

The scariest thing about prodigals is that they weren't always prodigals. In fact, once they looked a lot like us – they went to church, they sang, they prayed, they worshiped. They followed Jesus with their lives and their words, and in the years before they became prodigals, we were all sure that they were Christians.

The issue of prodigals in the church not only raises *life history* questions of *what happened*, which we looked at when we talked about making and becoming a prodigal, and not only the *practical* questions of *what to do*, which we've talked about under the headings of prayer, love, and grace, but it also raises theological questions about *what we believe*, questions that have to do with issues of covenant membership and eternal election, the perseverance of the saints and assurance of salvation. Can you lose your salvation? What does it mean to be a true Christian? How can I be sure that I won't become a prodigal?

The challenge we face is that the Bible teaches *both* that God doesn't lose any of His sheep, *and* that real covenant members can and do fall away from the faith. No one can snatch you out of God's hand, but branches *do* get cut out of the vine.

What I want to show you today is that a right understanding of *covenant* and *election* as *different* but not *contradictory* perspectives on the reality of salvation will help us see how the Bible can give us both *blessed assurance* and *stern warnings* like we just heard from Hebrews 10. So let's look at these important ideas outlined in your order of worship.

First, I want to bring back the definition of a prodigal that I introduced way back in September. A prodigal is not a random pagan, or someone who visits church for a couple weeks and never comes back. **A prodigal is a covenant member who has fallen away from the faith.** If he's not a covenant member, then he can't actually fall away; if you aren't married, you can't get divorced. Or, a branch can't be cut out of the vine unless it's *in* the vine (John 15), or a part of the olive tree (Romans 11). From our text today, you can't *profane the blood of the covenant by which you were sanctified* if you weren't actually a part of that covenant.

A prodigal is someone who has "received the knowledge of the truth." Hebrews compares the sin of a prodigal to "setting aside the law of Moses" – you have to *have* the law in order to set it aside. And as bad as it was to set aside the law of Moses, it's *worse* to keep sinning after knowing the truth. Such sin involves "trampling underfoot the Son of God" and "outraging the Spirit of grace." The important thing is, a prodigal is not falling away from a *pretend* relationship, but from a *real* relationship with Christ and His Church.

Election: So what does that mean for election? When we talk about election, we're usually talking about God's eternal decree to predestine some to everlasting life by choosing them in Christ. *Election* means that God has made a *choice* about who gets saved. That choice was already made in eternity past, and it wasn't based on *who we are* or *what we do* – it's simply based on God's will, His pleasure. The Bible talks about this in Ephesians 1.

So when someone becomes a prodigal, what does that mean for election? Do they lose their election? Is God changing His decree? The Biblical answer is no, may it never be. This sovereign, eternal decree isn't based on our actions, but solely on God's free choice. Not one of God's elect can ever be lost, because God's election is His choice to save them. They might wander for a time, sometimes a long time, but if they are one of the elect, God will turn their hearts back and save them. God makes His eternal decree known through what happens in time, and so His decree will only be fully known at the end of time. This means that history, or what happens in time, cannot *change* election, but it does *reveal* election.

This is why a snapshot approach to faith doesn't work: at any one moment in time, someone who is not elect might be a clean-living, church-goer, while his elect brother is off in the far country wasting his inheritance with riotous living. But another picture ten years later might tell a completely different story! Election is revealed through time, and only fully revealed at the *end* of time. But meanwhile, although we don't look over God's shoulder and read the decree, it's meant to comfort us to know that there is this decree, because the reality of election means that if God has chosen to save us, then nothing in heaven or on earth can change that.

Covenant: Now, God doesn't give us a copy of His decree, but He does set apart a people as sort of a rough sketch of the decree. He does this through His *covenant*. A covenant is a relationship based on promises and commitments, and God promises blessings to covenant keepers and pronounces curses on covenant breakers. God uses the covenant to *accomplish* or *carry out* His decree. Election is the *why* and *who*, and covenant is the *how* of salvation.

And here's one of the big differences between covenant and election – election isn't something we keep or break. It's God's eternal decision. But God works out His decree through covenant history, and the covenant *can* be kept or broken. At the *end of history*, the list of covenant members and the list of those whom God has elected to life will match perfectly, but *during the course of history*, they don't. They match *closely*, but not yet *perfectly*. The covenant gives us a *provisional* preview of election, a working model of the decree.

It's close enough that the New Testament writers speak to the church as "the elect", like we saw in 1 Peter, even though they can't be 100% sure about every individual. It's an accurate generalization about the group, and it allows the New Testament writers to apply the blessings and benefits of election to a particular people. God says wonderful things *about* the elect; He makes wonderful promises *to* the elect, but all that is *useless* unless we have some idea who they are!

The covenant is given so that we can apply the blessings of election to real people in real history while we wait for the end to come. Were you baptized and are you obeying Jesus? Then you're a covenant member, united to Christ! If you've never been baptized, or if you've been excommunicated, then you are not a covenant member.

If you come and ask me “Am I elect?” I can’t say for sure, because I don’t know God’s decree, but if you ask me if you are member of God’s covenant people, then that’s something I can verify. I have your names on a list.

Now, when a prodigal leaves the faith, *that* list is the list that changes; the covenant list, not the election list. But because the covenant list is the list of people who are connected to Christ through the covenant, which is where election is revealed over time, it gives us the only information we have about election. That’s why it plays such an important role in our assurance of salvation, which we’ll get to in just a minute. Before that, though, I want to look briefly at the idea of “*the perseverance of the saints.*”

Perseverance of the Saints: Here’s what this doctrine teaches: “They whom God hath accepted in His Beloved (Christ), effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally, nor finally, fall away from the state of grace: but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.” That’s from the Westminster Confession, chapter XVII, section I. The Bible teaches that in John 10, among other places.

But it looks like we’ve hit a problem: the doctrine of perseverance states that you *cannot* fall away if you are sanctified, but Hebrews 10 just talked about the terrible punishment that awaits the one who “profanes the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified.” Is this a contradiction?

No, it’s not. What’s happening here is that Westminster is taking the blessings of election, and applying them to covenant members. You might say that the Confession is looking at things through an *election* lens – those who are sanctified *persevere*, because they are elect. Hebrews 10, on the other hand, is looking at things through a *covenant* lens – there is a sort of covenantal sanctification that can be profaned. It’s the same word, because it refers to the same set of Spirit-filled experiences – baptism, worship, good works, etc., but it’s a qualitatively different reality.

Maybe this will help: the sanctifying work of the Spirit is like sap flowing through the tree. A dead branch is connected to a living tree, and so sap was made available to that branch. In that sense, speaking *covenantally*, the branch was sanctified. But because it’s *dead*, the sap doesn’t do any good! And so in that sense, speaking *in terms of election*, that branch *isn’t* sanctified. *This is the way Scripture speaks:* Not all who are Israel are Israel. Not all who are sanctified are sanctified. Not all the saints are saints. If you don’t understand *covenant* and *election* as two *complementary* but *different* perspectives on salvation, you’ll end up very confused.

Assurance of salvation: As long as we’re going through history, we won’t be able to perfectly identify the elect, so we’re called to operate in covenant terms, which we need to do in order to be the Church. *We know* that election is real and true, we just can’t see it yet. But that’s a bit scary – if someone who looks and seems and feels like a true Christian can turn out to be a prodigal, how can I be sure that I’m one of the ones who will persevere and be eternally saved?

Simply being a covenant member – being baptized, going to church, tithing - is not enough. Some covenant members fall away, and get cut out of the covenant. The covenant is a provisional means of making God's elect people visible, but since God's covenantal story is unfinished, you can't yet see how it ends.

But here's the good news: assurance walks by *faith*, not by *sight*. Your assurance of salvation shouldn't be based on what you can or can't see; it must be based on ***faith***. The foundation of your assurance is in Christ Jesus and His promises, promises that are communicated to you by His Holy Spirit, promises that are received *by faith*.

When the Bible says, "Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Have you called on the name of the Lord? Then *believe* that you will be saved! You can't have real assurance without faith, but when you have faith, then every Word God says to you, every drop of wine and bite of bread from the Lord's Table comes to you as God's own testimony. So believe Him!

By believing Jesus, you can be absolutely sure that you will persevere to the end, not because your faith is so strong, but because your faith comes to you as a gift from Jesus, bought with His own blood, and preserved by His power and prayers. Trust Him! Believe Him!

Warning: When you stop believing, that's when you become a prodigal. That's when you trample the Son of God underfoot. That's when you profane the sanctifying blood of the covenant and outrage the Spirit of grace. If you know the truth, if you've been united to the Son of God, if you share in the blood of the covenant and receive the grace of the Spirit, and in spite of all that, you fall away, then God isn't going to send any new sacrifice for you. There's nothing more to come, no *new* New Covenant. All that's left for you is a fearful expectation of judgment, and the fury of God's fire.

When you hear this warning, you shouldn't say, "I'm a Christian, and once saved always saved, so this doesn't apply to me." A prodigal is not someone who never had any connection to Jesus. A prodigal is a covenant member who falls away from a real connection to Christ, and because of this, all covenant members should feel this warning like a blast of heat to the face.

But here's what the elect of God do when they hear His warnings: *they believe Him*. They take His warnings seriously. This warning is for covenant members, which means that it's a warning for you. Don't ignore it, don't blow it off. Instead, run to Jesus, and cling tightly to His promises. Don't use the doctrine of election as a shield to protect you from God's warnings! Instead, respond to God's warnings in faith to make your calling and election sure.

Hope: And finally, look down with me to v. 39: This is the hope that we have: "we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." How do we know that? Because we are here right now and Jesus is renewing His covenant with us through His Word and at His table. Through these covenant blessings, He's renewing *us*, nourishing and strengthening our faith and preserving our souls.

And for those who have forsaken the covenant, our hope is far less *visible*, but we have this hope as an anchor: the Lord knows those who are His. He has chosen those whom He will save, and no matter how far they might be from Him right now, Jesus will not lose one of those whom the Father has given Him. We know that God's purpose according to election will stand, and so we call prodigals back to the covenant, so that we can watch His grace unfold in their lives.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

Let us pray:

“Almighty, merciful, and most gracious God and Father, we earnestly implore you to turn the hearts of all who have forsaken the faith once delivered to your Church, those who have wandered from it or are in doubt or temptation through the corruption of your truth; mercifully visit them and turn them again, so that with undivided hearts they may take pleasure in your Word and be made wise to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord, and Amen.”