**The grace of assurance**

Text: Romans 8:16-39

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**Scriptures:** Psalm 33:1-12; Romans 8:12-39

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 33, 378, 458, 73b, 523

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#16 – Articles 5:8-10)

**Theme:** The merciful preservation by God of His saints, who can be certain of their secure salvation which is founded upon faith in God’s promises.

**Proposition:** Assurance of salvation is a rich comfort from the Lord.

**Introduction**

Examinations can be very stressful at school, university or another educational institution. Likewise for people who are training for an athletic event, preparing for a driving test or a job interview. Doubts and nervousness can plague the student, athlete or candidate. Have I done enough to pass? Has the amount of time I have spent studying been sufficient? Will I remember all the stuff that I have been trying to cram into my head over the past months? The opposite of doubts and nervousness is assurance which can be defined in a dictionary as ‘confidence or certainty in one’s own abilities’.

A much more important ‘test’ must be faced by each one of us on the coming Day when “*we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil*” (2 Cor 5:10). How can you and I be sure that we have done enough to ‘get across the line’ on the Day of Judgement so that we can enter into God’s New Earth?

This is the question that plagued Reformer Martin Luther as he sought to gain certainty that he was saved from his sins. This is the question which the Roman Catholic Church answered by teaching people to regularly attend mass, confess their sins to a priest, do penance and purchase indulgences to gain extra credit either for themselves or for others. Jacobus Arminius and his followers (the Remonstrants) taught that whether or not a person perseveres in their salvation to the end depends on the decision of their will (error 5b.) They also taught that ‘*without a special revelation we can have no certainty of future perseverance (in our faith) in this life*’ (error 5e.).

It was against these errors, that the Synod of Dort wrote the articles we have in view this afternoon from the ‘Fifth Head of Doctrine’: the perseverance of the saints. This is the ‘P’ of the acronym TULIP which addresses the eternal security of the Christian believer. This doctrine answers the theological, pastoral, and very personal question: “*Once a person is saved, can he or she then lose their salvation?*”.

The word ‘perseverance’ in an English dictionary means ‘*continued effort to do or achieve a goal despite difficulties, failures or opposition*’. When the word is used in the phrase ‘perseverance of the saints’ it is not the saint’s (i.e. Christians) perseverance that is meant, but rather God’s sovereign work to achieve His goal of saving all His elect, despite difficulties, (their) failures and opposition. For this reason, some people prefer the phrase ‘*preservation of the saints*’. Our first point focusses on the truth that it is God who mercifully preserves His elect people – their security of salvation does not depend on any decision of their will or on their works.

1. **God mercifully preserves**

A key ‘golden thread’ which runs through the ‘tapestry’ of Scripture is the truth that God has supreme authority over all things. Not only does He know everything that has already taken place, that is currently happening and that will happen in the future. This is His divine foreknowledge. He also controls everything. All events, big or small in past history, all current circumstances and all future happenings which are yet to take place. This is His foreordination/predestination/predetermination. All things take place ‘*according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will*’ (Eph 1:11).

The will of God – His ‘divine decrees’ do not alter. They are fixed. They are immutable – ‘unchanging over time’. This truth is revealed in Psalm 33 (v11): “*The counsel of the LORD* ***stands forever****, the plans of his heart to all generations*”. The preservation of God’s elect people is not grounded in their ‘own merits or strength’ but in the ‘undeserved mercy of God’ (Art 5:8). This is why it is true that once a person is truly saved, they remain unchangeably saved.

My garage at home usually contains a number of projects that I have ‘on the go’. I generally finish most of them – eventually! However, over the years there have been some that I have never completed. Then I have moved house and the unfinished project has been sold or given away. In contrast to people like us, God **always** finishes what He starts (e.g. Phil 1.6). In our text, Paul reveals what has been called ‘the unbreakable or golden chain of salvation’: “*Those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified*” (Rom 8:30). It is because, and only because, salvation is grounded in the work of God alone and not the work of man (ref. Rom 9:11) that it is certain.

The Canons of Dort (5:8) express the preserving grace of God in these words: *“his promise cannot fail, the calling according to his purpose cannot be revoked, the merit, intercession, and pre­ser­va­tion of Christ cannot be nullified, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be frustrated nor destroyed”.*

The absolutely solid, stable, reliable and dependable saving work of God is revealed in many places in Scripture, for example: “*So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is* *impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as* ***a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul***” (Heb 6:17-19a).

The Apostle Paul knew what it was like to experience a physical shipwreck, not once, but three times. He was adrift at sea for a day and a night (2 Cor 11:25). When a ship is not safety anchored in a sheltered place, then the vessel is at risk of drifting into rocks or out into dangerous waters where wild waves can flood the hull and bring the whole ship down.

Paul uses this imagery to describe those like Hymenaeus and Alexander who ‘*made shipwreck of their faith*’ (1 Tim 1:19) How are we to rightly understand this given that God mercifully preserves His saints so that they are absolutely and eternally secure? Hymanaeus and Alexander had ‘veered off course, away from good teaching and drifted into the dangerous rocks of false teaching’ thereby ‘wrecking’ their faith. These men did not lose their salvation. They were either people who were never truly saved, as their shipwrecked faith revealed or people who, as straying believers, were being disciplined by God (Heb 12:6).

We know that the Apostle Peter went astray when He denied Christ three times, but His salvation was secure. Remember that Jesus said to him before he drifted from faith: “*I have prayed for you* ***that your faith may not fail****. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers*" (Luke 22:32). The truth that God mercifully preserves all His elect people does not mean that there is no uncertainty (from a human perspective) with regard to the salvation state of individual men, women and children like us as we move through this life. It can be deeply unsettling and disturbing for people like us to be unsure of our own salvation. Praise the Lord that He reveals how we can be certain that we are saved, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Personal salvation is certain**

Having certainty about passing a future exam or test is not really possible because you can’t control all the variables. For example: The questions might be harder than you had expected or cover topics you did not study sufficiently well; You might feel unwell on the day of your test and not be able to remember what you have learned.

In contrast to an examination, personal salvation does **not** involve you or me passing a test. Salvation is grounded in Christ passing the test of righteousness and dying in the place of those who have, or will yet, fail to be perfectly obedient to God. This is why the Canons of Dort make this statement about personal assurance of salvation: “*Believers themselves can be certain of this preservation of the elect to salvation and the perseverance of true believers in the faith*”.

We find an example of this truth in our text, where the Apostle Paul is certain about his own salvation and that of ‘*all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints*’ (Rom 1:7). “*If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died- more than that, who was raised- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*” (Rom 8:31b-35). Paul goes on to write that nothing and nobody can undo God’s justification of His elect in Christ.

The Canons of Dort do not deny that the experience of personal assurance of salvation varies between individual believers and also may change at different times during their lives. This is the topic of Article 5:11 which we will consider in more detail in the next sermon in this series. In Article 5:9 the degree of personal certainty that an individual experiences about their own salvation is ‘*according to the measure of their faith*’. We need to be careful here. It is **not** true that just because a person believes that they are saved they most certainly are. The foundation of security of salvation does not rest in a personal conviction but in the sure promises of God, as we’ll see in our next point.

The ‘measure of faith’ (Art 5:9) is **not** how much we **subjectively feel** we believe, but rather how much **objective evidence** there is that our faith is genuine. Faith is proven by works, as James wisely writes: “*Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works*” (Jam 2:18). Peter expands on this means of gaining assurance through the evidence of works in 2 Peter 1:10 “*be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities (virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love) you will never fall*”.

Salvation by faith alone is evidenced by works which demonstrate growth in Christlikeness. This does not mean that true believers who are genuinely working out their own salvation in fear and trembling do not at times have doubts and experience weakened assurance. Martin Luther once wrote that ‘*you must learn that if you are a Christian, you will without a doubt experience all kinds of opposition and evil inclinations in the flesh. For when you have faith, there will be a hundred more evil thoughts and a hundred more temptations than before*’. However, those whose genuine faith is proven by their works can have certainty of the salvation. This assurance does not come in extraordinary, miraculous ways, but is accessible to all of God’s children – which brings us to our third point:

1. **The comfort of God’s promises**

There is great comfort in certainty. It is good when you have confidence that your bus or plane is on time, the weather is fine, and you have every reason to expect that you will get to your destination safely. You can travel with peace of mind – with comfortable assurance. It is good when your teacher, who also set your exam, gives you so much information about what is coming up in the next test that you can be confident that you know and can recall what you need to in order to pass. You can wait for the exam with peace of mind – with comfortable assurance.

Earlier in this service we recited Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day One together. This is a statement of comfortable assurance in a matter of far greater importance than travel or exams. What is your only comfort in life and in death? “*That I am not my own but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ*”. How is this comfort possible in such an uncertain world, inhabited by people like you and me who are subject to change?

The Canons of Dort give the answer in Article 5:10 “*This assurance is not produced by a certain private revelation besides or outside the Word, but by faith in the promises of God, which he has most abundantly revealed in his Word for our comfort; by the testimony of the Holy Spirit, witnessing with our spirit that we are children and heirs of God; and, finally, by the serious and holy pursuit of a clear conscience and of good works”.*

First and foremost, assurance comes through faith in the promises of God. The stronger our faith the more confident we are that God will most certainly do what He has promised to do. Then the more we trust Him in all things, great and small. At a personal level, we receive assurance through the comforting work of the Holy Spirit, as Paul explains to the Romans: “*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs- heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him*” (Romans 8:16–17). This work of the Holy Spirit is not a ‘*private revelation besides or outside the Word*’, but is at the heart of His ministry to God’s people, just as Jesus promised: As the Helper, “*He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you*” (John 14:26).

The Spirit teaches us the truthfulness, reliability and certainty of God’s promises and He Himself is the guarantee given so that we can have assurance of salvation. Brothers and sisters, we are ‘*sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it*’ (Eph 1:13b-14). The work of the Holy Spirit is mysterious as He impresses on our souls the reasons by why the grace of God’s blessed assurance is available to all of us who believe in Christ. This assurance is enhanced when, as we have already seen, we diligently pursue growth in Christlikeness, as the Apostle Paul expresses in these words: “*I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” (Phil 3:14).

When Paul came before Felix, he explained that he worshipped ‘*the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God…. that there will be a resurrection of the just and the unjust*’ (Acts 24:14-15). In light of his faith in God’s promises, he then explained “*So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man*” (Acts 24:16).

The very good news of the gospel is that we can have assurance of our salvation. This is possible because it is God who mercifully preserves every one of His chosen people. Christ’s work is complete and fully sufficient to anchor each one of the souls of the people for whom He died. Personal assurance is obtained through faith in God’s promises, confirmed to the individual believer by the testimony of the Holy Spirit and made ever more certain in life as we press on in striving to be more and more like Christ.

Brothers and sisters, would you agree that assurance of salvation is a rich comfort from the Lord?

AMEN.