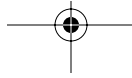


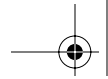


INTRODUCTION

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work
and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people
and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same
diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.
We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith
and patience inherit what has been promised. (Heb 6:10-12 NIV)

As a new millennium dawns, Christians continue to ponder the same questions and address the same issues that have unsettled believers since the early days of the church. Two of these issues concern perseverance in holiness and assurance of salvation. Each generation of believers must address questions that arise concerning both. Will all believers persevere in faithfulness to Christ Jesus? Is it possible for a Christian to have eternal life and subsequently perish forever? Can a believer be assured of final salvation before he or she dies? Is it not presumptuous to believe that a Christian can be assured of salvation? Is not belief in the necessity of perseverance in faithfulness to Christ simply a different form of believing in salvation by works? Do not the biblical warnings indicate that it is possible for believers to apostatize and be lost eternally? Is not the real issue at stake with all these biblical warnings simply a matter of rewards, not salvation? These and many other questions swirl about discussions concerning perseverance and assurance. Christians stand divided on how they respond to these questions. That is regrettable, but even more regrettable is the animus that attaches to this division. Listen to any discussion of Hebrews 6:4-6 on a Christian college campus or in the student lounge at a theological seminary. The conversation will likely be spirited, if not heated. We trust that our discussion of perseverance and assurance will cast more light on the subject and lower the thermostat on such discussions.





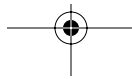
In recent years much of the discussion concerning perseverance has sounded like a battle between advocates of lordship salvation and those who claim to believe in free grace.¹ We have endeavored to compose a book that avoids the tendencies that accompany such battles. Our objective is to be irenic in spirit, careful in exegesis and interpretation, thoughtful in theological expression and pastoral by encouraging readers to continue to persevere in faithfulness to Christ Jesus and to lay claim to the bold assurance that springs from faith.

Restraints compel us to focus our discussion on the New Testament, the area in which we both primarily teach. While our discussion delves deeply into a range of selected biblical texts, all things considered, we restrict it primarily to the New Testament. Since we have adopted these limitations, some may wonder at our subtitle: *A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance*. By using the designation “biblical theology” we do not suggest that our coverage is exhaustive. We use the subtitle for two reasons: (1) to indicate an inductive method in contrast to a systematic theological approach; and (2) to note that, though our consideration of the Bible’s instruction on the subject is not exhaustive, it is substantial and representative.

Therefore, we offer this biblical theology of perseverance and assurance for three principal reasons. First, we believe that any proper formulation of a Christian doctrine of perseverance and assurance must derive from the biblical text. Biblical theology is the soil from which all Christian theology must grow. Second, a dearth of exegetical books on the subject beckons us to offer a fresh word on the subject. The last exegetical work on the subject was by Judith Gundry Volf: *Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away*.² However, her

¹The battle’s primary “generals” have been Zane Hodges on the free grace side and John MacArthur on the lordship side. See, e.g., Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: Rendición Viva, 1991); *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1989); John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1988); *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1993). Two British advocates of Hodges’s view are R. T. Kendall (*Once Saved, Always Saved* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1983]) and Michael Eaton (*No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995]).

²Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1990). For an excellent history of interpretation on the matter of perseverance and apostasy see B. J. Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy: Eschatology, Perseverance, and Falling Away in the Corinthian Congregation*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 2:115 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2000), pp. 1-





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book, showing a Calvinistic orientation, was aimed at a scholarly audience and thus never achieved the popularity that British Wesleyan scholar I. Howard Marshall's book *Kept by the Power of God* achieved twenty-five years ago.³ From the Reformed and Calvinist side, the last book on perseverance that had measurable popular influence was *Faith and Perseverance* by Dutch theologian G. C. Berkouwer.⁴ The third reason we wrote this book is that we recognize a need for believers to hear an urgent pastoral appeal to persevere in faithfulness to Jesus Christ. We pray that, to the degree that we have been faithful to the Word and the gospel, this book will be useful to spur readers on "to love and good deeds" (Heb 10:24), that they may be "imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Heb 6:12 NRSV).

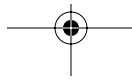
Our discussion throughout this book endeavors to assist readers to recognize the full range of biblical evidence one must include in any theological formulation concerning perseverance and assurance. Our objective is to lay out the biblical evidence and offer an interpretation consistent with that evidence that will help readers integrate it into a coherent and consistent whole. We will explore eight types of passages that must be considered in a biblical theology concerning perseverance and assurance.

First, certain passages reflect the gospel's announcement of conditional promises as it calls for us to receive salvation in Christ. God promises to give salvation to everyone who believes the gospel by following Jesus Christ. That is, the gospel calls for initial belief ("Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household," Acts 16:31), but it also summons all who believe to persevere in belief. Here we offer three conditional promises from the letters to the seven churches in Revelation: "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God"

34. Oropeza investigates 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 and argues for an Arminian position. Unfortunately Oropeza's work appeared after this work was completed, so we are unable to interact with it in more detail.

³I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (1969; reprint, Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974). Another book of some import from the Arminian tradition is Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance*, 2nd ed. (Springfield, Mo.: Westcott, 1976).

⁴G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*, trans. Robert D. Knudsen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1958).





(Rev 2:7); "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death" (Rev 2:11); and "He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels" (Rev 3:5).⁵

A second type of passage contains God's promise to preserve his people unto final salvation. No more assuring promise could be spoken than the one Jesus gave beside the tomb of Lazarus: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (Jn 11:25-26).

The gospel often beckons its hearers with a third type of passage: conditional warnings and admonitions that require believers to persevere in faithfulness to Christ to be saved. Though the New Testament is filled with warnings and admonitions of this kind, we select one from the closing chapter of the Bible: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Rev 22:18-19).

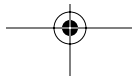
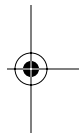
In a fourth type of passage the gospel announces that everyone who believes in Christ Jesus needs to persevere in faithfulness to him because they will face opposition and hatred from the world.

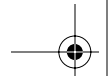
We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. (Rom 5:3-5)

Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (2 Tim 3:12)

A fifth type of passage summons us to examine whether our behavior matches what the gospel requires of all who believe. For example, the apostle John tells us, "We know that we have come to know him if

⁵Throughout this list of eight kinds of passages every biblical citation derives from the NIV. Throughout the remainder of the book, unless we note otherwise, biblical quotations reflect our own translations.



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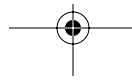
we obey his commands. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 Jn 2:3-6).

The Bible explains in a sixth type of passage that people who fail to remain loyal to Christ never were genuine believers. Once again the apostle John explains: "Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 Jn 2:18-19).

In a seventh type of passage the New Testament explains that all who persevere in loyalty to Jesus Christ do so because God is at work in them by his grace, causing them to desire and to do what pleases him. Two passages stand out in this category: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God" (Jn 3:19-21); "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13).

Finally, the writers of the New Testament teach us that everyone who believes in Christ Jesus and perseveres in faithfulness to him does so because of God's grace alone: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph 2:8-10). Salvation, from election to glorification, is all grounded in and secured by God's grace.

We integrate these eight kinds of passages into our eight chapters. Some chapters focus primarily on one type of text, while others span two or three. Because the athletic metaphor appears frequently in the

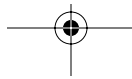


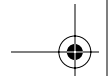


New Testament and suitably portrays the Christian's faith and quest of the prize of salvation, we adopted it as the motif for our title and chapters. We do not slavishly develop this motif, nor do we seek to elevate it above other biblical imagery for salvation. Rather, our chapter titles, derived from aspects of the imagery of the runner, should prompt our readers' imaginations to recognize how the familiar New Testament metaphor aptly portrays the Christian's persevering pursuit of eternal life. Chapter subtitles link the athletic metaphor to their corresponding aspects of biblical theology. To make these connections clear, we have included a suitable biblical passage at the head of each chapter, as appears under the title of this introduction.

Chapter one—"The Race Set Before Us: What Is There to Win or Lose?"—lays out the principal points of disagreement among Christians concerning perseverance and assurance, points of disagreement that prompted us to write this book. Disagreement concerning perseverance and assurance primarily focuses on biblical warnings and admonitions. One's understanding of them regulates (1) whether or not one believes in the necessity of perseverance, (2) one's belief concerning how Christians persevere and (3) one's perspective on whether or not Christians can have assurance that they will persevere to the end and be saved. In this chapter we present four popular approaches to warnings and admonitions. We endeavor to describe each approach as accurately and fairly as possible in order to show its beliefs and legitimate concerns. We seek to bring into sharp focus the different ways Christians read biblical passages such as "The one who perseveres to the end will be saved" (Mt 10:22). How one understands this passage is a gauge concerning one's view of perseverance and assurance. Though there are elements of these four popular explanations of warnings and admonitions with which we agree, we explain why we find each to be deficient.

Having surveyed four popular approaches to this issue, we propose in summary form a fifth view that has been expressed clearly in prior generations but not recently. Each of the subsequent chapters, moreover, unpacks the biblical evidence that led us to adopt this fifth view. We have arranged these chapters to engage readers in what we believe is a reasonable and orderly development of biblical ideas. Since we build our argument in a systematic and orderly way, readers who skip chapters one through three to read chapter four will likely



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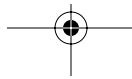
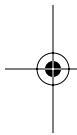
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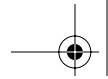
have an impaired understanding of our approach, for we have intentionally placed our extensive exposition of biblical warnings and admonitions after two crucial chapters that provide necessary biblical perspectives showing the multifaceted nature of both salvation and faith.

Chapter two—"The Prize to Be Won: Our Present and Future Salvation"—is foundational to all that we do in the next six chapters. We believe that a right understanding and use of biblical warnings and admonitions is bound up with acquiring a biblical orientation on salvation that is multidimensional: salvation is a gift and possession from God that we already have but do not yet have in its fullness. So in this chapter we make the case that Christians have tended to think of salvation in abstracted categories of systematic theology: justification, sanctification and glorification. We seek to correct these overly simplified categories by showing that a biblical concept of salvation is multifaceted, adequately portrayed only through a number of metaphors. We discuss six categories of biblical imagery, each with a variety of metaphors that portray the splendor and glory of God's salvation. Our goal in chapter two is also to correct a somewhat static and retrospective view of salvation by showing how the biblical concept of salvation entails both already and not-yet aspects. For example, the Bible portrays salvation as a gift we already possess (Eph 2:8-9) but also as a prize for which we hope (Rom 8:24-25; 13:11). Without an understanding of this already-but-not-yet perspective on salvation, one's grasp of perseverance and assurance will be truncated.

Chapter three—"The Race to Be Run: The Necessity of Obedient Faith"—begins to address the first two categories of passages identified earlier. Here we sketch a biblical portrayal of faith to show that the biblical concept of faith is like a multifaceted gem that can be described only with a number of metaphors. To establish the connection between faith and reward, we begin our discussion of faith from Hebrews 11:6: "Without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Following brief discussions on the relationship between faith and faithfulness and between faith and understanding, we focus attention on the multifaceted biblical metaphors for faith, with athletic imagery leading the way.

Chapter four—"Running to Win the Prize: Heeding God's Admoni-

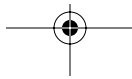


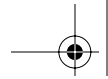


tions and Warnings”—is the largest of our chapters because it addresses the central concern that prompted this book. This chapter focuses attention on the first and third kinds of biblical passages noted above. These admonitions and warnings are the theological watershed in the biblical teaching concerning perseverance. We make our case that they function as a necessary means for believers to persevere unto final salvation. We show how they underscore the dynamic and prospective nature of our salvation. They draw our focus to the not-yet aspect of salvation without doing damage to the fact that believers already have salvation. Biblical admonitions and warnings link the already and the not yet. We propose a view that takes them seriously while at the same time retaining present and full assurance of receiving salvation in the day of Christ Jesus. We show how God uses warnings and admonitions to secure the salvation of his children.

Chapter five—“Reflecting on Fallen Runners: Who Are Those Who Have Fallen Out of the Race?”—addresses a number of biblical examples of individuals who fell away from the gospel of Christ. In particular, this chapter addresses passages that fit categories four and six above. We address two instructive passages on falling away—John’s perspective on those who have left the church (1 Jn 2:18-19) and Jesus’ parable of the soils (Lk 8:1-15)—then round out the chapter with a consideration of certain “fallen” ones: Alexander, Hymenaeus, Philetus, Demas, Judas and Peter. We address each relevant passage and weigh carefully the biblical evidence. We end the chapter by emphasizing the biblical distinction between the complete and final apostasy of Judas and the temporary lapse in faithfulness by Peter. We purposely conclude this chapter with a discussion of Peter’s triple denial and restoration by Christ, for it is Jesus Christ’s intercession that is our only hope to persevere in faithfulness to him.

Chapter six—“Drawing on God’s Grace: Going the Distance by God’s Power”—comments on passages that fit category seven above. We examine what four New Testament writers—Peter, John, Jude and Paul—say about how and why believers do persevere in loyalty to Jesus Christ. Tying this chapter with the previous one, we begin with Peter. We show how Peter and each of the others make the case that, if anyone does persevere in God’s grace and love, it is because God is the one who enables those who persevere. Hence, the view that we





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espouse in this book cannot be labeled works-righteousness, for we are simply reminding readers of what Augustine said long ago: God gives what he demands.⁶

Chapter seven—"Running with Confidence: Being Assured That We Shall Win the Prize"—discusses select passages that fit categories five and seven above. We closely examine these passages and make the case that assurance is integral to Christian faith. We endeavor to show that Christian assurance can be thought of as having three legs—God's promises, the fruit of the Spirit and the witness of the Holy Spirit. Every leg is important for Christian assurance, but the promises of God are the most important of all, for God's promises are the foundation of all Christian assurance.

Chapter eight—"Running by Divine Appointment: Who Are Those Who Run to the End and Win?"—expounds the eighth kind of biblical passage. This chapter reminds us that we run the race to the end only because of God's election. Those who run in the arena of faith and finish the race will not boast about their fortitude but will praise God that he has given them his grace.

As we integrate the eight kinds of biblical passages throughout this book, our paramount concern is faithfulness to Scripture. With pastoral concern we appeal to our readers to submit to the coherent biblical message, which simultaneously assures us (that God secures all who are in Jesus Christ) and admonishes us (that we must persevere in loyalty to Jesus Christ or else enter into eternal death). We hope to demonstrate, through careful attention to the biblical text, that assurance and admonition function in harmony, for God's promise grounds God's warning. This is a crucial and ever timely message for believer and unbeliever alike, for the matters we address are of the essence of the gospel's call for faith in Jesus Christ.



⁶This is a paraphrase of Augustine *Confessions* 10.39. See Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. William Watts, Loeb Classical Library 27 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 148-49.

