

## DOCTRINES OF GRACE.

### THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS.

THIS doctrine has been described by the greatest of Puritan theologians as the "very salt of the covenant of grace," and it is clothed in words of majestic sound, but it has had two readings, one of which is neither worthy nor reasonable. People have been apt to imagine that by this perseverance is simply intended that however a man may live, and whatever he may do, if only he has been the object of the Divine love and has accepted the offer of the Divine mercy, he will be kept from destruction in this present life and afterwards will receive the heavenly kingdom. Certain in ages past, and some possibly at this present, have persuaded themselves that they are free from the obligations of the moral law, and that they are at liberty to sin without punishment, because, as they believe, their names are written in the Book of Life and they are the favourites of the Eternal. Under no circumstances can they be cast out or finally be lost, since the doors of hell are for ever barred against them and the doors of heaven are ever opened for their entrance. No deed of theirs, they would argue, can revert the decrees of God or baffle His purposes, and the very grace of God may become to them the minister and safeguard of sin. Were this the doctrine of perseverance, it would be difficult to imagine one more absolutely unreasonable, since it would make the choice of God an arbitrary caprice wherein God has elected a person for no reason, and would not afterwards change His choice even for the strongest reason. Nor could one imagine a doctrine more thoroughly immoral,

because it not only tolerates wickedness, but bestows upon it the absolute favour of the Almighty, so that a man has been selected to fulfil the lusts of the flesh and to escape their punishment. Had this been the doctrine of perseverance, then it would have been a singular curse to all men who believed it, and long ago would have been cast out of the Christian faith with loathing and contumely.

This doctrine can be best understood in the light of its own terms, since the perseverance which is mentioned therein is the perseverance of the saints, and is never to be understood to be the perseverance of sinners. Among various desires which visit the human heart from time to time surely one of the worthiest is the passion for holiness. There come to us moments when we are ashamed of our sins, and desire to cast them off; other moments when we wrestle with sin and with principalities and powers of the evil world; moments when we are beaten and gravely discouraged in the spiritual conflict; other moments when we overcome and our hearts are filled with pure gladness. Again and again this question comes to one's mind as the day of life goes on and draws to its close, Am I to be beaten or victorious? and in the end shall I attain unto the heights of perfection in Christ Jesus after which I have striven, or shall I come short to the breaking of my heart? It is a question which deserves an answer, and it is answered in this doctrine. Some aims of life may not be attained: if a man will hunger for riches or for glory, he may be miserably disappointed. Some aims are bound to be attained; and if a man will make it the chief purpose and effort of his life to achieve holiness, he shall not be put to confusion either in this world or in that which is to come. What he has loved and striven after, what he has thought of in the quiet of the night, and in the midst of the day's business, as beyond all gain of this world shall be granted unto him, and granted beyond all that he ever could have imagined.

Whosoever fails the saint shall succeed, and whosoever misses his inheritance it shall not be the saint in light. This is the perseverance of the saint: it is the triumph of spiritual character.

The strong grounds on which this doctrine rests are various in their character, but they conspire together in their effect, and the first is the purpose of the Eternal. No one can study the physical world with any intelligence and not observe that from the beginning in the lowest and most helpless forms of life up to the consummation of physical creation in man, there has been a sustained progress towards perfection. As often as we see absolute imperfection in nature we conclude either that there has been some catastrophe or that there has been some arrestment. We expect to see at every stage a temporary and modified perfection, and that we accept as the prophecy of a final and complete perfection. Perfection first in progress and then in completion is a law of the physical universe. When we pass into the spiritual universe, we are surely right in judging that the same law will hold good according to its new circumstances and with its new subjects. The soul may be at first only a rude form of spiritual life, but as time comes and goes and the agencies of the spiritual world play upon it, the obedient and receptive soul will surely advance from stage to stage until it stands complete according to the type of its kind. If it is the case that the energy of God in the outer world working through long periods of time has never flagged and has not failed of its intention, then is there any one who can believe that the same energy directed to yet higher ends and trusted in by far higher creatures, will fail and grow weary before their desire and the mind of God have been fulfilled. Whom He called, them He justified; whom He justified, them he also glorified, is the certain and irresistible evolution of grace.

Another ground for this doctrine is the life of our Master,

since it is ever to be remembered that according to the theory of Christianity a man's future hinges not upon his own achievements but upon the achievement of his Lord. No one has reached the Christian standpoint—the standpoint, that is to say, of St. Paul and St. John—who can regard the agony and victory of our Lord as isolated and personal. When He came, it was not for Himself but for His Church; and when He resisted the enemy and trampled him under foot, it was for His Church; and when He died upon the cross, it was still for His Church; and when He rose from the dead, He rose again for the Church; and when He ascended into the heavenly places, the Church ascended also; and now when He offers His ceaseless intercession, it is as the High Priest of the people for whom He has entered within the veil and whom He represents. The lot of the Church and the lot of Jesus Christ are inextricably and eternally bound up together, and what holds good of the Church as a whole is true also of each one of her members. The Christian idea is that the disciples and the Lord are so entirely one, that in the history of the disciples the history of the Lord is repeated. In St. Paul or St. John or the most obscure and weakest of all the saints Christ is tempted of the Evil One and overcomes: Christ endures the trials of this present life and is not cast down, Christ obeys the will of God and finishes the work God gave Him to do. Christ is crucified unto sin and lives unto righteousness: He endured great travail and has won His recompense, which is to reap the fruit of His triumph in innumerable human lives which He guards and sanctifies, which He will present blameless unto the Father. When the disciple desires to strengthen his heart in the conflict of the soul, it is not wise for him to look overmuch within, and to take account of his inherent weakness, nor is it wise for him to look without upon the massed forces of evil and to allow his imagination to be darkened. His faith ought to look

without, but it also at the same time ought to look upward, nor rest till it has established itself in the very midst of the throne and upon the Lamb who once was slain. The hope of the Christian's ultimate victory and sure perfection is drawn from the Resurrection and the Ascension of Jesus Christ, His session upon the throne and His unceasing mediation. Were the poorest and feeblest disciple who had ever trusted and loved his Lord to be left a prey unto sin and be caught finally in the bondage of the Evil One, then the fruit of Christ's victory on Calvary had been taken from His hands, and the crown of gold had been replaced again by the crown of thorns. "None shall pluck you out of my hand," said the Lord and Good Shepherd to His dismayed and helpless flock; and since He said that word His hand has been pierced and has received the sceptre of the Cross whereby He has obtained all power in heaven above, and on the earth beneath, and in the dark places which are underneath the earth. Should one of His disciples miss the everlasting city, and be left in the outer darkness, then has this strong promise of the Lord been a thing of naught—a word which Satan had torn in pieces and flung in His face—and the power conferred upon Him in virtue of His Sacrifice had been only an empty show, a power which could be flouted and brought into contempt. Christ Himself declared plainly that for weal or woe He and they who trusted in Him would stand together, so that they could not be in the darkness and He in the light, nor He upon the throne and they in the prison when the end of all things has come, and every man is judged according to the law of God. "Where I am," He declared, "there ye shall be also, and because I live ye shall also live." Wherefore if you look closely into this matter, the perseverance of the saints is another word for the perseverance of Jesus Christ.

The hope of perseverance also builds her home in the love of God, because faith remembers that God is not only our

Creator and our Governor, but that He also is our Father. Between a master and a father there is one great difference, which affords strong consolation to the believer. A master may be kind and considerate, but it is not expected of him that he should endure stupidity and incapacity beyond a point, and no master would be justified in condoning moral faults and shiftiness of character. But a father, he must bear with the children who call him by this name, and who by the very word compel his patience. It is not possible for him to chide them as the world does, or to cast them out from his home as an unprofitable servant is discharged by his master. They are his whom he has brought into the world, and who bear his likeness, to whom his heart is knit, and whom he is bound to succour. With what thoughtfulness and foresight, with what gentleness and consideration, does a father deal with the failings of his children, encouraging them in every good endeavour, tenderly complaining of their wilful faults, covering over their inevitable infirmities and looking forward with expectation to a day of more perfect manhood. And God is the Father of our souls, in whom there is no variableness neither shadow of turning, in whom all the wisdom and patience of a frail earthly parent are raised to their supreme height and are glorified. Is not the whole system of providence a series of selected and regulated means by which the souls of God's children may be carved and shaped after the likeness of Christ? God's chastisements are represented in Holy Scripture as the evidence of His love and the instrument of holiness, and even His hot anger is the fire whereby the dross is cleansed away from human lives. He cannot be angry for ever with His children because He is a Father, and, according to the prophet Hosea—a prophet whose heart was made tender unto the breaking by the sorrows of his own home—the heart of the Eternal repents even of His just judgments, so that it cries aloud as in an agony

of affection. God remembers when Israel was a child and He called His son out of Egypt, when He taught Ephraim to walk, holding His children by their arms as a mother her little one. Very greatly had Israel sinned, and very far short had Israel come of the glory of God; but Israel was not a stranger nor a servant; Israel could not be dismissed for righteousness' sake; Israel could not be forgotten for love's sake: "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim, how shall I deliver thee, Israel? . . . Mine heart is turned within Me, My repentings are kindled together." The wisdom and the love of God are pledged unto the believer, and the perseverance of the saints is bound up with the Fatherhood of God.

According to the Bible, the saints have also greatly strengthened their hearts in the hope of victory, because they are firmly persuaded that their souls and God are bound together in a covenant which cannot be broken. This conviction is one of the secret things of the religious life which cannot be judged by reason and cannot be proved unto the outer world. As a man and woman may be knit together in ties of affection which are not known unto their neighbours, nor, indeed, can be declared, but which are the strongest bond on earth, so is it with the believer and God. The Eternal has spoken to him with a clear and unmistakable voice, and he has obeyed the call of God. What God asked of him was trust, and trust he has given. What God promised to him was His goodwill, and this goodwill God will surely give. While strangers seek to find God in the design of creation and in the march of history, this man knows God within his own soul, and there holds communion with Him. There have been many passages between him and God wherein God has complained of him and he has complained to God, wherein God has rebuked him and he has repented at the feet of God, wherein God has comforted him and he has said, "My

God!" As the years passed this friendship has become as the marriage bond, and the saint no more expects that it could be broken than a wife could believe that her husband would cast her off. Through the Old Testament the prophets returned again and again to the hope of the covenant, and declared that the mountains might depart and the hills be removed, but the covenant of peace between God and His people would never be broken. In the New Testament Jesus takes up the same beautiful conception in the upper room when He declares that the Sacrament of His Body and Blood is the sign and substance of this covenant. Before it had been stated in faithfulness, and the Word of God is exceeding strong: it is now sealed with blood, and believers have two things wherein to trust—the Word of God and the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As often, therefore, as the believer takes the Sacrament he pledges himself as in an oath to trust, to love, and to obey, and since there be two in a covenant, and the other be God, He in His turn pledges Himself to endure, to deliver, and to sanctify. Should, therefore, any believer be in the end put to confusion and fail to obtain the prize of holiness, he will leave the gate of the Heavenly City with the dishonoured covenant of the Eternal in his hands and be able to boast that his faithfulness has been greater than the Word of his God. God would then, to use the bold figure in the Epistle to the Hebrews, be ashamed because men had trusted in Him even unto death, and risked their souls upon the trust, and He had played them false; and therefore is it that however hard may be the road the saint shall travel, and however it may wind before it come to its close, it will one day bring him in by the gate into the City, and every one shall appear before God in Zion. And neither the God who invited this trust nor they who trusted will be put to shame.

Lest this sublime doctrine should be abused, it is guarded



in Holy Scripture by certain wholesome terrors of the soul and certain solemn warnings of the Almighty. The Psalms breathe a spirit of absolute confidence in God and of strong hope; but it is a Psalmist who has known God and who clings to God, who lifts up his heart in supplication that God would not cast him from His presence nor take away His Spirit. No one in the New Testament has asserted the perseverance of the saints with greater strength of reason or more passionate heat of affection than St. Paul, yet it is this apostle who entreats his Christian flock to use all diligence and to make their calling and election sure; who is sometimes stricken with fear lest he himself, who had preached the gospel and made converts for Christ, should at last be a castaway. There are also in the Hebrew Epistles certain passages which will always be a battleground between Arminians and Calvinists, and which, at any rate, may make the most confident take heed to his steps and save the most foolish believer from presumption. It is salutary for every one who is walking in the narrow way, which leadeth upward to the stars, to remember the precipices which are on either side and the hopelessness of him who wantonly flings himself over their edge. Should any one who has been cleansed in the blood of Christ trample Christ's sacrifice under foot through persistent love of sin, or should any one who had learned to call Him Lord deliberately deny His name, then it cannot be with him even as it was with David when he repented, and Peter when he wept bitterly, for this man has hardened his heart, and has forsaken the Lord who redeemed him. Whether it be possible that any disciple of Christ should fall into such utter impenitence may be questioned, but the mere thought of such a possibility is enough to make us give heed unto our steps and to keep steadfastly in the way of faith and righteousness. And if it be a good thing that our ways should at certain places be hedged up with thorns in

the trials and affliction of this present world so that we be allured not away from the royal road of the Cross, it is also a good thing that on the right hand and left of our way, when it is in high places of success and of light, there should be precipices whose very sight fills our soul with fear and makes us cling the closer to our guide.

Besides, if any believer should be so left to himself as to imagine that he can sin with impunity or even afford to be careless, he will be quickly undeceived. If God should not cast him off, but should remember His covenant, He will certainly see to it that this man be saved as by fire. In his sin he never can be saved; but while in his sin he will be visited with strong judgments of the Almighty, so that his own soul, and perhaps the public world, shall behold his punishment. No man will ever be punished more severely than the saint, or have a more overwhelming view of the Divine righteousness. Of all the sufferers in Old Testament history I take it that the chief was not Pharaoh nor Jezebel, but the patriarch Jacob; for every sin he committed he suffered double, and after the kind in which he had sinned, till he went down to his grave a sorrowful man, sanctified, but sanctified by the rod. David fell into the snare which besets rich and sensuous natures, so that he disgraced his own character and the name of God which he had mentioned, and the last years of David's life were years of trouble and of shame. He was not finally rejected, but he was severely chastised, and remains a monument as much of the righteousness as of the faithfulness of God. If it be difficult to understand the cowardice of Simon Peter's denial, it is more difficult to estimate the bitterness of his tears. Many and comfortable are the promises given unto the backslider in Holy Scripture, but searching and severe has been his discipline, so that when he returns unto the Lord it is with bent head and broken heart, never again to depart from the ways of righteousness.

Doubtless every one who has obeyed the invitation of God and set sail for the new world with an honest heart shall come at last into the fair haven of peace, whatever storm and head winds he may meet on the way; but all will not come in after the same fashion. Some ships will make the harbour mouth with difficulty, with torn sails and bare decks, and heavy losses—hardly saved; others will enter the harbour with a flowing tide and a following wind, their sails full set and showing white in the light of the sun, and they shall have an abundant entrance into the heavenly kingdom. Some believers may only escape to the shore on broken pieces of their ship, humiliated and half-dead, like David; others, like St. Paul, will come in as treasure ships, bearing with them the argosy of sacrifices and of services beyond all human reckoning, and at the very sight of their coming the inhabitants of the other land shall gather to bid them welcome and to escort them into the presence of the King.

JOHN WATSON.

*HISTORICAL COMMENTARY ON THE EPISTLES  
TO THE CORINTHIANS.*

VII. RELATION TO PHILOSOPHY.

THIS digression on baptism leads on to another. Paul has been led to affirm that his special duty and gift lay in preaching, and he again goes off to state emphatically the principle in his preaching. He had not trusted to philosophic argument, for to do so would be to distrust the power that lies in simply preaching the Cross.

But this second digression brings him back to the original and main topic. The strength and at the same time the weakness of the Greek intellect lay in its acuteness, its capacity for making delicate distinctions and re-