**The effective death of Christ**

Text: John 17:9

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**Scriptures:** 1 Kings 19:11-18; John 17:1-11

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 414, 34, 411, 240

**Series:** Canons of Dort #7 (Art 2.8-9)

**Theme:** According to God’s sovereign will, Christ has effectually redeemed all, and only those, of God’s people who from eternity were chosen to salvation and given to him by the Father so that they would be gathered together in one church through all eternity.

**Proposition:** Pray for everyone that Christ’s death may be effective for them according to God’s will.

**Introduction**

Do you think that you will die an effective death? It’s a bit of an odd, perhaps uncomfortable, question to ask isn’t it. What is an effective death? We could say that it is one that is ‘*successful in producing a desired or intended result*’. So what result do you intend from your own death?

Sadly for a growing number of people in our world today people take their own lives in order to end the pain and suffering they experience. I can understand that motivation. When we are in pain, we just want it to stop. That’s why people like you and me take painkillers – medications that reduce or eliminate the agony of bodily afflictions. Suicide is not a ‘good death’ though, because whilst it removes pain, it robs a person of life and robs those who know them of their company. It is also not a choice that is ours to make because ‘*the Lord gives life, and the Lord takes it away*’ (ref. Job 1:21). All human life is sacred because we are all made in God’s image.

If you ever wish to die, then know that you are not alone, saints of old have felt so low, so depressed, that they desired to live no longer, for example:

* Jonah “*O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live”* (Jonah 4:3).
* Elijah “*It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers*” (1 Kings 9:4).
* Jeremiah “*Cursed be the day on which I was born!*” (Jer 20:14).
* Job “*Oh that I might have my request, and that God would fulfil my hope, that it would please God to crush me, that he would let loose his hand and cut me off!*” (Job 6:8).

A good death – that’s the meaning of the Greek word from which our English term ‘euthanasia’ is derived is **not** one where we (or someone else) relieves our pain and suffering, but one in which God is glorified. Glorifying God in life and in death is the desired result for those who love Him. We die an effective death when we die, as we have lived, trusting in the Lord both in our comfort and our suffering, both in our pleasure and in our pain. The most effective death ever is that of Christ Jesus.

This is the subject of the last section of the second head of doctrine in the Canon’s of Dort, part of the ‘L’ or TULIP – limited atonement. Here’s the first part of Article 2.8: “*For this was the most free counsel of God the Father, that the life-giving and saving* ***efficacy*** *of the most precious death of his Son should extend to all the elect*”. Efficacy means ‘the ability to produce a desired or intended result’. This afternoon, we are going to consider the effective death of Christ has He reveals it through part of what is often termed his ‘high priestly prayer’ in John 17. We’ll do this in three points:

1. Praying for the disciples of Christ
2. Praying for the unbelieving world
3. The effective death of Christ
4. **Praying for the disciples of Christ**

In John 17 we find the longest recorded prayer of Jesus in any of the gospels. This entire intercessory prayer is commonly called Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer, although we don’t find that actual title in the Scriptures. As Jesus begins His High Priestly prayer, He reveals that His purpose in coming to earth was to glorify the Father by giving eternal life to all those who believe in Him. Although Jesus is God and was with the Father before the world began (John 17:5), He humbled Himself and came to earth as a man so people would know “the only true God, and Jesus Christ” whom He sent (John 17:3). Now, the hour had come when Jesus’ work on earth would be finished (John 17:1), and Jesus asks the Father to glorify Him as He prepared to finish the work that would “give eternal life” to those who believe in Him (John 17:2).

Jesus then continued His High Priestly prayer by praying for those whom His Heavenly Father had given Him out of the world (17:6). He specifically does not pray for ‘the world’ – that is those who have not been given eternal life. It is an inescapable conclusion from these words of Christ that there are two, and only two, categories of people when it comes to everlasting life: those who have been given by God the Father to the Son, and those who have **not** been given by God the Father to the Son. In His high priestly prayer, Jesus lifts up his disciples – not only the 11 of his closest followers at that time, but all who had already and those who would in the future call on the name of the Lord to be saved (Rom 10:13). Jesus does not ask that God the Father takes his disciples out of the world at that time, but that He keeps them from the evil one (v15).

Jesus declares that he has manifested the name of God to ‘*the people you gave me out of the world*’ (v6). The definite, we could say ‘limited scope’, prayer of Jesus here evidences the truth that Jesus did not die for everyone, but **only** for those the Father had given him out of this world. This is the doctrine of particular or definite atonement which arises directly from the words of Christ. It is thoroughly Biblical, although challenged by many. Why is this?

The concept that God the Father could give a particular and specific number of people to the Son to be saved before Jesus actually died makes no sense if God is time-bound as we are or if His influence in this world is limited, as ours is. As we’ve already seen in our studies so far through the Canons of Dort, errors arise when we conceive of God as being subject to the same limitations that we exist with as finite, time-bound creatures. Errors of this nature were the heresies of the Remonstrants, against whose teaching the Synod of Dort met in 1618-1619 to formulate the articles we have before us today. These errors are listed as 2.a-g under the second head of doctrine.

1. The first error suggests that God ordained His Son to die for an indefinite number of people.
2. The second error suggests that Christ secured the option to potentially save everyone, depending on whether they chose to believe.
3. The third error suggests that Christ opened up a way for the Father to deal with mankind, setting up conditions of entry into His kingdom which people could then possibly meet.
4. The fourth error suggests that God has cancelled the standard of complete obedience to law and replaced this with faith, which although it is imperfect is still made to equal perfect obedience to God’s law.
5. The fifth error suggests that nobody will be condemned by God for sin, but that all will be accepted as reconciled to Him by grace.
6. The sixth error suggests that God wanted to save everyone, but because of their free will only some people accept his offer.
7. The seventh error suggests that Christ did not need to die at all.

These are all somewhat plausible ideas, but none of them agree with Scripture. They are therefore not correct. The truth is that Jesus prayed and continues to pray before His Father’s throne of grace **only** for those for whom He died. That is a humbling thought and no cause for boastful pride. If you are someone who believes that God sent His Son to die in your place and to live a perfect life on your behalf so that you could have life, true life that never ends, then Jesus prays for you! That is a comforting reality in a world where we suffer the consequences of our own sins, the sins of others and the suffering, pain and loss that is an inevitable part of this broken world. Jesus only prayed for those He died for in His high priestly prayer; so should we **only** pray for other Christians? This brings us onto our second point

1. **Praying for the unbelieving world**

Notice that Jesus says, ‘*I am not praying for the world*’(v9). So if Jesus doesn’t pray for those who do not believe, should you and I? Let’s look at Scripture. Jesus teaches His disciples ‘*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*’ (Matt 5:44). There is a variety of reasons why people like you and me may have enemies, including:

* We may be unjustly persecuted by individuals, groups, organisations or governments.
* We may have enemies because we have treated others unjustly or sinned against them.
* We may have enemies simply because we belong to Jesus Christ (e.g. John 15:18).

The command of Christ here is clear, whoever our enemies are and for whatever reasons they are against us, we should pray for them. Jesus prayed for those who put Him to death saying "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*."(Luke 23:34). One of them later, a centurion, when he saw Jesus die and the earthquake that followed said ‘*Truly this was the Son of God*’ (Matt 27:54). Did that statement of belief by that Roman soldier indicate that that man is one of those for whom Christ died, one of the elect? I wouldn’t want to answer, ‘absolutely yes’, but I would say ‘probably so’. So what can we say?

In Christ’s humanity He certainly prayed for those who opposed Him, either because some or all of them would later come to saving faith or because the detailed knowledge of the individuals who God has elected to salvation was one of the privileges of equality with God that He set aside when He took on a human nature (Phil 2:6). We are certainly called to pray for our enemies. We are called to pray for all kinds of people. As the Apostle Paul writes to Timothy “*First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way*” (1 Tim 2:1-2).

What is the most important thing that we can pray for anyone? That, if they have not already done so, they would come to Christ Jesus in repentance and faith. We know (in the words of CofD Art 2:8) that God has willed that Christ should give faith to His elect, a gift that he acquired for them through his death; that he should cleanse them by his blood from all their sins.

We know that Christ is still gathering His church and guarding the community of His people faithfully to the end. We see this reality in history, for example in 1 Kings 19 where, even in a time of great apostasy within Old Testament Israel, yet there were 7,000 who had not turned away from the Living God to serve Baal (1 Kings 19:18). We know that those who are truly saved can never again be lost. Jesus said it this way “*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand*” (John 10:28).

The fulfilment of God’s electing love in Christ will most certainly take place because, unlike you and me, God is completely in control of all events that occur. The Canons of Dort speak of the security of God’s sovereign will in these words from Article 2.9:

“*This counsel, proceeding from eternal love for the elect, has from the beginning of the world to the present time been powerfully fulfilled, and will also continue to be fulfilled, though the gates of hell vainly try to frustrate it. In due time the elect will be gathered together into one, and there will always be a church of believers, founded on the blood of Christ. This church shall steadfastly love and faithfully serve him as her saviour (who as bridegroom for his bride laid down his life for her on the cross) and celebrate his praises here and through all eternity*”.

So continue to pray for any who are unbelieving in your own family. Pray for your unbelieving neighbours and friends. Pray for any enemies you may have. Pray that God would be pleased to bring them to saving faith in your Lord and Saviour. Know that the Lord will answer your prayer according to His sovereign plan and purpose whereby He sent His only Son to die for His elect people and them only, which brings us to our third point:

1. **The effective death of Christ**

The Canons of Dort affirm what the Word of God reveals – that the death of Christ was a completely effective death that achieved all the saving purposes of God to “*effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and tongue all those, and those only, who from eternity were chosen to salvation and were given to him by the Father. God further willed that Christ should give to them faith, which, together with other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, he acquired for them by his death; that he should cleanse them by his blood from all sins, both original and actual, both those committed after faith and before faith; and that he should guard them faithfully to the end and at last present them to himself in splendour without any spot or wrinkle*”.

As we’ve seen, the limited atonement of Christ, whereby he died only for those whom God had chosen to be saved from before the foundations of the world (Eph 1:4), is a consequence of the Biblical doctrine of divine election. All those who believe in Jesus Christ as their own Saviour and Lord can know with **certainty** that He has effectively saved them from their sins through His death on their behalf. All those who believe in Jesus Christ as their own Saviour and Lord can know with **certainty** that they are part of the church universal that He guards faithfully to the end so that He will at last present all God’s people to ‘himself in splendour without any spot or wrinkle’ (Eph 5:27).

All those who believe in Jesus Christ as their own Saviour and Lord can know with **certainty** that their own death will be an effective entrance for them into the presence of their Lord as a spiritual being awaiting a resurrection body. “*Death is swallowed up in victory*” (1 Cor 12:54). “*Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Cor 12:57).

As we’ve seen, the truth that God only elects some people to eternal salvation and that Jesus died only for these people in no way removes Christ’s call for all of His disciples to proclaim the gospel to everyone. We can assure people that if they come to Christ in faith then they too can be certain that His death has been effective for them. In a world where even the most effective medications can only at best postpone the evitability of death we can freely offer everyone the ultimate cure for the deadly disease that has run rampant throughout all human populations since the fall: sin.

The reality of sin is completely denied by many, ignore by some and joked about by others. However, the truth is that sin most certainly result in eternal death – that is separation from God – unless that sin is forgiven. The effective death of Jesus Christ saves many from the fate of eternal death. Congregation, we have a gospel to proclaim:

* A gospel that is good news for all kinds of people throughout the earth
* A gospel about Christ’s birth at Bethlehem
* A gospel about His effective death at Calvary
* A gospel about an empty tomb
* A gospel about His glorious reign at God’s right hand
* A gospel about the work of His Spirit in the church
* A gospel that we rejoice to believe and proclaim.

So let’s keep telling the most important story that there is for as long as we have breath on this earth.

AMEN.