

The “Normal” Christian Life

Philippians 3:2–21; Canons of Dort 5.1–2

Studies in the Canons of Dort #27

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THIS past summer Karajeon and I zip lined across and over a cloud forest high in the mountains of Costa Rica. As one who has acrophobia, a fear of heights—says the guy who is 6-4; go figure!—this was a conquest for me. When you’re up there on the platform and you see the wires, the anchors, and the supports, you realize the line all holds together from one end to the other and everything in between. It’s really a great illustration of the doctrines of grace. God’s “grace” was planned for me “in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9). God’s grace was purchased for me as Christ “loved me and gave himself for me” on the cross (Gal 2:20). God’s grace was “poured into [my] heart[...]through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). And God’s grace will be preserved “by [his] power” as I am “being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5).

We come in our study to the doctrine of the preservation or perseverance of the saints in the fifth head of the Canons of Dort. In fact, I don’t think there is any doctrine more practical! Why? Because this is no

mere doctrine; this is our life. And what is *the “normal” Christian life*? Some say its health and wealth. Some say its getting saved and then moving on. Some say its about finding yourself and becoming your potential. But I want us to turn to Scripture as it is summarized in our Canons.

Salvation’s Triumph

The first thing we see in Canon 5.1 is *salvation’s triumph*: “Those whom God, according to His purpose, calls to the communion of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and regenerates by the Holy Spirit, He also delivers from the dominion and slavery of sin.” This comes right from Romans 6, which describes our deliverance in several ways.

- First, “our old self was crucified” (Rom. 6:6). Notice the parallel: just as surely as Christ died so surely we have died to sin. How sure was Christ’s death? “For the death he died he died to sin, once for all” (Rom. 6:10).
- Second, the purpose was in order that “the body of sin might be brought to nothing” (Rom. 6:6). The word Paul uses here (*katargethe*) speaks of destruction.

○ Third, the end result is that “we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom. 6:6). Just as Paul spoke of himself as a “servant of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:1) and we as “slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6:17) and “slaves of God” (Rom. 6:22). In contrast to being “slaves of sin” (Rom. 6:17, 20), in which we were once willing lovers of sin now we are willing lovers of God. Paul goes on to summarize, saying, “For one who has died has been set free from sin” (Rom. 6:7). Practically speaking, this means that you “must consider yourselves dead to sin” (Rom. 6:11).

What a triumph! We’ve been delivered from captivity. We’ve been delivered from sin’s dominion and its slavery of our lives. We were once slaves of darkness, that is, the world, sin, and the Devil. But we have been delivered, redeemed, by the blood of the Son. We are under new ownership now. Scripture uses such momentous language when it describes our salvation! Is Scripture overstating the case for effect? Is it using hyperbole? What it says is true. It speaks of the already aspect of our salvation.

Salvation’s Toil

Now, many Christian traditions stop here and they end up in error. I cannot tell you how many emails I get each week with the latest fads to teach

God's people that they can cease from consciously sinning in this life, that they can progress from a carnal Christian life to a Spirit-filled life. That's because they read Romans 6 and stop. But Romans 7 as well as our text in Philippians 3 teaches us a second truth: *salvation's toil*. This is why Canon 5.1 continues to say, "though in this life He does not deliver them altogether from the body of sin and from the infirmities of the flesh," and article 2 begins saying, "Hence spring forth the daily sins of infirmity, and blemishes cleave even to the best works of the saints." We have a present struggle with sin. This means that we never perform a good work that is untainted by sin. We never perform a totally sincere work. This struggle leads us to action in the following ways according to article 2. As I toil with my sins in this life, God wants several things from me:

- First, *God wants me to be humble*. You are still sinful. As Paul says in Philippians 3:12, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect." This is why you must still ask for forgiveness daily: "Forgive us our debts." Humility is so key to the Christian life because the Lord is near to the broken hearted and saves the crushed in spirit (Ps. 34:18).
- Second, *God wants me to be centered on Jesus Christ*. Look again at Philippians 3:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own (Phil. 3:7-9).

○ Third, *God wants me to mortify my sin.* I must put to death, kill, and slay the sin that clings to me. As Paul says in Philippians 3: “forgetting what lies behind” (Phil. 3:13). How do I do this? Romans 8 speaks of the Holy Spirit guiding us in prayer. The Canon summarizes with the phrase “holy exercises of piety,” meaning, reading and listening to the Word, participating in the sacraments, praying and from time to time joining fasting, by meditating on the glories of Christ, by self-examining, by godly conversation and accountability.

○ Fourth, *God wants me to long for heaven.* We are to “press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus,” which is our perfection (Phil. 3:14).

My normal life is to celebrate my triumph already in Christ all the while I struggle and toil with my sins. And it’s only when we hold these two truths together that we experience the normal Christian life. Amen.