

The Unbreakable Golden Chain: “To the Praise of His Glorious Grace”

Romans 8:28-30 (text); Jeremiah 1:5; Ephesians 1:3-6

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Beloved congregation of Christ: Many evangelicals have heard of the acronym TULIP, but mostly through hearsay. So there is plenty of hearsay to go around it, and hardly anyone knows what this acronym means, and where it comes from. Worse, even after they learn what the acronym stands for, hardly anyone knows what they mean.

Well, it comes from the Canons of Dort, a confession adopted by the 17th century Synod of Dordrecht (or Dort) that arose out of a serious controversy in the late 16th century among the Protestant (or Reformed) churches in the Netherlands. To better understand the Canons of Dort, calls for a brief historical background surrounding this controversy.

In 1594-96, Jacob Arminius, a student under Theodore Beza, John Calvin's successor in Geneva, developed a new reading of Paul. Concerning Romans 7, he concluded that Paul was not describing a regenerate Christian. In studying Romans 9, he taught that God accepts those who accept him, not because they were included in God's sovereign decree of election. In spite of warnings against his teachings by sound pastors and theologians, he was still appointed as professor of theology at the University of Leyden. There, he taught doctrines contrary to what had been taught by all the 16th century Protestant Reformers. Among these teachings are that God elects those whom he foreknew would believe.

As early as 1605, Reformed pastors in the Netherlands were calling for discipline against Arminius and his followers because of his new teachings. When the Reformed churches refused, the pastors asked the government to call for a national synod, but was refused. Instead, leading Arminians in the government called for a synod to revise the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism to align them more to Arminius' teachings.

While all these controversies were swirling, Arminius died in 1609. But instead of quieting down, the Arminians became more aggressive, publishing a “Remonstrance” against the doctrines of the Reformed churches in 1610. Soon after, the Reformed churches responded against the Remonstrance. The Remonstrants then incited riots in 1617 against Prince Maurice, the commander of Holland's military forces, threatening war against Maurice. Because of military superiority, Maurice prevailed, and a national synod finally convened for seven months from November 1618 – May 1619. It was attended by 84 leading theologians from Holland, Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland, and France, so the Synod of Dort is actually the first and last ecumenical synod of Reformed churches in church history.

This historical backdrop already teaches us to take doctrine very seriously. Many of our forefathers sacrificed their lives “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

What did the Arminians teach as their main doctrines in their Remonstrance document that provoked so much opposition from Reformed churches? These are the so-called **“Five Points of the Remonstrance”**:

First: divine election based upon man's foreseen faith and obedience.

Second: Christ atoned for the sins of every single human being.

Third: regeneration enables sinners to do good toward salvation, but man has free will due to only to partial depravity.

Fourth: a person can resist the Holy Spirit's gracious, saving work on him.

Fifth: Believers may finally fall away from the faith.

The Synod of Dort responded to these “Five Points,” with the “Canons of Dort,” known today as the “Five Points of Calvinism.” This is a misnomer – Calvin did not formulate these five points, even though he actually taught it. So if the Arminians did not draft their “Five Points of the Remonstrance,” there will be no “Five Points of Calvinism,” only what is taught in Scripture about God's sovereign grace in our salvation. Also, the Canons of Dort is divided into four “Heads of Doctrine,” not five, because the Third and Fourth Heads were combined into one. Why? The Synod believed that man's total depravity and God's irresistible regenerating grace are inseparable.

About 1905, an unknown author rearranged the Five Points to coin the acronym TULIP out of the Canons of Dort, perhaps for easier memorization: ¹

T – Total depravity	Third Head
U – Unconditional Election	First Head
L – Limited atonement	Second Head
I – Irresistible grace	Fourth Head
P – Perseverance of the Saints	Fifth Head

In the next four months – according to my tentative schedule – we will be studying the various articles of this great document from the great Reformed Synod. But two things must be clear. First, since it is a lengthy document, I would preach on selected articles only. Second, the preaching would still be an exposition of Biblical text, with the Canons of Dort brought in to support the exposition.

So today, we began with this history, and now continue with a brief summary of the Canons, based on Romans 8:28-30. In this text, we find a series of God's actions in saving his people from sin, death and his wrath. In verses 29-30, we read of God's foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification of man. Each Head of Doctrine in the Canons is divided into two main sections: articles explaining the doctrine, followed by paragraphs stating the errors of Arminians rejected by the Synod. In Paragraph II of the Rejection of Errors in the First Head of Doctrine, the Canons call this series of actions as the “golden chain of our salvation.” The theologians of Dort wrote that this chain was “broken” by the Arminians, implying that this chain is an unbreakable golden chain.

¹ Justin Taylor, “The Origin of TULIP (Updated!)”, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2009/07/07/origin-of-tulip/>

This Lord's Day, our theme is, **The Unbreakable Golden Chain: "To the Praise of His Glorious Grace,"** which we will meditate upon under three questions: (1) **To Whom is the Chain Given?**; (2) **Who Forged the Chain?** and (3) **What is the Chain For?**

TO WHOM IS THE CHAIN GIVEN?

In verse 28 of our text is a favorite verse of many Christians, *"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."* Who was Paul addressing? It is *"those who love God... those who are called according to his purpose."*

Paul was not addressing unbelievers. Unbelievers don't love God. Unbelievers are not called by God for his purposes. He was addressing believers. Believers are to glorify God, and his ultimate purpose in saving his people is their final glorification in the new heaven and new earth.

God works all things together for the good of his children. This does not mean that unbelievers do not receive good things from God. God also gives them good things, but only in this life. The great difference is that believers may receive not only earthly good things, but they will surely receive good things especially in the age to come. And these include *"every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places"* (Ep 1:3), which believers possess here and now: adoption as children of God; redemption; an inheritance; and sealing with the Holy Spirit (Ep 1:7-14).

Our text in Romans 8 also lists other "good things" for the believer given by God: conformity with Christ, being justified before God, and ultimately, having a glorified existence in eternity.

Since verses 29-30 list the process of man's salvation from beginning to end, without any interruption, the chain of salvation is unbreakable. Those whom God foreknew, he also predestined. Those whom he predestined will surely be called (regenerated). Those whom he called will surely be justified by faith alone. And those whom he justified will surely be glorified. There are no ifs or buts or maybes whatsoever in Paul's words. And since all those who were foreknown from eternity past end up being glorified, no one except believers are included in this chain.

This is why it is called "golden" by the Canons of Dort. It is priceless, because the cost is the precious blood of Christ. It is most beautiful, because it originates from the farthest recesses of eternity past into eternity future. It is perfect, because it was conceived by the almighty Triune God.

We Christians are to treasure this great gift, because God gave it to us even while we were undeserving sinners. In fact, he knew us and chose us before the creation of the world, as Jeremiah 1:5 says, *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."* This is a hard text for those who think election is unfair. But for those who take God's Word as the absolute truth, this is a most wonderful text.

Surely, you have pondered at times, Why did God choose me? Am I better or more pleasing than those whom God did not choose? Certainly not! *"According to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace,"* before we were born or had done anything good or evil, God already chose us (Ep 1:6; Rm 9:11).

Therefore, how are we going to respond to his golden, unbreakable gift of salvation? With pride, because we are better than the next guy? With licentiousness, since we are saved no matter

what we do? No, we are to respond in humility, since we are undeserving, wretched sinners; in submission to God's will, because he chose us to be holy and blameless before him; and in praise and thankfulness to God's loving and merciful election of some people out of the whole humanity who are all destined to hell otherwise.

But some Christians still carry the sinner's baggage of pride. They cannot accept the utter humility of not being able to contribute to their own salvation.

WHO FORGED THE CHAIN?

Some Christians believe that they are the ones who made the decision to "accept Jesus" out of their own free will.

But if you believe in predestination, be forewarned of the kind that makes you your own elector. Because instead of being humbled and grateful to God for his unsearchable grace and mercy to you, a wretched, undeserving sinner, you might be thinking, "Ha! I'm better than my friends who have heard the gospel but were not good and smart enough to believe."

You have nothing to do with any part of your salvation. Paul makes it clear in the next verse, *"And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."* Who does the whole of this "chain of salvation"? It is God: *he* predestines, *he* calls, *he* justifies, *he* glorifies. Where are you in this whole process, O man?

Notice this very important grammatical construction used by Paul: all of the verbs used in the chain of salvation are in the aorist tense, a tense that indicates a past event, an event that has already happened. So in Paul's mind, the whole chain has already been accomplished by God, the one who forged it. This is surprising, since the final glorification of Christians is still in the future. But by using this type of past tense, Paul tells us that our glorification, even though it is still in the future, is so certain because it was decreed by God, that we may consider it *done!* According to Paul, the elect who have not even been born yet are already called, justified and glorified because it is God who predestined them by his eternal, unchangeable decree.

If man has a part in this chain, would there be such certainty or guarantee? Certainly not! Why? Because human beings are sinful, and so are subject to change of mind. If God elected us because he saw us accepting Christ into our hearts, then what happens to our election if we were later seduced by a false prosperity gospel? If God called and regenerated us because we believed in Christ by our own free will, then would God reverse our regeneration if we later went over to the Oneness Pentecostals' camp? And if this happens, then would God also take our justification and glorification back?

No, God took it upon himself to forge this chain of salvation all on his own. He knew that the man whom he created and who fell into sin is totally unable and unwilling to help himself. So even a man's faith, repentance and conversion are all given to him by the Spirit.

And this is the link that is missing from Paul's chain of salvation here: sanctification between justification and glorification. But although Paul does not mention it, it does not mean that sanctification is not important to Paul. In Chapter 6, he talks about believers being dead to sin and

alive to a new life. In fact, in verses 1-8 of Chapter 8, Paul exhorts believers to walk according to the Spirit, not according to the flesh. And from Chapters 12-15, Paul commands Christians to be living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God.

Therefore, a person is predestined by God in order for that person *“to be conformed to the image of his Son”* (Rm 8:29).

WHAT IS THE CHAIN FOR?

Why did God forge this chain for believers? In order for them, Paul answers, *“to be conformed to the image of his Son.”* From the moment that God created man, this has been his purpose: *“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him”* (Gn 1:27). Man was created good in the image of God, with true holiness, righteousness and knowledge of God.

But after Adam sinned, this pure image of God was so corrupted that man lost his true communion with God. In electing a person, God's purpose for that person is to restore this perfect image in him by giving him the golden chain of salvation. He was called according to God's purpose, *“to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called”* (Ep 4:1). He was justified after the Spirit wrought faith in his heart in order that he may live in holiness. And as he progresses in holiness, he is *“being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another”* (2Co 3:18). And on the last day, he truly becomes *“a new creation,”* a perfect creature according to the image of God.

The Spirit of God alone will conform us to the image of Christ, who is *“the image of the invisible God”* (Col 1:15; 2Co 4:4), and *“the exact imprint of his nature”* (Hb 1:3). Because God conforms individuals to the image of his Son, the church as a whole is also conformed to this image. We see this in verse 29, where Paul says that God transforms us to the image of Christ *“in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”* Who are his brothers? We, the universal church, are his brothers and sisters, since we are all adopted children of God. All of us who are foreknown, predestined, called, justified and glorified by God are Christ's brethren, chosen for holiness:

But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth (2Th 2:13).

How does the Spirit accomplish this work of conforming us to the image of our Lord and Savior? Through faith and obedience in spite of all kinds of sufferings that try to separate us from the love of God in Christ. This is why Paul proclaims later that our final victory and glorification is assured, in spite of sufferings:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that [nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rm 8:35, 37-39).

Paul says of this golden chain of salvation, *“I am sure.”* And this is what we will study next Lord's Day.