

## CHAPTER XVII.

### OF THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS.

Section I.—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.

Section II.—This perseverance of the saints depends, not upon their own freewill, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace; from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

Section III.—Nevertheless they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalence of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their perseverance, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts; have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalise others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.

### EXPOSITION.

The perseverance of the saints is one of the articles by which the creed of the followers of Calvin is distinguished from that of the followers of Arminius. The latter hold, that true believers may fall into sins inconsistent with a state of grace, and may continue in apostasy to the end of life, and consequently may finally fall into perdition. The same doctrine is avowedly supported by the Church of Rome; for the Council of Trent has decreed, that "If any person shall say that a man who has been justified cannot lose grace, and that, therefore, he who falls and sins was never truly justified, he shall be accursed." [*Decret. de Justificatione*, canon xxiii.] In opposition to this tenet, our Confession affirms, that true believers "can neither totally nor finally fall away from a state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved." There may seem to be a redundancy of language in this statement; for, if believers cannot fall totally, it follows that they cannot fall finally. Both terms, however, are employed with the utmost propriety. "They are intended to oppose the doctrine of Arminians, who affirm, that although a saint may fall totally from grace, he may be restored by repentance; but that since this is uncertain, and does not always take place, he

may also fall finally, and die in his sins. Now, we affirm, that the total apostasy of believers is impossible, not in the nature of things, but by the divine constitution; and, consequently, that no man who has been once received into the divine favour can be ultimately deprived of salvation." [Dick's Lectures on Theology, vol. iii. p. 516.]

For the purpose of explaining the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, and obviating objections against it, we offer the following observations, which will be found embodied in the several propositions of our Confession:—

1. The privilege of final perseverance is peculiar to true believers.

It is restricted in our Confession "to those whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit." Many in the visible Church are merely nominal Christians. They are joined to the Church by an external profession; but they are not united to the Head of the Church by the Spirit of grace, and by a living faith. They assume the form of godliness, but are strangers to its power. They may have a name to live, but they are spiritually dead. Now, it is readily granted, that such seeming Christians may finally apostatise. They never knew the grace of God in truth, and may, in a season of trial, discover their real character by open apostasy. They might have splendid profession of religion, and be possessed of eminent gifts, and might thus deceive themselves and impose upon others; but they had not "the root of the matter" in them. And we may assuredly conclude of all those who fall totally and finally away, that they were never really "rooted and grounded in Christ." An inspired apostle declares, concerning such persons: "They went out from us, but they were not of us: for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us; but they went out, that they might be made manifest, that they were not all of us."—1 John ii. 19.

This enables us to explain the several examples of apostasy mentioned in Scripture, in perfect consistency with the final perseverance of the saints. The stony-ground hearers, who received the Word with joy, and afterwards fell away, are expressly said to have had no root in themselves, and so endured only for a while.—Matt. xiii. 21. In Heb. vi. 4-6, some are said to be enlightened, and to have tasted of the heavenly gift, and to be made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and to have tasted the good Word of God, and the powers of the world to come, and yet it is supposed they may fall away and never be restored again; but it is evident, that notwithstanding the high things ascribed to them, they never had the truth of grace, for there are better things, even things that accompany salvation, expressly mentioned (verse 9) in contradistinction to their attainments. Those mentioned by another apostle (2 Pet. ii. 20), who had escaped the pollutions of the world, and were again entangled therein, and overcome, had evidently never experienced a real change of their impure nature, though they had an outward reformation. Such examples, or the fall of such mere professors of religion as Hymeneus, Philetus, and Demas, do not in the least invalidate the doctrine of the final perseverance of true saints.

It may here be remarked, that as the privilege of perseverance is limited to true believers, so it must be extended to every one of them. If one of them could be lost, this would sap the foundation of the comfort of the whole; for the condition

of all would be insecure. Not only those who have a high degree of grace, but all who have true grace, though but like a grain of mustard seed—not only the strong and flourishing, but such as are like “the smoking flax and bruised reed,” shall be enabled to “hold on their way” and shall grow stronger and stronger. The same reasons hold for the perseverance of all, as of any who have “obtained like precious faith;” and we must either erase this entirely from the catalogue of the believer’s privileges, or maintain that it extends to every one of them.

II. The perseverance of the saints is *not owing to their inherent strength, or to any measure of grace they have already received, but solely to divine grace*. We readily acknowledge, that in themselves they are utterly weak, and wholly insufficient to withstand the numerous and formidable enemy that are combined against them; such as Satan, the world, and the corruptions of their own hearts. If left to contend with their spiritual adversaries in their own strength, they would be easily overcome. If their perseverance depended on their own resolution, their faith would soon fail. How strikingly is this humbling truth exemplified in the case of Peter! He said with confidence: “Though all men should be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended.”—“Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee.”—Matt. xxvi. 33, 35. But how soon was his fortitude shaken! How soon was his good resolution forgotten, and given to the winds! He trusted too much in his own strength, and was left to feel his weakness. He was brought to the trial, and his presumed strength was gone. He trembled at the voice of a maid, and denied his Lord with dreadful oaths and horrid imprecations. What but the prevalent prayer, and upholding grace of the Divine Redeemer, prevented him from becoming, like Judas, a perfidious apostate! But such are the best of saints, considered in themselves. Their perseverance, therefore, as our Confession states, “depends not upon their own free will.” They have no might in themselves to resist and overcome the powerful foes united against them, and they are safest when most deeply sensible of their own weakness, and most entirely dependent upon divine grace; for “when they are weak, then are they strong.”

III. The perseverance of the saints does not *secure them from partial falls, but from total and final apostasy*. Our Confession admits, that believers may, “through the temptations of Satan, and of the world, the prevalence of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins, and for a time continue therein.” The caution addressed to “him that thinketh he standeth, to take heed lest he fall,” and the ardent prayers of the saints, that God would “cleanse them from secret faults, and keep them back from presumptuous sins,” manifest, that though none of the saints can fall from a state of grace, yet they may fall into very great sins. And the Scriptures furnish many instances of partial falls in the most eminent saints. The patient Job cursed the day of his birth. The man Moses, who was “meek above all men which were upon the face of the earth,” spake unadvisedly with his lips. David, the man after God’s own heart, was guilty of an atrocious and a complicated sin. Solomon, though the wisest of men, “did evil in the sight of the Lord, and went not fully after the Lord, as did David his father.” Peter, a bold and zealous disciple, denied his Lord in the most aggravated manner. But though true saints may fall very low, so low that themselves and others may have little hope of their recovery, yet they shall not be

utterly lost; for the hand of the Lord still in a measure sustains them. "Though a good men fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand."—Ps. xxxvii. 24. "A just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again."—Prov. xxiv. 16. Though David fell into very grievous sins, and appears to have remained in a state of great insensibility till he was awakened by the prophet Nathan, yet, it is manifest, that he had not lost entirely what was wrought in him by the Spirit of God. For we find him afterwards praying: "Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me" (Ps. li. 11); which implies, that he had then some experience of God's presence, and that the Holy Spirit had never wholly departed from him. When it is said of Solomon, that "he went not fully after the Lord, as did David his father" (1 Kings xi. 6.), it seems manifest, that his declension is to be understood of an abatement of his former zeal, and not of a total and final apostasy. God, as still his father, "chastened him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men;" but never suffered a his mercy to depart away from him."—2 Sam. vii. 14, 15. Peter, too, was recovered from his lamentable fall. When Christ "turned and looked upon him, he went out, and wept bitterly."—Luke xxii. 61, 62. When his Lord afterwards questioned him respecting his love, he could appeal to him as the searcher of hearts, that he did love him in sincerity; and Christ having renewed his commission, he laboured zealously and faithfully in his Master's service. The fact, then, that true saints may fall into grievous sins, is by no means incompatible with their final perseverance. The Lord promises to "heal their backslidings" (Hos. xiv. 4); and while this promise implies that they may fall partially, it secures that they shall not fall totally and finally.

IV. The perseverance of the saints *secures the preservation of the principle of grace in their souls, though it may greatly decay as to its exercise.* In regard to the acting or exercise of grace, the believer may sometimes be in a very languishing condition; but the principle of grace shall never be entirely eradicated. He may appear like a tree almost killed by a long and severe winter. He may seem to be without fruit, without verdure; yea, even without life. But, under all the witherings of the believer, "his seed remaineth in him," otherwise the promise would fail in which it is engaged, that "the root of the righteous shall not be moved."—Prov. xii. 3. We see this exemplified in the case of Peter. Christ said to him: "I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not."—Luke xxii. 32. We cannot doubt that Peter's faith, as to its exercise, did fail, and that in a most lamentable manner. But to suppose that his faith failed as to its principle or habit, would be altogether inconsistent with the success of Christ's prayer, which we are sure is always prevalent. As a tree in winter has still life in the root, though its branches wither, and it appears to be dead; so the believer, in his most decayed and languishing condition, has still a vital principle of grace within. And as the tree revives and flourishes as soon as the spring returns, so the believer's graces revive, and act with renewed vigour when "the Sun of Righteousness" returns with his refreshing influences. The exercise of grace may be interrupted, but the principle of grace, once implanted, shall never be entirely extirpated. The believer may fall into a very languid condition, but he shall never fall away from a state of grace. He shall be enabled to persevere until grace shall be consummated in glory.

Having explained the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, as it is exhibited in our Confession, the arguments by which it is supported may now be stated. These are arranged, in the second section, in the following order: -

1. The perseverance of the saints is secured by *the immutability of the decree of election*. That a certain definite number of mankind sinners were, in sovereign mercy, chosen of God, and appointed unto glory, before the foundation of the world, is a truth attested by many express declarations of Scripture.—Eph. i. 4; 2 Thess. ii. 13; Acts xiii.48. This purpose of God finally to bestow salvation or eternal life upon his chosen, necessarily includes a determination to do all that is requisite to make them meet for the enjoyment of it, and to preserve them amidst all snares and temptations to the full possession of it. Now, if one included in the election of grace should finally perish, the purpose of God would, in that instance, be frustrated, and in every instance in which such an event should take place. But his purpose, originating from himself, and being altogether independent of his creatures, must be unchangeable as his nature. Hence he proclaims, with divine majesty: "I am the Lord; I change not." "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure." Our Saviour himself, from the election of believers, infers the impossibility of their being seduced into a perishing condition. "There shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders, insomuch that (if it were possible) they shall deceive the very elect."—Matt. xxiv. 24. It is evident that, in this passage, our Lord treats of the elect after being brought to the knowledge of the truth, and that he speaks not of any seduction whatsoever, but that which is total and final. Now, the words, "If it were possible," imply a real impossibility of their being so seduced.

2. It is secured by *the merit of Christ's sufferings and death*. Christ "purchased the Church with his own blood." The "iniquities" of all his people "were laid upon him," and, as their Surety, "he bore their sins in his own body on the tree." He sustained the full infliction of the curse which they deserved, and "obtained for them eternal redemption." "Now, as a surety stands in the room of the person whom he represents, the latter reaps all the benefit of what the surety has done in his name; so that, if his debt has been paid by the surety, the creditor cannot demand the payment of it from him. Let us apply this illustration to the subject before us. If Christ made satisfaction on the cross for the sins of his people—not for some of them only, but for them all, as we are expressly assured—it would be contrary to justice to subject them also to the punishment. But, if the saints may fall from a state of grace, and perish in their sins, satisfaction will be twice exacted—first, from the surety; and secondly, from them. Either Christ did, or did not, make an atonement for the sins of his people. If he did not make an atonement for them, they must satisfy for themselves; if he did answer the demands of justice in their room, it is impossible that, under the righteous administration of Heaven, they should, by any cause, or for any reason, come into condemnation. Accordingly, the new covenant promises to believers complete and irrevocable pardon. I will 'be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.'—Heb. viii. 12. But if the doctrine of the defectibility of the saints is true, the promise is false; for their sins may be remembered again. Nay, if this doctrine is true, Christ might have died in vain;

for, as one saint may fall from a state of grace as well as another, it might happen that not a single sinner should be actually redeemed by his blood from everlasting destruction."

3. It is secured by *the perpetuity and prevalence of Christ's intercession*. As Christ purchased his people by the merit of his own blood, so "he ever liveth to make intercession" for them. And what is the matter of his intercession on their behalf? He prays for every one of them, as he did for Peter, "that their faith fail not." In those petitions which he offered up for his followers, while he was yet on earth, we have a specimen of his pleadings before the throne. Now, he prayed once and again for their preservation: "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me;" "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil."—John xvii. 11, 15. Lest any should confine these petitions to his immediate disciples, or to such as already believed on him, he adds (verse 20): "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word." If, then, there is any efficacy in the intercession of Christ, the perseverance of all who believe on him is infallibly secured. But his intercession, being founded on his satisfactory death and meritorious righteousness, must be prevalent and effectual to obtain for his people all that he asks on their behalf. Him the Father always heareth.—John xi. 42.

4. It is secured by *the constant inhabitation of the Spirit*. When our Lord was about to depart out of this world, he consoled the hearts of his disciples by the promise of the Spirit. "I will pray the Father," said he, "and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever."—John xiv. 16. That the gift of the Spirit was not peculiar to the apostles, but is the happy privilege of every real Christian, is evident from the inspired declaration: "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."—Rom. viii. 9. Now, the Spirit does not enter into the hearts of believers as a transient visitant, but "to make his abode with them." Hence they are called "the temple of God, because the Spirit of God dwelleth in them." And the constant residence of the Spirit in believers effectually secures their perseverance; for his gracious purpose in taking up his residence in them is, to make them meet for the inheritance of the saints in light, to guard them through life, and conduct them to glory. By him they are sealed to the day of redemption, and he is the earnest of their future inheritance.—2 Cor. i. 22; Eph. i. 13, 14. An earnest is a part given as a security for the future possession of the whole; and as the Holy Spirit is to believers the earnest of the heavenly inheritance, this must imply the utmost certainty of their future bliss. If any who have received the Spirit were left to fall totally and finally from a state of grace, and to come short of the heavenly inheritance, then, shocking thought! the Spirit of truth would be a precarious and fallacious earnest.

5. It is secured by *the unchangeable nature of the covenant of grace*. This covenant, being founded in the grace of God, and not in our obedience, is "ordered in all things, and sure." The tenor of this covenant is clearly expressed: "I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me." Jer. xxxii. 40. It is worthy of remark, that here is not only a

promise of the constant affection of God towards his people, so that he will never turn away from them to do them good, but also a promise that he will put his fear in their hearts, so that they shall not depart from him. God not only promises that he will continue to be gracious to them, if they continue to fear him, but he also pledges himself to put his fear in their hearts, or to grant to them such communications of his grace as shall preserve them from falling away. The certainty of the saints' perseverance could not possibly be expressed in stronger terms.

In addition to these arguments, which are specified in the Confession, we may state that the perseverance of the saints is also evident—1. From manifold divine promises.—Isa. liv. 10; John x. 27-30; Heb. xiii. 5. 2. From the various divine perfections. 3. From the connection between the effectual calling and the glorification of believers.—Rom. viii. 30. 4. From the character of perfection that belongs to all the works of God.—Phil. i. 6. 5. From the intimate and indissoluble union that subsists between Christ and believers.—John xv. 5; 1 Cor. xii. 12; John xiv. 19, 20. [This subject is treated by all systematic writers. It is also full discussed in the following works:—Lime Street Lectures, ser. 9; Berry Street sermons, Ser. 24; Elisha Coles On God's Sovereignty; Sam. Wilson's Sermons, Ser. 11-15; and President Edwards' Remarks on Important Theological Controversies, chap. v.]

The doctrine of the saints' perseverance has been sometimes represented as unfriendly to the interests of holiness. But how it can have this effect, it is not easy to perceive. Although believers "shall certainly persevere in grace to the end, and be eternally saved;" yet, if they fall into grievous sins, they thereby incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit—come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts—have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded—hurt and scandalise others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves." If, then, the saints feel any concern about the glory of their heavenly Father, the edification of others, and their own comfort, they have the strongest motives to "abstain from all appearance of evil," and to endeavour to be found "walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." Besides, the perseverance for which we plead is a perseverance in holiness to the end; and how can this doctrine have any tendency to make men careless about the commission of sin? Add to this, that the more firmly the believer is persuaded that nothing shall be able to separate him from the love of God, and the more he feels the love of God shed abroad in his heart, the more powerfully will he be constrained to live so as to promote the glory of God.—2 Cor. v. 14, 15.

The certainty of the saints' perseverance affords no encouragement to any to neglect the means which God has appointed for their preservation. "Watch and pray," said our Saviour, "that ye enter not into temptation." "Beware lest ye fall from your own steadfastness;" said his apostle. "Look to yourselves, that ye lose not those things which ye have wrought." The Scriptures abound with such exhortations and admonitions; and they are greatly mistaken who infer, from them, that the saints may fall totally and finally away from grace. God deals with his people as rational creatures, and these exhortations and admonitions are the very means which he employs, and which he renders effectual, for preventing

their apostasy, and for promoting their final perseverance. God works in believers, both to will and to do; but he requires them to do their part while he is doing his. Let every Christian, therefore, be "steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as he knows that his labour is not in vain in the Lord."