
THE FIRE ON THE WALL

IN THIS BRILLIANT scene, Bunyan speaks eloquently to an issue of controversy which brought much discussion to the Christian community during his time. The question was and still is “Can a true believer in Christ forfeit his salvation and fall from grace?”

In the fourth room of the house of the Interpreter we find a fire burning at the base of a wall and a man pouring water upon it in an attempt to quench the flame. The flame continues to burn higher and hotter because there is another person at the back of the wall continually pouring in oil.

Here is what Bunyan is trying to say to us. At conversion there is a work of grace begun in the heart of the true believer. The devil will attempt to quench the grace of God by his lies, deceits and evil machinations. The figure of a man at the back of the wall pouring in oil is Bunyan’s answer to the question. It is Christ Himself who pours in the oil of His grace from the other side of the wall, answering the works of the devil with all the mercies purchased for His people. The work of grace begun by Christ in His elect ones will be maintained until the end: “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

In our present day, the teaching of “eternal security” or “once saved, always saved” has occupied center stage in many an evangelical mind. This idea has become a weak and tepid understatement undermining the nature of the gospel and creating such questions as, “Must Christ be Lord to be Savior?” For

Bunyan it was an issue of perseverance (man’s working) and preservation (God’s working). To the Puritan mind this was not in any way a “works righteousness,” but rather two confluent biblical realities that flow together and merge into sanctification unto eternal life.

A fuller expression of this idea of perseverance and preservation is found in Philippians 2:12–13: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.” Here, both realities are found side by side. Our perseverance in faith, holiness and obedience is the evidence of God working within us, and at the same time, God doing His work in us is a powerful incentive for us to do works of faith, love and obedience.

There is something to fear, nonetheless, in growing careless and indifferent to the pressures of the world, the flesh and the devil. In *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Bunyan hears the hiss of the Serpent:

Though you may be burning hot at present, yet if I can pull you away from this fire, I shall have you cold before long. I will cool you inseparably by degrees, little by little. What care I ... if I be seven years in chilling your heart.

The fire on the wall is one side of a two-sided coin showing by way of allegory the ongoing work of Christ in the life of the believer, whereby the one who is predestined, called and justified is ultimately glorified (Romans 8:28–30).
