

THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

Psalm 73:23-28

Asaph had been looking at others and had observed that apparently the ungodly prospered, whereas the godly always seemed to be in trouble. It seemed to him that unbelievers were successful and prosperous and believers had the hard time in this world. He had actually wondered if, after all, there was any purpose in being godly, since those who were had so many painful experiences while others never seemed to have any trouble. He was tempted to ask, "Is God just? Is there any point in trying to walk in the straight and narrow way? Is there any use in trying to live a God-fearing life?"

It led Asaph here to the house of God, and there God opened his eyes and gave him the right perspective. God set him straight in his thinking. He convinced him that he had been entirely wrong in his thoughts about the ungodly, about himself, and about God. God convinced him that He was still ready to bless him. Thoroughly convinced of his own stupidity and irrationality, Asaph was amazed that he had ever thought and spoken as he had. Immediately he adopted a loftier view of life. Having condemned himself for sulking and being so foolish in the presence of God, and thrilled with surprise and astonishment that he had not received the fate which he had deserved, he said, "Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory." Thus he came to a new realization of God's amazing grace. If there is one thing which this psalm teaches above all else, it is that all that is best and most wonderful in life is entirely and solely the result of the grace of God. We are debtors to grace all the way from the beginning to the very end. The whole of our lives is due entirely to the grace and mercy of God.

The first thing that the Psalmist realized was that God, in spite of all that was so true of him, had forgiven him. If God had dealt with this man, as he deserved to be dealt with, he would never have been allowed to come back into the presence of God. Now that he was still in the presence of God was absolute proof to him that God had forgiven him.

There would be no beginning of the Christian life were it not for this saving grace. We are Christians because God had mercy upon us, sent His Son to die for us, and saved us by His grace. We are debtors to mercy alone. There is no merit in us to recommend us to God. God was moved toward us by His own love, compassion, mercy, and grace. It is truly amazing that God has forgiven us and is still with us, in spite of what we have been and have done.

Let us note God's restraining grace. "Thou hast holden me by my right hand." The Psalmist meant that it was God who had held and restrained him from a terrible fall. His position was described in these words, "As for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped." What kept him from falling was that God had held him by his right hand, just when he was on the very point of taking the plunge.

This same verse teaches us the doctrine of God's restoring grace. The Psalmist had come to see that God was holding his right hand, and at the most dangerous point He had pulled him back. God had caused him to go into the sanctuary. He went there because God through His restoring grace put it into his mind to do so. Frequently, just when we reach the breaking point, and are about to take the plunge into doing wrong, God suddenly intervenes and brings us back. He restores us to fellowship with Himself, and with the Lord's people, and gives us back the joy we had lost.

He lifts us up "out of the horrible pit, out of the miry clay", and sets our feet upon a rock and establishes our goings. In wondrous love and amazing grace God restores unto us the joy of our salvation.

What is the future going to be like? The Psalmist teaches us that we are going to be in God's

hand continually. He said, "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory." God has forgiven us, restrained us, and restored us because we belong to Him, and He will go on doing the same in the future. The doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints has given tremendous joy and comfort to God's people through the centuries. What the Psalmist is saying here is that God is guiding us with His counsel now, and will go on doing so, after which He will receive us into glory.

God is unchanging. What He wills, He does; what God purposes, He executes. If you do not believe that the unchangeable will of God is the bed-rock of everything, you do not have a sustaining faith. Unlike man, God never starts a work which He does not finish. We are so unlike Him in this respect. We have our new interests and we live for them, and then we drop them; but God is not like that. When God commences a work, He completes it. He never leaves anything half done.

There is nothing clearer in the scriptures than that God has a great purpose, and that His purpose is to save those who believe. This brings us to a consideration of the power of God. How can one be sure that he can persevere? The answer is that he is held by the power of God, and sustained by His grace. The greatest thing that you as a Christian could know is this, that the power that is working in you is the power that God exercised when He brought His Son out from among the dead and raised him again. That same power is working for us and in us. How does God sustain us? The Psalmist puts it like this, "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel." He leads; He guides. He restrains us; He works within us. He sustains us by His grace. He works in our minds, our dispositions, and our desires, and delivers us from sin.

If we are in God's hands, and are being sustained by Him, even in this world we begin to enjoy some of the fruits of salvation, of the life that is glory. The gifts of the Spirit, the graces of the Spirit, and the fruit of the Spirit are all a part of the glory. When God begins to produce these things in you, He makes you unlike the world and its people, and makes you more like Christ. As Isaac Watts said:

"The men of grace have found,
Glory begun below:
Celestial fruits on earthly ground,
From faith and hope may grow.

The hill of Zion yields
A thousand sacred sweets,
Before we reach the heavenly fields
Or walk the golden streets."

The ultimate end of salvation is that we shall go to be with God and enjoy life with Him. What poor creatures we are, what foolish creatures, grumbling and complaining, holding on to the things of this world. If we are in Christ, we are destined to enjoy the life and the glory of God Himself. That is the glory that awaits us.

In the light of all his experiences, Asaph could not do anything but give himself to the worship and adoration of God. This he did in verses twenty-five and twenty-six: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon the earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever." Can we speak like this? Is this our experience? Do we know God as this man knew Him? Whatever else we may have, or whatever else we may be able to say, we must never be satisfied until we can come to this. It is marvelous when one comes to the realization that there is no one else, that there is no one other person than God who can help him. In his experience, when he

was wrong with God Asaph was wrong everywhere. There is an emptiness about his life--no satisfaction, no blessing, no strength--and even though he was not able to make any positive statement about God, he could at least say there was no one else.

Asaph is saying that he now desires God himself, not only what God gives or what He does. The essence of Asaph's problem was that he had put what God gives in the place of God Himself. That was what underlay the problem concerning the ungodly. They are having a so-called good time, so why was he having such a bad time? What was it that he seemed to have cleansed his heart and washed his hands in vain? What caused him to think like this was that he was more interested in the things that God gives than in God Himself, and because he did not seem to be having the things that he wanted, he began to doubt God's love. But now he has come to the place in which he can say truthfully that he desires God Himself, and not just the things that He gives and does. The height of Christian experience is when a man can truthfully say, "What I desire above all else is God Himself." Paul's supreme ambition was a deeper and more intimate personal knowledge of Christ.

Asaph not only desired God Himself but he did not want anything but God. He was exclusive in his desire. He said that he did not desire anything on earth or in heaven except God. He found complete satisfaction in God.

In the last verse Asaph gives us an insight into his whole philosophy of life, his way of facing the uncertainties that lay ahead of him. Whatever may have been true about others he said that nearness to God was good for him. His chief ambition was to keep near to God. He had arrived at the conclusion that what had accounted for all his trouble was the fact that he had not kept near to God. After all, he says, if I am near to God, it does not really matter what happens to me; but if I am far from God, nothing can be right. The moment we move away from God everything goes wrong. One thing that matters is to be near to Him. When a Christian goes away from God things go wrong, and he is wretched, but when he returns to God, even though the conditions remain much the same, he is full of peace and joy. To truly be near to God is the best thing that anyone could do. Fellowship with Him is blessed experience for any Christian. Living in nearness to God is never a hindrance to the sweetest and best life. In Christ, God offers us His fellowship and His constant companionship. He has every blessing that we need. There is nothing we can ever need but what God has it.

Living in nearness to God will keep one a safe distance from the places where he ought not to be, and out of fellowship and away from bad associates. Living in nearness to God guarantees adequate wisdom and strength in times of temptation, adversity, bereavement, and old age. There is no satisfaction in life which is comparable to the peace, happiness and joy which come from being near unto God. Living near to God is so honorable, so delightful, and so elevating. It is through prayer, Bible reading, public worship, and Christian obedience that we can live near to God. When we live in nearness to Him, even death is a wondrous victory, crowned with the conscious presence of our wonderful Lord.