

LESSON 5:

How is Christ's Work Able to Apply to Us?

I. Introduction and Review

We looked in the previous lesson at how the Apostle Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus pointed to the crucifixion of Christ, His resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as the essential acts of salvation. For Paul, the grace he experienced after encountering Christ could not have been possible if Christ had not paid the penalty for sin at the cross. The crucifixion changes our position before God. The resurrection of Christ enables our new life and gives us a Mediator with the Father. And through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, God brings us into continual communion with Christ, renovating us to conform to His image. Indeed, this idea of our union with Christ is essential to understanding how the work that God did applies to us and moves us to the fulfillment of God's purposes for us. In this lesson, we are going to address some of the hardest and yet most important issues to get one's head wrapped around in the doctrine of salvation.

Preparation

1. Can you have assurance of salvation? If so, what is the basis of such assurance?

II. Salvation Undergirded by the *Pactum Salutis*

To begin with, the three redemptive acts discussed in the previous lesson highlight the Trinitarian nature of our salvation. **God the Son bore the wrath of God the Father** on the cross to make atonement for His people (Rom. 3:25, 1 John 2:2, 1 John 4:10). **God the Father raised God the Son from the dead** on the third day (1 Cor. 15:15, Rom. 8:11, Col. 2:12, 1 Pet. 1:21, 1 Pet. 1:3). **God the Father and God the Son send God the Holy Spirit** to dwell among God's people (John 14:15-17). **Such unity of action and purpose was not accidental; it was intentional.** The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit agreed from eternity to save a people in what Reformed theologians call the *pactum salutis* (or Covenant of Redemption)¹.

This idea of an agreement between the three Persons of the Trinity for the salvation of God's people can be seen in several places in Scripture. In Psalm 2:7-8, there appears to be a difference between the Father and Son in which the former will give the latter "*the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession.*" A similar distinction can be found in Psalm 45:2-7 and 110:1. In Isaiah 42:1-6, Isaiah conflates the Servant of the LORD with the Elect One and

¹ As "covenant" has been defined in this study series, it probably would be best to avoid calling this a Covenant of Redemption, since the suzerain-vassal connotations associated with the term covenant could imply a kind of subordinationism of the Son to the Father. Such subordinationism would run contrary Nicene orthodoxy in terms of understanding the relationship of the three Persons of the Trinity to one another.

indicates that the Spirit will be upon Him. In verse 6 he says that God will give this individual as “a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles.” During the Exile, the prophet Daniel spoke of

...One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed. (Dan. 7:13-14)

The prophet Zechariah, writing late in Old Testament redemptive history elaborates further on this:

Then speak to him, saying ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, saying: Behold the Man whose name is the BRANCH! From His place He shall branch out, and He shall build the temple of the LORD; Yes, He shall build the temple of the LORD. He shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule on His throne; so He shall be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both [i.e., between both offices] (Zech. 6:12-13)

The Branch is the Messiah, who has both the offices of King and High Priest.

In the New Testament, Jesus says in Luke 22:29 that the Father has bestowed a kingdom upon Him. In John 6:38-40, He says that He has not come to do His own will, but the will of the Father who sent Him and that that will was that He would lose none of those whom the Father has given him (cf. John 5:30, 43, 17:4-12). Paul indicates in 2 Tim. 1:9 that our saving and calling was “according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.” More verses could be cited, and as previously mentioned, Jesus also said that He and the Father would send the Holy Spirit.

The Confession of Faith understands these references to an agreement between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from all eternity regarding the salvation of God’s people to be centered on Christ as mediator. The ordination of Jesus as the Mediator between God and His people can be seen in WCF 8.1. In WCF 8.3 we learn that this was not an office He took to Himself independently but He was called to it by the Father who gave Him authority to execute it. In WCF 8.5 Christ’s work was offered up through the Holy Spirit to the Father to satisfy the Father’s justice and purchase reconciliation for the people the Father gave Him. Finally, in WCF 8.8, we see that Christ applies the benefits of salvation to His people, makes intercession for them with the Father, reveals to them through the Word the mysteries of salvation, persuades them by the Holy Spirit, and governs

Observation

2. What does WCF 8.3, 8.4, and 8.5 say about how Christ became a Mediator for His people? How do we see the Father and the Holy Spirit relating to this?

their hearts by the same Word and Holy Spirit. The proof texts detail the biblical passages this teaching rests upon.

This *pactum salutis* lays the foundation for what the Confession calls the Covenant of Grace.² After Adam broke the Covenant of Life (or Works), God would have been perfectly just to destroy Adam and Eve right then, but He does not. The reason why He does not is precisely because of this *pactum salutis*. **This should give us assurance of salvation**, an assurance that is typically lacking in Roman Catholic and Arminian views that salvation can be lost. God not only has a covenant with man (or specifically, with His people), but that is undergirded by the agreement within the Persons of the Godhead to bring about that salvation. God cannot be inconsistent with Himself and so God's commitment to our salvation is unquestionably solid.

III. Foreknowledge and Predestination to Election in Christ

In ordaining the goal of salvation for a people of God, the Triune God also ordained the means toward that end, and this inevitably leads into the question of God's foreknowledge, predestination, and election of such a people. These are particularly complicated and controversial matters. In fact, it is precisely for this reason that WCF 3.8 rightly notes that "The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care." To make things clearer, it will be worth putting this doctrine into the context of a controversy that emerged in the early 1600s and was the basis for what we today call the "Five Points of Calvinism."

A. The Arminian Controversy and the Five Points of Calvinism

The Arminian controversy centered on James Arminius, a Dutch pastor and theologian in the late 1500s and early 1600s. Arminius (1560-1609) studied at the University of Leiden, and later under Theodore Beza in Geneva, John Calvin's younger associate and successor in that city. Arminius distinguished himself as a promising student, but in his studies he began to have doubts about Reformed positions on the decrees of God, predestination, unconditional election, and irresistible grace. While a pastor, he begins to articulate his doubts through his writings and sermons. In 1603, he became a professor at the University of Leiden and one of his colleagues, Francis Gomarus, began agitating to have Arminius' views condemned as heretical. Arminius died in 1609, but in the last year of his life, he called for rewriting the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism on the issue of predestination. In the following year 46 of his followers drafted a Remonstrance (lit. a "Protest") laying out a set of views contrary to Reformed orthodoxy at the time, which they wanted the church to accept.

² Reformed theologians disagree as to whether this *pactum salutis* should be considered a separate covenant or as part of the Covenant of Grace. On the one hand, designating it a separate covenant clarifies who the covenant is with (i.e., the Covenant of Redemption is with the Persons of the Godhead, while the Covenant of Grace is between God and His People). On the other hand, the purpose of the *pactum salutis* is to underscore the certainty of the Covenant of Grace. The presentation given here leans toward the latter interpretation.

Arminius' doubts about the Reformed understanding of salvation were rooted in a controversy at that time over the logical order of God's decrees. Arminius rejected both sides of the controversy in favor of a different view of predestination that did not focus on individuals, but on categories of people (believers and unbelievers). This had ramifications on other aspects of his theology. First, it emphasized **free will** as necessary to how one became part of believers or unbelievers. Thus, God's predestination (**election**) of groups is unconditional, but that of individuals is conditional. Second, God's **grace** in a person's life is resistible. If one accepts it and works with it, it can become justifying grace leading to conversion. This view sees God's work in salvation as synergistic, not monergistic. This also ties into the doctrine of the **perseverance of the saints**. Arminius's own position was unclear on this point. If one accepts that the nature of grace changes after conversion, then God could preserve the saints until the end, but if not, then salvation could be lost if people do not persevere. Arminius' successors split on this point. In the 1610 Remonstrance, the Remonstrants laid out five points of disagreement with orthodoxy:

1. **Conditional Election.** God's election of a people is contingent on the basis of their foreseen faith and perseverance.
2. **Unlimited Atonement.** Christ's atonement applies to all men, but it is only effectually grasped by believers exercising faith.
3. **Man's Depravity.** Men are in a state of sin and cannot will, think or do what is good without being born again by the Holy Spirit.
4. **Resistible Grace.** God provides prevenient grace which man needs to cooperate with, but this grace of the Holy Spirit can be resisted.
5. **Perseverance of the Saints.** To persevere, believers must utilize the assisting grace of the Holy Spirit and be ready for spiritual conflict, be desirous of his help and active on their own. Whether salvation can be lost is uncertain. (In the years just before the Synod of Dort, however, the Remonstrants came to the view that salvation could be lost).

In November 1618, the Reformed Church of the Netherlands convened a synod at Dort to judge Arminius's teachings. Although this technically was a synod of the Dutch Reformed Church, it had representatives from German territories (Heidelberg, Hesse, Bremen), Switzerland, England, and Scotland. The Synod of Dort met for just over six months and produced a set of canons that definitively laid out the Reformed position on the Arminian Remonstrance. This has subsequently become known as the "Five Points of Calvinism," but that is somewhat of a misnomer, since Reformed theology is much broader than just these five points. Paralleling the five points of the Remonstrants, the Synod held:

1. **Unconditional Election.** God's election of men is not contingent on any foreseen faith and perseverance, but on God's decision alone.

2. **Limited Atonement.** Christ's atonement applies to the elect (not all men), but makes full atonement for them, rather than merely establishing a conditional one.
3. **Man's Depravity.** Men are totally unable to do good without the Holy Spirit (in this it agreed with the Remonstrants).
4. **Irresistible Grace.** The grace God provides does not simply provide a help for men, but actually draws His people to Himself.
5. **Perseverance of the Saints.** Because of the above view of grace, God will enable His people to persevere to the very end.

As a result of the Synod of Dort, 190 (out of more than 1,100) ministers were deposed from the ministry, 40 of whom eventually were restored to the church. To this day, the Canons of Dort are known as one of the Three Symbols of Unity (the others being the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism).

B. The Significance of the Controversy

The Westminster Standards were written about 28 years after the Canons of Dort and one can see echoes of the Canons of Dort in Chapter 3 of the Confession of Faith on God's decree. The Synod of Dort rightly held that Arminian views were incompatible with biblical orthodoxy because of the assumptions that the Arminians made about both the nature of God and the nature of man.

There is, first of all, the issue of **God's foreknowledge**. The Arminians held that God would look down the tunnel of time, identify those who would exhibit faith in Him and on that basis choose them to be part of the elect. **There are problems with this.** First, in presuming that God has to look through time it assumes that God is *in* time. That reduces God to a creaturely level, but God is outside time, in eternity. Think of it like a story; God is not in the story but is outside the story because He authored the story. Also, the Arminian view would make God contingent in some way on man's decisions. In reality, God is dependent on nothing. Moreover, God's decision to elect some men is depicted as a fairly clinical one, but contrast that with how David describes God's foreknowledge in Psalm 139:13-16:

For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You for I am fearfully and wonderfully; marvelous are Your works. And that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me when as yet there were none of them.

Observation

3. How does Psalm 139:13-16 describe God's foreknowledge?

4. What does Romans 8:28-30 and Ephesians 1:3-14 say about God's predestination?

We see from David that God's foreknowledge is not abstract, but personal and is intertwined with His love for us. Neither is it passive observation, but rather a knowledge that is active in bringing about the ends He has decreed for the ones whom He loves. Arminianism, however, has a limited view of God. God chose us because we, of our unaided will, chose Him first. Thus, God is in reactive mode with regard to His creation.

Second, there is the idea of **predestination**. For many people, the doctrine of predestination rankles them: it seems so contrary to our notion of free will, and people are afraid it will make God the author of sin. But let's look at how the Confession addresses this in WCF 3.1:

God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

Predestination is not an exclusively "Calvinist" or "Reformed" doctrine, despite common misperceptions. Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther, among a host of others, all believed in predestination. That is because it is fundamentally as biblical doctrine. Two key passages in this regard are Romans 8:28-30 and Ephesians 1:3-14.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified (Rom. 8:28-30).

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace by which He made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence, having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory (Eph. 1:3-14)

When people get onto the topic of predestination, there is often the tendency to go off in speculative philosophical directions, but that is not how Scripture treats this matter. A full exploration of the relationship between God's will and our wills is beyond the scope of this study but suffice it to say that the fact that God works through secondary causes (as WCF 3.1 says) preserves both the freedom of God's will and activity and that of men. While God can be coercive—certainly that was the case with Paul's conversion—by controlling the range of circumstances we face and having absolute sovereignty over the full range of means, God is active, subtle, and even gentle in how He interacts with us. Arminianism is confused on this score, seeing that our free will can only be free if God restrains His free will. This is not the picture we get from Scripture.

More importantly, **this doctrine holds several practical implications for our salvation.**

First, the importance of the doctrine of predestination is that our assurance of salvation rests in God's promises, not our decision. Many Christians deeply wrestle with the question as to whether or not they are saved. We are surrounded by an evangelical culture that, on the one hand, asserts we can be assured of our salvation if we "made a decision" for Christ at a revival or an altar call. The problem with that is that if our assurance is based on our decision, then it could be lost if we changed our minds or were never sincere enough to begin with. This is why many people who grew up in Arminian churches feel they have to continually "recommit" themselves to Christ. What the Reformed understanding of predestination holds is that the assurance of our salvation is not grounded in our decision, but in God's promises and His decision in eternity past. The assurance of our salvation is objectively, not subjectively grounded.

Second, predestination also means that no one who has been chosen by God is lost. This is contrary Arminianism, which holds that Christ only died to establish a condition by which one could be saved, but then requires people—who, mind you, are dead in sins—to get themselves together and make a decision for Christ. As WCF 3.6 says, "As God has appointed the elect unto glory, so has He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto." In other words, it is because of predestination, that God will bring everything in our salvation to pass. For Arminians, God's grace can be resisted; in the Reformed understanding, God's grace is not something we can effectively resist.

This is the significance of the doctrines in TULIP of unconditional election and limited atonement. **Our election is not conditioned on anything other than**

Observation

5. How does WCF 8.8 say we should handle the doctrine of predestination?

Reflection

6. How might this understanding of God's foreknowledge and predestination be a comfort to you as a believer?

God's choice. Our atonement is not limited in terms of how thoroughgoing it is but is limited to those whom God has elected. For the Arminian, salvation is for everybody but only partial because it is conditional; in the Reformed understanding, salvation is for God's elect, but what it accomplishes it accomplishes completely.

C. Election in Christ

A discussion of predestination would not be complete if we failed that election is "in Christ." The Father has given Christ a definite people and no one can take them out of His hand (see, e.g., John 17:11 and 20). The Ephesians passage contains a number of "in Him" or "with Him" references. There are about 190 occurrences in the New Testament of the phrase, "In Christ" or "In Him," of which 118—about 63 percent—are found in Paul's epistles. Of these, almost all are used in connection with the idea of "union" with Christ.

While Paul's emphasis on this was evident in his first letter (Galatians), he progressively expanded upon it over the course of his life. For Paul, believers were predestined in Christ (Eph. 1:4-14), created in Him (Eph. 2:10), and new creatures on account of Him (2 Cor. 5:17). We were baptized, crucified, dead, and resurrected in Him (Rom. 6:3-14). When Christ returns, those who are in Him who are "asleep" will return with Him and those who are alive will be caught up with Him (1 Thess. 4:14-16). Through our union with Him, by the indwelling of the Spirit, we also have union with the Father (John ch. 17).

More than that, though, in Romans chapters 5 and 6 and elsewhere Paul talks about how we have been both crucified and resurrected with Christ. **For Paul, this means that union with Christ is part of the continuing, vital life of the believer in sanctification and glorification, and is the ground for union with other believers.** Resurrection in Christ is the basis for believers being indwelt by Him through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:15-19, 2 Cor. 13:5, Eph. 3:17-18). It is the Holy Spirit Who provides the power and seal of the Christian life, the ability to grow in grace, and the continual conforming to the image of Christ (Gal. 4:19, Eph. 4:15-16). Because of our union with Christ, we have communion with Christ now. Because of our union, we have access to the power of God now. And, because of our union, we are not to continue living according to the deeds of sinful flesh, but to live in holiness now (1 Cor. 6:15-19, Rom. 8:10-17). Lastly, because they are united to Him, believers also will follow His pattern of suffering before glory (Rom. 8:17). Grasping this brings into focus the rest of the process of salvation

