

Kept by the Power of God

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(Review of 'Kept by the Power of God — A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away.' I. Howard Marshall. Epworth Press. 228pp.)

THE PROBLEM of the relationship of the supreme will of Almighty God and the subordinate but real wills of men and women is a difficult one. There is no parallel in our experience to help us understand it, and our imagination finds difficulty in comprehending how our wills, which we know to be real, can remain true wills within the sovereign will of our creator, in whom we move and live and have our being, and whom — so we are clearly taught by Revelation — works all things after the counsel of His own will.

Philosophical theology stumbles at the problem, but it provides no problem within the experience of the converted regenerate Christian. For example, the Christian who is in personal fellowship with his heavenly Father calls with complete confidence upon God for guidance through the intricacies of life. In this he is following numerous scriptural injunctions to commit his way to the Lord who will direct his paths. As the Christian looks back over life he can see clearly that God has and is fulfilling his promise to answer this prayer for guidance. Yet the guidance experienced comes through entirely 'natural' means. At no point is the Christian conscious that his own natural God-given faculties are suspended in order that the guidance might be piped to him. Every step of the road is his step, every decision is his, made — if he has these particular gifts — by intellectual reflection and decision, otherwise perhaps through the influence of friends and their intellectual wisdom. Thus the Christian is conscious both of the guidance of God and of the full and true working of his own nature and circumstances in the receiving of this guidance. Reason may find difficulty in reconciling these two, but experience finds none. The promises of Revelation are found to be true. Or take another illustration from the held of human relations. The Christian does not hesitate to pray for divine protection from external dangers whether through natural forces or through malevolent men. He is conscious that God is able to restrain the wrath of man, indeed if God did not do this, who would survive? Thus, the Christian prays with confidence that God, if He sees fit, will protect him. It never enters his mind to think that the answer to his prayer might be that God has given man a free will and that therefore the supplication should be directed to the malevolent person, rather than to Almighty God. In these two areas of Christian experience we have examples of the relationship between the free will of man and the sovereign will of God. God is sovereign; yet the reality of our nature and our free will is not infringed. The Scripture bounds with examples. Thus Joseph answered his brothers 'It was not you who sent me here but God' (Genesis 45: 8) and 'you meant it for evil but God meant it for good' (Genesis 50: 20). Every action which led to Joseph's position in Egypt was God's action. God sent him to Egypt. Yet, at the same time, it remained truly human actions freely decided on, so that those who perpetrated the wrong remain responsible. Or again, Job's reply to his misfortunes has always been recognised not only as very pious but also very true, 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away'. The ultimate truth was that the Lord took away Job's possessions; for the Lord was in complete control of the Chaldeans and the other brigands who, enflamed by greed and lust for loot, destroyed Job's servants and drove off his live-stock. The Lord was not only in complete

control of the brigands, and all their actions which they freely undertook, but He also controlled the maliciousness of their demonic master, setting strict limits to his actions.

The problem of the relationship of God's will to a created will is not to be solved by denying God's sovereignty as though through creation of the human will (and demonic wills!). He had de-limited an area within His creation over which He has no control. Not only is this contrary to the whole of Revelation but it would be unbearable and terrifying were it true. Prayer would become impossible, as we have seen. Nor is the problem of the relationship to be solved by denying the reality of the human will as though it were not what we experience it to be, namely a true will. Sometimes it is thought that the word 'free', whether insisted on or denied, affects the problem. This is an illusion. Every will must be a freewill. The word 'free' adds nothing to the meaning. And the denial of the word 'free' to the word 'will' is meaningless so long as we are talking about what we experience as will, which is the only will we have access to. Although our wills are free-wills it is incorrect to say that they are independent wills over against God's will. The possibility of this concept was the false suggestion of the Devil to Adam, grasped at by man but certainly not achieved by man, though man thinks he has attained to it and that he is in fact free from God's sovereignty. Adam's mistake was that of thinking that by rebelling against God he became sovereign; but no creature can ever become sovereign over against its creator, and no will can be free if by this is meant independent of its creator. The regenerate man does not wish to have a will operative outside the sphere of God's sovereignty. The concept is repulsive. The unregenerate may desire this, but he certainly doesn't possess it.

The freedom (i.e., the realness) of our will is not infringed by God's sovereignty, because He exercises His sovereignty only in accordance with the 'natures' of His creation. Thus in working in us He works through our natures which He created and which He foresaw in determining His plan—indeed created for the purpose of fulfilling His decrees. Thus from our point of view God's working out His sovereignty will appear to us entirely natural, that is, in accordance with the 'nature' of things, as in the illustration above of God's guidance and protection. And yet revelation teaches us, and our own converted consciousness confirms, that guidance and protection is to be primarily attributed to God and thanks are to be offered to Him for granting these prayers.

The problem of reconciling God's sovereignty and the reality of our will remains with the intellect, but it is not a problem of experience, nor a problem of Revelation which is clear on the subject.

A subdivision of the relationship of the will of God to the will of man is the experience of conversion and the theological concepts of regeneration and perseverance. Although converted Christians do not differ amongst themselves on the reality of God's guidance and protection there has been strong controversy about the sovereignty of God in the transformation of the rebellious sinner into a son of God, a new creation in Christ. Yet it must be said that there does not seem to be any real room for denying that the testimony of Revelation is overwhelming in support of the sovereignty of God in all aspects of salvation as in every other sphere of human affairs.

The present book under review is the latest contribution to this controversy. It is written from a frankly Arminian point of view which sees the vital decision which differentiates a Christian believer from his non-believing friend as the believer's decision to accept what God offers, while his friend decides not to do so. The Arminian affirms that the decision is not only ours, as everyone who has experienced this decision knows to be the case, but that it is

ours alone. It follows, naturally, that if we can decide from within our own will to accept the offer of salvation it is possible not only to decide to reject it when first offered but also to reject it after having experienced it for a time, that is to fall finally from grace and sonship. To establish this latter point is the main burden of the book. The author's aim is to establish not only the possibility but also the actuality (in some few cases, at least) of falling away into final apostasy after having become a child of God, experiencing fellowship with God, through a new nature, while seated with Christ in the heavenlies. To fall headlong from this throne should be, according to the writer, the fear of every Christian.

Arminianism sometimes is known as semi-Pelagianism. Pelagianism is the attitude of the man in the street who believes that to be approved by God he needs, at the most, to turn over a new leaf and do his best. Semi-Pelagianism is the Christian modification of this, for it adds that a man cannot do this in his own strength, but needs the help of God which is available to everyone who calls for it. What he can do in his own strength is to accept the promptings of God to decide to turn over a new leaf, or (for an evangelical Christian), to accept Christ and to persevere. We are all born Pelagians and only give up the notion as the result of the clear teaching of Revelation. Nor would any Christian not be an Arminian were it not for the fact that Scripture appears overwhelmingly to exclude Arminianism. Thus, controversy between 'Arminianism' and 'Calvinism' can only be solved by careful exegesis of Scripture, and it is the merit of this book that the author addresses himself to examining the teachings of Scripture.

At this point two criticisms of the book should be made. In reviewing the evidence of the Old and New Testaments the writer includes a great slab about what the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls appear to believe on the subject of perseverance and then goes on to examine the teaching of the Rabbis. There is a contradiction here. Either the problem is to be resolved from Revelation, and no Christian, however 'liberal' would suggest that the Dead Sea Scrolls or teachings of the Rabbis are part of Revelation. Or it is to be resolved in the area of human reflection, in which case it is much more important to examine modern thought on the subject than scrutinizing either Old Testament or New Testament, let alone the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Rabbis. But of course it cannot be solved in the area of human reflection, for our knowledge of God's will is beyond the area of our human reflection which draws its data from our own experience. Thus, if we are to seek a solution, it must be through careful exegesis of revelation.

The author devotes the bulk of his book to examining passages of Scripture, but his examination is not by any means thorough enough, so that he appears to draw his conclusions out of the air and not out of the passage. Thus, he writes (page 13) of the message of the Old Testament prophets, 'God takes the initiative...but the people themselves must take the decisive step of returning to God'. The author, however, has not noticed that this step is never taken by Israel, for the nation goes from bad to worse. It cannot in fact take this step because of its deadness in sin. This, however, does not lessen the obligation of the prophet to call Israel to take the step of returning because it remains the duty of the nation to do so. In this situation the prophets' ministry was a ministry of death. Nor has the author noticed that the prophets foretold that in the future things would be different. God would not only take the initiative but would make that initiative effective by taking away the stony heart (so Ezekiel), and by writing His law not merely on tablets of stone but on the fleshly hearts of His people (so Jeremiah). These prophecies have been fulfilled in the gospel and so the ministry is now a ministry of life. The author adds (page 14), 'God's promises always appear to be conditional on the faith and obedience of His people'. This is true, but the writer appears to think the faith

and obedience of His people is the work of the personality of the believer only and not also the work of God in the heart of the believer. Yet as we have seen, God works through the natures that He has created and in His working does not destroy or suspend these natures, nor do the natures get in the way of His working. It is this inability to see that faith can be both a work of God and our own work at the same time and not half one and half the other that is at the basis of the Arminian error. Since faith is the work of man we must preach the gospel and exhort people to believe and ourselves believe and persevere in our obedience. Yet since it is a work of God we must look to God and trust Him that He will give faith according to His will, and give thanks when we see evidence of that creative will, and rely on His faithfulness to keep us according to His promises.

The author chooses Jeremiah as a key Old Testament writer. He assembles passages warning of judgement which follows apostasy and other passages promising forgiveness on repentance. But the question is how can the sinners turn back to God? Warnings and promises are not indications of ability, which the writer appears to take them as. Jeremiah's answer is the new covenant. What was impossible for sinners under the old when God's law was written only on external tables of stone, under the new covenant becomes not only possible but certain ('They shall all know Me') because God deals with the inner person, writing His law on the heart itself. Marshall summarises the prophecy of the New Covenant thus: 'The thought here seems to be that the display of God's love will cause some of God's rebellious children to turn back to Him. God will give them new hearts.' But the scripture has quite a different order; God's love is the giving of the new heart and it is the new heart which causes the rebellious children to turn back to God. The Arminian scheme of salvation may be described as 50/50, or God/us/God; thus, to quote from page 13, '1. God woos with words of love. 2. The people themselves make the decisive step of returning. 3. God forgives; gives them new hearts.' Or again, 'God takes the initiative in restoring His people to Himself but the people themselves must make the decisive step of returning to God.' Note the words 'themselves' and 'decisive'. These words in the sentence are intended to exclude God at the point of decision.

Arminianism is based on philosophical rather than exegetical considerations. It has two prime bases. One, the ethical sense of fairness. Righteousness and justice is the basis of all our relationships with one another, but we are on dangerous ground if we set up our sense of fairness, i.e., what we believe to be due to us and to others, as a criterion for judging God's relationship and dealings with his creation, particularly his relationship and dealings with a rebellious creation. It is in fact difficult to see why a rebel deserves anything but condemnation and condign punishment. Since salvation, however, is in the realm of mercy, not punishment, it is difficult to see how the concept of fairness plays any part in it. If God is to be fair and just to rebels, all deserve punishment. Mercy supervenes but is above the realm of justice. In fact, the two concepts are mutually exclusive. That which is deserved is not mercy. Consequently, the rebellious sinner who is the recipient of God's mercy can hardly discuss this mercy, and make demands, on the basis of his sense of fairness. St. Paul reminds the caviler against God's distribution of His mercy that it is highly unsuitable for an earthen pot to expostulate with the potter about the way he carries out his task. The Lord's parable of the labourers in the vineyard warns us against the fatal error of impugning God's goodness when we seek to judge his acts of mercy and overflowing benevolence by our own judgement of what is fair. The judge of all the earth will do right, of that we may be sure. But He will not be judged by us and it is a very dangerous activity for us to set up as criterion our sense of what is fair for Him to do to rebels in His distribution of mercy, especially when the results of this judgement of ours fly in the face of overwhelming testimony in Revelation.

The other ground from which Arminianism draws its vigour is its concept of free-will, in which the will is not regarded as free when it is responding to the overwhelming grace of God. But we cannot be free against our creator in whom we live and move and have our being, nor should we wish it. It is sufficient for us if we are free against the influences of all that is not God. As sinners we are very far from free in this respect but are slaves to our passions and led captive by the Devil. But restored in Christ, we become free in the only way a creature can be free, free to follow its God-given nature but not free against the Giver.

The argument in this book is based on a misunderstanding of the doctrine the author is controverting. He appears to think that a full assurance of final perseverance is incompatible with warnings and exhortations against falling away, so that the occurrence of such warnings and exhortations in Scripture is regarded as proof that the writers did not believe in predestination and final perseverance even when they explicitly said that this was their belief. Illustrations abound. Thus in writing about the Qumran sect Marshall says 'From this survey of the teaching of the sect on apostasy two apparently contradictory facts will have become apparent. On the one hand, the Qumran sect believed firmly in divine predestination and had a strong conviction of His protective power, on the other hand they devoted much attention to the possibility of sin and apostasy' (p. 22). The author considers these two things contradictory, and this fatal misunderstanding vitiates his whole treatment of scripture. His method is a simple one. Wherever he finds a warning against sin and its consequence of condemnation he regards this as evidence that the scriptural writer did not believe in predestination. Yet a brief reflection on the history of theology would have shown that there have been innumerable Christian theologians who, like the Qumran sect, believed in the fullest sense the doctrine of predestination but none of whom have been unconcerned about sin and apostasy but have been vigilant in warning against it. The Christian's assurance of perseverance flows from his realization of the faithfulness of God who will continue the work which He has begun. Yet every Christian at the same time knows that no fornicator or unclean person etc., will inherit the kingdom of God. So he buffets his body lest he become such and so be a castaway. The two concepts of faith in God's faithfulness to keep souls which we have committed to Him and of diligence to make our election sure fit together like hand and glove. They are not in contrast or 'apparent contradiction' but complement each other for it is God who works in us as we work. The author however, believes that predestination excludes the reality and responsibility of human response. Thus, in dealing with the Johanne evidence he comments: 'We must now observe that the predestination language is not rigorously applied in every case.... John 5 criticises the Jews for not believing in Jesus, and the reason adduced for their unbelief is not that they have not been predestined to believe but they seek glory from men' Op. 176). The author assumes the two concepts are exclusive of each other. Of St. Paul he writes (p. 175), 'Even his most stringent predestinarian language did not exclude the need for human faith'. But this argumentation is fallacious. No-one who believes in predestination has ever suggested that faith is not the means of salvation. Luther and Calvin were the most stringent predestinarians, as any acquaintance with their writings will show, yet none have written more eloquently or stringently on the necessity of justification by faith only than these two! The fact is, of course, that our salvation is 100% God's work and 100% man's response. Yet the Arminian is apparently unable to see how this can be and is determined to assign part to God and part to man. The Pelagian mind is inclined to ascribe, shall we say 5% to God and 95% to man, the semi-Pelagian 50%-50%, while the evangelical Arminian, such as our writer, 95% to God and 5% to man. Yet after all it is this last 5% which makes the difference between heaven and hell so that man is in the end his own saviour. When speaking of faith, Marshall writes,

'granted that faith is a gift of God, it is none the less a gift which may be refused' (p. 175). In Marshall's evangelical Arminianism, man's contribution is narrowed down to the point of accepting or rejecting faith. Here man is acting on his own. However, reflection will show that there is a contradiction at this point. If it is conceded that faith is the gift of God as the Bible affirms, then to say that the gift may be refused is verbal 'non-sense'. Faith is a nonentity, unless it is exercised. It is only a gift when it is received. Until it is received it does not exist. Therefore the notion that it exists as a gift which is refused is without meaning. If faith exists and is a gift it only exists as an accepted gift, so that the acceptance (i.e. the exercise) of faith is the gift.

The writer depends heavily on adjectives and adverbs to take the place of argument. Thus he constantly speaks of rigid predestination, as though predestination could be anything else than rigid, and he uses adjectives such as 'inevitable' and 'mechanical' to denigrate the concept of predestination. These are impersonal words, but predestination, with its concomitant of perseverance, is always the gift and work of a personal God and depends on His faithfulness. Predestination in scripture is never mechanical, if by that it meant an impersonal purposeless process. Yet predestination is as certain in its results as is any machine, for God is sovereign in his purposes; but to use impersonal adjectives and adverbs as this writer so freely does is to bamboozle the reader with irrelevant notions. The question to be resolved is a simple one, has a loving God who is of infinite power, wisdom and goodness told us of his purposes. If he has, then we should believe that these purposes are good and wise and will certainly be accomplished and in their accomplishment will not destroy His creation (i.e., our will and nature and the reality of our response) even though we cannot understand exactly how these things can be. The question, therefore, is a question of exegesis of Revelation and Marshall acknowledges this and devotes his book to it. Yet it is on the point of exegesis that the book fails, and the reason is that he does not come to the Bible to find out what it says so much as to show that it cannot be saying certain things which others have thought that they see there. Thus in his concluding pages he rejects the doctrine of predestination as understood by Calvinists, not because it is unbiblical, but because it cannot be biblical. He writes, p. 194: 'Although this view claims to be based entirely upon the Bible and to represent biblical teaching faithfully, it is difficult to believe that it does so. It teaches that divine grace is given only to a limited specified group of mankind... it is impossible to avoid the impression that the picture of God thus presented is One who is unjust ... we must be content simply to register our feeling of certainty that this is a false interpretation of the New Testament. ... A rigid theory of predestination is then not to be deduced from the biblical teaching ... We must rule out the view that God foreordains a certain number of elect for salvation with its logical consequence that they are bound to persevere to the end and attain final salvation.' The reviewer has underlined the words in this passage which show that the writer's conclusions are based on a priori concept of what God must do in His mercy towards rebels. Coupled with this a priori approach is the writer's failure to understand that warnings to avoid danger and sin are quite compatible with confident assurance of ultimate salvation. Indeed these warnings and the careful attention to duty that ensues are the means of attaining that salvation. Take two simple illustrations from current life. The driver of a motor vehicle has full confidence that he will attain his destination but at the same time he is fully vigilant, and he is also aware that if, for example, he goes to sleep at the wheel he will be killed. His care and wakefulness in no wise diminish his confidence but are the grounds for it. Or again, in the recent moon shots, an awareness of the frightful dangers and the inevitable death that follows even one careless slip does not diminish the confidence of the astronauts in the successful completion of their mission. Vigilance against the known dangers and the warnings that might be needed to make these

dangers known are simply the means of ensuring the successful completion of the mission. They don't reflect any lack of confidence. Neither is there any need for an accident to take place to make one aware of the dangers or of the need of the utmost vigilance all the time. Yet our writer appears to think that there must be some apostates if the warnings in scripture against apostasy are to be real. Armstrong might have come to grief in spite of his vigilance and the vigilance of his supporting team though it is right for him to have confidence both in himself and in his friends at Houston. But the Christian rests on the character of God made known through His promises of faithfulness. The Christian is confident that he will not come to grief, and that no one will pluck him out of his father's hands. His confidence is well-based and will be justified for God is faithful and almighty. Yet he knows full well that were he to turn away from God, were he to decline to do what was necessary (e.g., the buffeting his body) he would be lost. So it is an expected phenomenon to discover in the New Testament the fullest confidence and sureness of salvation along with the dearest warnings against the dangers of drifting away. But the writer's argument throughout this book is based on the assumption that these two things are mutually exclusive, so that where warnings and exhortations to vigilance occur, there can be no sure confidence of the successful outcome of the mission. This assumption comes out, for example, in the author's summary of the evidence of the Book of Acts. 'It does not appear on the whole that Luke holds a rigid predestinarianism. When men reject the Gospel it is their own choice. Nor have we found anything in Luke's teaching which guarantees that those who are elected to salvation will necessarily and inevitably be preserved from falling away. Continual perseverance in faith is required' (p. 86, my italics). The two italicised sentences are, of course, perfectly true. The writer appears to think that they modify rigid predestinarianism or complete perseverance and that they are incompatible with the sentences that go before them. The reader will also have noted, in this passage, the impersonal words 'rigid', 'guarantee', 'necessarily' and 'inevitably', which obscure the fact that any doctrine of predestination or perseverance deals with the will and actions of a personal God.

Although St. Peter begins his first epistle by describing his readers as 'elect according to God's foreknowledge' and declares that 'by the power of God they are guarded through faith to salvation', our writer says 'we must ask whether Peter had any doubts about his readers failing to complete their pilgrimage' and after noting about the devil being like a roaring lion seeking whom he might devour, concludes 'we are probably justified in agreeing that for Peter election did not necessarily guarantee salvation' (p. 158). The mistake here is in the word 'guarantee' — which leaves out of sight the Christian's responsible attention to making his election sure. The whole tenor of the passage in 1 Peter is of assurance, not of dubiety, and the author's conclusions are imported into the passage. There is no shred of evidence that Peter had any doubts lest his readers fall away, or that for him election did not have the consequence of final salvation. The drift of the passage is quite to the contrary. The author's failure is a failure in exegesis, and this is fatal, for it is only by a true interpretation of revelation that the doctrine of predestination or perseverance can be established or assailed. In his exegesis, the author skids round some of the key pre-destination passages. Thus in dealing with our Lord's description of those disciples who are excluded from His presence in Matthew 7: 22, he does not notice the key remark 'I never knew you', that is, 'you were never in true relationship with me'; and in Mark 13: 22 he is forced to assign to the deceivers our Lord's words that they would deceive the very elect 'if such a thing were possible'. But Jesus' choice of language (not pope but ei dunaton) shows that the apostasy of the elect is an impossible concept. This single example is enough to undermine the whole of Marshall's thesis. And Acts 13: 48 'as many as were ordained to eternal life believed' is explained away: 'We are simply told that those Gentiles who were already devout Proselytes now took the step of faith' (p. 84). Nor is there any attempt to tackle the problem of unbelief as presented in St.

John's gospel where predestination plays so large a part in our Lord's solution to the problem. For example, 'You do not believe because you are not my sheep', and 'My sheep hear My voice' John 10: 26). Nor does he deal with 'The golden chain' of Romans 8: 30, 'And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified'. The writer's comment on this passage 'Salvation thus depends upon God's purpose and call but nothing is said which would exclude the need for human response to that call' betrays once again his mistaken concept that the need for human response to the call of God excludes the concept of God's predestination. An important passage which the author omits completely is the argument of the objector in Romans 9 and St. Paul's answer to those objections. The objector, we may say is an Arminian, for he uses an Arminian's arguments, 'Is there injustice on God's part?' 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will.' But St. Paul's answer shows that there is not the slightest streak of Arminianism in him. How easy to have said that man must make the final decision of faith, and so to have saved God's justice from this cavil. But St. Paul replies, 'God says to Moses "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" ', and goes on to cite the case of Pharaoh whose heart God hardened and concludes 'So then He has mercy on whomever he wills and he hardens the heart of whomever He wills', and when the objector expostulates, St. Paul simply replies 'Who are you, a man, to answer back to God?'