

God preserves Christians in faith in Jesus to eternal life

Jesus said to the church in Smyrna, “Be faithful, even to the point of death [unto death], and I will give you the crown of life,” (Rev. 2:10). But, how can I remain faithful? What if I am not strong enough in my faith? Years ago, an airplane crashed into an icy river after takeoff. Some of the survivors managed to get out of the plane, but they fell into the icy river. People on the shore threw them lifelines. They encouraged them to “hang on” until they were pulled to shore. Some of the passengers drowned. The icy cold of the river sapped their strength. Though they knew they had to hang on to be saved, they didn’t have the strength, of themselves, to do this.

How thankful we can be that perseverance in the faith does not depend on us but on the Holy Spirit, who preserves us in the faith to life eternal. Paul wrote, “May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it,” (1 Thess. 5:23-24; see also 1 Peter 1:5). He also wrote to the Philippians, “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus,” (1:6).

God preserves believers in the faith. He alone can bring them to faith. He alone can keep them in the faith to eternal life. How does God preserve faith? He does this through the means of grace: the gospel, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper (Rom. 1:16; 1 Thess. 2:13). We cannot expect the Holy Spirit to carry out His work of preserving us in the faith apart from the means of grace. As Luther observed: “Therefore we should and must insist that God does not want to deal with us human beings, except by means of His external Word and sacrament. Everything that boasts of being from the Spirit apart from such a Word and sacrament is of the devil,” (SA III VIII:10).

Whoever neglects or despises the means of grace despises the tools through which the Holy Spirit carries out His work of preserving faith. This is why neglecting the means of grace is a serious sin. This is why we ought to be concerned about those who neglect hearing God’s Word and receiving the Lord’s Supper. If a person does not eat or drink, he cuts himself off from the tools by which God preserves physical life. If a Christian neglects the means of grace, he cuts himself off from the means by which God preserves faith.

Do Christians need to be warned that they can fall from the faith? Yes, because they have a sinful nature that is inclined to be spiritually smug and self-confident. Do Christians have the assurance that God will preserve them in the faith? Yes, because God clearly gives that assurance in His gospel. How can both be true, that Christians are warned that they can fall from the faith at the same time they are assured that God will preserve them in the faith? Both are true. The warning that we can fall from faith is a statement of the law. The assurance that God will preserve us in faith is a statement of the gospel. Both are needed because of the dual nature of Christians. We still have an old Adam, which needs the warnings of the law. To keep us from becoming self-righteous, the law warns us that we can fall from the faith (Rom. 11:19-20; 1 Cor. 10:12). At the same time, the gospel assures our new man that God will preserve us in faith in Jesus so that we inherit eternal life (John 10:28; Rom. 8:38-39).