

A Biblical Theological Study of Perseverance

“Go the distance.” This is one of three whispered messages that an Iowa farmer named Ray Kinsella received in the baseball fantasy film, *Field of Dreams*. I know this is an unlikely source of a wonderful theological concept, but it certainly summarizes well the New Testament doctrine of perseverance. Sadly, most Christians probably know movie lines like this one better than they know the Bible’s teaching about perseverance. My goal in this paper is to begin a way forward toward alleviating this ignorance.

The doctrine of perseverance is by no means a neglected doctrine as a glance at most of the church confessions shows.¹ Nor has it been overlooked in systematic theological treatments.² Furthermore, several biblical-theological works have been written in the last 65 years including the scholarly *Paul and Perseverance*, Berkouwer’s *Faith and Perseverance*, the very helpful *The Race Set Before Us*, and *Run to Win the Prize*.³ With all this material and many more essays and articles that remain unmentioned, why offer a paper on this subject? As with all doctrines, we must continue advancing the conversation about biblical truth—not because we need fresh topics for dissertations or because the

¹See the Augsburg Confession (1530), §6; The Scots Confession (1560), §13; The Thirty-Nine Articles (1563), §12; The Second Helvetic Confession (1566), §114, §115, §119; Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), §17; Second London Baptist Confession (1689), §13, §17; the Articles of Religion (1784), §10; and the New Hampshire Confession (1833), §11. See John Jefferson Davis, “The Perseverance of the Saints: A History of the Doctrine,” *JETS* 34.2 (June 1991): 213–28, for more on this subject.

²A quick perusal of the systematic theologies in my personal library demonstrated that each of these writers discusses perseverance: Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology* (Zondervan, 2013), 595–605; James Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Zondervan, 1962), II, 145–48; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. McNeill, trans. Battle (Westminster Press, 1960), 2.3.9–11; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), III, 267–354; Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Baker, 1985), 986–97; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2d ed (Zondervan, 2020), 970–97; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (Eerdmans rpt, 1989), III, 104–13; Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity* (Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 3:179–90; Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Victor Books, 1988), 328–34; William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Klock & Klock rpt, 1979), 557–60; Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Judson Press, 1907), 881–86; Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1949), 294–99. For a more thorough bibliography of important works on perseverance see Robert A. Peterson, “Perseverance and Apostasy: A Bibliographic Essay,” *Presb* 16.2 (1990): 119–25.

³Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990); G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance* (trans. Robert D. Knudsen; Eerdmans, 1958); Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (InterVarsity Press, 2001); and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Run to Win the Prize: Perseverance in the New Testament* (Crossway, 2010). This last book is a condensation and nuanced presentation of the material from *Race Set Before Us*.

Bible is not comprehensive enough—for the Bible focuses upon the infinite God whose revelation includes aspects of His character and revealed instruction which will never be fully comprehended or explained by His finite creatures. So with that knowledge and with the desire to progress in the study of this doctrine my humble goal in this essay is to provide a biblical-theological study of the doctrine of perseverance, i.e. “[believers] continue in faith, love, and holiness because God freely save[s] them once for all.”⁴ The study will include three parts: 1) a section on definition that delineates what perseverance is; 2) a section on the biblical data that surveys the teaching of Jesus, Paul, and the authors of the general epistles; and 3) a section that provides a summary of the biblical teaching about perseverance.

The Definition of Perseverance

Typically a biblical-theological study proceeds inductively by looking at the texts in Scripture that speak to the theme and then providing a summary explanation of that theme. However, in the current case, I need to distinguish perseverance from preservation (eternal security) and assurance so that the reader does not suffer from an initial confusion of categories. Following this explanation we can move to the scriptural study of and concluding observations about perseverance.

We begin with **assurance**, which is the subjective awareness or inner confidence of believers that relates to their personal knowledge and certainty of eternal salvation. It is a kind of personal and emotional intuition. John describes assurance in 1 John 2:3 (“And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments”) and in 1 John 5:13 (“I write these things . . . that you may know that you have eternal life”). Paul states, “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:16). And the author of Hebrews 6:11 desires that his readers “have the full assurance of hope until the end” even as they are to “draw near [to God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb 10:22). The New Testament clearly affirms that Christians can have assurance of their salvation.⁵

Many authors have recognized that the Bible gives three foundational bases by which believers may be assured of their salvation.⁶ These include 1) the *promises of God* to

⁴Robert A. Peterson, “Preservation, Perseverance, Assurance, and Apostasy,” *Presb* 22.1 (1996): 33.

⁵All Protestants would agree with this statement. However, Roman Catholics reject the idea that assurance is possible. See H. J. Schroeder, O.P., *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent: English Translation* (Tan Books & Publishers, Inc., 1978), 35. Robert A. Peterson, “Christian Assurance: Its Possibility and Foundations,” *Presb* 18.1 (1992): 10–13, gives a helpful overview of the Roman Catholic teaching on assurance.

⁶*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 18.1–2. Further discussion and commentary on this truth may be found here: Joel R. Beeke, *Knowing and Growing in Assurance of Faith* (Christian Focus, 2017), 75–120; Peterson, “Christian Assurance,” 14; D. A. Carson, “Reflections on Assurance,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Baker, 2000), 275, n. 50; Schreiner and Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us*, 276.

save and keep His own, 2) the *inner witness of the Holy Spirit*, and 3) the *perseverance* of the believer in good works. The first of these is the objective ground and the latter two are the subjective grounds of assurance.

Though there is little confusion regarding the differences between assurance and perseverance, there is often a misunderstanding regarding how they relate to each other in the believer's experience. Perhaps we could frame this discussion best with a question: Can a Christian have assurance of salvation without perseverance? Some have sought to answer this question affirmatively because they want to avoid moralism or legalism that might result in pride or exhaustion⁷ or because they want to avoid doubt and uncertainty that might cause paralyzing inertia.⁸ On the other hand, most believe (and I also affirm) that assurance and perseverance are inseparable, and that "to stress the Word and downplay [perseverance and Spirit] is to risk easy believism and antinomianism."⁹ In other words, perseverance is a necessary aspect of a Christian's walk that one should observe when seeking to give assurance.

While assurance and perseverance are not easily confused with regard to their meaning, the same cannot be said with regard to preservation and perseverance. So I would like to describe each of these terms briefly before providing some important distinctions between them. **Eternal security** or **preservation** is the objective truth that God secures and guarantees the final salvation of all true believers. Simply put, God promises that salvation can never be lost. Jesus said this about His children: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:27–29). Peter heard those words and later described our salvation as "kept in heaven" by the Father, "guarded through faith" and "prepared" or "ready" for final salvation (1 Peter 1:4–5). Paul also believed the truth that the Lord would bring him safely into His heavenly kingdom (2 Tim 4:18) and that the Holy Spirit has been given to Christians as a seal or guarantee of their salvation (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13–14; 4:30). Thus, the Scriptures teach

⁷Jon Moffitt, Justin Perdue, and Jimmy Buehler, *Safe in Christ: A Primer on Assurance* (Theocast, 2020), 44–46.

⁸Joseph Dillow, "Finding Assurance," in *A Defense of Free Grace Theology with Respect to Saving Faith, Perseverance, and Assurance* (ed. Fred Chay; Grace Theology Press, 2017), 231–2; David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology* (3d ed.; Grace Theology Press, 2018), 228. For further summary of the Free Grace teaching regarding perseverance and assurance see Jon Pratt, "The Free Grace Movement and Perseverance," in *To Seek, To Do, and To Teach: Essays in Honor of Larry D. Pettegrew* (ed. Doug Bookman, Tim Sigler, Michael Vlach; Shepherds Press, 2022), 163–8.

⁹Peterson, "Christian Assurance," 22. Peterson makes a helpful observation about the foundations of assurance when he argues that when considering the three foundations of assurance, "epistemological priority must be given to the first and objective foundation—God's promises to save and keep his people. Let only those who profess faith in Christ consider the other two, subjective foundations."

that once people believe in Jesus for salvation, their future existence in heaven is eternally secure and can never be lost.¹⁰

Perseverance is the enabling that God provides for all true believers to continue in faith and good works to the end of their earthly lives, i.e., every true Christian will produce righteous fruit. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (17.1) explains: “They whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally or finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.” Three verses among many substantiate this truth: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide” (John 15:16). “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6).

As mentioned above, some theologians have mistakenly treated perseverance and preservation as synonyms,¹¹ so I must give some needed clarifications. First, if someone is referring to God’s power to preserve or keep a person who has believed in Christ for eternal life, then the word *preservation* should be used. On the other hand, if reference is made to the Christian’s continuation in holiness and good works of obedience, then *perseverance* is the proper term.¹² Second, “the perspective of *preservation* is from God’s viewpoint. . . . A kindred doctrine, *perseverance*, looks at it from the believer’s viewpoint; that is, the believer will progress in the Christian life until the day of final redemption.”¹³ To clarify McCune’s point, the actors in these two scenarios are different: regarding

¹⁰Numerous books have been written about preservation so I limit reference to three: Sam Storms, *Kept for Jesus: What the New Testament Really Teaches about Assurance of Salvation and Eternal Security* (Crossway, 2015); Robert Gromacki, *Is Salvation Forever?* (Moody Press, 1973); J. F. Strombeck, *Shall Never Perish* (Strombeck Agency, Inc., 1936). Also see Robert A. Peterson, “‘Though All Hell Should Endeavor to Shake’: God’s Preservation of His Saints,” *Presb* 17.1 (1991): 40–57.

¹¹John Piper, *Astonished by God: Ten Truths to Turn the World Upside Down* (Minneapolis: Desiring God, 2018), 134, states, “This doctrine, which goes by different names, has an urgent and practical application to our life together as Christians. Some call it the doctrine of eternal security. Some call it the doctrine of perseverance.” The context of Piper’s discussion shows that he is talking about perseverance and not preservation (eternal security), but he unhelpfully equates the two in this statement. Also see Chafer, 3.267; Ryrie, 328; and Thiessen, 294–99. To use *preservation* as a synonym for *perseverance* is one way perseverance as defined here is misunderstood. I should also mention two other ways people may misapprehend perseverance in common usage. They may think perseverance relates to the idea of endurance (e.g. “I persevered to the end of the hike.”) or to the notion of bearing up under the burden of a trial (e.g. “I am asking God to help me persevere during this period of unemployment.”). While these are legitimate uses of this term, it is not the way we are using it here.

¹²Anthony Badger, “TULIP: Free Grace Perspective Part 5: Perseverance of the Saints,” *JGES* 18 (Autumn 2005): 31.

¹³Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity* (Vol. 3; Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 159.

preservation God keeps and regarding *perseverance* the Christian obeys. Finally, it may be helpful to consider these two ideas in terms of what they are promising to keep: 1) *preservation* means that God keeps believers *in the faith*, i.e., God ensures that believers will not lose their salvation; *perseverance* means that God keeps the believer *in doing good works*, i.e., God ensures that believers will live obediently and bear good fruit to the end of their lives.

To summarize, God secures and guarantees the final salvation of all who believe. This reality is described in theological terms as the *preservation* or *eternal security* of the saints. Once justified, all believers will *persevere* in doing good works up to the end of their lives, and this truth serves as a foundation (along with the promises of God and the internal witness of the Spirit) to the *assurance* that they truly have eternal life. Understanding these interrelationships provides a solid footing for our next section in which we will survey the biblical data regarding perseverance.

Biblical Data about Perseverance

My goal in this portion of the paper is to delineate the ways that Jesus, Paul, and the writers of the general epistles teach the biblical doctrine of perseverance. Before embarking on this journey, I must establish a few parameters.

First, while verses about preservation and assurance do touch in certain ways on perseverance, I am limiting this study to biblical data that directly relates to our definition of perseverance, namely, that believers will continue to the end of their earthly lives in obedience by producing righteous fruit.

Second, the Bible provides several *means* God uses to produce spiritual fruit in believers' lives, but these means are not in themselves evidences of perseverance. For example, God uses suffering or discipline to produce spiritual fruit in the life of a Christian (Hebrews 12:10–11), but this truth, as precious as it is, does not speak to the reality that true believers do persevere in the faith. Scripture uses at least four other means to encourage persevering obedience: a) positive and negative commands; b) conditional promises (Rev 21:6–7) and warnings (Rev 22:18–19); c) Christian fellowship in the church (Heb 10:24–25); and d) prayer by others (Jn 17:11; Acts 14:22–23) and oneself (Jude 20–21). While these five means are used by God to enable perseverance, this study will not pursue such examples.

Third, our study will be limited to fruit-bearing *obedience* rather than divinely bestowed *possessions*. Spiritual fruit is the righteous response of a believer to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. These righteous responses include a person's actions, attitudes, or thoughts. And these evidences of spiritual fruit should be distinguished from possessions. For example, when Paul states that believers enjoy peace with God as a result of being justified in Romans 5:1 ("Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"), he is speaking of a *possession* believers enjoy. But this blessing does not speak to any *fruit-bearing* on the believer's part. A little farther in the same chapter, we do see an action believers perform—rejoicing in hope and tribulations (5:2–3 – "Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in

our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance”). This rejoicing is an example of spiritual fruit-bearing, a righteous response.

Fourth, descriptions of persevering actions need to be presented in the indicative mood, the mood of assertion or the presentation of certainty,¹⁴ rather than the oblique moods which refer to actions as merely possible or commanded. For example, we find a number of imperatives calling believers to live obediently, but though these are means God uses to encourage perseverance, they do not speak to the existence or non-existence of obedient actions in the lives of those addressed.

Fifth, promises of God’s persevering work on behalf of one individual (e.g. Peter in Luke 21:31–32 or Paul in 2 Tim 4:16–18) do not constitute the kind of examples we hope to unearth as we consider God’s work for His people. Certainly, God’s ability to help individuals like Peter or Paul (both apostles) does not necessarily translate into promises that God will help all believers persevere.

With these restrictions established we are ready to begin by looking first at the teaching of Jesus.

Jesus and Perseverance

We discover at least three ways Jesus affirms the doctrine of perseverance in His teaching. First, He uses the metaphor of fruit-bearing; second, He utilizes the metaphor of sheep, and third, He employs conditional statements.

Metaphors of fruit-bearing. When Jesus advocates perseverance, he does so using three distinct fruit-bearing metaphors: 1) the parable of the sower; 2) teaching about fruit bearing trees; and 3) teaching about the vine and branches in John 15.

The parable of the sower is likely the most well-known parable in the Gospels (Matt 13:1–9, 18–23; Mk 4:1–20; Lk 8:5–15). It is one of the few of which Jesus gives an interpretation, and it is found in all three of the synoptics with virtually no differences in the three accounts. Here is Mark’s account: “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold” (4:3–8). As Jesus explains the meaning He states that the seed on the path is taken away by Satan (4:15), the rocky-soil seed falls away (σκανδαλίζονται – 4:17), and the thorny-soil seed proves unfruitful (ἄκαρπος γίνεται – 4:19). Only the last soil, sown on good ground, welcomes it and produces fruit (παραδέχονται καὶ καρποφοροῦσιν – 4:20), and it is only the last soil which represents true believers.

There are at least two times in Jesus’s ministry when He teaches about fruit-bearing trees. In Matthew 12:33–35a (“Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. . . . The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good”) Jesus discusses the good fruit that comes only from good

¹⁴Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Zondervan, 1996), 448.

trees. Jesus also speaks about the ability to recognize true believers on the basis of the good fruit they produce (Matt 7:15–20; par. Lk 6:43–45).

Jesus's discussion of the vine and branches provides four clear statements regarding the good fruit that comes from abiding in the vine. First, John 15:2 – "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." There are two types of branches described here, those that do not bear fruit, which are taken away, and those that bear fruit, which are pruned so they can bear more fruit. Indeed, true believers are those who are pruned and who bear fruit.

Second, Jesus continues his discourse in John 15:5–6 – "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." As Jesus continues His discourse we learn more about the two branches. Good branches abide/remain in Christ and bear much fruit. Bad branches do not remain/abide in Christ; they wither; and they are thrown into the fire and burned. As a result, these bad branches can do nothing and they represent unbelievers.¹⁵

Third, John 15:8 – "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." Notice that the way someone demonstrates that they are a disciple/believer is by bearing fruit. This fruit includes believing and following His word (v. 7), obedience to His commands (v. 10), and love for Him and other believers (vv. 12–14).¹⁶

Fourth, John 15:16 – "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you." In the strongest statement of the chapter Jesus states that He has appointed His chosen ones to bear fruit and to ensure that the fruit they produce abides and continues (μένει speaks of the idea of permanence in John, e.g. John 15:10 and the continuance and permanence of the relationship between Jesus and the Father).¹⁷

Metaphor of Sheep. In John 10:27 we read, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." This is such a straightforward comment that it requires no further explanation.¹⁸

Conditional Statements. Though conditional statements often share an element of contingency when the apodosis provides a possible outcome if the protasis is accomplished (e.g., "If he hits a homerun, his team will win the game"), they can also be employed as a literary device to give factual information in that both the protasis and apodosis share equivalence (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:44b – "If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual

¹⁵J. Carl Laney, "Abiding is Believing: The Analogy of the Vine in John 15:1–6," *BSac* 146 (January–March 1989): 55–66. For a contrary view see Joseph C. Dillow, "Abiding is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1–6," *BSac* 147 (January–March, 1990): 44–53.

¹⁶Robert A. Peterson, "The Perseverance of the Saints: A Theological Exegesis of Four Key New Testament Passages," *Presb* 17.2 (1991): 111.

¹⁷Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1971), 644, among many others.

¹⁸McCune, *Systematic Theology*, 3:188.

body.”) when the two elements of the condition could be switched and still have the same meaning.¹⁹

We see this in John 8:31–32 – “So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’” The two elements of the condition could be reversed with the same meaning: true disciples of Jesus abide/remain in Jesus’s word. Or to say it another way, continuing/abiding in Jesus’ teaching proves that these hearers are true disciples. We learn later in the chapter that they fail to continue to follow Jesus’ teaching because they do the works of the devil (8:44) and seek to stone Jesus (8:59), but true believers would never act this way.

John 15:10 states, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. Notice the equivalence of the two parts of the condition. Obedience (keeping Jesus’s commands) demonstrates a continuance in Jesus’s love, i.e. salvation.

Summary. Jesus uses metaphors about fruit-bearing and sheep as well as conditional statements of fact to assert that all true disciples of Jesus will bear fruit, keep His words, and follow Him. They will persevere in good works.

Paul and Perseverance

We find numerous references to believers persevering in obedience when we consider Paul’s 13 letters. I have chosen to organize these verses under four headings: 1) failing to persevere demonstrates unbelief; 2) persevering demonstrates true belief; 3) statements of God’s promise or decision to help believers persevere; and 4) indicative statements of righteous responses. Throughout this section I will provide the text of the Bible verses (ESV) and then make comments on that particular text.

Failing to persevere demonstrates unbelief. If it is true that failure to bear spiritual fruit shows that someone is an unbeliever, then these verses prove that *only* believers who are obedient will persevere and further, that *all* believers must persevere. The reason they must persevere in good works is that they prove to be unbelievers if they do not. There are three texts which validate this truth.

- 1 Corinthians 15:1–2 – “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.” Failure to hold fast demonstrates a lack of true belief; and it is also true that holding fast demonstrates true belief.²⁰
- 2 Corinthians 13:5 – “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” This text assumes that there is some type of

¹⁹Steve Nicolle, “Conditionals in the New Testament,” *Journal of Translation* 18.2 (2022): 1–30; Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 682–4; Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed (JSOT Press, 1994), 267; James L. Boyer, “First Class Conditions: What Do They Mean?” *GTJ* 2.1 (Spring 1981): 76.

²⁰McCune, *Systematic Theology*, 3:183, states, “If the Corinthians had believed a wrong message or a distorted gospel not based on the resurrection of Christ, their faith would be false and thus unending.”

verifiable evidence in an individual's life that demonstrates he is a true believer, and an inability to recognize such evidence indicates absolute failure. Contrariwise, believers will find evidence of spiritual fruit when they examine themselves, proving that they are truly saved.²¹

- 2 Tim 2:12b – “If we deny him, he also will deny us.” Denial of Christ in this context means that the person is unwilling to endure persecution for the name of Christ, something that only a true believer would do. And God's response of denying the person speaks to His rejection of them and their eternal damnation.

Persevering demonstrates true belief. Paul makes conditional statements which are the semantic opposites to those in the previous section. In these two passages the readers' perseverance in obedient actions shows that they are true believers.

- Colossians 1:21–23 – “And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.” Continuance in the faith is shown by not shifting from the hope of the gospel (in context this behavior is opposite of evil deeds and an antagonistic mindset against God). And this continuance demonstrates that the Colossian believers have been reconciled and that the “design of this reconciliation” includes the present path of imperfect blamelessness that Paul prays for as the pathway to the perfection of [the] last day” when believers will be presented holy and blameless before God.²²
- 2 Timothy 2:12a – “If we endure, we will also reign with him.” Endurance in the context is a willingness to continue to believe and obey even in the midst of being persecuted for believing. This ability to endure is proof that a person is a true believer.

²¹Some Christians are paralyzed by a verse like 2 Corinthians 13:5, for they fear that they are not good enough to pass the test. But Paul does not quantify the spiritual fruit, rather he asserts that unbelievers will not find *any* spiritual fruit in their self-examination. I believe that if a person can answer the following questions in the affirmative, she passes the test: Do I care about obedience in my life? Do I long to please my heavenly Father? Do I want to love and serve Him? Do I care when I stumble and sin? Do I confess and repent when I sin?

For those who basically seek to be perfect Thomas R. Schreiner, *Run to Win the Prize: Perseverance in the New Testament* (Crossway, 2010), 51–67, shows how the NT teaching about perseverance is not requiring perfection because of the Bible's calls to seek forgiveness when Christians sin (1 John 1:9), the attainment of perfection occurs only at the resurrection (Phil 3:12–16), the many calls for putting sin to death in the epistles, the fact that Christians stumble in many ways (Js 3:2), and even sinning Christians are “saved through fire” (1 Cor 3:10–17).

²²John Piper, *Providence* (Crossway, 2020), 628–29. Also, Peterson, “Perseverance of the Saints,” 96–99.

God's promise or decision to help believers persevere in good works. Whenever Paul makes a clear pronouncement of God's promise, provision, or decision to do something for His children, we have certain evidence of the fulfillment of that work by God. I see at least four examples of this teaching in Paul's letters.

- Romans 8:29 – “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” Conformity to Christ's image, while something God demands of the believer (Rom 12:2), is also something He predestines. And this predestining work is part of the “golden chain” of God's soteriological purpose which includes foreknowing (προέγνω), predestining (προώρισεν), calling (ἐκάλεσεν), justifying (ἐδικαίωσεν), and glorifying (ἐδόξασεν).²³ Just as believers are assured of glory, they are assured of persevering conformity to Christ's image.
- Philippians 1:6 – “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” While there is some debate as to what the good work in the Philippians lives is exactly, most agree that it refers to the outworking of their salvation (see Phil 2:12–13) as seen by those around them.²⁴ And Paul is saying that God will help the Philippians to persevere in this “good work” until Christ returns.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24 – “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.” The prayer for the Thessalonians sanctification is speaking about their *present* sanctification, and Paul is praying that it would be carried out completely. But this is more than a prayer since Paul states that God in his faithfulness “will surely do it.” Thus, God ensures that his children will persevere in holiness and be kept blameless to the end.
- 2 Thessalonians 3:1–4 – “Finally, brothers, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command.” Paul points to the Lord's faithfulness and power to guard the Thessalonians from the attacks of the evil one. Furthermore, this guarding includes protecting the Thessalonians in their doing. The reason Paul has confidence that they will continue to act obediently is because he knows that the Lord is faithful and powerful to help them persevere in good works.

Indicative statements of righteous responses. The largest number of biblical texts supporting the doctrine of perseverance in Paul are found in this section of the paper. I will organize these by letter and will proceed canonically.

²³Piper, *Providence*, 614.

²⁴Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1995), 87, and most Philippians commentators.

Romans and Righteous Responses²⁵

- Rejoicing in hope, tribulations, and God – Romans 5:2, 3, 11
 - 5:2 – “Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”
 - 5:3 – “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,”
 - 5:11 – “More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”
 - Summary: In 5:1–3 Paul gives two results of justification: peace with God and rejoicing. If all believers experience peace with God, they must also all experience rejoicing in hope and tribulations. Furthermore, the fact of the believer’s rejoicing in 5:11 is parallel to the final salvation experienced by all believers in 5:10.
- Walking in newness of life – Romans 6:4
 - “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”
 - Summary: All believers are united with Christ by baptism into his death (Paul explains this reality in v. 2 as being dead to sin). This is one of the metaphors Paul uses to describe the transfer all believers experience when they leave the old realm of sin “in Adam” and enter the new realm of life “in Christ.” As a result of the believers’ death to sin (Paul uses ἵνα), they “walk in newness of life.” This means that all believers who have been united with Christ now live obediently. I should note that “walk” (περιπατήσωμεν) is in the subjunctive mood which I mentioned earlier would exempt this from consideration. However, ἵνα always takes the subjunctive mood, even when it expresses result (and this occurs many times in the NT). Thus, when God, who is the unexpressed agent of the passive verb, “buried” (συνετάφημεν) acts by uniting someone with Christ, His actions always have a certain result.²⁶ It is safe to say, then, that all who are buried with Christ by baptism into his death will live obediently, i.e., they walk in newness of life.
- Being ashamed of past sin – Romans 6:21
 - “But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.”
 - Summary: When Paul contrasts the former lifestyles of the Roman believers (6:20–21) with their present ones (6:22), he speaks of what they were formerly and what they now have presently. One of their present possessions is an attitude of shame (“things of which you are *now* ashamed”) regarding

²⁵For further explanation and exegesis of the passages cited in this section, please see Jonathan R. Pratt, “The Relationship between Justification and Spiritual Fruit in Romans 5–8,” *Themelios* 34.2 (2009): 162–78, which is a summary of my dissertation, Jonathan R. Pratt, “The Relationship between Justification and Sanctification in Romans 5–8,” (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1999).

²⁶Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 473–74.

those pre-conversion activities. Believers also enjoy freedom from sin's power, enslavement to God, fruit leading to sanctification, and eternal life (all listed in v. 22). The attitude along with the blessings are all presented by Paul as necessary responses of believers. Indeed, all believers have left their enslavement to sin and become slaves of God (6:17–19), and all believers are ashamed of what they were and of what they did prior to entering the service of their new Master.

- Producing fruit leading to sanctification – Romans 6:22
 - “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.”
 - Summary: We saw in the previous explanation that all Christians have received freedom from sin, enslavement to God, fruit leading to sanctification, and eternal life. These are consequences true for all believers, and one of these is clearly a righteous response—fruit leading to sanctification.
- Bearing fruit to God – Romans 7:4
 - “Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.”
 - Summary: In language reminiscent of 6:22, Paul states that those who have died to the law, i.e. all believers, have been united with Christ. Paul includes himself (“we”) along with his fellow believers, all of whom have been united with Christ and all of whom bear fruit for God. Again, Paul uses the same result clause (ἵνα) he used in 6:4 to emphasize that everyone who has died to the law and been united with Christ bears fruit as a result of that union.
- Serving in newness of the Spirit – Romans 7:6
 - “But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.”
 - Summary: Two factors support understanding this text as proof of an inevitable righteous response: 1) Paul uses a result infinitive clause (ὥστε δουλεύειν ἡμᾶς) indicating that all who have been released from the law serve in newness of the Spirit. 2) Paul compares the believers’ service in the Spirit with life under the Old Covenant (“oldness of the letter”), thus making a clear connection to the New Covenant blessing of Spirit-imprinted obedience on the heart of all who participate in the New Covenant, i.e., all church-age saints.
- Walking according to the Spirit – Romans 8:4
 - “in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”
 - Summary: This is yet another result clause (using ἵνα) flowing from the action of God in v. 3. There God is said to send his Son and to condemn sin, then in v. 4 we learn the result of this action—the righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled in those who “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Again, Paul includes himself in this group (notice the “us”). So the

major question of this verse and this entire section (8:5–11) is the identity of the two groups of people contrasted with one another: the “flesh” people and the “Spirit” people. On the one hand, the “flesh” people set their minds on the things of the flesh (v. 5); their thinking results in death (v. 6); their thinking is in antagonism to God because it is incapable of submitting to him (v. 7); and they are not able to please God (v. 8). On the other hand, the “Spirit” people set their minds on the things of the Spirit (v. 5); their thinking results in life and peace (v. 6); the Spirit indwells them (vv. 9b, 10a, 11a, 11c); the Spirit conveys resurrection life to them (v. 10c); and their mortal bodies will be made alive in the future (v. 11). If there is a thought of arguing for two groups of Christians here (and some Keswick and Chaferian teachers do believe this to be the case²⁷), v. 9a settles the issue quite plainly when Paul says that “you,” i.e., all the Christian readers of the epistle, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit. Furthermore, all believers are identified as those indwelt by the Spirit (v. 9b). And if we have any question about the significance of being indwelt by the Spirit, Paul says that anyone not indwelt by the Spirit is an unbeliever (v. 9c). Thus, God’s condemnation of sin results in obedience for all believers, all of whom walk according to the Spirit.

- Minding the things of the Spirit – Romans 8:5
 - “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.”
 - Summary: the description of these who walk according to the Spirit is that they “set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” This moral action is true of all Spirit-indwelt Christians and contrasted with the mindset of flesh-oriented unbelievers.
- Praying for God’s help – Romans 8:15
 - “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’”
 - Summary: Paul’s argument is straightforward: all believers have been adopted as sons into God’s family, and all believers cry out to their Father for help.
- Groaning for bodily redemption – Romans 8:23
 - “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”
 - Summary: Notice how Paul includes himself in this description. Also, we know all believers have the firstfruits of the Spirit, and all are looking forward to the redemption of our bodies. This is not a groan of complaint as

²⁷Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Schoettle Publishing Co, 1992), 360–65; Dave Anderson and Jim Reitman, *Portraits of Righteousness: Free Grace Sanctification in Romans 5–8* (Liberty University Press, 2013), 140–66.

much as it is a groan of anticipation, a longing for future adoption and presence with the Lord (probably similar to the idea Paul expresses in Phil 1:23 where he longs to depart and to be with Christ).

- Expressing love for God – Romans 8:28
 - “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”
 - Summary: For whom does God cause all things to work together for good? There are actually two descriptions of these people given by Paul. The one that comes to mind is the second—“those who are called according to his purpose” (τοῖς κατὰ πρόθεσιν κλητοῖς οὖσιν) This is why we are quick (rightfully) to remind our fellow Christians that God works all things for good for them because all who are called enjoy this benefit. But Paul also states that these same people are those who love God (τοῖς ἀγαπῶσιν τὸν θεόν). Loving God is an inevitable and certain reality for those who have been called.

There are at least 10 more verses in Paul’s letters which demonstrate that all believers have righteous responses to the ministry of the Spirit which results in their persevering obedience.

The Corinthian Letters and Righteous Responses

- 1 Corinthians 8:3 – “If anyone loves God, he is known by God.” This is another example of the two elements of a first class conditional sentence in which both the protasis and apodosis are equivalent in their logical relations.²⁸ Thus, believers (those known by God) love God, i.e. they are actively obedient to the Spirit’s prompting to love.
- 2 Corinthians 3:18 – “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul is explaining the effects of the New Covenant ministry of the Spirit through Paul and his associates (the “us” who are the ministers of the New Covenant – 3:6). He contrasts the glory of the Mosaic covenant with the greater glory of the New Covenant four times in 3:7–11,²⁹ and then he marvels in the blessing of the freedom from spiritual blindness that New Covenant believers enjoy as opposed to the blindness that law-following Israelites still retain (3:12–17). Verse 18 is the culminating verse of the chapter as Paul delineates three key ideas: a) New Covenant believers behold the glory of the Lord because their faces have been unveiled; b) New Covenant believers are being transformed; and c) this transformation takes place by means of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is clear

²⁸See n. 19.

²⁹Here are the four contrasts in 2 Corinthians 3:7–11: “ministry of death” in v. 7 with the “ministry of the Spirit” in v. 8; the “ministry of condemnation” in v. 9a with the “ministry of righteousness” in v. 9b; “what once had glory has come to have no glory at all” in v. 10a with “the glory that surpasses it” in v. 10b; and what was “being brought to an end” in v. 11a with “what is permanent” in v. 11b.

that Paul is equating the New Covenant blessings with the transformation of all believers which is precisely what two key New Covenant texts promised. First, Jeremiah 32:40b states, “I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.” Failing to turn away from the Lord means that New Covenant believers live obediently.³⁰ Second, Ezekiel 36:27 declares, “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”³¹ Both of these OT texts speak to the promise of God to transform New Covenant believers through the ministry of the Spirit. Doug Moo’s comment provides a helpful summary of this discussion: “Central to the new covenant that God promises to ‘cut’ with his people in the last days is his own provision for the peoples’ obedience—an obedience that was singularly lacking in the history of Israel under the Torah. A Spirit-fueled conformity to God’s will is therefore a central and distinguishing characteristic of new-realm living.”³²

- 2 Corinthians 5:16 – “From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.” The immediate context shows that Paul and his readers have died with Christ and now live for Christ (5:15). Furthermore, they have become new creations in Christ (5:17). So when Paul states that from now on (ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν) believers no longer view the world through the eyes of unbelief but rather with the perspective of true belief, he shows that all believers enjoy the fruit of a Holy Spirit-generated viewpoint—a righteous response.
- 2 Corinthians 9:8 – “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.” Whatever God is able to do for His children, He does in abundance.³³ In this case He empowers the Corinthians (“you”) to abound in every good work.

The Prison Epistles and Righteous Responses

- Ephesians 2:10 – “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” The “we” in this verse are the same group of people who have been saved by grace through faith apart from any work of their own (2:8–9), i.e., all believers. Using new creation language Paul argues that all Christians have been saved for the purpose of doing good works (ἐπὶ ἔργους ἀγαθοῖς). And to emphasize the certain nature of the production of this obedience, Paul tells us that God prepared the doing of those good works (ὅς προητοίμασεν ὁ θεός) ahead of the time that Christians would

³⁰Piper, *Providence*, 618, 639–40.

³¹Ibid., 625. Piper connects Ezekiel’s words (“I will put my Spirit within you”) with those of Jeremiah 31:33 when God says, “I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts.” Also see the connection to the New Covenant and the heart of flesh God promises in Ezek 11:19–20 (Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* [Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963], 199).

³²Douglas J. Moo, *A Theology of Paul and His Letters* (Zondervan, 2021), 610.

³³Notice that God gives “all grace” and “all sufficiency” to do every kind of good work (“all things”) at “all times.”

begin to “walk in them.” This is language reminiscent of 1:4 where God “chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world,” and it reminds all readers that just as certainly as the believers’ election was foreordained so also is the persevering obedience of believers as well.

- Philippians 1:6 – “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”³⁴
- Philippians 2:13 – “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” This is the indicative statement that serves as the foundation for the imperative in 2:12 (“work out your own salvation”). The reason why believers can obey this command is that God is producing both a Spirit-driven willingness and a Spirit-motivated action in the lives of the Philippians and all Christians generally.
- Colossians 1:3–6 – “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.” The gospel is bearing fruit and increasing in that the Colossians have heard and understood the grace of God. The Colossians have embraced the Gospel and it is bearing fruit and increasing among them not only in the form of new converts but also in “the fruit of spiritual character” which is evidenced in the Colossians themselves.³⁵

The Pastorals and Righteous Responses

- 2 Timothy 4:8 – “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.” The crown which is righteousness³⁶ is received by all who love Christ’s appearing. Since every believer will receive the verdict of justification at the final judgment (Rom 5:19) due to the cross work of Christ (2 Cor 5:21), every believer also loves His appearing and demonstrates this righteous response.³⁷
- Titus 2:14 – “Who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” Paul uses two adjectives to describe the people (λαόν) whom He has redeemed and purified. They are “chosen” (περιούσιον) and “zealous” (ζηλωτήν) for good works. Since all believers are chosen, it is clear that all believers are also zealous to do good works. This is an attitude or desire that cannot come from an unbelieving heart (Rom 3:10–12) but can only be generated by the work of the Spirit.

³⁴See comments on this verse and the “good work” on p. 10.

³⁵McCune, *Systematic Theology*, 3:186.

³⁶This is certainly a genitive of apposition.

³⁷John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Multnomah, 1991), 297, believes that this love of Christ’s appearing is a necessary response of all true believers.

General Epistles and Perseverance

Having considered the New Testament teaching on perseverance in the teaching of Jesus and Paul, we now turn to the general epistles and Revelation. For this portion of our study I have chosen to organize these verses under the same four headings used for Paul's letters: 1) failing to persevere demonstrates unbelief; 2) persevering demonstrates true belief; 3) statements of God's promise or decision to help believers persevere; and 4) indicative statements of righteous responses. Throughout this section I will provide the text of the Bible verses (ESV) and then make comments on that particular text

Failing to persevere demonstrates unbelief. Just as we found in Paul's letters so also there are four texts in the general epistles which show that unbelievers do not continue to believe and obey. Therefore, these examples show that continuance in obedience will be evidenced in the lives of true believers.

- Hebrews 12:14 – “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” If someone does not have a holy life, he will not have the privilege of seeing the Lord in eternity. The holiness in this verse is speaking of progressive sanctification because it is something the believer is to make an effort to achieve (i.e. it is not referring to past sanctification or future sanctification but to present sanctification without which no one will see the Lord). The implication of the command is that believers will obey it since failure to live a holy life, i.e. to be obedient, will result in final damnation.
- James 2:14–17, 26 – “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”
“For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”
Because of space I have not included the entire text from this section of James's discussion of faith and works, but these verses are sufficient to show James's big point: a faith that does show itself in good works is a dead faith. And only those who do show their faith in their good works are true believers—true believers persevere in good works.
- 1 John 2:19 – “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” Failure to continue with the apostle and his associates in the apostolic faith demonstrates that they were not true believers. Thus persevering in the faith would have been shown by a willingness to “hold on” and to “continue” in fellowship with the apostle and the apostolic faith he promoted.
- 2 John 9 – “Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.” Again, it is important to note the Johannine usage of “abide” (μένω) which normally indicates continuance. In this case the false believer does not continue in the teaching (as those described in 1 Jn 2:19), but the true believer does continue or remain in the teaching of Christ, he does persevere in the faith.

Persevering demonstrates true belief. I find three different ways the general epistles show that believers do persevere and so demonstrate true belief. These include: a) heeding the warnings of Hebrews; b) passing the tests of faith in the Johannine epistles; and c) meeting conditions that Hebrews and Peter provide.

Our **first** group of texts that demonstrate perseverance of believers is rhetorical rather than textual in nature. By this I refer to the function of warnings in the New Testament and in Hebrews in particular. Why does the author of Hebrews use warnings? I will seek to answer this question by considering the purpose of the letter and the makeup of the audience. Then, based on the discussion of purpose and audience, I will discuss the five warning passages and how they function with regard to perseverance.

The author's *purpose* for writing is to exhort his hearers to have faith in Jesus as the supreme and unique Son of God and faithful high priest by holding fast to Jesus and obeying his Word. He accomplishes this goal by giving exposition and warning.

The main *audience* of the book is mostly Jewish Christians in Rome with a Hellenistic background. It is likely they came out of synagogues in Rome when they were saved, and for this reason, there are some Gentiles among them as well.³⁸

There are five *warning* passages in Hebrews (2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; 12:14–29). Each of these passages contains four components: 1) a warning/exhortation; 2) subjects of the warning; 3) the sin committed (e.g. apostasy); and 4) the consequences of the sin.³⁹ While interpreters are generally agreed regarding 1) and 3), there are basically five different approaches to the answers for 2) and 4).⁴⁰

- True Believer: Loss of salvation (the standard Arminian approach)
- True Believer: Loss of reward (the standard Free Grace approach)
- True Believer: Hypothetical loss of salvation
- Professing but False Believer: Eternal condemnation
- True Believer: Conceivable consequences

Note: the last three views are embraced by various Reformed scholars though the fourth view is the most common Reformed interpretation.⁴¹

³⁸See the commentaries on these issues of audience and location. There is general agreement among them in regard to the ethnic makeup of the audience as well as to the provenance of the letter. Of course, the main point, regardless of the ethnicity or location of the readers, is that they are believers. See Rodney J. Decker, "The Original Readers of Hebrews," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 3.2 (1999): 20–49.

³⁹For an excellent layout of the structure and meaning of the warning passages see Scot McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions," *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992): 21–59.

⁴⁰Three helpful resources that lay out these views include: Bruce Compton, "Persevering and Falling Away: A Re-examination of Hebrews 6:4–6," *DBSJ* 1 (Spring 1996): 135–67; Herbert W. Bateman IV, ed., *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Kregel, 2007); and Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (IVP, 2001), 19–45. Schreiner and Caneday represent the fifth view delineated here.

⁴¹There is a sixth view which combines views 4) and 5). It suggests that the audience was mixed, consisting of both true and false believers. C. Adrian Thomas, *A Case*

I believe the best approach is view #5 with a nod toward view #4 as well. So how does this fit with what the writer of Hebrews is trying to say in his letter and how does the writer use the warnings to accomplish his purpose?

Since his audience is primarily made up of true believers,⁴² the author uses these warnings as a means of helping his readers to persevere, to hold on to Jesus. The rhetorical function of the warnings is “to appeal to the mind to conceive how actions have consequences.”⁴³ In this way God is using the warnings to speak to both the true believers and the professing believers in the audience.⁴⁴ For the believers, the warnings serve to encourage them to “hold on” (4:14; 10:23) and to persevere in the faith to the end. For the professing, but false, believers, they serve to remind them that failing to persevere will result in eternal damnation (2:3; 4:11; 6:4–6). Thus, the warning passages of Hebrews remind us that continuing in the faith with right belief and right actions is the expectation and necessity for the true children of God.

Our **second** set of texts come from the Johannine epistles where we find the well-known “tests of life.”⁴⁵ There are three tests John gives so that the reader can know that she has eternal life (1 John 5:13).

- Doctrinal test: do you believe Jesus is the Son of God?
 - 1 John 4:1–3 – “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess

for Mixed-Audience with Reference to the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews (Peter Lang, 2008), 15–16, states, “The best way to understand these warning passages in Hebrews is to view them in the context of a mixed-community. . . . That is, the author of Hebrews writes under the assumption that his community, like any other New Testament community, is a community of professing believers in which profession must be tested. . . . Of course, not knowing for sure who these individuals are, he addresses the whole body as though all were believers, while at the same time making indirect references to elements of concern in the congregation.”

⁴²There are two lines of support for the idea that the audience is made up of true believers: 1) the author uses first person plural pronouns to include himself along with his readers throughout the book – 3:1, 6, 14; 4:14; 6:9; 10:23; 12:4, 22; and 2) the readers had already been persecuted for their faith and had faithfully endured – 10:32–34.

⁴³Schreiner and Caneday, 207.

⁴⁴McCune, 3:184, states, “These warnings are concerned with professing but false believers, but since no one knows for certain where the line between the living and the dead is exactly in a group of professing Christians, the warnings are addressed to all.” Buist Fanning, “A Classical Reformed View,” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (ed. Herbert Bateman IV; Kregel, 2007), 218 (especially n. 99), agrees. However, in my view I think the emphasis lies in the other direction. The writer of Hebrews was primarily thinking of motivating the true believers in his audience toward perseverance in good works and secondarily of warning false believers.

⁴⁵Robert Law, *The Tests of Life: A Study of the First Epistle of St. John* (Baker, 1968; reprint from 3d ed., T. & T. Clark, 1913), is typically credited with using the phrase “tests of life” to describe the evidences of true belief in 1 John.

Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.”

- 1 John 4:14–16 – “And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”
- Moral test: do you obey the commands of God?
 - 1 John 2:3–6 – “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.”
 - 1 John 2:29 – “If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.”
- Love test: do you love the people of God?
 - 1 John 4:19–21 – “We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.”
 - 1 John 3:14 – “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.”

For John the believer’s perseverance is demonstrated by whether or not she believes in Jesus as Son of God come in the flesh, lives obediently, and loves other Christians. Indeed, this is how we know that someone is a Christian in that they persevere in these righteous ways.

The **third** way we see the general epistles encouraging perseverance is in the use of conditional statements, which show that the hearers are truly Christians as they fulfill the conditions.

- Hebrews 3:14 – “For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.” The perfect form (γεγόναι) is significant in that the writer does not use the future tense to indicate that perseverance will result in salvation if we persevere, but rather it “proves that we have already come to share in Christ” and that we continue to do so if we hold fast.⁴⁶ D. A. Carson makes this point regarding the perfect even more clearly: “It follows from this verse that although perseverance is mandated, it is also the evidence of what has taken place in the past. Put another way, perseverance becomes one of the essential ingredients of what it means to be a Christian, of what a partaker of Christ is and does. If persevering shows we have (already) come to share in Christ, it can only be because

⁴⁶Piper, *Providence*, 607.

sharing in Christ has perseverance for its inevitable fruit.”⁴⁷ This is stating the same truth as 1 Corinthians 15:1–2 in that holding firm shows that one shares in Christ.

- 2 Peter 1:10 – “Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities [virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, love] you will never fall.” Again, possessing these fruits shows that one is a Christian and will never fall eternally.

God’s promise to help believers persevere in good works. In the general epistles we have one example of God’s ability and commitment to help believers in persevering.

- Jude 24–25 – “Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.” Not only is God able to keep a believer from stumbling and to help him to persevere in good works, but he does do this, because He is faithful to his promises (e.g. 2 Thess 3:3) and He has the power to fulfill them.

Indicative statements of righteous responses. The general epistles also provide several straightforward indicative statements that believers persevere in good works.

- Hebrews 9:13–14 – “For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of the Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” In an amazing act of grace, the blood of Christ accomplishes two wonderful effects: 1) it clears away the defiling effects of dead works and 2) it puts in motion a life of obedient service for God.⁴⁸ Thus, we see that all Christians have received a purified conscience that results in obedient actions.
- James 1:12 – “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.” The crown which is life (an appositional genitive similar to 2 Tim 4:8) is given to all believers. In this verse its recipients love God and remain steadfast under trial. Both of these righteous responses are true of Christians showing their perseverance in the faith.
- 1 Peter 1:8 – “Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.” This verse gives a straightforward description of all Christians—they love God, a spiritual fruit.
- 1 Peter 2:24–25 – “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” Those who have been healed include all believers, for no Christian can be exempted from the effects of the atonement. There are two evidences of persevering action described for those who have been healed. First, these who have

⁴⁷D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Baker, 1984), 88. Also, Peterson, “Perseverance of the Saints,” 103–6.

⁴⁸Piper, *Providence*, 632.

died to sin live to righteousness, i.e. they respond obediently. Second, after straying like sheep, they have returned to the Shepherd. Straying is not merely a positional concept nor is returning. When these believers return to the Shepherd away from their sinful actions, they are giving evidence of obedient actions.⁴⁹

- 1 John 5:3–5 – “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” The context shows that Christians show their love for God by obeying Him (v. 3). And this obedient faith is connected to the fact that they are overcomers (whether the ὅτι at the beginning of v. 4 is causal or explanatory). Thus, overcoming includes keeping God’s commandments.⁵⁰

In this second section of the paper I have sought to lay out the biblical teaching about perseverance focusing on Jesus, Paul, and the writers of the general epistles. The data is overwhelming in support of the truth that true followers of Christ will endure in faith and good works until they die.

Summary and Implications of Perseverance

We have traveled a lengthy road through the New Testament text, mining the depths of the Scripture to find the Bible’s teaching about the doctrine of perseverance. The gospel record of Jesus’s teaching revealed that He employed metaphors about fruit-bearing and sheep as well as conditional statements of factuality to show that believers will produce spiritual fruit, will follow their Shepherd, and will continue to do so until they die.

Our section on Paul’s teaching was the longest of the three groupings of texts we considered, and we discovered four basic ways that Paul emphasized perseverance: 1) texts which showed that failing to persevere demonstrated unbelief; 2) texts which showed that persevering demonstrated true belief; 3) statements of God’s promise or decision to help believers persevere; and 4) indicative statements of righteous responses. The last of these constituted the largest set of texts numbering 23 in all.

We followed the same four categories when considering the teaching of the general epistles and Revelation. This included some lengthier treatments of the warnings in Hebrews and the tests of life in the Johannine epistles.

The reader will hopefully concur with me that the New Testament clearly affirms and emphasizes this important doctrine. But I believe there are several implications that arise from this study and that should be delineated. Also, I would like to include a very short summary of the means God has chosen to encourage perseverance. I will treat these in reverse order.

⁴⁹Ibid., 631.

⁵⁰James E. Rosscup, “The Overcomer of the Apocalypse,” *GTJ* 3.2 (Fall 1982): 264. Rosscup argues that every one of the overcomer passages in 1 John and Revelation include all believers as he argues against the notion that the “overcomer” is a special class of Christian.

The Means of Perseverance

God could have chosen to make his children perfect at the point of their justification. But He did not do this. Instead, He chose to use several means to help His children to persevere in faith and good works to the end. In His kindness to us God provides at least five means by which he spurs us on to fruit-bearing.

First, God uses suffering or discipline to produce fruits of righteousness in us. Hebrews 12:10–11 make this point clearly: “For [our earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but [God] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

Second, God gives us an abundance of both negative and positive commands or imperatives. Why? I can think of at least three reasons: 1) transformation continues to take place in the believer’s life (2 Cor 3:18) and this assumes the ongoing presence of sin; 2) believers need direction to improve and grow in their submission to the Spirit’s work of sanctification because Christians are still ignorant and forgetful; and 3) we need encouragement and motivation to fight sin and to resist temptation (the Puritans referred to this activity as mortification), and this temptation comes from without (the world and the devil) and from within (the flesh).

Third, God uses conditional promises and warnings to help Christians persevere.⁵¹ An example of a conditional promise is Revelation 21:6–7 – And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. An example of a conditional warning is Revelation 22:18–19 – “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”

Fourth, God uses the Christian fellowship of the local church to encourage believers to persevere in the faith. Hebrews 10:24–25 states that the way believers provoke one another to love and good works is by assembling together. Paul’s encouragements to believers to engage with the body for mutual edification and spiritual ministry in Romans 12, Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12–14 (especially 12:12–26) are notable for the connection between church gathering and perseverance in good works by the individuals in the gathered church.⁵²

Fifth, we see examples of times when prayer for others and oneself pleads with God to bring about perseverance in the believer. Jesus prayed for His children to persevere in John 17:11 – “Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.” Acts 14:22–23 explains how Paul and Barnabas prayed for the Galatian churches to continue in the faith. Paul prayed that the Thessalonians would

⁵¹Schreiner and Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us*, 41–45, provide an excellent discussion of conditional promises and warnings.

⁵²Sinclair Ferguson, *Know Your Christian Life: A Theological Introduction* (IVP, 1981), 160, states: “Our spiritual progress depends in measure on our being able to minister *to* others, and our receiving ministry *from* others. We are members of a body, says Paul—and the body moves, lives and grows *together*” (emphasis in original).

be sanctified completely (1 Thess 5:23) and that their hearts would be directed to love God (2 Thess 3:5). The author of Hebrews prayed that God would equip his readers with the ability to do God's will which would be pleasing in His sight. And Jude 20–21 reminds his readers to pray in the Holy Spirit to “keep yourselves in the love of God.”

By these five means, suffering, commands and prohibitions, conditional promises and warnings, the local church, and prayer, God has provided several gracious ways to help believers persevere in the faith.

The Implications of Perseverance

Without much elaboration I will lay out just a few of the ramifications of this biblical-theological study of perseverance.

First, while we can marvel at and appreciate the doctrine of perseverance, we must not jettison the Bible's many calls to us to “pursue holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14).⁵³ So we cannot ignore the imperatives. Thus, if it is true that believers will persevere in good works (the indicatives), it is equally true that believers must persevere (the imperatives), so we must acknowledge and seek to balance properly both of these truths.⁵⁴

Second, obedience or continuance in the faith is the evidence of true faith which helps to explain the false faith we sometimes see in the Bible.⁵⁵ And it reminds us that false believers are still present and active today in our churches.

Third, if perseverance in good works is an inevitable and necessary result of our justification, then it is not possible to argue for two classes of Christians (the “spiritual” and the “carnal”). To expand on this point a bit: 1) while the NT clearly speaks in regard to the necessity of fruit-bearing in the lives of the justified, its authors never suggest that growth in holiness is completed or perfected in the earthly existence of the believer. The numerous imperatives given to believers calling them to obedience and growth should quickly dispel such thinking. 2) We all observe various levels or degrees of maturity and growth in the experience of believers, but the NT gives no indication of distinct classes of Christians nor does it advocate certain types of decisions to help move a Christian out of one class into another.⁵⁶

Fourth, these texts show that God is the one who initiates and brings forth fruit in the believer's life. But we also realize the need for believers to submit obediently to the prompting of the Spirit in their lives. This reminds us again of the mystery of spiritual

⁵³Schreiner, *Run to Win*, 103.

⁵⁴McCune, 3:181.

⁵⁵McCune, 3:173–77, mentions Judas Iscariot, Simon Magus (Acts 8:9–24), false prophets (2 Pet 2:20–22; Matt 7:22–23; Mk 7:6–7); false apostles (2 Cor 11:13–15; Rev 2:2); and secessionists (1 John 2:18–19). I would also add the second and third seeds in the soils parable (Matt 13:5–7, 20–22) and “believers” in John's gospel (Jn 2:23–25; 8:30, 31, 59).

⁵⁶Ernest C. Reisinger, *What Should We Think of “The Carnal Christian”?* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1978). Also see Michael Riley, “Carnal Christians: A Pastoral Perspective,” *In the Nick of Time* (May 13, 2016) and Jon Pratt, “Carnal Christians? Part One,” *In the Nick of Time* (April 22, 2016); idem, “Carnal Christians? Part Two,” *In the Nick of Time* (May 6, 2016).

growth in the believer's life—too much emphasis on God's work and the indicatives of sanctification and we fall into *antinomianism or quietism* and too much emphasis on man's work and the imperatives of sanctification and we fall into *moralism and legalism*. We must seek God's help to maintain a proper balance in our thinking and teaching about sanctification. Notice the expression of this mystery in 1 Corinthians 15:10 – “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

Fifth, there is no need for a jump start, a second work of grace, an act of consecration or dedication, to activate one's spiritual growth. While it is true that some experience a period (or even periods) of spiritual lethargy following their justification only to see a significant jump in their spiritual vitality due to a significant spiritual decision, this is only experiential and should not serve as an expected pattern for all believers. The doctrine of perseverance shows that the production of spiritual fruit begins at regeneration and continues to the end of life. I appreciate the dictum, “Christians don't need to ‘let go and let God’; rather they need to ‘trust God and get going!’”

Sixth, in the interests of theological precision we will be more helpful if we make a clear distinction between *perseverance* and *eternal security* as we teach and preach.

May God help us to appreciate this wonderful truth of perseverance even as we continue to seek His help in pursuing holiness and conformity to the image of Christ.