Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

As I explained last week, the Canons of Dort is a document that was written by a Church Synod way back in 1618. So, you might very well wonder if it is relevant for today? Well, the fact is that if you believe in the doctrines laid out in the Canons of Dort, then you are in a small minority among Christians. Most Christians today believe in the views of salvation that led to the synod meeting of 1618 and that the Canons were written to answer. So, the doctrines in the Canons are certainly *as* relevant, and probably even *more* relevant, today, than they were back in 1618!

And I want to demonstrate this reality with just one quote, shortly, but the doctrines outlined in the Canons are known as **Calvinism**, after the great Reformer, John Calvin. Now, Calvin did not invent these doctrines. They are in fact the teachings of Scripture, as we are going to see. But in the 1500s, when Calvin was alive, they had been lost and neglected and replaced with false doctrine, for around 1000 years of church history! But when Calvin *rediscovered* them, they were embraced in the Reformed churches. So, as a Reformed Church, we hold to what is known as Calvinism. Well, some of you will have heard of the author **Tim La Haye**, of the ‘Left-Behind’ series of books and movies, and the book, ‘The Act of Marriage.’ Well, here is what Tim La Haye said about Calvinism:

*To suggest that the merciful, longsuffering, gracious and loving God of the Bible would invent a dreadful doctrine like Calvinism, which would have us believe it is an act of ‘grace’ to select only certain people for heaven and, by exclusion, others for hell, comes perilously close to blasphemy*.

So, according to La Haye, anyone who agrees with Calvinism, or the Canons of Dort, holds to a doctrine that “comes perilously close to blasphemy”! And I can assure you that La Haye is far from unique in his criticism. If you were to rock up to most churches in New Zealand, today, and ask people there what they think of Calvinism, you will hear it mocked and rejected and even hated. They simply cannot believe that any Christian would hold to what is, in their eyes, a truly awful belief.

Now, what we do have in common with most Christians is **the belief that not everyone is saved**. And we all agree that God does choose some and not others. If you did not believe that, you would have to cut whole verses and chapters out of the Bible, as we shall see. Where we differ, though, is the ‘why’ – why are some saved and not others? What is the basis of election? And that is the chief concern of the Canons of Dort – It is a consideration of the doctrine of salvation, or what we commonly call the doctrines of grace, and especially the doctrine of election. Why are some saved, and not others, and how are they saved?

And that question is an age old question.

* It is the question Jonah asked when God chose not to destroy the people of Nineveh. He just could not understand why God would allow the wicked people of Nineveh to live, and it “*displeased Jonah exceedingly*.”
* And then there is the part of the Bible that examines the doctrines of God’s sovereignty and election in most detail – **Romans 9**. And there we read these words of God: “*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated*.” And God is very clear there that this was the case “*though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad*.” So, we ask, why, God? Why did you choose to love Jacob and hate Esau?

Well, this is something of a spoiler in terms of this sermon series, but questions like this really boil down to this one thing: **Will we let God be God**? In other words, does God have to fit into our views and expectations, and answer all our questions, or are we prepared to acknowledge the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible? Will we let God be God?

And I want to be very clear about one thing, right at the get go. This sermon series is not about just having the correct doctrine. This is not an academic exercise, so that we can pat ourselves on the back for getting the Bible right. At the end of Paul’s consideration of the doctrine of election, he bursts out in one of the most glorious doxologies in the Bible! And that’s how these matters should affect each one of us, also. So, as we consider these things, the question is: Is God's sovereignty really **a theme of joy** for you? Will your response to how God has revealed Himself in the Bible be a song of praise and a life of thankful obedience? May it be so!

Well, in terms of these first five articles of the Canons, and how they function, I want to begin with an **illustration**. When someone is coming to visit you at your place, and you meet them outside, what is the first part of your house that you will take them to? It’s the door, isn’t it. It might be a plain door or it might be a fancy door, but the first part of the house they will encounter is the door, as you step inside. Now, after that, if they are interested, you might show them around your house – kitchen, bedrooms, bathroom, backyard, rumpus room, etc. And only then, if the person is really interested or you have done some renovations, might you show them the house foundations. Now, when you think about, the most important part of any house is the foundations. We all know a lot of technical engineering goes into designing and building foundations, to make sure that they do what they need to do. And if you get the foundations wrong, the building will not be safe and likely crumble. But if you turned up at my place, and I straight away said, “Come and look at my block foundation!” I am sure you would be polite, and say, “Ok,” but you would think. ‘That’s a bit weird!’ You would expect to be taken to the front door.

Well, that illustrates how the Canons begin. We will, eventually, explore the foundations of this building. But first of all, we are brought to the doorway of the building and the door is opened and we are invited to go through the doorway. But as with any good story or movie, there is a **massive plot twist**. And that massive plot twist is that when you go through this door, you don’t go *into* the building, you go *out* of the building. And the building is a prison cell; not an *actual* prison cell, but a **spiritual prison cell**!

So, with article 1, we will see **why we are all in this spiritual prison**. With articles 2-4, we will see **how we can be released from this spiritual prison**. And with Article 5, we will see **who is to blame for those that choose to remain in the spiritual prison, and who receives the credit for those that choose to leave**? And these articles are simple quotations of Scripture that make simple points, so we can brief with each one.

1. First of all, then, **why we are all in this spiritual prison**.
   1. And the reason we are all in this spiritual prison, as Article 1 explains, is that “all men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and deserve eternal death.” And the Scripture that these words are based on is **Romans 5:12**; there we read these words, “*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all* sinned.” And we will look more closely at this verse and how it all works later in the Canons, but the simple truth that is declared here is that because every human being has Adam as a common ancestor, we are all guilty sinners. You, me, everyone; we are all guilty sinners.
      1. And this is declared, also, in **Romans 3:19 and 23**, as we read earlier, “*So that … the whole world may be held accountable to God … for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*.”
      2. And **Romans 6:23** tells us that “*the wages of sin is death*.” And by death is meant physical death and being condemned to an eternity in the fire and misery and loneliness and terror of hell. If the whole matter of eternal life was entirely about what we deserve, it would be hell.
      3. This is the spiritual prison that all humans are in. And we deserve to be there.
   2. And this is the perfect place for us to recall again that statement in Romans 9 that I mentioned earlier, where God says, “*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated*.” What is your gut reaction to that statement? What is your immediate question? My guess is: **God, why do you hate Esau**? Am I right? But you see, that is the wrong question, or at least it is the easiest question to answer. Esau sinned and fell short of the glory of God. And the ‘wages’ of Esau’s sin is death; he deserves God’s hatred; he deserves death and eternal condemnation to hell. But so does Jacob! For Jacob also sinned and fell short of the glory of God. And the ‘wages’ of Jacob’s sin is death; he deserves God’s hatred; he deserves death and eternal condemnation to hell. So, the much more difficult question to answer is actually: God, **why do you love Jacob**? That does not make any sense in view of Jacob’s sin and guilt. That is the real mystery! And of course, that is the real mystery in terms of you and me, who, like Jacob, are loved by God. How can that be? And the answer, as we shall see, is God’s Amazing grace to sinners in the Lord Jesus Christ!
2. And that is where we go with our second point, and Articles 2-4, which is where we see **how we can be released from this spiritual prison**.
   1. And this is really is THE story of the Bible; it is that salvation or escape from condemnation is possible. And we find examples of this story all through the Bible.
      1. We see it with **Adam**. He had been told by God that if he ate the forbidden fruit, he would surely die. And after he ate the fruit, when he heard God walking in the garden, he didn’t approach God to apologize, he hid from God! And if he got what he deserved, it would have been instant death and eternal condemnation. But is that what happened? No. God promised to send Messiah and Adam believed and received the gift of eternal life. And that is amazing grace – undeserved favour!
      2. We see it in **Genesis 6**, for example, where we read that the Lord looked down and “*saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*.” And so, God said that He would blot out all mankind with a world-wide flood. But did He? Well, yes, in that He sent the world-wide flood, but no, in that He saved **Noah** **and** **his** **family**. And Noah, as a human being, as we have just seen, was a guilty sinner. And we read about Noah’s sins later in Genesis. So, did Noah deserve to be saved? No, He did not. God showed undeserved favour or grace to Noah.
      3. And we saw the same thing with **Jonah and Nineveh**. The Assyrians were exceedingly wicked and idolatrous. Now, did they repent in response to Jonah’s preaching? Yes, to some degree, at least. But they were still guilty sinners; they still deserved death as the wages of their sin. So, God showed grace, or undeserved favour, to the people of Nineveh.
   2. And story after story like this prepare us for the coming of the Lord Jesus. And that is what Article 2 is about. For there we are introduced to the love of God. **John 3:16**: “*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life*.” So, we don’t have to stay locked up in the spiritual prison. Eternal condemnation in hell, which we all deserve, is not the only possible outcome. We can be released from this spiritual prison; we may also go out and enter eternal life, with the Lord, in heaven!

* 1. And do you see the origin or the basis of this second, undeserved option? It is the **love of God**. “*For God* ***sooooooo loved*** *the world*.” And again, we will have more to say about the love of God and what His love for the world does and does not mean, in later sermons, but let us in no way minimize the importance of the love of God. Salvation begins not with me or you and our worthiness, which, as we have seen, is an *un*worthiness of sin and guilt, but with the love of God. And that is a reliable and solid foundation for an unshakeable salvation!!!
  2. But in the spiritual prison of sin and guilt, how do get to hear about the love of God and the hope of eternal life? Well, **Article 3** tell us: “God mercifully sends heralds (or messengers) of this most joyful message.” So, preachers open their Bibles and tell us about God’s love in Jesus Christ and the free gift of eternal life for all who repent and believe in Him.
     1. In **Old Testament times**, it was a message preached pretty much only to the Jews and it was a *pointing forward* to a coming Messiah. They had to believe that they were guilty sinners whose only hope was the Messiah that all of the sacrifices and ceremonies and promises pointed forward to.
        1. And as **Article 4** says, “Those who receive it and embrace Jesus the saviour with a true and living faith are delivered by Him from the wrath of God and from destruction, and are given eternal life.” And so, figuratively speaking, they got up and walked through the door and outside the spiritual prison.
        2. But of course, many Jews and many people and nations of Old Testament times either did not seek Messiah or rejected the message of Messiah. And as Article 4 says, “The wrath of God remains upon those who do not believe this gospel.” So, they, as it were, stayed inside the spiritual prison of unbelief and guilt.
     2. And it is the same today, although the message is a Jesus Christ who *has* come, and who died on the cross and rose again for the forgiveness of sins. He even spoke of Himself as “the door” in John 10!
        1. And all who today receive and embrace Jesus the saviour with a true and living faith are delivered by Him from the wrath of God and from destruction, and are given eternal life.” So, they too, as it were, get up and walk through the door and outside the spiritual prison.
        2. But also today, “The wrath of God remains upon those who do not believe this gospel.” So, they remain in the spiritual prison of unbelief and guilt.

* 1. And so, before we conclude with our last Article, I must ask you, today, for your response to the gospel? Have you already left this spiritual prison? Have you repented and believed in Jesus Christ? And notice what I am asking here; I am not asking you if you go to church, or if your parents are believers. I am asking you if you have recognized and embraced Jesus Christ as your Saviour, through faith and repentance? And if not, will you do so today? The door out is open, right now. You are a guilty sinner who deserves eternal condemnation. And your only hope of escape is faith in Jesus! Please, come out of the spiritual prison of unbelief and guilt and enter into the joy of eternal life!

1. Now, we all know that not everyone who hears the gospel chooses to believe. So, that brings us, thirdly, to Article 5, which is where we see **who is to blame for those that choose to remain in the spiritual prison, and who receives the credit for those that choose to leave**?
   1. And this article is really just an introduction to biblical doctrines that are at the heart of the Canons of Dort. And they are the doctrine of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility, and the doctrine of election. So, we will have plenty of time to consider them in more detail as we continue. But “the cause of guilt for this unbelief, as well as for all other sins, is by no means in God. But rather in man.”
      1. You boys and girls will remember **the story of the** **Israelites** who had left Egypt after the 10 plagues, and were brought, miraculously, through the Red Sea, only to repeatedly complain and murmur against God. And then, just as they were about to enter the Promised land, 10 spies came back and said that they had no chance of conquering the inhabitants of the land, despite the fact that God had promised them that they He would do the conquering! And do you remember what their punishment was? They were not allowed to enter the Promised Land and they had to wander in the wilderness for forty years until that whole generation had died off. Now, is God sovereign? According to the Bible, is God in control of everything? The answer is Yes. **Psalm 115:3**: “*Our God is in the heavens; He does all that He pleases*.” And what did we confess earlier in the service? “Not a hair can fall from my head apart from the will of my father in heaven.” So, God is sovereign. But according to the Bible, who is to blame for the people of Israel not entering the Promised Land? Not God, but them. **Hebrews 4:6**: They “*failed to enter because of disobedience*.” And in the same way, the blame for all those who reject Jesus and choose to remain in the spiritual prison rests is themselves, not God. They are responsible for their unbelief and sin.
         1. Now, I know what you are probably thinking: How can you have God’s sovereignty *and* man’s responsibility? Well, you may have heard this analogy before, but it is helpful to think of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility as railroad tracks that run along beside each other. And when you look at railroad tracks in the distance, what happens? It looks like they merge into one. Right? So, preachers like Charles Spurgeon have said, Similarly,

*the doctrines of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility, which seem separate from each other in this life will merge in eternity. Our task is not to force their merging in this life but to keep them in balance and to live accordingly*.

And I find that a really helpful analogy. The Scriptures teach God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. Our duty is to accept both and trust in the Lord!

* 1. But finally, Scripture is also clear that **the credit for faith goes not to man but to God**. And this is because even the choice to believe is the gift of God. And again, we will come back to this verse in later sermons, but **Ephesians 2:8** says, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this (meaning faith) is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*.” Think of it this way, the faith muscle that we exercise is miraculously planted within us by the Holy Spirit. So, it is God and God alone who deserves all the credit and praise and thanksgiving for our salvation. And as we shall see, this is wonderful news! And it is wonderful news because me and my ability to choose and to keep hold of Christ is at best a shaky and unreliable foundation for hope. But God and His electing choice and His unchangeableness is a firm foundation for hope!

So, there you have it. We have heard the ‘good news of the prison door.’ We deserve eternal condemnation, but we can have eternal life through faith in Christ, as the gift of God. May the Spirit of the Lord guide us as we explore the foundations of the salvation together. Amen.