

Declension in the life of a True Believer: Causes, Consequences, and Consolation

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“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” Peter said to him, “Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.” Jesus said, “I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me.”

Luke 22:31-34

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

1 Peter 1:3-5

And though they may, through the temptation of Satan, and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein, whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to have their graces and comforts impaired; have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves; yet they are and shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.

Savoy Declaration, 17.3

As Peter stood there, weeping bitterly at another evidence of the prophetic precision of his Master's words, did he think back to his characteristic shrinking from the cross and all that it meant¹, back to that that day when he, speaking for all of the disciples, affirming what God had revealed from heaven to them, “You are the Christ, the

¹ Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Grow in Grace*. (129) Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987. Ferguson describes Peter's greatest weakness as fear, “fear of suffering and fear of men.” (113)

Son of the Living God? Then, hearing those words of blessing from Jesus. So soon after, as Jesus tells them all that will occur in the near future, persecution from the leaders of God's people that would blossom into His murder and God raising Him, Peter takes Him aside and corrects Him, sets Him straight. Jesus lets him know who is speaking through his mouth: Satan. From the same mouth come profession of who Jesus is, revealed from heaven, and denial and fear of what He came to do, kindled from hell. Did Peter think to back what was only last night, to his misguided distaste, when it is his turn to have his feet washed by Jesus, typifying to all the disciples what Jesus was about to do in dying for them? What he did remember were the words of his Master (Matthew 26:75), his Friend who knew what he would do, and he weeps. Still ahead is the bleak deadness after the crucifixion and even after the resurrection.² Still ahead, is the morning when Jesus will give him the opportunity three times to “undo” the denial of this day. But, even after the Spirit falls in power, on the day of Pentecost, Peter will be rebuked to his face when his fear of the circumcision group leads him to separate himself, though he knew the gospel message was to go to the Gentiles, that the distinctions between Jew and Gentile had been fulfilled in what Jesus had done.³

Why do believers not live up to what has been revealed to us and all the graces we have been given in Christ? I don't have to look far to see in the last week the many with whom I have spoken who, as believers, continue to struggle with the reality of the nature of the sin remaining in us. The young man who doesn't understand how he can't seem to do what he knows is right and wonders what is wrong with him. Or myself, my coldness in prayer, my distraction,

² Consider their hiding for fear of the Jews (John 20:19), Peter's possible failure to believe upon seeing the empty tomb (20:8-10) which seems to be confirmed in Luke 24:10-12, and perhaps their going back to fishing. Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (669). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans. Carson writes, “This fishing expedition and the dialogue that ensues do not read like the lives of men on a Spirit-empowered mission.”

³ Ferguson. *Grow in Grace*. (110) Galatians 2:11-14; Acts 10-11; Ephesians 2:11-21.

“this poor dying rate” at which I live in view of the riches of my graces and the beauty of the One who gave them. But I know, because of the universality of remaining sin in believers, that you, too, know it well. Those of you who are pastors may know best what it is like to talk “of spiritual things as much as ever [you] did in [your] lives, and perform duties with as much constancy as ever [you] did; but yet you have poor, lean, starving souls, as to any real and effectual communion with God. . . . The streams will not run so *swiftly*, or at least not so *sweetly* as formerly.”⁴

Savoy 17.3 closely follows the Westminster article, though it frames the desperate description of the believer who sins grievously with a reminder of the promise and comfort of the doctrine of perseverance, more confidently concluding (as does the Larger Catechism Question 79), by quoting 1 Peter 1:5.⁵ John Owen, the only member of the

⁴ Owen, J. *Vol. 6: The works of John Owen*. (W. H. Goold, Ed.) (293).
Edinburg: T&T Clark.

⁵ *The Westminster larger catechism*: “True believers, by reason of the unchangeable love of God, and his decree and covenant to give them perseverance, their inseparable union with Christ, his continual intercession for them, and the Spirit and seed of God abiding in them, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.” *The London Baptist Confession* (1677, 1689) differs in inserting the same passage earlier as part of its wonderful addition to 17:1 (the addition is in italics): Those whom God hath accepted in the beloved, effectually called and Sanctified by his Spirit, *and given the precious faith of his Elect unto*, can neither totally nor finally fall from the state of grace; (a) but shall certainly persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved, *seeing the gifts and callings of God are without Repentance, (whence he still begets and nourisheth in them Faith, Repentance, Love, Joy, Hope, and all the graces of the Spirit unto immortality) and though many storms and floods arise and beat against them, yet they shall never be able to take them off that foundation and rock which by faith they are fastened upon: notwithstanding through unbelief and the temptations of Satan the sensible sight of the light and love of God, may for a time be clouded, and obscured from (b) them, yet he is still the same (c) and they shall be sure to be kept by the power of God unto Salvation, where they shall enjoy their*

Savoy drafting committee not to attend the Westminster Assembly but now the acknowledged leading theologian of England,⁶ had already written extensively upon the work of the law of sin in believers in the years before Savoy.⁷ The work of two hundred delegates to Savoy in prayer, writing and ratification took only eleven days, seen by those attending as evidence of an uncommon unity worked by a “great and special work of the Holy Ghost.”⁸ Though the assembly was permitted by Cromwell, those Independent churches called to attend from in and near London did not meet until twenty-six days after his death. By this time Owen had experienced the heights of academic life, leading Oxford University, preaching to Parliament, and serving as chaplain to Cromwell himself. However, already drunkenness in Cromwell’s New Model Army had stained the Independent witness to holy living. Presbyterian pastor Richard Baxter, believed that the doctrine of justification held by Owen was destroying holiness in the lives of those soldiers with whom he worked. Believing that our righteousness was that of Another *and* understanding that this righteousness imputed to us was perfect, reasoned Baxter, cut the nerve to any holy living; he believed he had seen enough of the results of Owen’s theology in the chaotic lives of those in the army who held to it.⁹ In a very short time, Owen would lose his academic position, see Charles II¹⁰ return and the government expel any pastors who would not conform to the Church of England, leaving

purchased possession, they being engraven upon the palm of his hands, and their names having been written in the book of life from all Eternity.

⁶ Beeke, Joel R. *The Quest for Full Assurance: the Legacy of Calvin and His Successors*.
Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999. (187 fn)

⁷ *Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance Explained and Confirmed (1654), Mortification of Sin in Believers (1656), Temptation and the Power of It (1658).*

⁸ Schaff, Philip. *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 1. Christian Classics Ethereal Library (832) [same pagination as the Baker version].

⁹ Neal, Daniel. *The History of the Puritans*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1844, Vol. 2. (179-180)

¹⁰ The reign of Charles II, the “Merry Monarch,” (who would later secretly convert to Roman Catholicism) was characterized by the bawdy restoration comedies and his many illicit affairs.

Owen as leader for his fellow Independents through the years of persecution until his death in 1683. It was in 1677 that Owen, after the sinful behavior of some professors in Cromwell's army, and after so many reversals in his own life, when temptation was strong to lead a political struggle to regain the rights of conscience and liberty of worship which had been lost, would write his most thorough work on sin in the life of the believer, *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainers of Indwelling Sin in Believers*.¹¹

The Makeup of the Soul

Indwelling Sin labors to show the seriousness of sin for the believer by showing how that sin, while not ruling *over* his heart any longer is still *in* his heart, with Romans 7:21 as its text. Owen, in line with Puritan thinking on the soul or heart, describes the condition of the "faculties" before the fall. A person's heart, the seat of human moral operation, is described in different ways in the Bible: the mind, the will, the affections, and the conscience. The mind seeks, discerns, and judges what to do and what not to do. God created the *mind* and reason to perfectly submit to God's will. What the mind discovers, the *will* chooses in answer, or refuses and avoids. Then the *affections*, the emotions, like and attach to or dislike and are repelled by what the *mind* had discovered, and the *will* had chosen or

¹¹ Thomas Chalmers writes: "That such a work should have been prepared under the gloom of public trials, and the hardship of personal exposure to civil penalties, evinces not merely great industry, but a strength of religious principle with which no outward commotions were permitted to intermeddle. . . . he was intent, with engrossing zeal, on the advancement of vital piety; and his treatise on "Indwelling Sin" is a specimen of the discourses which he preached whenever a safe opportunity occurred." Owen, J. *Vol. 6: The works of John Owen*. (W. H. Goold, Ed.) (154). Edinburg: T&T Clark.

rejected.¹² The mind's subjection to God was the spring that drove the watch and all the soul's harmonious actions. But with the entrance of sin, all is disordered.

[The mind] being disturbed by sin, the rest of the faculties move cross and contrary one to another. The will chooseth not the good which the mind discovers; the affections delight not in that which the will chooseth; but all jar and interfere, cross and rebel against each other. . . . Hence sometimes the will leads, the judgment follows. Yea, commonly the affections, that should attend upon all, get the sovereignty, and draw the whole soul captive after them. . . . Sometimes the mind retains its sovereignty, and the affections are in subjection, and the will ready for its duty. This puts a good face upon things. Immediately the rebellion of the affections or the obstinacy of the will takes place and prevails, and the whole scene is changed. This, I say, makes the heart deceitful above all things: it agrees not at all in itself, is not constant to itself, hath no order that it is constant unto, is under no certain conduct that is stable; but, if I may so say, hath a rotation in itself, where oftentimes the feet lead and guide the whole.¹³

After the entrance of sin, every component of the soul is wrought upon by sin. The unbeliever is not even sensible of his bondage to sin because he always obeys it without realizing it. Any opposition he may make to sin "either in the root or branches of it" is from his conscience; the desire to sin is never taken away. If all restrictions, restraints and motivations on behalf of self-interest and preservation are taken away, the unbeliever would always sin.¹⁴ The one who floats along with the stream does not know the strength of the current, but only the one who tries to swim against it.¹⁵

The unbeliever is ruled by the "law" of sin; it is a law "to" him. With the entrance of a new principle, the heart of the believer is controlled by a new and contrary principle, the "law of the spirit" which now wars against the "law of the flesh," inclining the heart

¹² Owen, J. *Vol. 6*: (170).

¹³ Owen, J. *Vol. 6*: (173–174).

¹⁴ Owen, J. *Vol. 6*: (160).

¹⁵ Owen, J. *Vol. 6*: (159).

toward doing obedience.¹⁶ Those converted have a division “not *of* the heart, but *in* the heart.”¹⁷ Though the heart has a new ruler, grace at work in each of its faculties, the old law fights the new. Paul “finds” this law in himself, not because he has heard of it, but because he has experienced it.¹⁸ And he experiences it just at the time when he wants to do right: there it is, not only as a tenant living in a house, but a tenant who meddles with what the owner of the house has to do.

Would you pray, would you hear, would you give alms, would you meditate, would you be in any duty acting faith on God and love towards him, would you work righteousness, would you resist temptations,—this troublesome, perplexing indweller will still more or less put itself upon you and be present with you; so that you cannot perfectly and completely accomplish the thing that is good.¹⁹

The rule of indwelling sin is broken, yet it still has power to countermand the new ruler. And the more it is fed, the more it “swallows up its own poison” and grows in opposition, every sin increasing its strength.²⁰ But not only is indwelling sin present in all of the faculties, not only can it be fed and grow, it also deceives even the believer, when we are enticed or hooked as with bait.²¹ The affections are led to meditate on the things of the world, the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions.²² Even if the will has consented and even if it is prevented by God from consenting, *sin is present*, as “when a cloud is full of rain and ready to fall, . .

¹⁶ Galatians 5:17; Romans 8:2; Ephesians 1:19

¹⁷ Owen, J. *Vol. 6:* (197).

¹⁸ Romans 7:21

¹⁹ Owen, J. *Vol. 6:* (167).

²⁰ Owen, J. *Vol. 6:* (170).

²¹ James 1:14-15

²² 1 John 2:16

. when the will is ready to bring forth its sin, God diverts it by one wind or the other: but yet the cloud was as full of rain as if it had fallen, and the soul as full of sin as if it had been committed.”²³

Both Jesus and Adam had none of this power of indwelling sin. “The prince of this world cometh, and he hath no part in me,”²⁴ said Jesus. Satanic attack on the Son of Man was more intense, more frequent, and more powerful than it is ever on any of the sons of men. The reason sin gets power over us is that Satan poisons, inflames, and entangles the remaining corruption within.²⁵ When temptation fell on Adam, he (not having indwelling sin) had only to defend against the attack and watch from which way it was coming. Not so with us. We have not only an enemy on the outside, but a fifth column on the inside. And this law of sin is ready to open the back door to any of the desires the world and Satan present.

In view of the prevalency of indwelling sin in concert with Satan and the world, how could the believer possibly persevere if unsupported by God’s preserving grace? Summarizes Owen,

How are our enemies [in the Scriptures] described, as to their number, nature, power, policy, subtlety, malice, restlessness, and advantages! with what unimaginable and inexpressible variety of means, temptations, baits, allurements, enticements, terrors, threats, do they fight against us! Such and so many are the enemies that oppose the saints of God in their abiding with him, so great and effectual the means and weapons wherewith they fight against them, so unwearied and watchful are they for the improvement of all advantages and opportunities for their ruin, that [without God’s preservation], they will be found to be so far from a state of no danger and little probability of falling, or only under a remote possibility of so doing, that it will appear utterly impossible for them to hold out and abide unto the end. Had the choicest saint of God, with all the grace that he hath received, but one of the many enemies, and that the weakest of all them which oppose every saint of God, even the feeblest, to deal withal, separated from the strength of [God’s

²³ Owen, J. *Vol. 6:* (251).

²⁴ John 14:30

²⁵ Owen, J. *Vol. 6:* (203).

preservation], let him lie under continual exhortations to watchfulness and close walking with God, he may as easily move mountains with his finger or climb to heaven by a ladder as stand before the strength of that one enemy. Adam in paradise had no lust within to entice him, no world under the curse to seduce him, yet at the first assault of Satan, who then had no part in him, he fell quite out of covenant with God . . .²⁶

Understanding the causes, power, and nature of the sin that breaks out from this indwelling law is necessary, says Owen, as it is for a general to know his opponent and his typical strategies: “The man that understands the evil of his own heart, how vile it is, is the only useful, fruitful, and solid believing and obedient person.”²⁷ Yet this is only a start: the inroads of indwelling sin are so everywhere and ever-present, so powerful to counter when we want to do good, and so deceitful, that the remedy must be greater still.

Motivations for Obedience

The consequences of sin conceived and continued in are tragic in the life of believers as seen in the lives of Moses, Aaron, Noah, David, Jonah, Peter and others, as described in the Reformed Confessions. Sinning believers incur God’s displeasure: Moses and Aaron will not enter the promised land, David’s son will die, God’s people will go into exile.²⁸ God’s Spirit will not leave them, but an anthropomorphism is used to help us understand the bitterness of our holding onto an enemy to God, sin, in us.²⁹ The joy we had in our

experience of the gracious effects of God’s love are diminished and we lose the *joy* of our salvation, though not our salvation itself.³⁰ Our hearts are hardened but, since we are believers, not finally, as Pharaoh’s heart was hardened.³¹ Even this, “God ordains for believers to bring them back to His love and favor.”³² To add to the pain sin causes believers, their consciences are wounded, and they feel deeply their guilt goading them to turn in repentance.³³

The believer who sins hurts others: David’s son dies for his sin; seventy thousand die when it is David who sins in taking the census; Barnabus is led astray by Peter’s actions.³⁴ Finally, the believer may experience judgments and afflictions for his sin.³⁵ Even then, God in His kindness uses these means to lead us to turn to him: “But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world (1 Cor 11:32).”³⁶

³⁰ Psa 51:10, 12; 8; Matthew 26:75.

³¹ Isa 63:17; Mark 6:52; Mark 16:14!

³² Gerstner, John H. Kelly, Douglas F. and Rollison, Philip. The Summerton Company, 1992. (86)

³³ Psa 32:3-4; 51:8

³⁴ 2 Sam 12:14; 1 Chr 21; Gal 2:13

³⁵ Psa 89:31-32; 1 Cor 11:30-31

³⁶ Consider these words of Anthony Burgess for further reflection on how God may use a withdrawal of graces to lead his wandering children home. *Spiritual Refining: or, A Treatise of Grace and Assurance* (London: A. Miller for Thomas Underhille, 1652), pp. 35-36. First, *That hereby we may taste and see how bitter sin is . . .* If grace or the Assurance of it were in our power to have it when and as soon as we would, how sleighty and perfunctory would our thoughts be about sin? . . . Secondly, *Hereby God would keep us low and humble in ourselves* That all such worms of pride may be killed in us, God hides his face from us, and thereby we see nothing but sin and weaknesses in us . . . Thirdly, *God may therefore keep Assurance form our knowledge, that so when we have it, we may the more esteem it, and the more prize it, taking the greater heed how we lose it.* We see the Church in the Canticles, when she had despised her Spouse’s love, how earnest she was to get it again, but it cost her much ere she could have it . . . Dost thou therefore pray, and again pray for Assurance, yet can not obtain it? then think this delay may be to increase my appetite the more after it, the more to bless God when my soul shall enjoy it. Fourthly, *God doth it that thou mayest demonstrate thy obedience unto him, and give the greater honour to him.* For to rely upon God by faith, when thou

²⁶ Owen, J. *Vol. 11*: (104–105).

²⁷ Owen, J. *Vol. 6*: (201).

²⁸ Num 20:12; 2 Sam 11:27; Isa 64:5, 7, 9

²⁹ Eph 4:30. In Psa 51:11, the Spirit has not left David, though he has sinned, and continued in it for the gestation of his son.

While some, like John Goodwin (not related to Thomas Goodwin) might see the danger of falling away/fear of hell as a helpful tool to engage believers toward godly living, Owen found this deceptive. A law *proposed from the outside* could never have the effect of a law *inbred* in us. Adam before the fall had this inbred law; all faculties worked in submission to God's will and in order to each other, making obedience "easy and pleasant."³⁷ Though that law was cast out by entrance of sin, still some "sparks of it remain" that, because they are inbred, are powerful.³⁸ The external law written on stones never had this power, so God implants it on the heart as He did at first:

"The written law," saith he, "will not do it; mercies and deliverances from distress will not effect it; trials and afflictions will not accomplish it. Then," saith the Lord, "will I take another course: I will turn the *written law* into an internal *living principle* in their hearts; and that will have such an efficacy as shall assuredly make them my people, and keep them so."³⁹

hast no sensible testimonies of his love to thee, is the purest . . . act of obedience that can be . . . The way of Assurance brings more comfort to thy self, but the way of believing gives more glory to God. When *Abraham* did not stagger in his Faith, though Sarah's womb was a dead womb, this was giving glory to God . . . Fifthly, God withholdeth the sense of pardon, that thou mayest be an experienced Christian able to comfort others in their distress . . . Paul makes this end of God's comforts in his tribulations, that they might comfort others in the like case. He that is not tempted about the pardon of sin, wonders at those who are so afflicted, and therefore is altogether unskillful to apply fit remedies.

³⁷ Owen, J. *Vol. 6*: (165).

³⁸ Romans 2:14-15; *ibid*.

³⁹ Owen, J. *Vol. 6*: (166).

The old legal obedience (fear of punishment) pointed to the glory of God as a rewarder according to merit in strict judgment. The new gospel obedience showed the glory of God as a rewarder "according to his bounty, free grace, and mercy."⁴⁰ Now the believer lives the new life, not out of debt and fear, but out of grace and gratitude. Now the new obedience flows,

. . . according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power **through his Spirit in your inner being**, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. (Eph 3:16-19)

This new motivation, this new inbred law, is what is now at work in those who believe and what alone can lead to acceptable obedience: "put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24)." Any obedience done by the flesh and prompted by what motivates the flesh is defiled. "The doctrine of the law, indeed, humbles the soul *for* Christ; but it is the doctrine of the gospel that humbles the soul *in* Christ."⁴¹

Owen's wandering response to the Arminian John Goodwin's wandering book tells the believer that only in the doctrines of grace is found the cure for the believer's battle against the world, and not in any legal threat of the believer's falling away.

Hope for Obedience

With the power of indwelling sin so desperate in us, and its consequences is in the lives of believers so grave, only a work of

⁴⁰ Owen, J. *Vol. 11*: (384).

⁴¹ Owen, J. *Vol. 11*: (387). Rom 6:2-6; 8:13; 2 Cor 5:15; Rom 7:7; Gal 3:23. See also Ramsey, D. Patrick. *In Defense of Moses: A Confessional Critique of Kline and Karlberg*. *Vol. 66: Westminster Theological Journal Volume 66*. 2004 (2) (379ff). Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary.

God sovereign grace can maintain us. The Savoy article ends with a scripture text also cited in the 79th question of Larger Catechism of the Westminster Confession 1 Peter 1:5. Here is one of the clearest statements of God's work of preserving believers, without which, we could not persevere:

According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Here is the Satan-get-behind-me—I'll-never-deny-you—don't-wash-my-feet—asleep-in-the-garden—man-fearing apostle at the end of his life. The lessons he has learned make him most suited to speak with the voice of reality as the straying one who now tells others "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 (1 Peter 2:24-25)." He found medicine for himself which he gives to others. And he must write, because these believers were facing trials. Would they make it through? Would they have what they needed? Would they endure to the end?

To any Israelite in the wilderness, "inheritance" meant one thing, the portion of land belong to each tribe or family—its "share."⁴² The land God had given to the Israelites, upon their disobedience, had not been kept but taken away, later to be given to the Romans. Their sinful lives defiled the land's holiness.⁴³ The land produced that

⁴² Grudem, W. A. (1988). *Vol. 17: 1 Peter: An introduction and commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (59–60). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

⁴³ Num 35:34; Jer. 2:7; 3:2), *ibid* under 1:3.

which perished, which decayed. But solid joys and lasting treasures await New Zion's children. This treasure cannot perish (in secular Greek the word meant something left unravaged by an army, Mat 6:19-21).⁴⁴ It cannot be polluted by sin; it does not fade away⁴⁵ like a week-old bunch of cut flowers, *because* it is kept in heaven, kept by God for those who believe, reserved by him, a completed past activity with results still continuing in the present.⁴⁶ But not only is the inheritance kept, the inheritors are kept. "Guarded" means "kept safe, carefully watched."⁴⁷ Grudem believes that both "kept from escaping" and "protected from attack" are meant here. And it is God's power that is continually guarding us, for a salvation that is already prepared, accomplished, sure, that only needs have the curtain open for all to see it. And our faith in His word and His promises is the conduit through which He keeps us.

Sin has its promises, too. At the outset, it seems to offer everything that appeals to us. But it is only the promises of God, held on to by the faith, which waters gospel obedience.

By this faith, a Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ MacArthur, J. J. (1997). *The MacArthur Study Bible* (electronic ed.) (1 Pe 1:4). Nashville: Word Pub.

⁴⁵ 1 Pet 5:4

⁴⁶ Grudem, *ibid*.

⁴⁷ The governor of Damascus "guarded" the city to seize Paul (2 Cor 11:32).

⁴⁸ Beeke, Joel R. *The Quest for Full Assurance: the Legacy of Calvin and His Successors*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999. (266) Also, J. van Genderen WH. Velema. *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, trs. by Gerrit Bilkes and Ed M. van der Maas. P&R Publishing Company, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2008. "Faith is a claim on this inheritance on the basis of the relationship with him who has prepared this inheritance and who preserves both it and them for each other. Faith is the instrument through which they receive this grace i.e., the grace of the inheritance as well as preservation of and for the inheritance.

Joel Beeke has seen that this time in which we live, as was the time in which Owen and Peter wrote, is a “bruising time.”⁴⁹ “To be lights on a hill we need much assurance.”

To trust in His promises to preserve us that we persevere is what gives us assurance today to live. Just as we were caused to be born again to a living hope, the God Who gave us faith and repentance unto initial conversion, “supplies [us] with faith and repentance all along the way to heaven.”⁵⁰ He began the work in us and he will complete it (Phil 1:6). He made the everlasting covenant and promises not to turn away from doing good to us (Jeremiah 32:40). Those who are believe Him have eternal life *now* (John 3:36). *We have passed* from death to life (John 5:24). Because of all our enemies without and within, we never could persevere in our own strength.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 171

⁵⁰ Ibid., quoting Curt Daniels (125). Canons of Dort, Head V, Article 8: For it was the entirely free plan and very gracious will and intention of God the Father that the enlivening and saving effectiveness of his Son's costly death should work itself out in all his chosen ones, in order that he might grant justifying faith to them only and thereby lead them without fail to salvation. In other words, it was God's will that Christ through the blood of the cross (by which he confirmed the new covenant) should effectively redeem from every people, tribe, nation, and language all those and only those who were chosen from eternity to salvation and given to him by the Father; that he should grant them faith (which, like the Holy Spirit's other saving gifts, he acquired for them by his death); that he should cleanse them by his blood from all their sins, both original and actual, whether committed before or after their coming to faith; that he should faithfully preserve them to the very end; and that he should finally present them to himself, a glorious people, without spot or wrinkle.

⁵¹ Canons of Dort 5:3 “By reason of these remains of indwelling sin, and also because of the temptations of the world and of Satan, those who are converted could not persevere in that grace if left to their own strength. But God is faithful who, having conferred grace, mercifully confirms and powerfully preserves them therein, even to the end.

Finally, our hope for living today is in the unity of purpose of the Father and Son. It is the Father and the Son who preserve (John 17:12, 11, 15). But it is the intercession of Jesus, an intercession continual, which is happening as I read these words. It is what upheld the shaky Peter: “Satan demanded to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith might not fail.”

*Rom 8:34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised— who is at the right hand of God, **who indeed is interceding for us.***

*Hebrews 7:25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since **he always lives to make intercession for them.***

*Hebrews 8:1 Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a **high priest**, one who is **seated at the right hand** of the throne of the Majesty in heaven,*

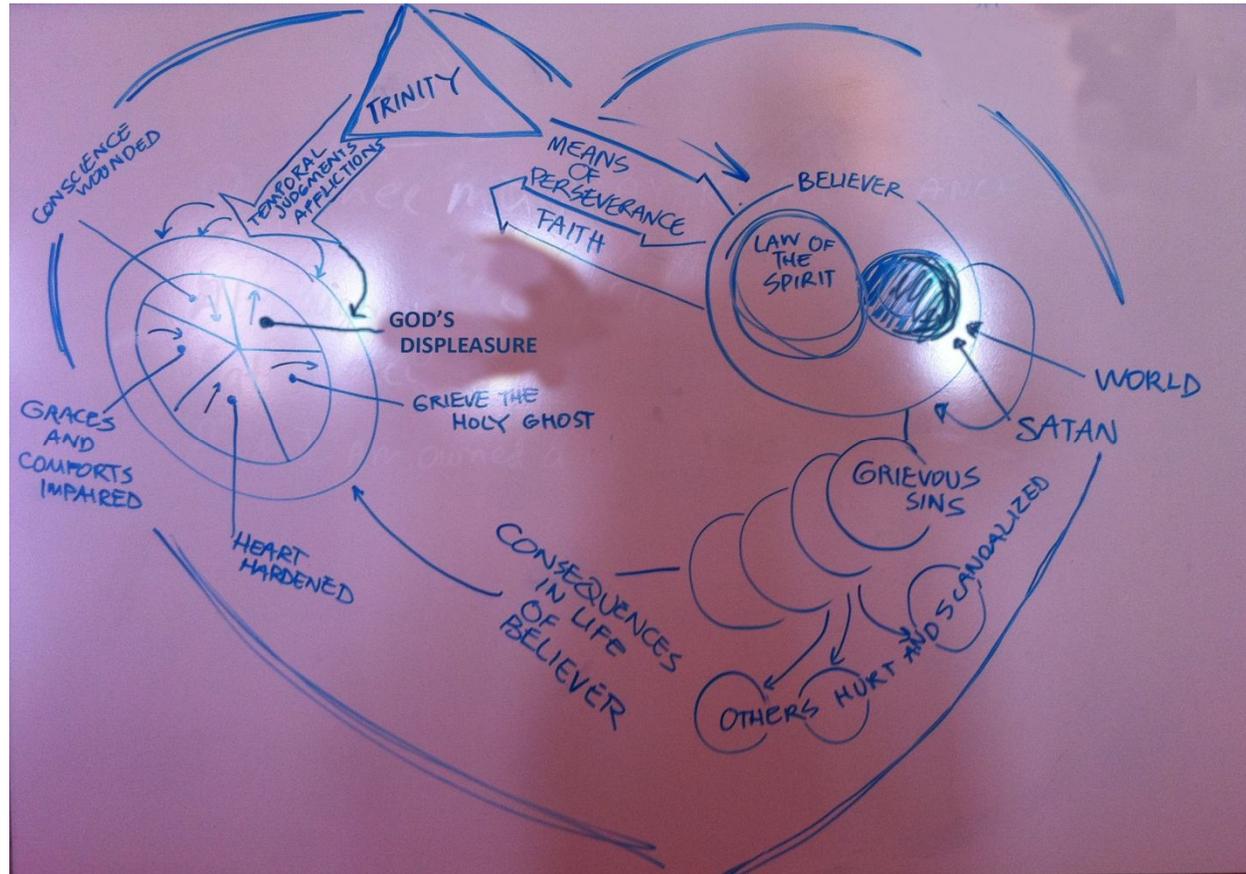
*Hebrews 9:24 For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, **now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.***

*1 John 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. **But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate** with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*

It is this One Who was alone able to stand before sin and bear the full weight of infinite wrath for our infinite-in-quality-sin, Who prays for us in John 17:11, that we might be kept in union with Him and with each other, “His dying request,” as Owen writes:

Either Christ is not heard in his request, or the Father cannot keep them by his power, if these thus interceded for are not preserved. Many temptations, many oppositions, great tribulations without, strong corruptions within, they must needs meet withal: these they have no power in themselves to overcome nor to resist. Should they be left to themselves, they would never be able to hold out to the end. Saith Christ, “I shall lose these poor sheep for whom I have ‘laid down my life’ to bring them unto thee. Holy Father, do thou therefore keep and preserve them from all these evils, that they may not prevail over them. And keep them through thy name and thy power (for we are “kept through the power of God unto salvation); “Let thy

power be exerted for their preservation. And what is too strong for thy power? Who can take them out of thy hand? Lay that upon them for their defense, show it out in their behalf, that all their enemies may feel the weight and strength thereof. 'Keep them through thy name,' thy grace; let that be sufficient for them. Let them have such supplies of gospel grace and pardoning mercy (concerning which I manifested thy name unto them, verse 6, and so revealed thee [as] a Father), that they may be encouraged to trust in that name of thine, and to stay themselves upon thee.⁵²



The above was drawn on a whiteboard at the conference to show, albeit in an incomplete way, some of the argument of Savoy 17.3. All of these works of God are the ways that he preserves us, including even the heart being temporarily hardened, even the conscience wounded, even the temporal judgments and afflictions sent by God, all are sent for the benefit of the believer as God brings the believer back into a realization of his dependence upon Him, guarding and keeping us "by the power of God through faith unto salvation." All of these are the ways within His will in which He demonstrates love toward His own.

⁵² Owen, J. Vol. 11: (368).