> By saying this, Jesus is promising (through use of the future tense) that his hand provides security for his sheep; he will not allow them to be taken from him.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 406.

<sup>28</sup> BDAG, 36. Also Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 201.

<sup>29</sup> Gerhard Kittel, “ἀκολουθέω, ἔξ-, ἐπ-, παρ-, συνακολουθέω,” in *TDNT I*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 214.

<sup>30</sup> Kittel, “ἀκολουθέω, ἔξ-, ἐπ-, παρ-, συνακολουθέω,” 213; Beasley-Murray, 174.

<sup>31</sup> BDAG, 115, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Michaels, *John*, 598.

<sup>33</sup> BDAG, 134; Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 221, 500, 584, 475.

<sup>34</sup> Morris, *John*, 463.

The claim that Jesus' hand provides security for his sheep is expanded upon in 10:29. He says that the Father's hand is equally unassailable. The translation of this verse is widely disputed due to different textual traditions where the main issue is determining what the adjective "greatest" actually describes. Some textual variants seem to imply that what was given by the Father is greater<sup>35</sup> while others describe the Father himself as greater than all.<sup>36</sup> Contextually, it is much more likely that the author's purpose in this statement is to assert the superiority of the Father because the next line has to do with the security of "his hand." What is the point of saying that what he gave the Son is the greatest if the lines directly before and after talk about the strength of the Father and Son's hands? The assertion of the Father's greatness makes more sense in this reading.<sup>37</sup>

The last line, "I and the Father are one" (10:30), has been described as a statement regarding the unity of purpose and mission between the Father and Son rather than ontological unity.<sup>38</sup> This conclusion is drawn from the use of the neuter *ἐν* instead of the masculine *ἐἷς* that is used in Mark 12:29 when Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:4 regarding the most important commandment, "the Lord is one." The unity of purpose between the Father and Son may simply be an explicit comment on what Jesus has already stated: the Son's hand is equally as secure as the Father's because they are working toward the same goal.

#### Contribution to the Doctrine of Perseverance

John 10:22-30 is often referred to in systematic texts when they discuss the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints because it appears to confirm it. The passage seems to clearly describe

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<sup>35</sup> Michaels, *John*, 600.

<sup>36</sup> The UBS classifies this as a 'D' rating, indicating that the textual tradition provides limited answers.

<sup>37</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 174.

<sup>38</sup> Moloney, *John*, 316; Colin G. Kruse, *John*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 239; Brown, *John*, 407.



Jesus comforting his people by proclaiming that his sheep will remain safe in his hand. However, there is room for discussion concerning a few key points: the necessity for the sheep's obedient following to be kept securely, internal versus external threats, and the emphasis of Jesus' words themselves. When these different aspects of the passage are examined it may be argued that Jesus is describing the preservation of his flock in that he will not allow apostasy to afflict his sheep.

This section will begin with a consideration of an argument opposed to perseverance of the saints. Robert Shank's discussion of the passage recognizes the assurance given by Jesus in 10:28-29, but he claims that these verses do not reveal the complete picture. In fact, Shank contends that merely quoting these two verses would be "incomplete" because 10:27 "is an integral part of the statement and quite essential" and that "it sets forth the specific condition governing our Saviour's promise."<sup>39</sup> According to Shank, 10:27 ("my sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me") is indicative of the condition attached to Jesus' promise of security, in other words: "no one will take them out of my hand *as long as they follow me*."<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that Shank's concern appears to emphasize action as necessary to the Christian life, but in this case he seems to be reading too much into the text as well as neglecting to take the whole context into account since he does not mention 10:26, a verse that defines the identity of the sheep a little more clearly and will be discussed in the next paragraph.

Robert Reymond's discussion of John 10 concerning perseverance of the saints begins by arguing against the position which claims that the security of the sheep is *dependent* on continuing to follow Jesus.<sup>41</sup> In order to draw this conclusion one must affirm that inclusion into

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<sup>39</sup> Shank, *Life in the Son*, 56.

<sup>40</sup> Shank, *Life in the Son*, 56.

<sup>41</sup> Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 783.

Jesus' flock requires belief first, which Raymond denies. He appeals to the immediate context where Jesus says of his opponents that "[they] do not believe because [they] are not from [his] sheep" (10:26).<sup>42</sup> Raymond is right to argue that the belief of the sheep appears to be dependent on their identity as Jesus' sheep, not the other way around. Raymond Brown agrees with Raymond when he explains that the disciples "are sheep given to Jesus by the Father, and so they hear his voice and know who he is."<sup>43</sup> Based on this identification Jesus claims that "no one will take them by force from [his] hand" (10:28), effectually promising his people that they will be eternally secure in him<sup>44</sup> because their identity is based on his action, not theirs.

Wayne Grudem brings two important points to the discussion surrounding John 10. The first concerns whether Jesus is simply referring to external dangers. Grudem claims that "some have objected to this that even though no one else can take Christians out of Christ's hand, we might remove ourselves from Christ's hand."<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, he does not cite who argues for this stance so it is difficult to fully engage with this claim. Grudem rejects the possibility that John 10 is only dealing with external threats through an appeal to the knowledge of how "our own hearts are far from trustworthy."<sup>46</sup> He argues that if Jesus' comforting statement did not include the possibility of our own removal from his hand then it would cease to be comforting at all.<sup>47</sup> The appeal to Jesus' words as comforting is a natural conclusion, but a better conclusion would be to note that in the context Jesus is explaining some identity markers of his sheep in contrast to his opponents (who are thieves and robbers, see 10:1, 10). Part of Jesus' purpose in explaining identity markers could be that Jesus is dissuading his opponents from thinking that

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<sup>42</sup> Raymond, *Systematic Theology*, 783.

<sup>43</sup> Brown, *John*, 407.

<sup>44</sup> Raymond, *Systematic Theology*, 783.

<sup>45</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 789.

<sup>46</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 789.

<sup>47</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 789.

they will be able to have any effectual influence over the sheep. The focus on dissuading opponents means that the discussion of internal factors is not really an issue dealt with by the passage since Jesus is only concerned with external foes.

Grudem's second point concerns the forcefulness of the phrase "they will never perish" (οὐ μὴ ἀπόλωνται, 10:28). The verb in this phrase is in the subjunctive mood, which usually conveys possibility and could be translated alongside the qualifier "might," so in this case it could be translated as "they might never perish."<sup>48</sup> However, the translation must take into account the double negation οὐ μὴ that is modifying the subjunctive verb in order to convey that whatever is understood as possible through use of the subjunctive is rendered impossible.<sup>49</sup> The phrase becomes an emphatic negation and "has the strength or force of the colloquial expression 'No way!'"<sup>50</sup> This leaves absolutely no question about the possibility of future destruction of the sheep; it is unequivocally ruled out as a possibility.

### Conclusion

John 10:22-30 describes Jesus in a controversial discussion with his opponents. He continues themes he touched on earlier in the chapter like the recognition between shepherd and sheep and the connection between himself and the Father, as well as making more extreme claims regarding his oneness with the Father. The description of eternal life as something given by Jesus and the claim that no one can take believers by force out of the hands of the Father and Son contributes nicely to the idea of divine preservation, which is a subset of perseverance. Jesus is described as providing eternal life for his sheep, those who believe, to ensure that they will surely not perish as well as providing protection from anything that might attempt to forcefully

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<sup>48</sup> David L. Mathewson and Elodie Ballantine Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar: Syntax for Students of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 165.

<sup>49</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 789.

<sup>50</sup> Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 168.

extract them from his flock. He is promising that his sheep are safe in his hands; their condition will be divinely preserved.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Romans 8:31-39**

Paul's letter to the Romans is often cited as one of the key documents in understanding the core doctrines of Christianity, particularly the fact that people are justified by faith alone instead of through righteous actions. This doctrine is seen as foundational to the Christian faith, and rightly so, but the implications of such a doctrine are often over-looked; justification by faith alone is built upon trust in God's faithful actions on our behalf. This idea of trust in God's actions is also a key foundation to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. The discussions concerning this doctrine inevitably appeal to Romans 8:31-39 because its plain meaning seems to rule out the possibility of apostasy, particularly the phrases ruling out the idea of separation from God's love (8:35, 39). In order to determine whether these conclusions are warranted, this chapter follows the same pattern as the previous one in describing the literary context of Romans 8:31-39, expositing the passage in question, and concludes by describing how the passage contributes to the conversation pertaining to perseverance of the saints.

#### **Literary Context**

In the introduction to Romans, Paul describes himself as a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul also explains his desire to visit the Roman church so that he "may impart ... some spiritual

gift” (Romans 1:11). Paul’s purpose statement is often understood as 1:16-17, particularly in describing the gospel as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (1:16). Paul then moves into the first main section of the body of the letter: 1:18-3:20.<sup>51</sup> This section opens with a general indictment of humanity as Paul describes the unrighteousness and ungodliness that causes them to “suppress the truth” (1:18). Something of particular note concerning the present discussion is Paul’s use of the verb παραδίδωμι, which is used three times to describe God’s action towards the unrighteous in that he “gave them up” to their sinful dispositions (1:24, 26, 28). The rest of this opening section describes the inability of humanity to find righteousness through the law and ultimately states that all have failed to live up to the standard given to them.

This melancholy section is followed by a section detailing the necessity of faith concerning justification and reconciliation with God (3:21-5:21), beginning with the proclamation that the law – although it was unable to save in itself – pointed toward the redemption given to God’s people as a gift through propitiation by Jesus’ blood (3:21-31).<sup>52</sup> This is followed by an exposition of the promise made to Abraham, a man who was counted righteous because of the faith he placed in God (ch. 4). Romans 5 begins to describe the process of our reconciliation to God through Christ’s blood “while we were still sinners” (5:8). This section also mentions God’s love twice: it “has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (5:5) and “God shows his love for us in that ... Christ died for us” (5:8). This love is described as being revealed through Christ’s sacrificial death on our behalf as well as fostering hope in us that “does not put us to shame” (5:5). The idea of God’s love is picked up in 8:35, 39 as part of a statement explaining that it is impossible for believers to be separated from it. Paul is able to

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<sup>51</sup> I. Howard Marshall, Stephen Travis, and Ian Paul, *Exploring the New Testament Volume 2* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), 115. The section outline details are taken from this volume.

<sup>52</sup> Marshall, Travis and Paul, *Exploring the New Testament Volume 2*, 117-8.

make this conclusion because of the foundational explanation concerning God's love in the beginning of chapter 5.

The next main section (6:1-8:39) continues Paul's pattern of introducing material through a potential question that is answered negatively (see 3:9; 4:1). The first two questions (6:1, 15) deal with the issue of continuing to sin since God's grace has freed us from the requirements of the law. The third question deals with the law's relationship to sin in order to show that the purpose of the law was to reveal sin (7:7). The fourth reasserts the fault of sin in producing death in order to avoid placing the blame at the feet of the law itself (7:13). This section builds toward chapter 8 where Paul explains that "God has done what the law ... could not do. By sending his own Son ..., he condemned sin in the flesh" (8:3). Paul also explains that the "Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (8:16) and that "the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (8:27). The joyful proclamation leads into a series of verbs describing God's chain of action concerning his people: he foreknows, predestines, calls, justifies, and glorifies them. Romans 8:31 begins with the question, "therefore what will we say to these things?" There is some debate as to what exactly "these things" refers to. In light of Paul's argument up to this point it may be fair to claim that "these things" refers to all of the preceding material. This supposition effectively makes the section dealt with below the conclusion of the letter thus far.<sup>53</sup>

#### Exposition<sup>54</sup>

Paul follows his initial question of "what will we say" with "if God is on our side, who is against us?" The if-statement here is rhetorical in style and assumes that God is in fact on the side of

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<sup>53</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 537-8.

<sup>54</sup> For the author's translation of Romans 8:31-39, see Appendix B.

Paul and the churches meeting in Rome. It is also a way of concluding the previous material<sup>55</sup> in that up to this point Paul has been explaining “what Christ Jesus has done for humanity [and attributes] it all to the prevenient love of God.”<sup>56</sup> Paul does not need to answer the question because he is supremely confident in God’s faithfulness.<sup>57</sup> This confidence is not because he believes that the life of the believer will be untouched by difficulties but rather that any opposition will be ultimately ineffectual.<sup>58</sup> Paul follows his question concerning ineffectual difficulties by explaining that since God gave up his own Son for the sake of his people he will surely deal graciously with them as well.<sup>59</sup> This word usage (“gave up”) is significant because the same form of παραδίδομι is used in 1:24, 26, and 28 to describe God’s action of giving sinners up to their own unrighteousness. Although God gave the unrighteous up to their sins for a time, he also gave up his Son in order to redeem them.<sup>60</sup> All of the things Paul has described in this letter are predicated on the fact that Jesus is the perfect sacrifice on behalf of the elect; Paul is concluding that God’s faithful actions in the past are indicative of his faithfulness in the future. He has begun to reveal a reason for his people to hope in him and he will not allow that hope to be put to shame (Romans 5:5).

The next section begins with another question: “who will bring charges against the ones chosen by God?” (8:33). The language of this question brings to mind a judicial context where the believer seems to be standing before a judge. Paul’s answering statement and follow-up question reveal the futility of any accusation because the judge is God himself! Since he has

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<sup>55</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 752.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 529.

<sup>57</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1988), 500.

<sup>58</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 539.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 458.

<sup>60</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 500-1.



already labelled his people as ἐκλεκτός (chosen, elect)<sup>61</sup> they have already been justified in His sight.<sup>62</sup> The surety of this promise is made clearer through the description of Jesus' position in relation to God on behalf of His people. The question "who is the one who condemns?" is answered through the explanation that Christ, who has already died, was raised, and sits at the right hand of God, is interceding for his people. In this way, Paul is emphasizing that no one is able to condemn believers because they have Christ himself as their intercessor and advocate.<sup>63</sup> Any attempt to slander those whom Jesus died for will be in vain because God is the one who justifies them and Christ is interceding for them.

The triumphant proclamation that Jesus intercedes on behalf of his people leads into the next question: "who will separate us from the love of Christ?" (8:35). Based on the questions in the preceding verses, it would be safe to assume that an emphatic "nobody!" is the answer Paul is looking for. Paul lists several temporal obstacles as possible answers, but the same negative response is expected. Paul presents a list most likely drawn from his own personal experience in order to make the point that he has experienced everything that the world can throw at him to threaten his salvation.<sup>64</sup> Despite these hardships, Paul is ready to claim that none of them is able to separate him from God's love. To support his claim, Paul quotes from Psalm 44 where the psalmist laments the fact that God has abandoned his people to suffering and death. This psalm is cited as proof that God's election does not negate the possibility of difficulties in life; they should instead be expected and seen as proof of God's preservation of his people.<sup>65</sup> Paul

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<sup>61</sup> BDAG, 306.

<sup>62</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 462.

<sup>63</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, Translated by John Owen, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), loc350557-70. Kindle Edition.

<sup>64</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 543; see also 2 Cor. 11:26-27; 12:10.

<sup>65</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 464; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 534.

recognizes that God's people have almost always been persecuted in one way or another, but their numbers continue to grow because God is at work in their midst.

The next statement makes his previous assertions clear as Paul claims that “in all these things we are completely victorious through the one who loves us” (8:37). Despite the constant threat of poverty, suffering, and death, Paul is claiming unprecedented victory because of what Jesus has done through his love for his people. The key word in this section is ὑπερνικάω, a word that is only used here in the New Testament (and never in the Septuagint) and can be translated as “prevail completely”<sup>66</sup> or “to be completely victorious.”<sup>67</sup> It is used in this situation because the normal form, νικάω, might have seemed too weak for Paul in this situation.<sup>68</sup> This claim of “hyper-victory” likely builds on Paul's earlier claim that “all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (8:28).<sup>69</sup> What Paul has in mind is that these difficulties will ultimately serve to increase hope and character in the believers (see 5:3-5) in order that they would be able to glorify God more effectively. Paul is not saying that believers will conquer all opposition through their own force but instead that Jesus will turn all opposition to their benefit through his salvific power.<sup>70</sup>

The surety in Paul's argument is followed by a statement of confidence: “For I have confidence that neither death nor life ... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38, 39). Paul begins with the perfect passive form of the verb πείθω which means that its most likely meaning is “to have (complete) confidence in”<sup>71</sup> or “to attain

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<sup>66</sup> BDAG, 1034.

<sup>67</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 501.

<sup>68</sup> O. Bauernfeind, “νικάω, νίκη, νίκος, ὑπερωικάω,” in *TDNT 4*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 945.

<sup>69</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 544.

<sup>70</sup> Longenecker, *Romans*, 758.

<sup>71</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 376.

certainty in reference to something.”<sup>72</sup> This means that what Paul is saying is true beyond a shadow of a doubt in his mind. The purpose of the list that makes up the majority of these two verses is to drive home the point that there is nothing in the created universe that is able to separate a believer from the love of God, a fact revealed through the last thing listed: “any other created thing.”<sup>73</sup> Although the word ἕτερος can be used to introduce something in a series that is of a different kind from those preceding it, in this case it is much more likely used to conclude the series in a way that encapsulates anything that does not fit the previous categories perfectly.<sup>74</sup> The other main qualifier of this last phrase is the word κτίσις which essentially denotes something “that has been created,”<sup>75</sup> furthering the case that the last part of the list is meant as a way to include all of creation in the list of things that are unable to separate believers from the love of God.<sup>76</sup> Paul appeals to God’s role in salvation as the basis for any sort of assurance in this passage in that his action preserves the status of the believer throughout their existence.

#### Contribution to the Doctrine of Perseverance

Romans 8 places a tremendous amount of emphasis on Jesus’ actions on behalf of his people, and this chapter is often appealed to in discussions regarding perseverance of the saints. The plain meaning of the passage is difficult to avoid. Even those who are not completely in agreement with the doctrine of perseverance cannot help concluding that “Paul’s tone is one of exalted optimism and assurance.”<sup>77</sup> There are two main discussions regarding the implications of Paul’s argument in Romans 8 concerning the doctrine of perseverance: the nature of conquest in

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<sup>72</sup> BDAG, 792

<sup>73</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 463.

<sup>74</sup> Hermann W. Beyer, “ἕτερος,” in TDNT 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 702; Longenecker, *Romans*, 759.

<sup>75</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 514.

<sup>76</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 508.

<sup>77</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 103.

8:37, and the connection between Christ's intercession and the possibility of separation from God in 8:34, 35, and 39.

Robert Shank's argument concerning Romans 8 does not engage the more "obvious" statements concerning perseverance of the saints such as the impossibility of separation from God or the fact that no one can bring an effectual accusation against God's elect. Instead, Shank focuses on 8:37: "But in all these things we are completely victorious through the one who loves us." He argues that certain translations of this passage tend to be too passive while the act of conquering is by necessity active since the verb is in the active voice.<sup>78</sup> His perspective requires that true Christians engage in conquering (as opposed to relying on someone else) in order to persevere.<sup>79</sup> Shank is clearly concerned with motivating a passive church and is therefore emphasizing the need for action in a life that claims to follow Christ, which is an admirable endeavour.

However, Shank appears to place an undue amount of emphasis on a part of the verse that is not emphasized by Paul. According to Shank's view, conquest is achieved solely through a personal action in appropriating the gift of divine grace. The Greek text, on the other hand, seems not to emphasize the active tense of the verb but the prepositional phrase that follows (διὰ τοῦ ἀγαπήσαντος ἡμᾶς: *through the one who loves us*). This phrase is the foundation for confidence in future conquest because it places the responsibility on God and God alone.<sup>80</sup> Paul is calling for confidence in his audience in order that they may endure whatever comes against them, not because of their own strength but based on the work of God that is already completed. Since God has already acted on their behalf in salvation, he will surely cause them to be more

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<sup>78</sup> Shank, *Life in the Son*, 209.

<sup>79</sup> Shank, *Life in the Son*, 210.

<sup>80</sup> Longenecker, *Romans*, 758.

than conquerors in the face of trials and tribulations (8:35). Romans 8:37 (“we are completely victorious *through the one who loves us*”) is an appeal to divine preservation, and to a lesser extent a call to action in response to the confidence that the elect can have in God.

Another point of interest concerns Christ’s intercession and its connection to the affirmation that separation from the love of God is impossible. G. C. Berkouwer claims Jesus’ intercession “accompanies our weaknesses, our dangers, our sinful tendencies, and even our sinful activities. All confidence in self falls away when we look to [him].”<sup>81</sup> Since Jesus is interceding on behalf of his elect (8:34), it follows that there can be no condemnation for them either present or future. According to this view, the Christian can walk confidently towards the final judgment because he knows that Christ is interceding for him. As Millard J. Erickson says, “Like a student who is thoroughly prepared for an examination, the Christian regards the last judgment, not with apprehensiveness, but with an anticipation, knowing that the result will be positive.”<sup>82</sup>

Christ’s intercession on behalf of his elect reflects the idea that he is actively preserving and protecting them until the end. Wayne Grudem concludes that Paul is “saying that Jesus continually lives in the presence of God to make specific requests and to bring petitions before God on our behalf.”<sup>83</sup> Augustus Strong describes Christ’s intercession on the behalf of the elect as “a special activity of Christ in securing, upon the ground of that sacrifice, whatever blessing comes to men, whether that blessing be temporal or spiritual.”<sup>84</sup> This conclusion is drawn from an examination of the structure of Romans 8:31-39. The opening verses (8:31-34) function as a known premise as Paul describes the current situation for all believers and concludes with the

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<sup>81</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 138.

<sup>82</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 926.

<sup>83</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 627.

<sup>84</sup> Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1907), 774.

fact that Jesus is interceding for his people at the right hand of God (8:34). The affirmation of Christ's intercession is foundational to what Paul moves into next: the impossibility of his audience's separation from God (8:35, 38-39). Christ is described as having acted mightily on behalf of his people through love; therefore, there is nothing imaginable that can separate them from him.

### Conclusion

Romans 8:31-39 is a passage that is appropriately mentioned in nearly every discussion on perseverance of the saints and is usually recognized as making an argument for continued assurance of salvation in the life of the believer based on the faithfulness of God. Paul's argument hinges on the love of God for his people being stronger than anything in creation that might pull them away from him, rendering loss of salvation as impossible. The status of believers' righteousness before God "depends entirely on divine love"<sup>85</sup> and therefore will never be lost or forsaken. This passage, especially when combined with John 10:22-30, creates a compelling argument for denying the possibility of apostasy in genuinely regenerate believers. However, the understanding of these passages must be weighed appropriately against others that appear to say the opposite: genuine followers of Jesus Christ must be continually on guard against apostasy lest they find themselves counted among the faithless. In the following chapters, I will address Hebrews 6, James 5, and 2 Peter 2, which appear to affirm the opposite conclusion as that just noted in John 10 and Romans 8.

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<sup>85</sup> Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 554.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Hebrews 6:4-12**

The epistle to the Hebrews has often held a contentious position in the history of the church, mainly because the author is unknown and its authority has been questioned. Its style features alternating blocks of exposition and exhortation and may have originally been a homily preached to an early church gathering. When one is considering the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, Hebrews is included in the conversation because of its sixth chapter, which appears to affirm the idea that truly regenerate believers are able to fall away from their faith. Those arguing in favour of the doctrine of perseverance have two main responses to this apparent affirmation: either Hebrews 6 does not describe true Christians or it describes a hypothetical rather than actual situation. In the following chapter, I will exposit the Greek text of Hebrews 6:4-12 before engaging with these doctrinal arguments.

#### **Literary Context**

The epistle to the Hebrews begins with a series of Old Testament quotations that the author uses to show that there has been a new revelation in salvation history because God has chosen to speak to his people through his Son, Jesus (1:1-2). This initial exposition concerning the supremacy of Jesus is immediately followed by an exhortation to “pay much closer attention to

what we have heard, lest we drift away from it” (2:1). The author then moves into a discussion about how it was fitting for the “founder of their salvation” to be made “perfect through suffering” (2:10) and an explanation for Jesus being worthy of greater honour than Moses (3:1-6). This proclamation is followed by another warning as the author quotes from Psalm 95, which recalls Israel’s rebellion in the wilderness and implores those listening to learn from their nation’s past mistakes (3:7-11). He follows the quotation with an exhortation: “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God” (3:12). The author uses the example of the wilderness generation to warn his audience of the possibility of apostasy because those who died in the wilderness had witnessed the liberation of Israel from Egypt through the mighty acts of God but chose to rebel against him anyway.

God promised his people rest in the land, but they were never given full rest because of their disobedience (4:6); the author then exhorts the recipients of the letter to “strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience” (4:11). The striving that the author calls his recipients to is always augmented by the work of the newly revealed high priest: Jesus Christ. Since as high priest Jesus knows human frailty, he is able to sympathize with and assist his people in striving after God, but because he is perfect he does not need to offer sacrifices on his own behalf; he may focus his priestly efforts on his people (4:15). The author then mentions the priesthood of Melchizedek but quickly turns to another exhortation because of the lack of spiritual progress in the congregation. He points out that they are more suited for introductory matters instead of more advanced teachings (5:10-14). Despite the claim that his audience is not ready for elementary doctrines, the author declares that he will nevertheless move on to a more



mature discussion. Before he does this, however, he will again exhort them to avoid apostasy at all costs.

### Exposition<sup>86</sup>

Hebrews 6:4-6 contains a series of participial phrases describing in detail those for whom it is impossible to be restored to repentance after they have fallen away. The author describes them as “once enlightened, tasting the heavenly gift, being a companion/sharer in/of the Holy Spirit, and having tasted the goodness of God’s word and the powers of the coming age.” Despite these glowing descriptors, they are also said to have “fallen away.” Their restoration is deemed impossible because in their rejection of Christ they are essentially crucifying him again and exposing him to public ridicule.

The author begins with a statement that brackets the bulk of the description: “it is impossible ... to restore (them) again to repentance” (6:4, 6). The word translated as “impossible” is ἀδύνατον and carries two meanings: incapable<sup>87</sup> and impossible.<sup>88</sup> The latter meaning should be emphasized for this context because of the warning nature of the passage and the author’s use of the same word elsewhere in the epistle to describe impossible situations (6:18; 10:4; 11:6).<sup>89</sup> The sentence itself is structured in such a way that whatever is impossible is not known until the conclusion of the statement, after the series of participial phrases which serve to emphasize that it is impossible to restore apostates.<sup>90</sup> The main verb in the conclusion (ἀνακαινίζω) is typically translated as “renew” or “restore” and it has the added meaning “to

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<sup>86</sup> For the author’s translation of Hebrews 6:4-12, see Appendix C.

<sup>87</sup> BDAG, 22; Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 678,

<sup>88</sup> BDAG, 22; Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 669.

<sup>89</sup> Kevin L. Anderson, *Hebrews: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 201), 187; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 318-9; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 135.

<sup>90</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 157.

cause a change to a previous, preferable state.”<sup>91</sup> The use of this verb is telling in that it implies that the previous state of those being described is much better than their current state, but also that they were previously in a true state of repentance. Their former condition is impossible to restore.

The former condition of those described in this exhortatory passage can be drawn from the content in the middle of the two phrases discussed above concerning the impossibility of restoration. The first of this series of participial descriptions is that they “were once enlightened” (6:4b). There is some discussion concerning the nature of the Greek word ἅπαξ (“once”) and whether it applies only to the first participle or to all of them. Since all of these short phrases work together to illustrate the former condition of an apostate, it seems likely that the ἅπαξ encompasses the entire section instead of merely referring to the first,<sup>92</sup> which is the verb φωτίζω. Φωτίζω can be used in either the literal sense of “to function as a source of light”<sup>93</sup> or the figurative sense “to cause something to be fully known by revealing clearly and in some detail,”<sup>94</sup> or when it is used in the passive voice (like here) it means for something to have been fully revealed to someone (note its use in 10:32). The exact meaning of their previous enlightenment has been speculated over ever since Justin Martyr identified enlightenment with baptism.<sup>95</sup> Although this interpretation has some historical precedent, other uses of the word throughout the New Testament support its meaning as a description of “those who have come out of darkness into the light and so have gone through the necessary conversion of the imagination

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<sup>91</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 157; Muraoka, *Lexicon*, 40.

<sup>92</sup> Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 319; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1991), 141.

<sup>93</sup> BDAG, 1074.

<sup>94</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 338-9.

<sup>95</sup> George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), 106; Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 269.

and intellect.”<sup>96</sup> This means that the first phrase is likely referring to the idea of genuine regeneration. The theological ramifications of this interpretation will be discussed below.

The second participial phrase in this description is “who have tasted the heavenly gift” (6:4c). The main issue in this phrase is the meaning of the verb γεύομαι, which is translated as “taste.” This verb can mean either to taste/eat something<sup>97</sup> or “to experience something cognitively or emotionally.”<sup>98</sup> Although it is possible for the idea of “tasting” something to refer to a very small and literal taste, it seems more likely to be a reference to a legitimate experience based on the same word being used earlier in Hebrews to describe Christ’s death (2:9).<sup>99</sup> Gareth Cockerill describes this verb choice as “[demonstrating] that those described have not just been taught about these realities but have truly experienced them.”<sup>100</sup> Of course, something should be said about the heavenly gift that they have tasted. Although the details are not clear in the passage itself, the heavenly gift most likely refers to “a general image for the gracious bestowal of salvation, with all that entails – the [Spirit], forgiveness, and sanctification.”<sup>101</sup> If this is accurate, it is more likely that the author of Hebrews is discussing the possibility of genuine apostasy.

The third participial description in this passage is that they “were made a companion of the Holy Spirit” (6:4d). There are two Greek words worth noting briefly in this phrase: γίνομαι and μέτοχος. Γίνομαι is a common “being” verb so its meaning is very similar to εἶμι, but it

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<sup>96</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James and Jude* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 212; see also Jn. 1:9, 2 Cor. 4:4-6, Eph. 1:18, 2 Tim. 1:10, and 1 Pet. 2:9.

<sup>97</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 249, 284.

<sup>98</sup> BDAG, 195.

<sup>99</sup> Anderson, *Hebrews*, 188; Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies*, 212.

<sup>100</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 270.

<sup>101</sup> Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 170; Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 141.

usually carries the implication that what is being described is in a different state from before; it usually denotes a change in status or being.<sup>102</sup> The use of γίνομαι instead of εἰμί could reveal that there was a true change in status or understanding for those described in that they *became* companions of the Holy Spirit. For example, the author uses γίνομαι as “become” in 5:9 and 11:7. The first describes Jesus in his high priestly role as becoming “the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him,” (5:9) demonstrating a new understanding for those who obey Christ as Jesus becomes their high priest. The second describes Noah becoming “an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith,” showing that Noah underwent a change in status through his faith. The other notable word, μέτοχος (companion, partner), is used two other times in Hebrews in the context of a group participating “in a heavenly calling” and “in Christ” (3:1, 14). The use of this word in 6:4d shows that those being described are true Christians, having become companions of the Holy Spirit. Their relationship with the Holy Spirit proves as much based on the author’s earlier assertion that participating “in the Holy Spirit is the hallmark of being a Christian.”<sup>103</sup>

The fourth participial phrase describes the apostates as having “tasted the goodness of God’s word and the powers of the coming age” (6:5). Similar to the previous phrase that used the participial form of γεύομαι, the repeated use of the verb here should also be taken as experience instead of merely sampling the nouns that follow. What is tasted, “the goodness of God’s word,” may refer to Old Testament stories of God’s promises being fulfilled. Joshua 23:14-15 refers to the conquest of Canaan as God’s good word being fulfilled, while Jeremiah 29:10 and 33:14 utilize the language of promise in order to give hope to Judah in exile.<sup>104</sup> Psalm 34 presents a

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<sup>102</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 150; BDAG, 198.

<sup>103</sup> Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies*, 212. See also Heb. 2:4.

<sup>104</sup> Buchanan, *Hebrews*, 106-7.

phrase that is most similar to that used by the author of Hebrews when it exhorts to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8), further demonstrating Old Testament precedent for the idea conveyed here. The audience of Hebrews had already experienced God’s faithfulness and could therefore trust in his long-term promises as well. In mentioning that they have experienced “the powers of the coming age” the author is possibly connecting this description to his earlier description of God as bearing “witness by signs and wonders and various miracles” (2:4).<sup>105</sup> At the very least, the description presented in 6:5 points to participation in spiritual events that are usually reserved for the final consummation of the heavenly kingdom, pointing toward a fuller description of people who have had a genuine conversion experience.

The last participial phrase is the one that causes much controversy, as it creates contrast with the previous phrases by claiming that they have “fallen away” (6:6a). The verb used is *παραπίπτω*, which denotes “[abandoning] a former relationship or association”<sup>106</sup> or “[failing] to follow through on a commitment.”<sup>107</sup> This word conveys a conscious choice to dissociate with former companions. Instead of speaking of falling away as “accidentally or carelessly falling down,” the author describes it “in the sense of deliberately stepping into a black hole.”<sup>108</sup> When taken alongside the previous descriptions of a seemingly legitimate regenerate member of the Christian community, this is a drastic decision. They have experienced true spiritual life, but similarly to the wilderness generation in Exodus, they have knowingly rejected God (note 3:7-11, which cites Psalm 95:7-11). Israel’s example reveals the reason why the author claims that it

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<sup>105</sup> Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 159.

<sup>106</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 449.

<sup>107</sup> BDAG, 770.

<sup>108</sup> Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies*, 214.

is impossible to restore them: “the willful sin which [they have] in mind is deliberate apostasy.”<sup>109</sup> They cannot be restored.

Following the statement that they cannot be restored, the author explains why this is the case: “they are crucifying again the Son of God to themselves and are exposing him to public ridicule” (6:6c). The author uses the word ἀνασταυρόω here, which may simply mean “to crucify” (same meaning as σταυρόω) but in this context may mean “to crucify again.”<sup>110</sup> The key to interpreting the use of this word in this context involves the word that directly follows: παραδειγματίζω. This verb means “to cause someone to suffer public disgrace,”<sup>111</sup> a necessary aspect of crucifixion. The apostates described have unequivocally decided to sever “their relationship with the Son of God,”<sup>112</sup> revealing a hardened heart against God’s grace. Hebrews 6:4-6 seems to present a description of a true Christian who has rejected the teachings of Christ; the author appears concerned that the audience has begun to be sluggish in their own faith (note 5:11). The audience has not yet become wilful dissenters, but they are told that if they continue down the path described they will not be able to return.

The author then uses an agricultural analogy to emphasize his point in 6:7-8 (“for the land drinking the rain ... shares in the blessing from God; but producing thorns and thistles ... its purpose is burning”). There is some notable discussion concerning the identity of the land described because the author may be describing one plot of land or two. The latter position seems to be influenced by the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4 and claims that the fruitful land represents the true believer while the desolate land represents one of the three other soils Jesus

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<sup>109</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 149.

<sup>110</sup> BDAG, 72; Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 237.

<sup>111</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 311.

<sup>112</sup> Anderson, *Hebrews*, 191.

describes.<sup>113</sup> However, the former possibility is much more likely: the author is describing two possibilities for one piece of land, possibly drawing on the vineyard passage in Isaiah 5.

Isaiah 5:1-7 describes Judah as a vineyard planted by God that will only bear wild fruit. It is subsequently judged and has its divine protection removed. This comparison is not precisely the same as Hebrews 6:7-8, but the principle that God's people should produce what God expects of them is similar enough to warrant at least some continuity (see also Luke 13:6-9). In Hebrews, the one piece of land represents the potential apostate in that it has drunk the rain of God's blessing and will either produce a fruitful crop or not. The apostate will not be suffered lightly as the unfruitful land is described as "worthless and on the verge of being cursed, its end is burning" (6:8). This image builds on the previous description of the fate of apostates because it reveals that those who have received God's grace and yet refuse to produce fruit deserve judgement from God.<sup>114</sup> There is a line of thought that claims that the burning of a field may be intended to restore it by destroying weeds and other detriments to agriculture, but the language used by the author of Hebrews is clearly punishment from God.<sup>115</sup>

Following this grim description, the author of Hebrews shifts into a section of encouragement as he tells them that "we have been persuaded concerning you, beloved, if we speak in this way, that you have better things approaching salvation" (6:9). The first word used in this sentence is *πείθω*, a word that is used here in the perfect aspect and passive voice. This means that the meaning of the verb is akin to "[believing] in something or someone to the extent of placing reliance or trust in or on."<sup>116</sup> The author is assuring his audience that although apostasy is a real possibility, he does not believe that this is their fate. He softens the reality of

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<sup>113</sup> Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 165.

<sup>114</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 278.

<sup>115</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 173.

<sup>116</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 376.

the previous warning by calling his audience “beloved” for the only time in the epistle, a word that functions as “a term of endearment” but also as “an affirmation of their unity with the [author] as part of God’s people.”<sup>117</sup> Despite the bleak picture of the fate of apostates in 6:4-8, the author is seeking to convince his audience that they can rest assured that the description will not apply to them.

The reason for this assurance is given in the next verse: “For God is not unjust to neglect your work and the love that you show in his name, having served the saints and continuing to serve” (6:10). The former belief and action of the audience is offered as sufficient proof for their continued perseverance because God will not forget them. It is likely that the author had particular instances of their past faithfulness and good works in mind based on 10:32-34,<sup>118</sup> where he describes their “former days” where they suffered many trials and assisted less fortunate members in their community after their “enlightenment.” The audience has been known to act in such a way that their conversion was recognized by God, but this is only secondary proof for their continued salvation. The primary evidence is the author’s knowledge of God’s character.<sup>119</sup> The point being made is that God will remain faithful to those he has previously enlightened since the author appeals to the previous state of the audience and their ability to persevere through many trials and hardships. Past examples of God’s promises to those who do his will (10:37) should serve to embolden his people in the present. Since the audience has shown that they were capable of doing godly work through love, God will surely remember them in the future. This reminder of their past likely serves a double purpose: reminding them of their previous state of faithful endurance as well as of God’s past faithfulness.

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<sup>117</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 280.

<sup>118</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 144.

<sup>119</sup> Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies*, 220.



The last two verses of this section consist of another exhortation in order to spur the audience on to being “imitators of those who receive the promises through faith and patience” (6:12). The phrase “those who receive the promises” is notable in that faith and patience are indicative of Abraham (who is brought into the discussion in the following section) but may also include all of the departed faithful listed in ch. 11,<sup>120</sup> which further ties this section into the larger context of the epistle. The author is attempting to motivate his audience to faithful action through imitation of the example of Jesus, the perfect high priest. The Christian life is not simply concerned with intellectually *knowing* the truth, but with “[translating] Christian conviction into action that will express the quality of hope that distinguishes the Church from other contemporary clubs and societies.”<sup>121</sup> The author is concerned with the church’s witness in a polytheistic world and is trying to demonstrate that “above all, fidelity to the God who promises salvation”<sup>122</sup> is important. Fidelity to God is shown through patiently and joyfully enduring difficult times as well as having compassion on others who are suffering (10:32-34).

#### Contribution to the Doctrine of Perseverance

Hebrews 6:4-12 is often cited as a proof against the doctrine of perseverance of the saints. Verses 4-6 are particularly important because the nature of the warning is debated through questioning the salvation of the person described. One side asserts that the author is not describing a true Christian<sup>123</sup> or that the author is merely engaging in a rhetorical device meant to convince the recipients to faithful action. The other side claims that Hebrews 6:4-12 is an example of the Bible affirming that genuine apostasy is possible not just for nominal “believers” but for the truly

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<sup>120</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 283.

<sup>121</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 144.

<sup>122</sup> Attridge, *Hebrews*, 176.

<sup>123</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 289.

regenerate as well. This specific theological discussion will form the content for the rest of this chapter.

Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* provides an example of how those supporting the doctrine will interpret Hebrews 6:6-4 as he goes through his reasoning for why the author of Hebrews is not describing genuine believers. Some of the key words that he discusses include φωτίζω ("enlighten"), and γεύομαι ("taste"), but he focuses on the word for "repentance" while not mentioning ἀνακατανίζω ("restore"), which is arguably more relevant to the discussion. Concerning "enlighten," Grudem states that it "simply means that they came to understand the truths of the gospel, not that they responded to those truths with genuine saving faith."<sup>124</sup> However, later in the epistle the same word is used to describe the audience in their earlier days: "after you were enlightened [φωτισθέντες], you endured a hard struggle with sufferings," (10:32). The enlightening described in ch. 10 resulted in actions as drastic as "joyfully [accepting] the plundering of [their] property" because they "had a better possession and an abiding one," namely Christ (10:34). It does not stand to reason that the author would use "enlighten" here in reference to a very real and life-changing conversion if he had previously used it to describe something that was disingenuous. Both uses of the verb should be understood consistently. It is likely that if only a cursory understanding of the faith was meant by the author, then it would not be fitting for an assembly who remained faithful during persecution and difficulty.<sup>125</sup>

Grudem argues that the "taste" described in Hebrews 6:4-5 "is temporary and one might or might not decide to accept the thing that is tasted."<sup>126</sup> He also notes that there is a figurative

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<sup>124</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 796.

<sup>125</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 142.

<sup>126</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 797.

sense to the word. Grudem determines that “they came to understand it and have some experience of spiritual power,”<sup>127</sup> but he decides that their “experience” was not indicative of regeneration. A significant problem with Grudem’s view is the author’s use of the same word to describe Christ’s death in 2:9: “so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” The author’s use of the same word to describe Christ’s death should be indicative of the meaning intended by the word because Christ fully experienced death on behalf of everyone; Jesus did not partially die only to decide that continuing to live would be better.<sup>128</sup> It is possible to interpret Christ’s “tasting” death in light of the resurrection in that he experienced it for a short time, but this unduly brings an unnecessary point into the immediate context of 2:9. The point of the passage is that Jesus suffered in the flesh in order to “become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (2:17) through the blood shed during his death. Since the verb “tasted” is used here to describe the experience of Jesus on behalf of his people, it is likely that the author of Hebrews also uses it to describe people who have genuinely experienced “the heavenly gift.”

Grudem mentions that the texts says “it is impossible ‘to restore again to *repentance*’ people who have experienced these things and have then committed apostasy.”<sup>129</sup> He explains that the use of repentance here “does not need to refer to inward heart repentance unto salvation” but that it may simply refer to a temporary change of mind.<sup>130</sup> This interpretation places emphasis on one word to the detriment of another: “restore.” As stated above, the meaning of the word itself implies bringing something back to a previously attained and better state, so this statement is saying that their previous state of “repentance” was preferable to their current one.

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<sup>127</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 797.

<sup>128</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 142.

<sup>129</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 798. Italics original.

<sup>130</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 798-9.

But how much better off could they be if they were not truly repentant? Grudem's analysis of the passage exemplifies the biases of a system that separates the parts of a passage instead of understanding them as a whole. Each of these phrases is meant to stand together to create "a composite picture" of a Christian.<sup>131</sup> The author of Hebrews clearly has genuine believers in mind during this discussion of apostasy.

Despite the fact that the author of Hebrews is describing genuine Christians in 6:4-6, the argument is occasionally made that he is simply describing a purely hypothetical situation in order to convince his audience to be more faithful Christians. Hebrews 6:9 is claimed to hold interpretive authority; it states that although apostasy was just described in 6:4-6 the author does not think that apostasy is a possible fate for his audience.<sup>132</sup> Unfortunately, the text itself does not give an indication that this is the case.<sup>133</sup> If the author does not believe that Christians can become apostates, then according to this theory he is essentially trying to scare them into becoming mature. The author creates a distinction between the apostates and his audience in his use of pronouns; during the description of the apostates, the author uses impersonal third-person language and shifts to more personal second-person language during the more comforting part.<sup>134</sup> The reason for this could be because he wants to separate his audience from the real possibility of apostasy while also identifying them with perseverance. It seems very unlikely that the author has a *purely* hypothetical situation in mind (in the sense that it is hypothetical in the case of the audience in particular but not overall) because the argument would lose its rhetorical force.

It is possible that the greatest appeal from the passage to support perseverance of the saints is 6:10 because it explains the reason for the author's confidence in the continued

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<sup>131</sup> Anderson, *Hebrews*, 189.

<sup>132</sup> Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 885; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 921.

<sup>133</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 146; Shank, *Life in the Son*, 177.

<sup>134</sup> Shank, *Life in the Son*, 177-8.

faithfulness for his audience: God's just character. Erickson mentions this verse in his systematic theology, but he only discusses it with reference to the audience's "past work and love" in order to prove that they will ultimately not fall away.<sup>135</sup> As mentioned above, the primary reason for the author's assurance that his audience will not ultimately fall away is rooted in God's character: "he is not unjust" (6:10). Continuing in salvation is based on God's faithfulness to his people, not their own works or effort in persevering, at least that is why the author is so convinced that his audience will not fall away.

### Conclusion

There is something mysterious going on in Hebrews 6 that cannot be easily resolved. The author warns his audience that if they fall away from the faith there will be no opportunity for them to return. However, after this stern warning, the author then declares that he is not worried about this possibility for them in particular because of God's justice and his remembrance of their past works for his name. The appeal in 6:9-10 seems to imply that there is a universal precedent for trusting that God will continue to sustain those who have already demonstrated faith in him, but it does not negate the legitimacy of the warning given earlier. Hebrews 6:4-12 encapsulates the mysterious nature of the perseverance of the saints in that it affirms God preserving his people because of his character and faithfulness, but it also recognizes the requirement for his people to become "imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (6:12).

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<sup>135</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 921.

## **Chapter 4**

### **James 5:19-20**

The book of James holds an interesting place in the history of the Bible because its canonicity has been questioned due to its emphasis on works. The structure of the book has segments dealing with varying materials in an almost circular fashion; themes are very nearly alternated throughout the epistle. Concerning the discussion pertaining to perseverance of the saints, the last two verses of the letter are relevant to the present discussion despite not appearing to flow from its immediate literary context. Nevertheless, a brief examination of the literary context will be necessary before the specific details of the relevant passage, James 5:19-20, is examined and the theological contributions explained.

#### **Literary Context**

The book of James begins with a series of short sections that appear to be dealing with multiple topics that include endurance during trials and persecution (1:2-4, 12-15), seeking godly wisdom (1:5-8), and the importance of action in response to knowing God's commands (1:19-27). Then James explains to his readers that the church is to avoid showing partiality based on worldly affluence (2:1-13) before returning to the idea that true faith in God is shown through faithful works (2:14-26). Chapter 3 begins with a section on the importance of restraining the destructive

tendencies of the human tongue (3:1-12), which may be an expansion of 1:19-20: “Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, *slow to speak, slow to anger*; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” The remaining verses of chapter 3 continue the theme of wisdom by comparing “wisdom from above” with wisdom that is “earthly, spiritual, [and] demonic” (3:13-18).

James 4 opens with a section encouraging the recipients to forsake friendship with the world in favour of friendship and brotherhood with each other (4:1-12). The idea that his audience is beginning to subtly embrace worldliness is likely an expansion on the exhortation to avoid partiality because of the world’s tendencies to place value on possessions and affluence instead of on more important things. Chapter 4 concludes with a short section on boasting about what the future will look like. In this section, James emphasizes the fragility of human life (4:13-17), possibly expanding on 1:10: “because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.” This reference to 1:10 is actually picked up in more detail in chapter 5 where James describes the futility of striving after temporal riches because they are easily destroyed (5:1-6). The next section describes the value of suffering (see 1:2-4, 12-15) and God’s faithfulness in remembering those who suffer for his sake (5:7-11). The theme of suffering is also foundational for the last large section of the letter (5:13-18) where James encourages confession and prayer as a remedy for bodily illnesses as he notes the power that can be imbued through the prayer of a righteous man (citing Elijah causing a drought). It is difficult to locate James 5:19-20 in the context of what comes before the command, since it seems to be disconnected from its context. However, in considering the bigger themes in James, the last section may be connected to faithful action as a response to genuine belief (2:14-26) in God in that a living faith will seek to restore wandering believers.

## Exposition<sup>136</sup>

James begins 5:19-20, these final two verses (or final statement, since they make up one sentence), by addressing his audience as “brothers” (ἀδελφοί). In doing so, he signifies his connection with them, as well as identifying his audience as “siblings in the family of God.”<sup>137</sup> After this reminder and comforting address, he moves into a conditional statement marked by the use of the particle εἰάν.<sup>138</sup> Since this particle is combined with the use of the subjunctive mood of πλανάω (πλανηθῇ), it is most likely within the third class of conditional statements.<sup>139</sup> Although the subjunctive is sometimes used to note varying levels of possibility, this possibility is determined by the context more than the mood of the verb itself.<sup>140</sup> Since James seems to be mainly concerned with practicality, it seems unlikely that he would present a purely hypothetical situation to exhort his audience. So, unless there is concrete evidence from the text itself that this condition is meant to be hypothetical, it should be seen as a legitimate possibility.

James’ warning to his audience is defined by the verb πλανάω, which may be translated as being led astray because it is used in the passive voice. The active voice of the verb usually conveys the act of influencing someone else in order to cause them to wander (“to cause to go astray from the specific way”<sup>141</sup>). Since it is used in the passive here, it seems as though James is envisioning a situation where an exterior threat is influencing his audience; however, his

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<sup>136</sup> For the author’s translation of James 5:19-20, see Appendix D.

<sup>137</sup> Dan G. McCartney, *James*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 262.

<sup>138</sup> Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 453; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 337.

<sup>139</sup> Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 239; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: an Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 696.

<sup>140</sup> Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 165.

<sup>141</sup> BDAG, 821; see also Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 366-7.



exhortation does not mention what this exterior threat is. Instead James focuses on the role of the congregation in bringing the wanderer back into the fold.

In the situation that James describes someone is understood to have brought the wanderer back, an action described by the verb ἐπιστρέφω (ἐπιστρέψη). In the context described by James (someone being led astray from the truth), the most likely meaning for ἐπιστρέφω is “to return to a point where one has been.”<sup>142</sup> This meaning is most likely since it appears James has in mind the restoration to a former state. James is writing this in order to show that the community has a responsibility to its members; if someone falls, there should be someone else ready to pick that person up.<sup>143</sup> It is important to note that the two verbs used are understood in the context of each other because this scenario seems to require a wandering *and* a restoration. The reality of the wandering is described in the second half of the statement: 5:20.

The opening verb in 5:20 is the third person imperative γινώσκέτω, meaning that it is a command for someone to know what follows in the sentence. The nearest referent in the previous clause would be the person who corrects the wandering brother, meaning that the following information is for those who have remained faithful to the church. Once again, the verb ἐπιστρέφω is used to describe the action that James expects from his audience, although in this context it is a participle instead of a subjunctive. In this case it is functioning as the nominative of the clause and the subject for the main verbs σώσει and καλύψει: “the one who turns ... saves ... and covers ....”

Although σώζω can be used to convey “rescue from natural disasters”<sup>144</sup> and “[causing] someone to become well again after being sick,”<sup>145</sup> here it is most likely used in the sense of

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<sup>142</sup> BDAG, 382; Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 194.

<sup>143</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *James*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 189.

<sup>144</sup> BDAG, 982.

“[causing] someone to experience divine salvation.”<sup>146</sup> This conclusion is reached through the phrasing that immediately follows in that the sinner is saved from death (ἐκ θανάτου). This statement is joined with what follows with a καὶ, meaning that both of the indicative verbs have the same subject. The second indicative verb is καλύπτω and can mean “to cause something to be covered over and hence not visible”<sup>147</sup> or “to cause something not to be known.”<sup>148</sup> In this case, the object that is being covered is “a multitude of sins,” which likely means that James is conveying the idea of forgiveness instead of a superficial covering.

### Theological Contributions

James 5:19-20 is not mentioned as often as the other passages in discussions surrounding perseverance of the saints. Perhaps theologians do not view it as particularly relevant to the debate. However, the plain meaning of the text appears to describe a situation where a member of the believing community has wandered away into apostasy. It is necessary to engage with it alongside the other passages because it adds some nuance to the discussion. James’ concern does not appear to be the possibility of apostasy, but rather the church’s requirement to bring wanderers back.

Marshall explains that the purpose of the final section of James is in reference to situations where “men sin and do not bother to seek forgiveness by confession of their sin,” supported by James’ exhortation to confession in 5:16.<sup>149</sup> Marshall appears to consider that those in question are backsliders and also notes the responsibility of the congregation in that they

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<sup>145</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 269.

<sup>146</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 242; see also the second definition in BDAG, 982.

<sup>147</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 705.

<sup>148</sup> BDAG, 505; Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 345.

<sup>149</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 160.

“have the duty of seeking to save him from condemnation.”<sup>150</sup> The backsliding believer is in real danger in that if they continue in their wandering ways they will be subject to death. However, Marshall also draws attention to the fact that the emphasis is not placed on the exact situation of the one who has wandered but is instead on the results of the action of bringing them back.<sup>151</sup> James’ concern was not to define the situation of the wandering believer *precisely* because he was more focused on the goal of bringing them back into the community of believers.

It should be clear that James does not indicate that there have been situations where apostasy has already occurred. Instead, he is dealing with the possibility.<sup>152</sup> James’ use of the word for “wander” plays into the discussion here because if he meant something a little stronger then he would have used something like “disowned.”<sup>153</sup> At the very least, James is describing a public falling away instead of “merely a private change of theology or thought.”<sup>154</sup> Blomberg and Kamell claim that the passage does not really settle the debate on one side or the other but is perhaps left purposefully ambiguous. Instead, James focuses on a call to action: bring the wanderer back to the community, whether they are apostates or backsliders.<sup>155</sup> In that way, James is truly concerned with the saving of souls.

In his discussion of James 5:19-20, Peter H. Davids makes the following observations. The letter of James has been written in order to correct wanderings taking place in the community of believers, so this final exhortation to restore wandering brothers sums up the

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<sup>150</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 160.

<sup>151</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 160.

<sup>152</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 248.

<sup>153</sup> Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 248.

<sup>154</sup> Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 248.

<sup>155</sup> Blomberg and Kamell, *James*, 253.

letter.<sup>156</sup> He also claims that James is reminding his audience that “the one who brings an erring brother or sister to repentance delivers them from total death – total death that would happen at the final judgment if they did not repent.”<sup>157</sup> The idea that James 5 is describing true spiritual death is supported by Augustus Strong who says that “‘death’ is frequently used in Scripture in a moral and spiritual sense, as denoting absence of that which constitutes the true life of the soul, namely, the presence and favor of God.”<sup>158</sup> Therefore, it seems clear that apostasy is possible if James is concerned with bringing wandering brothers back in order to keep them from death. Davids also notes that this may result in an uncomfortable realization that there are people in the community of believers who are in real danger, but this fits within James’ main concern to exhort the community to truly faithful living.<sup>159</sup>

### Conclusion

Although James 5 is only mentioned in a handful of theological contexts that engage with the doctrine of perseverance of the saints, it still addresses a situation where a genuine member of the believing community has wandered from the truth. Admittedly, the language used by James is not as forceful as other warnings, but his main concern is not to describe all of the details of the apostate’s condition. He is more concerned with saving the soul of the wandering believer because he recognizes that they are at risk of spiritual death.

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<sup>156</sup> Peter H. Davids, *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 70.

<sup>157</sup> Davids, *A Theology of James, Peter, and Jude*., 71.

<sup>158</sup> Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 659.

<sup>159</sup> Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 85.

## **Chapter 5**

### **2 Peter 2:20-22**

Peter's second letter is relatively short, but it contains an important theme in that it stresses the need for true knowledge of God. This knowledge will lead to surety in one's own calling and election and protect believers against false teachers. Peter's exhortation to this effect is made certain by his eyewitness accounts of Jesus (1:16). For the present discussion of perseverance of the saints, 2 Peter 2:20-22 is of particular interest because it appears to describe a situation where truly regenerate believers are in a nearly hopeless state after being entangled by what they had previously escaped: worldly defilements. This chapter will briefly examine these three verses and discuss their relevance to the larger discussion of the doctrine in question.

#### **Literary Context**

2 Peter begins with a greeting and salutation that is similar to those in other biblical epistles. The first main section of the letter contains an encouragement for the audience to grow in godly virtues so that they would become more effective in their knowledge of God (1:5-9). Peter also encourages his audience through the following promise: "if you practice these qualities you will never fall" (1:10). Peter then reveals his intention to continually remind his audience of godly qualities they should aspire to have so that they might remember his teaching after his death

(1:12-15). Peter's reason for highlighting his teaching like this is that he was an eyewitness of the majesty of Jesus Christ (1:16). His teaching has authority because of his experience with Jesus, just as the prophets' authority came from the work of the Holy Spirit through them (1:21).

Chapter 2 introduces the idea of false teachers who are attempting to lead the people astray, just like false prophets in the Old Testament (2:1). Peter then encourages his audience through listing a series of examples where God punished the wicked while sparing the righteous (2:4-9), including the stories of Noah and Lot. Peter then goes on to describe the foolishness of the false teachers as they “do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones” (2:10) and “count it pleasure to revel in the daytime” (2:13). These men are also described as having “gone astray” (2:15), which serves to clarify this passage's inclusion in a discussion on perseverance of the saints. Peter also describes them as “waterless springs and mists driven by a storm” (2:17), further cementing his view that their teachings are ultimately fruitless; they are unable to fulfill the promises that they made to those they have led astray, possibly leading to their destruction as well.

### Exposition<sup>160</sup>

For the sake of brevity, only the most important words and phrases will be dealt with in the expositional section. First, the people being discussed have at one time “escaped the defilements of the world.” The verb used here is ἀποφυγόντες and is a nominative participle and can be simply translated as “escape (from).”<sup>161</sup> Peter uses this verb two other times in this letter (see also 1:4 and 2:18) to describe salvation, and it is likely that he is using the same meaning here.<sup>162</sup> What they have escaped from is described using the word μιάσματα, which can be “a state of

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<sup>160</sup> For the author's translation of 2 Peter 2:20-22, see Appendix E.

<sup>161</sup> BDAG, 125.

<sup>162</sup> Gene L. Green, *Jude & 2 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 300.

mind being tainted or stained by evil”<sup>163</sup> and has been translated as defilement. Taking these two words together, Peter is describing people who have been sufficiently freed from the evil of the world.

The next description is that they are “being entangled by these again [and] are overcome.” A key word in this phrase is *πάλιν*, which usually conveys some sort of repetition;<sup>164</sup> in this case, it likely refers to those who had once escaped the world but are entangled in it again.<sup>165</sup> In discussing the verb translated as “being entangled” (*ἐμπλακέντες*), it is important to keep in mind that the passive voice is being used. The passive shows that the action of the verb is being done to the subject. In this case, leaving the community is described as external action threatening the members of the congregation. Describing the danger as entanglement conjures an image of a trap that is waiting for an unsuspecting traveller. Peter is hoping that through his exhortation his audience will be properly equipped to avoid the trap. The two states described in the last phrase of 2:20 (“the last [state] has become worse than the first”) are very likely referring to “pre-escape” and “re-defilement.” If it was simply that their newly fallen state is worse than when they were saved, it would not actually warrant much comment. The exposition of the next section will clarify the interpretation of this one.

2 Peter 2:21 begins with the post-positive conjunction *γὰρ* (“for”), which often acts as a link between clauses and introduces a reason for a previous claim.<sup>166</sup> In this case, *γὰρ* signifies the reason why their “last (state) is worse than the first.” Peter states, “For it would be better for them not to know the way of righteousness than having known it to turn back from the holy commandment” (2:21). It is clear that Peter is talking about people who have recognized

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<sup>163</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 770.

<sup>164</sup> BDAG, 752; Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 790.

<sup>165</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 218.

<sup>166</sup> Mathewson and Emig, *Intermediate Greek Grammar*, 265.

(ἐπιγινώσκω) the “way of righteousness”<sup>167</sup> and have subsequently “[turned] back” (ἐπιστρέφω) from it. Ἐπιγινώσκω may convey the idea of recognition, but in this case I have translated it as “know” because it may mean to “possess more or less definite information about, possibly with a degree of thoroughness or competence.”<sup>168</sup> The people being described here have clearly had some sort of knowledge regarding Jesus and salvation. They are also described as having “[turned] back” through the use of ἐπιστρέφω (see James 5:20). The meaning of this verb has already been described with regard to James 5, and here in 2 Peter 2 a very similar meaning is intended: “to return to a point where one has been.”<sup>169</sup> The difference is that where James used the verb to describe bringing someone back from their wandering, Peter is using it to describe someone who has returned to their pre-saved state.

Peter combines two proverbs in 2:22 as he describes the situation of the apostates. Instead of walking away, many dogs seek to return to their own vomit to try and consume it again. A pig does not have a true sense of cleanliness, so after it is washed by its owner it will return to the mud.<sup>170</sup> Both of these phrases involve futile cleansing in that the animal seems to immediately return to what has just been removed. In Peter’s eyes, the apostates are people who have been legitimately cleaned but who (possibly seem eager to) return to their old ways; however, some scholars have used this comparison to claim that their nature was never actually changed and therefore they were never saved.

### Theological Contributions

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<sup>167</sup> This makes the discussion concerning the identity of those discussed as either false teachers or disciples led astray moot for the discussion of perseverance of the saints; the important aspect is that they are true apostates.

<sup>168</sup> Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 334.

<sup>169</sup> BDAG, 382.

<sup>170</sup> Michael Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 132.



Robert Reymond lists 2 Peter 2:20-22 among passages that appear “to affirm that Christians either have fallen, may fall, or shall fall away from the estate of salvation and be finally lost.”<sup>171</sup> He goes on to say that “it needs to be stressed that those persons who have only this temporary faith were never God’s elect and were never regenerated, and are therefore not true believers. The single greatest piece of evidence that this is so is the fact that they fall away from the faith.”<sup>172</sup> Unfortunately, Reymond does not deal with this passage in particular detail so it is difficult to interact with his argument directly. However, Thomas R. Schreiner comments on 2 Peter 2:20-22 in his commentary on the letters of Peter and Jude. He first appeals to 1 Peter 1:5 as a proof against the possibility of genuine apostasy because it says “that God guards believers so that they will *certainly*, not probably, obtain eschatological salvation.”<sup>173</sup> He goes on to explain that “the language used in 2 Peter is phenomenological” in that Peter used Christian language “to describe those who fell away because they gave every appearance of being Christians.”<sup>174</sup> This conclusion seems to indicate that Peter used the same language to describe members of the visible and invisible church despite the fact that the two have very different statuses before God.

Whenever there is an issue between clear and unclear passages, Scripture must be allowed to interpret Scripture, but this method becomes problematic when it is employed for multiple clear passages. What are the criteria for determining which passages are used to interpret others? From what I can tell (as a fairly unexperienced student), the main condition is whether or not a passage fits within a set doctrinal stance that has been previously decided to be

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<sup>171</sup> Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 788.

<sup>172</sup> Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 790, this conclusion uses circular reasoning and should be avoided.

<sup>173</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 364. Italics original.

<sup>174</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 364.

correct. Instead of allowing passages to stand on their own (or at least in their own immediate context), they are interpreted in light of passages that are dealing with a different context and audience so that they begin to mean something completely different than the plain meaning. It is troublesome to claim that Peter would use language that seems to be describing regenerate believers (“they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,” 2:20) when he actually means people who were never actually Christian. To claim this is essentially to claim that Peter is intentionally deceiving his audience. This reasoning is counter-intuitive and should be avoided by those who wish to seriously study Scripture.

The view that Peter is actually describing nominal Christians<sup>175</sup> is challenged by Peter’s claim that they are worse than they were previously. If those described had never actually believed, then there would be no reasonable penalty for continuing in unbelief. It is clear that those being discussed are in a *worse* position because “they no longer have the excuse of sinning unwittingly or in ignorance.”<sup>176</sup> If their previous state was unchanged, then it would make little difference whether they continued in the congregation. They had saving knowledge of Christ’s power and chose to reject it, which is a valid reason for them being in a worse state than previously.

D. A. Carson appears to embrace a position contending that Peter’s use of dogs and sows to refer to the false teachers means that they were never truly saved because Peter would never refer to Christians in that manner. He writes that “the two proverbs that Peter deploys in 2 Pet. 2:22 powerfully make the same point by insisting that the fundamental nature of such people

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<sup>175</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 549.

<sup>176</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 170.

remains unchanged.”<sup>177</sup> Carson claims that Peter felt justified in using proverbs about dogs and swine because he is describing people who were not truly regenerate. Unfortunately, Carson’s interpretation neglects the earlier phrase that those described had already “escaped the defilements of the world.” This interpretation assumes that one verse is more foundational than another because of assumed theological preferences.

### Conclusion

Despite not being covered in as many systematic theologies as passages like Romans 8 or Hebrews 6 in their discussions on perseverance of the saints, the preceding exposition should make it clear that it belongs in the conversation. Peter is clearly describing a situation where there were genuine believers in the community but who became apostates through entanglement with worldly defilements. Their rejection of the salvation through the knowledge of Jesus Christ has led them to a seemingly hopeless and terrible position, an assertion that emphasizes that they were in a regenerate state at one point. 2 Peter 2:20-22 challenges traditional notions of perseverance of the saints in that it confirms the possibility of genuine apostasy.

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<sup>177</sup> D. A. Carson, “2 Peter,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 1058.

## Conclusion

If anyone is to seriously study theology, they must become acquainted with the concepts of mystery and humility. Mystery is not a comforting thought because it admits that there is something that we are unable to fully know, but theology must admit some level of mystery. In discussing the contemplative action of simply meditating in God's presence, an unknown medieval author wrote that "you will feel frustrated, for your mind will be unable to grasp him, and your heart will not relish the delight of his love."<sup>178</sup> J. I. Packer describes a similar situation in the following quote taken from one of C. H. Spurgeon's sermons on the study of theology: "but when we come to this master science, finding that our [plumb line] cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought that vain man would be wise..."<sup>179</sup> The study of God requires us to embrace some aspect of mystery.

Both of these authors use this aspect of divine mystery to introduce the humility that theology should inspire in those who truly seek to learn more of God. The medieval author responds to the human tendency towards pride in knowledge by teaching that "far from being conceited, you ought to be all the more humble and devoted to your heavenly Lord when you

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<sup>178</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling*, trans. William Johnston, (New York: Image, 2014), 40-1.

<sup>179</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 17-18.

consider that he, Almighty God, the King of kings and Lord of lords, has stooped so low as to call you.”<sup>180</sup> He goes on to explain that we are dependent on the grace of God in revealing himself to us, because “without his grace, it is very difficult and almost, I should say, quite beyond you.”<sup>181</sup> Of course, dwelling on our lower state can leave us in a position of despair, which is why it is important to hold it in tension with God’s promise that those who seek will find (Luke 11:9); it is in the seeking that we become more in awe of his majesty and purposes for his creation. One of the divine mysteries we are to struggle with appears to be perseverance of the saints because there are biblical passages that seem to affirm and deny it. This project has been an attempt to synthesize a solution from seemingly contradictory passages, but before solutions are offered a brief summary of each passage examined may be helpful.

#### A Brief Recap

So far we have examined passages that clearly affirm God’s power in ensuring that his people will remain securely in his possession. There were two such passages in this study: John 10 and Romans 8. In John 10, Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd and promises that those who belong to his flock will never be snatched out of his hand (10:28). To be fair, the emphasis of John 10 is Jesus’ proclamation that he and the Father are one, but this emphasis can further strengthen Jesus’ claim because he also states that no one is able to snatch his sheep from the Father’s hand. This passage serves as a clear and concise example of God’s preservation of his people as it implies a passive role for the sheep: they are protected from “the thief” who attempts to snatch them away from Jesus and the Father.<sup>182</sup> This passage is foundational for those who

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<sup>180</sup> *Cloud of Unknowing*, 39.

<sup>181</sup> *Cloud of Unknowing*, 40.

<sup>182</sup> Michaels, *John*, 598.

argue in favour of perseverance of the saints, and understandably so; Jesus appears to affirm that whoever belongs to his flock will remain a part of his flock for eternity.<sup>183</sup>

The second passage, Romans 8, is in line with what is revealed in John 10 because it features an appeal to God's preservation in the lives of his people. Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions that should inspire confidence in the believer (God's elect) including "if God is for us, who can be against us" and "since it is God who justifies, who will condemn us?" (8:31, 34). The latter half of the passage features the question "who shall separate us from the love of Christ" answered with an emphatic "I am sure that [nothing] ... in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:35, 39). Romans 8:31-39 focuses nearly all of its attention on the actions that God takes on behalf of his people: he is for them, gave up his Son for them, justifies them, Jesus intercedes on their behalf, and enables them to be more than conquerors. Together, John 10 and Romans 8 present a picture in favour of perseverance of the saints in that they do not mention a possibility of truly regenerate believers being able to leave the love of Christ. Once God has taken hold of a person he will not let them go.<sup>184</sup> John 10 and Romans 8 form a solid foundation for the opinions of those who argue in favour of the doctrine, but James 5 and 2 Peter appear to disagree.

First, in James 5:19-20, James exhorts his audience to bring back those who have "wandered from the truth." Unlike John 10 and Romans 8, James 5 does not (explicitly) mention God's action in the situation and instead focuses on the results of the audience's action. James describes a situation where someone appears to have left the community of believers and who possibly rejected the teachings of the church. Although there may be ambiguity regarding whether the person described was actually regenerate, the second part of the passage is clear

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<sup>183</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 174.

<sup>184</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 459.

about the results of bringing these people back: their souls will be saved from death and their sins will be covered.<sup>185</sup> These two phrases are clearly salvific, indicating that James has genuine re-conversion in mind.

The second passage is 2 Peter 2:20-22 and features a discussion surrounding false teachers who have evidently led faithful believers astray. The language of the specific passage renders the discussion of whether the false teachers or their students were the focus as moot because Peter is clearly envisaging people who had “known the way of righteousness” at some point (2:21). The clearest insight into Peter’s intention in writing is when he claims that they have knowingly rejected the holy commandment and made their later state worse than their original one of ignorance.<sup>186</sup> Their “escape from defilement” is possible through the knowledge of Jesus Christ, but unlike John and Romans, there is no mention of God’s continued preservation of his people. Instead, Peter recognizes a possibility where the regenerate can knowingly reject the message that they had previously embraced and therefore are in a worse state than before their conversion. James 5 and 2 Peter 2 appear to contradict John 10 and Romans 8 because they clearly teach that genuine apostasy is possible.

Hebrews 6 is a difficult passage to include in either of the previous two categories because it seems to encompass both sides of the discussion. Initially, the author explains to his audience that “it is impossible ... to restore [those who have fallen away] to repentance” (6:4, 6). The description of those who have fallen away is clear in that the author is describing those who have experienced genuine regeneration and have knowingly rejected what has been revealed to them.<sup>187</sup> The author holds apostasy as a real threat in the life of the believer and should be

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<sup>185</sup> Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 201.

<sup>186</sup> Green, *2 Peter and Jude*, 130.

<sup>187</sup> Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 275.

carefully avoided. However, the author comforts his audience a few verses later through an appeal to God's character. The author is confident that God will preserve the audience from apostasy because of their former actions resulting from their "enlightening."<sup>188</sup> Hebrews 6 features warning and assurance, apostasy and preservation, representing the complexity of the larger discussion.

### The Struggle

It should be clear that the solution to the problem is not simply to appeal to one passage over another. If all Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16), then it is not spiritually or academically responsible to negate the plain meaning of one text by appealing to another, particularly when there are no clear criteria for doing so. There are occasions where this sort of interpretation is necessary, but in the current case each passage has a fairly straightforward plain meaning that has been shown to be accurate to the Greek text. Therefore each passage should be weighted equally unless a convincing case can be made for one set of passages to be more foundational than the other. The view in this project is that Scripture is authoritative such that "all the words in Scripture are God's words in such a way that to disbelieve or disobey any word of Scripture is to disbelieve or disobey God."<sup>189</sup> Each passage must be viewed as authoritative in order to come to a biblical solution to the problem of perseverance.

In order to determine a clear answer to the question of perseverance, certain presuppositions must be cast aside. It seems as though scholars on either side of the argument utilize certain passages to interpret others, but oftentimes the same passages are used for different purposes. If perseverance of the saints is being argued for, then James 5, Hebrews 6 and 2 Peter 2 are interpreted differently because they seem to contradict doctrines that are

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<sup>188</sup> Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies*, 220.

<sup>189</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 73.



presupposed.<sup>190</sup> Unfortunately, the exact same thing happens when perseverance of the saints is argued against. The scholars who oppose perseverance attempt to show that the passages from John and Romans (and the latter part of Hebrews 6) cannot affirm eternal divine preservation because such an interpretation would contradict presuppositions concerning the legitimacy of the many warnings concerning apostasy.<sup>191</sup> Oftentimes, when the five passages in this study are examined in the context of a systematic theology the conclusion has already been predetermined. All that is lacking is the proper explanation for how every relevant passage fits into the system that is already in place. This methodology is not sufficient for studying theology; it is an attempt to prove one's own views without genuine concern for what is true and a problematic method for anyone who affirms a high view of Scripture.

Both sides of the debate have certain presuppositions that they bring to the discussion, and these presuppositions are not necessarily wrong. They are simply emphasized over others. Consider those who argue in favour of perseverance. They are motivated by a desire to uphold certain divine attributes, but they do so to the detriment (to a certain point) of human responsibility. Since the entire process of salvation is initiated by God, it is clear that he will not allow it to fail. His Spirit will continually work in the lives of those he has chosen so that they will be able to persevere until the end of their earthly lives. There is a certain level of comfort to this conclusion. However, those who argue against perseverance claim that this doctrine creates passive Christians.<sup>192</sup> On either side, the presuppositions have been shown to determine how the evidence is examined, and although this study is not exhaustive, it sufficiently evidences the need for a more synthetic conclusion rather than disregarding the meaning of disagreeable texts.

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<sup>190</sup> Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* is one example of this.

<sup>191</sup> In particular, note the argument in Robert Shank's *Life in the Son*.

<sup>192</sup> Shank, *Life in the Son*, 300.

## Hypotheses

One possible solution is to simply hold both views in tension simultaneously and embrace it as another mystery of God. Marshall seems to wholeheartedly affirm that it is possible for God's people to apostatize but also clearly recognizes God's action in preserving their faith.<sup>193</sup> In terms of allowing the biblical text to speak for itself, this is a laudable solution despite the fact that it seems to be contradictory. This solution holds Scripture very highly, but ultimately seems academically unsatisfactory because there is no qualification given, no attempt to properly nuance the competing claims. This view opts to fully accept the paradox instead of attempting to synthesize and wrestle with it.<sup>194</sup> This conclusion is a good starting point because of its concern for biblical integrity, but is it possible to probe the mystery a bit more?

Berkouwer offers another solution. He explains that the warning passages (like Hebrews 6 and 2 Peter 2) are examples of the audience being warned about apostasy and actually serve divine preservation.<sup>195</sup> In his view the warnings themselves are meant to keep God's people from committing apostasy because they serve to entice wayward believers into returning to God. This view does not necessarily have an issue with seeing regenerate believers described as committing apostasy because the function of the warning is to keep them from making the same mistakes.<sup>196</sup> An apostate is simply a hypothetical example given to frighten doubters into remaining part of God's people. Unfortunately, there is nothing inherent in the texts themselves to lead to this conclusion; it is simply a matter of using the presupposition that genuine apostasy is impossible to influence the interpretation of the warning passages.

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<sup>193</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 209.

<sup>194</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 210.

<sup>195</sup> Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, 117.

<sup>196</sup> Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, 109-10.

Berkouwer's solution is similar to the one proposed by Millard J. Erickson, who concludes his discussion on the matter with the assertion that "there is a logical possibility of apostasy, but it will not come to pass in the case of believers."<sup>197</sup> Erickson's discussion is mainly focused on reconciling the seemingly contradictory examples given by John 10 and Hebrews 6, and he even acknowledges that the author of Hebrews was describing genuine apostasy as more likely than the alternative.<sup>198</sup> However, he places an emphasis on the concept that the John passage is conveying a *certainty* while the Hebrews passage is dealing with a *possibility*. Therefore, the possibility of apostasy must be affirmed while simultaneously affirming God's preservation of his sheep as a certainty.<sup>199</sup> His conclusion on the Hebrews passage claims that "the full data of the passage would seem to indicate, then, that the writer has in view genuine believers who could fall away, but will not."<sup>200</sup> Unfortunately, Erickson does not differentiate properly between the two sections of Hebrews 6 where 6:4-8 seem to be dealing with a possibility related to any congregation of believers while 6:9-12 deal specifically with the audience; he takes them both as referring to the audience.

#### A Situational, Pastoral Solution

What if theology (for disputable matters) is more similar to grammatical and linguistic rules than rigid laws? When learning a language, it becomes apparent very quickly that although there are a series of rules meant to govern the linguistic system there are also many exceptions. Biblical authors seem to be unconcerned with rigid logical systems and seem to easily affirm contradictory statements that twist modern Western thinkers into knots. Although it can be dangerous to consider theology mouldable, certain aspects of theological understanding may be

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<sup>197</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 921.

<sup>198</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 921.

<sup>199</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 921.

<sup>200</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 921.

*situational*. The precedent for this kind of thinking can be drawn from the following biblical passages. Consider Zech. 7:13: “‘As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear,’ says the LORD of hosts.” God is described as responding to his people in a way that is fitting to their previous response to him. Or consider Luke 12:48: “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.” Jesus is explaining that with divine revelation comes tremendous responsibility. Lastly, consider John 9:41: “Jesus said to them, ‘if you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, “We see,” your guilt remains.’” Jesus solemnly tells the Pharisees that since they claim to have knowledge, they will be judged accordingly despite the fact that throughout his interactions with them they have demonstrated the opposite. To put this in statistical terms, the rule is that God will actively preserve his people so that they will remain his indefinitely. The exception to the rule is the small percentage of cases where this is not the case. The exception does not render the rule invalid, but it does serve to indicate that the world is more complicated than we would like it to be.

It is likely that the two aspects of the current discussion could be said to be situational in that comfort is given to those who are enduring difficult times while warning is given to those who are becoming lax in their faith. This reveals a pastoral aspect to perseverance of the saints. There is no question that both types of passage are meant for people who were genuinely saved, but the situations warrant a different pastoral response. If James is dealing with people who are slacking off in their Christian duties, it makes sense that he would mention apostasy as a possibility.<sup>201</sup> To be fair though, he exhorts his audience to bring apostates back. Peter is dealing with false teachers, so he explains that if anyone does commit apostasy it would have been better

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<sup>201</sup> McCartney, *James*, 37.

for them to not have been saved in the first place; apostasy is seen as a real threat to the life of the congregation.<sup>202</sup> The audience addressed in the book of Hebrews seems to have cooled down after a time of intense faithfulness, so the reminder that apostasy is possible could have served the pastoral purpose of lighting their desire again.<sup>203</sup> On the flip side of this, the congregation addressed by Paul in Rome was likely going through serious trials<sup>204</sup> so Paul affirms that God will not allow anything to separate them from his love.<sup>205</sup> Likewise, John's audience may have already experienced persecution (getting kicked out of the synagogue, see John 9:22)<sup>206</sup> and were in need of comfort in order to strengthen their resolve. What could be more comforting than to know that nothing can snatch them out of God's hand? They are securely in his possession! This conclusion would mean that divine preservation provides the best explanation of the texts examined but apostasy remains a real possibility; each statement is used in a different context. Practically, this means that there are certain passages that can be appealed to depending on the situation that the pastor is confronted with. If someone is struggling with the idea of assurance or dealing with trials, they can be assured that God will preserve them through appeals to John 10 and Romans 8 (and possibly Hebrews 6:9-10); if morality has become lax within the congregation, warnings can be appealed to from Hebrews 6:4-6 and 2 Peter 2; but in all cases James 5 is applicable as we struggle to hold each other accountable and seek to bring wandering brothers and sisters back into the fold of God.

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<sup>202</sup> Green, *Jude & 2 Peter*, 302

<sup>203</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, lv.

<sup>204</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, li.

<sup>205</sup> Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 103.

<sup>206</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 153-4.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: John 10:22-30

<sup>22</sup>At that time the Jewish Feast of Dedication was in Jerusalem, it was winter, <sup>23</sup>and Jesus was walking in the temple within the portico of Solomon. <sup>24</sup>Then the Jews surrounded him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us openly.” <sup>25</sup>Jesus answered them, “I told you and you did not believe; the works which I do in the name of my Father testify on my account; <sup>26</sup>but you do not believe because you are not (of) my sheep. <sup>27</sup>My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me, <sup>28</sup>and I give eternal life to them and they will never perish into eternity and no one will take them by force from my hand. <sup>29</sup>My Father, who has given to me all things, is the greatest, and no one is able to take by force from the Father’s hand. <sup>30</sup>I and the Father are one.”

### Appendix B: Romans 8:31-39

<sup>31</sup>Therefore what shall we say to these things? If God is on our behalf who is against us? <sup>32</sup>Who did not even spare his own son but delivered him up on behalf of all of us, how will he not give to us all things along with him? <sup>33</sup>Who will bring charges against the ones chosen by God? God is the one who justifies; <sup>34</sup>who is the one who condemns? Christ [Jesus] died, but more than that was raised to life, who is also at the right hand of God, who also prays on our behalf. <sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Suffering or calamity or persecution or famine or poverty or danger or sword? <sup>36</sup>Just as it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day, we are considered as sheep for slaughter.” <sup>37</sup>But in all these things we are completely victorious through the one who loves us. <sup>38</sup>For I have confidence that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things that are present nor things that are coming nor powers <sup>39</sup>nor heights nor depths nor any created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

#### Appendix C: Hebrews 6:4-12

<sup>4</sup>For it is impossible (for) those who were once enlightened, and who have tasted the heavenly gift and was a companion born of the Holy Spirit <sup>5</sup>and who have tasted the goodness of God's word and the powers of the coming age <sup>6</sup>and who have fallen away, to restore (them) again to repentance (because) they are crucifying the Son of God again and exposing (him) to public ridicule. <sup>7</sup>For the land drinking the rain that often comes upon it and produces vegetation useful to those for whom it was cultivated, shares in the blessing from God; <sup>8</sup>but (if) producing thorns and thistles, it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed, its end is burning. <sup>9</sup>But we have been persuaded concerning you, beloved, (if) we speak also in this way, that you have better things approaching salvation. <sup>10</sup>For God is not unjust (as to) neglect your work and the love that you show in his name, having served the saints and continuing to serve. <sup>11</sup>But we long for each of you to show diligence with reference to the certainty of hope until the end, <sup>12</sup>in order that you might not be lazy, but imitators of those who receive the promises through faith and patience.

#### Appendix D: James 5:19-20

19 My brothers, if anyone among you is led astray from the truth and someone turns him back 20 Let him know that the one who turns a sinner back from his deceptive way saves his soul from death and covers a multitude of sins.

#### Appendix E: 2 Peter 2:20-22

<sup>20</sup>For if after escaping the defilements of the world through recognition of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and the ones being entangled by these again are overcome, for them the last (state) has become worse than the first. <sup>21</sup>For it would be better for them to not know the way of righteousness than having known (it) to turn back from the holy commandment that was

entrusted to them. <sup>22</sup>The true proverb has happened to them; (they are like) a dog that has turned back to its own vomit, and a sow that has washed (turning back) to mud rolling.



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### “About the Author”<sup>207</sup>



Sir Benjamin J Klassen III currently resides in the city of Toronto, but he has traveled throughout many of the world’s most spectacular regions. He grew up with a particular fondness for literature, spending much of his adolescence indoors with his nose in a book. At the age of twelve, his governess grew concerned about his quiet nature and called for a physician, who declared the young man’s dire need for external stimulation. Thus, his parents sent him to Switzerland to stay with his great-uncle Herbert Klaus. Here, he began to study different languages and quickly became fluent in French, Italian, Romansh, and German. These newfound language skills proved themselves useful, as he relocated to Venice in his late teens.

He found himself working as a gondolier, navigating the “streets” of Venice both for business and pleasure. It was here that he developed an appreciation for the musical arts when a man by the name of Vincente von Strapnert challenged him to a duel of sorts – von Strapnert, a breeder of Anatolian Shepherds, had recently lost his fortune due to a series of unfortunate events, and one night stumbled drunkenly towards the water. Fearing that the man might drown, Klassen stepped out and grabbed von Strapnert by the collar, pulling him to safety. Being a proud man who was quite intoxicated, von Strapnert turned and pulled a switch blade from his pocket, pointing it at Klassen. It was then that Klassen remembered the tambourine a gypsy woman had given him while travelling through Paris – he pulled it out and began to dance, beating the tambourine and distracting von Strapnert from his defensive plans. The drunk started to clap and cheer, drawing the attention of passersby. A police officer arrested von Strapnert for being drunk and disorderly, and he spent the night in jail. Klassen felt pity for the man and visited him the next morning, bailing him out of jail on the condition that von Strapnert pull himself together and move forward with his life. Von Strapnert gratefully offered Klassen the life of his firstborn son as thanks for this service. However, he was later diagnosed with testicular cancer and

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<sup>207</sup> This section is written by the subject’s sister, Samantha. It should also be noted that *some* of the details described are fictitious in nature and are meant for entertainment purposes.

underwent a radical inguinal orchiectomy before he had the chance to produce a child. Klassen forgave the debt, but von Strapnert insisted on making good on his promise and instead gave him an Anatolian Shepherd pup from his last litter. Klassen had never been fond of animals, but the bond between man and beast was instant. He named the pup Bruce and parted with von Strapnert. He traveled back to Switzerland before making his way to eastern Asia.

By this time, Klassen had passed the age of twenty and was considered, in many cultures, to have fully reached the age of manhood. He had planned to tour the countries within eastern Asia, starting with Mongolia and working through the territories of China before circling around through Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Taiwan, and finally up through South Korea and Japan. It was at this time, however, that the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami struck – the devastation appealed to Klassen’s humanitarian nature, and he found himself gravitating towards Japan first. By the time he had arrived in Sendai, Japan, the death toll had reached over 11,000. He decided to help wherever it was needed, starting with a search and rescue team. He and Bruce worked very closely with two men, John Hawkes from America and John Rockwell from Wales. The team they formed was personally responsible for the rescue of exactly 38.5 (amputee situation) victims of the tsunami. Klassen and the Johns formed a close bond of brotherhood that lasts to this day. They were forced to split ways when Hawkes was called home due to the death of his father and Rockwell fell ill with a gangrenous arm. Klassen pressed forward, transitioning from search and rescue to distribution of food and medical supplies, and finally clean-up. He dedicated a total of sixteen months to aiding the victims of this tragedy, a feat which earned him nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize (his work also contributed to the reconciliation between the much maligned Ainu people and the Japanese government). He adamantly turned down this honour, citing his love for God as his motivation and not earthly reward. At hearing this, Queen Elizabeth II extended an invitation to join her for a private dinner, at which she told him of her plans to bestow him with a knighthood. He declined at first but accepted at her insistence for fear of offending Her Majesty. He became Sir Benjamin on November 30, 2012 and headed back to Canada with Bruce shortly afterwards.

A severe case of gout caused Sir Benjamin to slow down for a period, and it was at this time that he decided to further his theological understanding. He held a pastoral position for a while before enrolling in postsecondary school to work towards his doctorate in theology and biblical studies (or psychology or something, I can never remember). He dazzled fellow students with his facial hair-growing abilities and his hitherto unheard of benevolence, and quickly left a trail of broken hearts longer than his ponytail. Bruce is also pursuing higher education and is working towards achieving his dogtorate in canine medical science.