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zum Neuen Testament · 2. Reihe 37

Judith M. Gundry Volf

Paul and Perseverance



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Begründet von Joachim Jeremias und Otto Michel

Herausgegeben von
Martin Hengel und Otfried Hofius

37

Paul and Perseverance

Staying in and Falling Away

by

Judith M. Gundry Volf



J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) Tübingen

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To Miroslav

Preface

The present study is a slightly revised version of a doctoral dissertation accepted by the Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät of the University of Tübingen in 1988. Prof. Dr. Otfried Hofius inspired me to work on the problem of perseverance and falling away in Paul's thought and supervised the project. His critical interaction with my thinking in the course of the investigation always proved invaluable, and his warmth and great personal interest added pleasantness to the task. One cannot wish for much more from a *Doktorvater*—thus, my heart-felt gratitude. The years of research in Tübingen were made possible to a large extent by the Diakonisches Werk of the Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands through its scholarship program for international students. During my time as a *Stipendiatin* I enjoyed the fine hospitality and resources of the Evangelisches Stift in Tübingen. My sincere thanks goes to both organizations.

A teaching post then took me to Yugoslavia, where my writing and, later, revisions were completed. By that time I had had the benefit of the reactions of others to the results of my research. I would like to thank those individuals here. Prof. I. Howard Marshall, whose expertise in my topic is well-known, kindly read various parts of the first draft and took the time to give helpful feed-back in conversation and correspondence. Prof. Robert H. Gundry read the entire first and final drafts of the dissertation and provided thorough and detailed comments—an accomplishment which owes no less to fatherly love than to academic enterprise. I benefited greatly from his insights. Prof. Dr. Peter Stuhlmacher read the dissertation as *Korreferent* and his extensive and provocative comments figured significantly in my thinking as I revised the manuscript for publication. Prof. Hans Dieter Betz kindly read the dissertation and made suggestive new observations which I was unfortunately unable to pursue and develop in the revisions. The one who perhaps knows more than any other how this book took shape and whose interaction also left its important traces on the text is Prof. Miroslav Volf, my husband. His theological interest and competence were a boon to me throughout. I remember gratefully the breakfast, mid-afternoon, and late night talks about whatever I was working on just then and the many helpful

insights they brought. Not only my mind was fed, but my soul as well by his confidence-inspiring manner. It is fitting that this book is fondly dedicated to him, for it incorporates some of the fruits of our life together.

Finally, I express my appreciation to Prof. Dr. Martin Hengel and Prof. Dr. Otfried Hofius for accepting this book in the WUNT 2 series. Thanks also go to Mr. David Sielaff, Ms. Carey Wallace, and Ms. Sandy Bennett of the Word Processing Department of Fuller Theological Seminary for their mammoth effort and expertise in reformatting the better part of my text for this publication, and to Mr. Simon Seitz of the Wilhelm-Schickart-Institut für Informatik of the University of Tübingen for his extraordinary helpfulness at the critical stage of producing a laser print-out of my manuscript.

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Judith M. Gundry Volf

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INTRODUCTION

An interest in re-examining fundamental aspects of Paul's gospel has characterized more recent New Testament scholarship. One of these aspects, to which in particular the work of E. P. Sanders has devoted considerable attention, is Paul's view of "staying in" salvation.¹ Using this terminology, Sanders put forward the thesis that for Paul as well as for Palestinian Judaism "salvation is by grace but ... works are the condition of remaining 'in'."² The ensuing debate has focused primarily on Paul's relationship to Judaism as regards the question of staying in salvation. The present book is interested in the same question but narrows the subject to *Paul's* teaching on staying in salvation; and instead of attempting a comparative religions study, this work is primarily exegetical-theological in nature. Further, it seeks to know not only *how* one remains in salvation according to Paul but also, more fundamentally, *whether* one necessarily does so.

If the present investigation bears a relation to the contemporary New Testament debate on Pauline soteriology, it is also, and even more closely, related to the centuries-old theological debate on the perseverance of the saints. Since Augustine this doctrine has served as a theological framework within which theologians have wrestled with the question of whether and how one remains in salvation. Augustine introduced the idea of a *donum perseverantiae*: as a divine gift the perseverance of the saints in grace was certain.³ Calvin later championed the doctrine by affirming the perseverance of believers through the power and faithfulness of God.⁴ The Reformed confessions, in particular, the *Canons of Dort*, emphatically espoused the perseverance of the saints by denying that they could totally or finally fall away.⁵ Down through history, nevertheless, a chorus of

¹ See especially his major works, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* and *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*.

² Sanders, *Palestinian Judaism*, 543.

³ See Augustine, *De dono perseverantiae*; *De correptione et gratia* XII.33.

⁴ See Calvin, *Institutes* III.2.15–28, 38–40; III.24.6–8.

⁵ On the systematic-theological debate, see esp. Moltmann, *Prädestination und Perseveranz*; Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*.

criticism has been heard against perseverance. Out of a wide variety of theological concerns the voices of dissent have offered an alternative: in the final analysis, remaining in salvation hinges on believers themselves, who may or may not persevere to the end, depending on the degree of steadfastness in their faith and practice.

In the discussion Paul's epistles have assumed a prominent position. Calvin drew scriptural arguments for the teaching of perseverance primarily from them, but they have served others well enough to affirm that Christians can "fall from grace" and "lose salvation." Interpreters have not only paid varying degrees of attention to a given Pauline text relating to perseverance. They have also come up with conflicting interpretations of the same text. The current debate on "staying in" carries on these efforts to show where Paul stands on the matter. The intersection of the contemporary discussion with the traditional debate calls for a reassessment of Paul's teaching related to perseverance.

Does Paul assume that Christians will remain in salvation? If so, on what basis? What, if anything, can disrupt this continuity, and to what extent can it do so? I will attempt to answer these and related questions through a detailed exegetical analysis of the relevant texts. The magnifying glass of rigorous exegesis will, I hope, let Paul's meaning prevail over our dogmatic prejudices, whatever they be. Moreover, no full-scale critical treatment of the Pauline passages related to perseverance is available, to my knowledge. Sanders' treatment in his two major works is neither comprehensive nor exegetically thoroughgoing—perhaps because his investigation is guided by a special interest in comparative religions—and the conclusions he draws are often, for this author, unsatisfyingly hesitant.⁶ I. H. Marshall's chapter on Paul in his book *Kept by the Power of God* stands out as an important contribution to serious New Testament study of the problem, yet it suffers from brevity. We therefore need to expend a good deal of effort at the exegetical grindstone if we are to understand better Paul's thought on staying in salvation. Both the comparative religions side of the debate and the systematic-theological side stand to profit from this kind of study.

As the reader will discover, the exegetical conclusions reached here through in-depth analysis of the texts tend toward the classical Reformed doctrine of perseverance. Nevertheless, this study was not undertaken to confirm that doctrine; nor is the book meant to function as an exegetical defense of it. Rather, my intent is to uncover what Paul, unaware of

⁶ See esp. Law, 105–113; *Palestinian Judaism*, 515–518.

theological systems formed after his time, believed about continuity in Christians' salvation. I have tried to let Paul set the agenda and determine how it is carried out. The material in his texts, not the internal requirements of a dogmatic treatise, gives the study its shape. The apostle himself raises the issues to be discussed here. For the most part, the degree of emphasis and amount of attention he devotes to a particular aspect of the problem will determine even the degree of its prominence in my investigation. And despite the aforementioned tendency, the conclusions drawn from the exegetical discussions will not invariably fit the Reformed position. Needless to say, the highly developed doctrine of perseverance that comes out of the sixteenth-century is not a mirror image of Paul's first-century teaching on continuity in individual salvation. It is the latter in its distinctiveness and pristine fullness which I purpose to investigate here. I will leave to others the task of applying the results of this study to dogmatic theology and comparative religions.⁷

Some readers will wonder however whether I have not set too ambitious of a goal in attempting to organize Paul's thoughts on the question of remaining in salvation into a more or less unified whole. Can we speak of a Pauline view of staying in or falling away, or, for that matter, of Pauline theology at all? Or do not such conflicting thoughts flow from the apostle's pen that it is hard to attribute to him a "theology" in the strict sense? It is true, on the one hand, that Paul's epistles, occasional documents that they are, do not together constitute a comprehensive or watertight theological system. Therefore we can hardly expect them to set forth a systematically worked out, tightly argued position on a problem such as continuity in individual salvation. On the other hand, the presupposition that Paul was prone to blatant contradictions seems just as problematic. We do best to expect a certain coherence and consistency in his thought until the texts, whose contingency we have thoroughly taken into account, prove otherwise. The following study will support the reasonableness of this presupposition with exegetical evidence.

The epistles to the Thessalonians, Galatians, Corinthians, Romans and Philippians, whose Pauline authorship is widely and successfully defended,⁸ constitute the sources for this investigation of Paul's thought on continuity in salvation. Although examination of all the pertinent texts in Ephesians, Colossians and the Pastoral Epistles would doubtless enrich the discussion, whether or not they are authored by Paul, for lack of time and

⁷ For a view of the relationship between Paul and Judaism on continuity in salvation different from Sanders' and critical of it, see Gundry, "Grace," 1-38.

⁸ On the question of the authenticity of 2 Thessalonians, see p. 15, n. 35.

space I have limited my comments to the most significant parallels.

I have arranged the texts under investigation topically instead of chronologically. This arrangement does not overlook the possibility that Paul's epistles reflect a general development in his theology. But other factors affecting interpretation—especially historical and literary contexts—seem in this case to unlock more doors to Paul's meaning than do chronological considerations. Besides, Pauline chronology itself is a matter of debate. The topical arrangement which I have used does not assume too much with regard to chronology. Further, the grouping of texts with common *topoi* lets their parallelism, nuances and contrasts come to light more easily. To avoid an artificial systematization by this kind of arrangement, however, careful attention is paid to immediate and overarching contexts.

The discussion of Paul's teaching on staying in salvation opens with an analysis of texts in which Paul announces and expounds fundamental theological truths about God's saving work in Jesus Christ, present and future, for Christian believers (Part One). In the first group of texts (Chapter I) Paul indicates the relation of various divine saving initiatives to each other and especially to final salvation. These texts reveal whether Paul believes in principle that a sure continuity exists in the individual's salvation,⁹ so that aspects of God's saving work which have already benefited believers are integrally connected to the future consummation of their salvation.

The second group of texts (Chapter II) addresses the question of remaining in salvation in the light of the eschatological tension as characterized by Paul. Not only must believers endure in faith and hope the interval between present salvation and its future consummation. Until that day they also face tests and tribulation in which antagonistic forces threaten their continuance in salvation. The eschatological distress and final judgment raise the possibility of failing to remain in salvation to the end. Thus those passages where Paul's fundamental theological assertions on continuity in salvation meet with the concrete realities of present Christian existence provide yet deeper insight into the apostle's view of staying in salvation.

Parts Two, Three and Four seek to refine Paul's meaning further by analyzing texts in which the concrete problems Paul faced in his ministry touch the question of staying in salvation. These texts are often taken to have negative implications for the idea of sure continuity in Christians' salvation. They fall fairly neatly into two familiar categories: the first group deals with the problem of ethical failure as a possible reason for exclusion

⁹ As the analysis of the texts will reveal, Paul can conceive of salvation as a work of God in *individual* Christian believers, not just as God's saving activity *among* them in the Christian community. Cf. Sanders, *Palestinian Judaism*, 547.

from salvation (Chapters III–V), and the second concerns the possibility of falling away through unbelief or abandonment of belief in the gospel (Chapters VI and VII). The last group of texts, in which the dangers are formulated more generally, deal with the final outcome of Paul’s ministry for himself and his converts (Chapters VIII and IX).

Finally, the Conclusion will summarize the basic findings of the exegetical discussions and relate them to each other in an attempt to show how Paul answers the question whether and on what basis one “stays in.”

PART ONE

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL TENSION AND STAYING IN

In his fundamental theological expositions of God's saving work in Jesus Christ for Christian believers Paul can distinguish between various aspects or stages of salvation. Further he indicates that some of these divine saving initiatives have already benefited believers, but others lie yet in the future. The temporal separation between present and future aspects of salvation raises the question whether the blessings of salvation experienced now will certainly be followed by the coming ones. Is there a connection between them, and if so, what is it? Paul deals with this matter of the interrelationship of God's saving initiatives toward believers as he announces and explains to them basic theological truths about their Christian existence. First I will look at the most important Pauline texts in which the relation of present to future aspects of salvation comes to light and try to answer the question whether Paul there presupposes or asserts an underlying, sure continuity in Christians' salvation in view of which it will definitely reach completion (Chapter I). Then I will take up the same question where it surfaces in the context of the eschatological distress and final judgment. When Paul is dealing with end-time threats to the full accomplishment of Christians' salvation, how then does he portray the interrelationship between its present and future aspects (Chapter II)? What grounds does he put forward for his view?

I. CONTINUITY IN SALVATION

God's Saving Works and Final Salvation

Romans 8:29, 30. In the "golden chain" of Rom 8:29, 30 Paul names in succession various aspects of God's saving work in Christians. "Whom he foreknew, he also predestinated to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren; and whom he predestinated, these he also called; and whom he called, these he also justified; and whom he justified, these he also glorified." What is the goal of God's saving work portrayed here as a chain of divine actions leading up to a final climax? How are the individual links of the chain related to the goal?

The "beginning" of Christians' salvation lies in God's eternal counsel, according to Paul. He develops the notion of the divine *πρόθεσις* at 8:28b in the next verse with the use of the terms *προγινώσκειν* and *προορίζειν*.¹ According to God's eternal purpose, Christians are "foreknown" and "predestinated." *προγινώσκειν* denotes God's prior choice, not prior knowledge (so also 11:2; for the idea, cf. 9:11).² *προορίζειν* refers to God's eternal determination of the elect to a goal.³ *Predestination* thus expresses the goal-oriented aspect of divine election. Paul explains the goal of divine predestination here to be conformity to the image of God's Son: *προώρισεν συμμόρφους τῆς εἰκόνης τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ*. Interpreters have understood the expression "conformed to the image of God's Son" in different ways. Does it refer to conformity to Christ in baptism (cf. Phil 3:10; also Rom

¹ V. d. Osten-Sacken, *Römer* 8, 279; Wilckens, *Röm* II, 163.

² BAGD, s. v. *προγινώσκω*: "choose beforehand." Cf. Schmithals, *Anthropologie*, 164: "Der Weg zum Heil beginnt also damit, daß Gott sich in freier Wahl die Menschen auserwählt, die er zum Heil führen will, nicht aber erkennt er nur im voraus diejenigen, die sich aufgrund ihres eigenen Verhaltens das Heil verdienen werden." Cf. also Bultmann, *προγινώσκω*, *TDNT* 1, 715; Calvin, *Institutes*, III.21.5; below, p. 167 with n. 27. Cf. the semitic use of ידע. The textual history of Rom 8:29, 30 suggests that *προγινώσκειν* and *προορίζειν* are so similar in meaning that they could be substituted for each other (Schmidt, *προορίζω*, *TDNT* 5, 456). In v. 30 *προέγνω* is the variant reading (A) for *προώρισεν*.

³ See Michel, *Röm*, 277; Luz, *Geschichtsverständnis*, 253; Hofius, "Hoffnung," 9; Marshall, *Kept*, 102. Cf. 1 Cor 2:7: *προώρισεν...πρὸ τῶν αἰώνων*.

6:3–5)?⁴ Is it rather a present, on-going process (cf. 2 Cor 3:18) in imitation of the Son's obedience in suffering?⁵ Should we take it as a reference to the eschatological transformation (cf. Phil 3:21)?⁶ Or is it used more broadly to connote the whole Christian life as participation in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:9)?⁷ What is the goal of divine predestination described as conformity to the image of God's Son?

Paul can think of Christian conformity to Christ as both conformity in present mortal existence (*συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ*, Phil 3:10)⁸ and in the future glorified life of the resurrection (*μετασχηματίσει τὸ σῶμα τῆς ταπεινώσεως ἡμῶν σύμμορφον τῷ σώματι τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ*, Phil 3:21). There is even present transformation (*μεταμορφούμεθα*) "from glory to glory" (2 Cor 3:18). Thus there are various aspects of conformity to Christ for Paul. Which aspect is meant in Rom 8:29?

The standard of conformity in Rom 8:29 is the *εἰκὼν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ*. Paul uses the phrase *εἰκὼν Θεοῦ* elsewhere to designate Christ as the image of God in whom God's glory and essence shines forth (2 Cor 4:4, 6; cf. Col 1:15, 19). *τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα* at 2 Cor 3:18 must also, in the light of 4:4, 6, refer to Christ as the image of God.⁹ For Paul, *δόξα* characterizes Christ as the *εἰκὼν Θεοῦ* (2 Cor 3:18; 4:4, 6). We see then that Paul uses the term *εἰκὼν* of Christ with reference to Christ's divine glory. The standard of conformity to which Christians are predestinated, therefore, is the Christ of glory.

This view gains support from 1 Cor 15:49, where Paul makes a sharp distinction between *ἡ εἰκὼν τοῦ ἐπουρανίου*, which "we will bear," and *ἡ εἰκὼν τοῦ χοίκοῦ*, which "we have borne." The "image of the heavenly" refers to Christ,¹⁰ and the future bearing of Christ's image, to the resurrection life, as the context makes clear.¹¹ Christians will be made like unto the image of the heavenly one, the resurrected and glorified Christ. This association of the resurrection with the image of Christ may form the background to Paul's formulation in Rom 8:29. For here Paul says that Christians will be conformed to the image "of his Son" (*τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ*),

⁴ Paulsen, *Römer* 8, 159.

⁵ Calvin, *Rom*, *ad loc.*; Cranfield, *Rom*, 432; Bruce, *Rom*, 178. Cranfield and Bruce, however, do not exclude a future conformity.

⁶ Michel, *Röm*, 277; Thüsing, *Per Christum*, 126, 127.

⁷ Wilckens, *Röm* II, 164; similarly, v. d. Osten-Sacken, *Römer* 8, 284–286.

⁸ The present tense of the participle does not permit a reference to baptism, however (Grundmann, *σύν μετά*, *TDNT* 7, 788, 789).

⁹ Larsson, *Christus*, 277; Barrett, *2 Cor*, 125.

¹⁰ Conzelmann, *1 Cor*, 287, 288; Grosheide, *1 Cor*, 389; Schlatter, *Bote*, 441; Jervell, *Imago Dei*, 191.

¹¹ Cf. Schlatter, *Bote*, 441; Grosheide, *1 Cor*, 389.

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