**The assurance of salvation – observed by self-examination**

Text: 2 Corinthians 13:5

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**Scriptures:** Job 19:23-27; 2 Corinthians 13:5-10

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 439, 23, 438, 461, 284, 46

**Series:** Canons of Dort (articles 1:11-13) (#3)

**Theme:** The assurance of unchangeable divine election is evident within the self-examining Christian and results in humility, adoration and fervent love for the Lord.

**Proposition:** Examine yourself to see the evidences of God’s work for greater personal assurance.

**Introduction**

Is there anything that you are uncertain about in your life? Do you have any anxieties and fears for your future? Most people, for most of human history, would need to answer ‘yes’ to both these questions, that is if they were to respond honestly. Perhaps we feel the unpredictability of the future more keenly at present with a growing COVID outbreak in the North Island and our Government’s abandonment of the previous ‘elimination strategy’ and no clear plan for ‘where to from here’. A deep sense of unease is a reality for many of us in this fallen world of sin, suffering, pain, grief and death.

In his 1847 hymn ‘Abide with me’, Henry F. Lyte wrote: “*Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day; earth’s joys grow dim, it’s glories pass away; change and decay in all around I see; O thou who changest not, abide with me*”. Lyte was a pastor who ministered in Brixham, a fishing village in Devon, England during the 19th century. He suffered from poor health throughout his life, including a variety of respiratory illnesses. His last words on this life were ‘Peace! Joy!’ It is clear that Pastor Lyte had certainty about his relationship with Jesus Christ, his Lord and Saviour, even though he saw much change and decay during his life. One of the many glorious truths of God’s Word is that it is possible for people like Henry Lyte, you and me to have certainty about our faith. This assurance of salvation is a God-given confidence for every true disciple of Christ of their present approval and future acceptance by their loving Heavenly Father.

The Canons of Dort provide helpful Biblical teaching on the topic of assurance. As we’ve noted earlier in this preaching series: The word ‘canon’ does not refer to a large gun firing metal balls, but to a body of rules, principles or standards. ‘Dort’ is a shortened form of the name of the city of Dordrecht in the Netherlands where a church synod was held between 1618-19. They met during 154 sessions to consider the views of the followers of Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) who had been a gifted student of Theodore Beza, John Calvin’s successor in Geneva. These followers of Arminius were called the ‘Remonstrants’ and the doctrine they believed is now called ‘Arminianism’. Arminianism is a system of belief that attempts to explain the relationship between God’s sovereignty and mankind’s free will, especially in relation to salvation; while Calvinism emphasises the sovereignty of God, Arminianism emphasises the responsibility of man.

The Canons of Dort contain what we now know as the ‘five points of Calvinism’ that are often expressed in the acronym TULIP. The five ‘heads’ of the Canons of Dort are actually ordered U.L.T.I.P. The ‘P’ of TULIP stands for ‘perseverance of the saints’. This theological doctrine can be briefly summarised in the words ‘once saved, always saved’.

Whilst assurance is the main topic of the ‘Fifth head of doctrine’ in the Canons of Dort, the Bible’s teaching about assurance of salvation is also found in the ‘first head of doctrine’ in the Canons of Dort ‘divine election and reprobation’. In articles 1:11-13 the connection between ‘unconditional election’ (the ‘U’ of TULIP) and ‘perseverance of the saints’ (the ‘P’ of TULIP) is laid out. This is our focus this afternoon, under these three headings:

1. The security of election
2. The observation of inner self
3. The value of assurance
4. **The security of election**

Imagine a government who could control everything down to the last detail. Not only could this ruling authority know the future, they would have the power to secure the destinies of all creatures and the outcome of all events. If this was an evil dictatorship that governed by tyranny and oppression, then those under this government would have no hope, they would live in constant fear of disaster and their lives would be miserable. If however, this government was perfectly good, protecting and providing for their citizens then these subjects could live happy, secure and hopeful lives.

The government of the Living God is perfect rule by a perfect Ruler who provides ultimate security for His people. In the words of CofD Art 1:6, ‘*He knows all his works from eternity, and he “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Ephesians 1:11)*’. The eternal fate of individual people like you and me is determined by God alone who has chosen every one of His people in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). The gospel is God’s good news (Rom 1:1), because He is the power behind this gospel. He will always accomplish His purposes (Rom 4:21).

God has spoken sure promises in His Word (e.g. 1 Cor 15:3-4) and we can have absolute certainty about these divine commitments because He is the God who never lies (Tit 1:2; Heb 6:18). The words which God speaks are entirely trustworthy, infallible, and reliable (2 Tim 3:16-17; Luke 1:4; 2 Pet 1:20). God Himself does not change (Mal 3:6), unlike everything in the creation which He has made, and which is now subject to futility because of sin (Rom 8:20). God’s unconditional election, His Divine decree to save His elect, is trustworthy, true, and unchangeable because He is the Author of salvation.

The Canons of Dort Article 1:11 expresses this with the words: “*As God himself is most wise, unchange­­able, all-knowing and almighty, so his election can neither be undone and redone, nor changed, revoked, or annulled; neither can the elect be cast away, nor their number be diminished*”.

Saving some people from their sins is His good idea which He has, is now, and is yet going to, work out in history for His glory and for the good of His chosen people. Election is secure because God is unchangeable. Jesus expressed the certainty of the salvation of individual souls with these words: “*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out*” (John 6:37). “*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand*” (John 10:28). God’s salvation is certain and unchangeable, but the question which troubles many souls like ours from time to time is ‘but am I one of God’s elect?’. The answer lies in Scriptural self-examination, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The observation of inner self**

In times past, if doctors wanted to see what was going on inside a human body, exploratory surgery was necessary. Now, with the advent of medical imaging techniques like X-ray, MRI, CT scans and ultrasound, it is possible to see what is going on inside us without opening up a cavity in our bodies. However, even the most skilled surgeon or the most qualified imaging technician cannot examine the human soul.

God is able to view deep inside us and see our thoughts, intentions, motivations and desires. God explained to His servant Samuel: “*For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart*". Psalmist David understood this and prayed “*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*” (Psalm 139:23-24).

In our text from 2nd Corinthians 13:5 we hear a call to examine our inner beings ourselves: “*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves*” (2 Cor 13:5). The Greek word translated ‘examine’ means to test, or to put to the test. This word literally means ‘to perforate or pierce’ in order to determine if something is durable. The Greek word translated ‘test’ means to examine, discern or prove. It was used in the ancient world of the process of testing metal objects, like coins, by fire to prove that they were genuine. Any impurities would float to the surface of the molten material.

We see from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians that they were demanding ‘proof’ that Christ was speaking through the Apostle (v3a). Paul now calls on them to ‘prove themselves to themselves’. It is not that Paul is expressing his own doubt about the genuineness of their faith. We know this because elsewhere he expresses assurance about them, writing ‘*I rejoice, because I have perfect confidence in you*’ (7:16, also. 1:1; 7:4). It has been helpfully said that ‘*the opposite to faith is not doubt but disbelief and there is a corner of doubt in every Christian.* “*I believe; help my unbelief” is to some extent the normal Christian life*’. Doubt is not the same thing as unbelief.

Self-examination is an important part of living life as a disciple of Christ because, by nature, we prefer self-deception. Deceiving ourselves is easy and comfortable. We want to believe ourselves better, smarter, and more ethical than we really are, so careful, Spirit-directed self-examination keeps us honest with ourselves and with God. If, as a result of careful self-examination, we can never find sin within ourselves, the Scriptures reveal that “*we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*” (1 John 1:8). When we examine ourselves before partaking of the Lord’s Supper, we have the opportunity to agree with the Lord about our sin, repent of it, and receive His forgiveness. We can then take the elements in a worthy manner, in fellowship with God and with other believers, purified through the blood of Jesus (1 John 1:7; Romans 5:8–10).

One difficulty with self-examination is that by ourselves we do not see our own hearts clearly. Jeremiah 17:9 reveals that “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick*”. True self-examination must be performed with the help of the Holy Spirit, who searches the deep things of the heart (1 Corinthians 2:10–11). Lack of self-examination can lead to ongoing self-deception; however, an over-attention to one’s self is also unhealthy. Robert Murray M’Cheyne, the young and gifted Scottish minister, wisely urged his congregation that, “*they should take ten looks at Christ for every look they take inside themselves*.”

The Canons of Dort helpfully highlight the benefit of observing the inner self in order to gain assurance of salvation in Article 1:12: “*The elect in due time, though in various stages and in different measure, are made certain of this their eternal and unchange­able election to salvation. They attain this assurance, however, not by inquisitively prying into the hidden and deep things of God, but by observing in themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God: such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness.”*

Are you in the regular habit of self-examination in light of God’s Word and with the help of the convicting Holy Spirit? Congregation worship, personal devotions and group Bible studies are some of the settings in which we can readily search within ourselves and by doing so gain greater assurance of our salvation. There is great benefit and blessing in doing so, which leads us to our third point:

1. **The value of assurance**

The mental health of many people around the world has deteriorated due to the effects of lockdowns, other movement restrictions, workplace disruptions, job losses, debt, and the overall unpredictability of this current pandemic. Hopelessness can be fatal. People just give up.

Assurance of salvation provides much needed personal stability in this unstable world. Assurance of salvation strengthens belief in Christ; as the writer to the Hebrews expresses in these words: **“***Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Heb 11:1). Article 1:13 of the Canons of Dort lays out some of the benefits of assurance: “*The awareness and assurance of this election provide the children of God with*

* *greater reason for daily humbling them­selves before God,*
* *for adoring the depth of his mercies,*
* *for cleansing them­selves, and*
* *for fervently loving him in turn who first so greatly loved them.*

We know that Job lost much and suffered greatly. He was tested, perplexed and had many unanswered questions and yet He expressed a profound assurance of faith which enabled him to endure, to confess, to repent and to continue to believe with greater faith. He declared: “*I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth*” (Job 19:25) – that is a statement of faith in Christ’s resurrection. He also declared “*And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!*” (Job 19:26-27) – that is a statement of personal assurance of salvation.

Personal assurance of faith is important, not only because it provides great comfort to God’s people, but also because it is a source of joyful holiness and heartfelt praise of the God who elects to save His people in Christ. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones, the 20th century Welsh minister once said, “*We should all be concerned about our assurance of salvation, because if we lack assurance we lack joy, and if we lack joy our life is of probably of poor quality*”.

400 years ago the Synod of Dort understood that the teachings of the Remonstrants undermined the glorious gospel of God because this heresy essentially taught ‘one saved, maybe saved, maybe lost’. The authors of the Canons of Dort express this aspect of Arminianism in Error 1:f *“Not every election to salvation is unchangeable. Some of the elect can and do indeed perish everlastingly, notwithstanding any decree of God”.* These are not the exact words you’ll likely hear in many churches today, however this same error may be expressed in these ways:

* If you’ve made a decision to follow Jesus in the past and you’ve never had any doubts, then you are saved.
* If you are giving to the church and/or are wealthy and healthy then you have true faith and so you are saved.
* If you’ve had a dramatic conversion experience, then you are saved.
* If you’ve had a baptism of the Holy Spirit and can speak in tongues, then you are saved.
* You can’t ever really know if you are saved, but you can hope for the best. God will surely not keep a good person like you out of His heaven, will He?

Back in the 16th century, the Roman Catholic Church responded to the Reformers’ clarity of gospel assurance by emphatically declaring that “*no one can know with a certitude of faith which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained God’s grace*.” (Council of Trent 1547.8). Those who deny that it is possible to have assurance of salvation often point to the examples in Scripture of those who believed but then failed to persevere to the end, including Judas, Demas, Hymenaeus, and Alexander (1Tim. 1:20). Many of us in this church knows people who once “*called on the name of our Lord*” but have subsequently denied Christ and fallen away.

There are warnings in Scripture about falling away from faith (Heb. 6:4-6; Matt 24:3-14), presuming on the grace of God (1Cor. 10:12), not being ashamed of Christ (Mark 8:38), confessing Christ but not doing the Father’s will (Matt. 7:21-23), of spurious faith without works (James 2:26), those tempted to go back under the law (Gal. 5:3-4), or works of the flesh (1Cor. 6:9-10; 13-15). Do the biblical warnings about falling away contradict the doctrine of personal assurance of faith? From the perspective of the observer, professing Christians do fall away. However from the vantage point of both God and the elect themselves true believers will not fall away.

So brothers and sisters in Christ, examine yourself to see the evidences of God’s electing work in your life for greater personal assurance and joy in Christ. Such assurance is a rich blessing in times of uncertainty; that is at all times.

AMEN.