

# AP

REFORMED  
THOUGHT  
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CHRISTIAN  
LIVING

## The Perseverance of the Backsliding Christian (Biblical Issues)

*By Thomas Eglinton*

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints sounds wonderful. Christians will certainly persevere in grace to the end. What hope this doctrine should bring! Does this mean “once saved, always saved”? There is ample biblical warrant for the idea that Christians will persevere to the end, but there are also Bible passages that speak of Christians falling into great sin. We read warnings to Christians about repenting from sin lest they perish. How can these two ideas come together? How can Christians certainly persevere to the end while also being capable of falling into sin and needing warnings to flee from sin to escape judgment?

There are two answers to this question. The first relates to definitions: what is the Christian who will persevere to the end? The answer is “true Christians”. The second answer is contained in Paragraph 3 of Chapter 17 of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith and is summed up in the word “backsliding”. It is with this second answer that I am concerned. In this two part series, we will investigate the historical views of backsliding and, in this study, the biblical basis for the confessional view of backsliding.

### CAN A CHRISTIAN SIN?

The first question we must answer from the Bible is whether or not Christians can sin. Passages such as 1 John 1:8 and 3:6 make it clear that Christians can and do sin. The fact that a large portion of the New Testament (which was predominantly written to Christians) is dedicated to exhorting the reader to keep away from sin should teach us that sinning and repenting will be a regular occurrence in the life of a Christian.

### WHAT IS A GRIEVOUS SIN?

But Chapter 17 Paragraph 3 of the Confessions is not concerned with “general” sin in the life of the believer. Instead it is talking about “grievous sins” that are continued “for a time”. When the Confessions refer to grievous sins it is not referring to murder as opposed to lying. Instead, it is referring to sins that are willful

and deliberate. When we sin in an area where we know full-well what the right thing is to do, but we choose the sinful way instead, the Bible describes that sin as particularly grievous to God (Num. 14:11-12, Eph. 4:30).

### BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF BACKSLIDING

True believers can and do fall into grievous sins and can even stay unrepentant in that sin for an extended period of time. David is a classic example. David commits adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite (2 Sam. 11:4). He then arranges the murder of Uriah to try to cover up the fact that he got Bathsheba pregnant (2 Sam. 11:15). After committing adultery and murder, David remains unrepentant for what seems to be a period of at least 9 months. The child that Bathsheba bore to David appears to have been borne by the time Nathan arrived to rebuke David (compare 2 Sam. 11:27, 12:14-15). Upon Nathan’s rebuke, David does repent and does so beautifully in the words of Psalm 51.

Peter is also a well-known example of falling into sin. Bold Peter who was ready to die for Christ in Matthew 26:33-35 is denying Christ publicly three times with curses by the end of the same (rather lengthy) chapter (Matt. 26:70-74).

### THE CAUSES OF BACKSLIDING

But what causes a Christian to deny Christ either in word (like Peter) or in deed (like David)? The 1689 Confession highlights four reasons: the temptation of Satan, the world, the strength of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation. Chad Van Dixhoorn points out that the first three may be seen in Peter’s denial:

“Jesus warned him of the approaching tempter, but Peter still fell under the spell of an unbelieving mob in a palace, and his heart gave way under the fear of persecution”.

### THE WORK OF SATAN

Peter certainly knew about how Satan is at work to tempt Christians and cause them to stumble. In 1 Peter 5:8 he speaks

of Satan prowling around like a lion “seeking someone to devour”. C.S. Lewis explores this idea in *The Screwtape Letters* where he demonstrates (through fictitious letters from a demon named Screwtape to a younger demon named Wormwood) the many methods that Satan and his angels employ to seek to make a Christian fall. Screwtape advocates for everything from distraction to self-righteousness to the corruptions of liberalism. Satan does want Christians to fall and he will do all he can to make this happen.

### THE INFLUENCE OF THE WORLD

Peter was also well aware of the pressures that the world can impose on Christians. Repeatedly in his epistles, Peter warns of the influence of the world. In chapter 2 verse 12 he calls Christians to “keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable” implying that we will be tempted to not act honorably before our neighbors. Peter calls Christians to “not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you” (1 Pet. 4:12). The fiery trial clearly involves suffering (1 Pet. 4:13, 16, 19) including insults (1 Pet. 4:14). The world may mock Christians, hurt them physically, or try to deceive them (2 Pet. 2:1-3) in order to make them fall.

### THE CORRUPTION OF THE FLESH

We also see Peter’s awareness of the weakness and corruption of the flesh in his epistles. He urges Christians to “abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). Even our flesh is working to cause us to fall into sin.

### THE NEGLECT OF THE MEANS OF GRACE

The fourth reason for Christians stumbling can be seen in Peter’s fall as well. Before the moment of temptation Jesus tells his disciples to pray with him. “Pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Lk. 22:40). But Peter, due to the weakness of his flesh and mere tiredness, did not pray with Christ. Jesus “came to the disciples and found them sleeping” (Lk. 22:45). Peter fell into sin in part because he neglected prayer – one of the means of his preservation.

Samuel Waldron points out that we cannot avoid the first three causes of backsliding (Satan, the world, and the corruption within us), but we do have some control over the fourth (the means of our preservation).

### THE CONSEQUENCES OF BACKSLIDING

When a Christian does fall into sin, there are consequences. These consequences fall into three broad categories. God’s view, the effects on the Christian, and the effects on others.

#### GOD’S VIEW OF BACKSLIDING

When a Christian falls into grievous sin, God is displeased and

the Holy Spirit is grieved.

In Psalm 38:2 David (a believer) finds that the hand of God has come down on him. God is even described as being wrathful towards David because of his iniquities (Ps. 38:1). However, God’s wrath and displeasure with his people is not God’s final view of the Christian. His anger is designed to bring about repentance and is therefore coming from a place of great love for His people. Although he may be “overflowing [in] anger for a moment ... but with everlasting love [He] will have compassion” on the Christian (Is. 54:8).

### THE EFFECT OF BACKSLIDING ON THE CHRISTIAN

God’s displeasure is a heavy hand (Ps. 32:4) which makes a Christian feel miserable. “There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin” (Ps. 38:3). Paragraph 1 of Chapter 17 describes “the felt sight of the light and love of God” being “clouded and obscured from [Christians] for a time”.

But this is not all: a Christian who has fallen into sin wounds their own conscience and can harden their heart. Asaph describes this as becoming “brutish and ignorant” (Ps. 73:22). The elect will hate this state and will bemoan their own foolishness in chasing after sin. This wounding of their conscience will drive them back to the foot of the cross, seeking mercy and forgiveness.

Although God will not punish His elect in eternity, He may bring judgement on them in this life due to their backsliding. Paul describes sickness and even deaths occurring in the Corinthian church as being a judgment of God on Christians who were sinning in how they were taking the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:30-32). This punishment is not intended to destroy the Corinthian believers who were sinning but was designed by God to discipline them “so that we may not be condemned along with the world” (1 Cor. 11:32).

### THE EFFECT OF BACKSLIDING ON OTHERS

“You may damn your children” and “hurt others” by your sin. Paul writes about Christians exercising their liberties without a loving consideration of their ‘weaker’ brothers in 1 Corinthians 8 verses 9-13. He states that it is possible that by this sin (of not lovingly considering the conscience of your fellow believer) a Christian can be the cause of the destruction of a fellow believer. This occurs because the weaker brother is convinced to sin against their own conscience and so stumbles. The weaker brother here is not falling away entirely (he is described as “the brother for whom Christ died”) but one Christian’s sin is having an effect on another Christian and causing them to sin as well.

David’s backsliding demonstrates this principle in a more physical sense. After David repented of his sin, Nathan declares

that he is forgiven. However, because David “scorned the Lord, the child ... shall die” (2 Sam. 12:14). At times the backsliding of a believer will cause a divorce, bankruptcy, a church split, a family feud, or any number of other earthly consequences.

All of these effects of sin are designed by God to work repentance in the believer. In fact, as we saw in our historical survey, by the mercy of God these consequences of backsliding can often be the cause of humbling, watchfulness, and a growth in grace

in the elect. God’s purpose which He will bring about is the salvation of His people through faith in Christ and repentance from their sins (Lk. 22:32, 1 Cor. 11:32).

*Tom is the manager at Reformers Bookshop and an elder at Smithfield Baptist Church.*