

The Canons of Dort: The Perseverance of the Saints

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 8:28-32, Hebrews 3:12-19

I want to start today's sermon with what might seem like a strange question. How fast am I moving right now? How fast am I going? Some of you are looking at me and thinking, "What is he talking about? Is this a trick question? You are standing still. You are you're wiggling a little, but you are standing still! You are going exactly zero miles per hour." And that's right of course. If a police officer put the radar gun on me, it would read zero. I'm just standing here.

But change your perspective and you might change your answer. Right now the earth is turning. It makes one full rotation every day. That means at this latitude I'm moving about 500 miles an hour! If you were hovering in space above the earth, you'd think I was moving pretty fast! But wait! The earth is also going around the sun. The earth makes a full rotation around the sun every year, and if you measure the distance the earth travels around the sun and divide it by the time, it turns out that we are all moving 66,658 miles per hour through space. That means if someone were looking at all of us from the perspective of the sun, by the time this sermon is over we will all have travelled 22,000 miles through space. We are really moving! Maybe we should be wearing helmets. Or at least applying for air miles. Your perspective of things can really change depending on your vantage point.

This is always true of our life as Christians. We are people who believe that things are not always as they seem on the surface. We see things with the eyes of faith and when you look with the eyes of faith, you see the sacred dimension beneath the surface of things. That's true for the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. That's the doctrine we will study today. When hear someone mention the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, two different things can come to mind, depending on your perspective. There are two dimensions to this doctrine.

On the one hand, when you hear Perseverance of the Saints, we can think of the serious Biblical call to perseverance. On the journey of faith, God calls all his saints to persevere. That's a clear and serious Scriptural call. When his promised child is slow in coming, Abraham is called to persevere in his faith. When the journey through the wilderness towards the promised land is taking longer than expected, Moses is called to persevere on his journey. When they are struggling with their faith, Paul calls the Galatians to persevere. "*Do not grow weary in well-doing, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*"

The book of Hebrews is full of calls for Christians to persevere. It's one of the main themes of the letter. You hear that theme in the passage we just read. The preacher of Hebrews encourages people to keep going with their faith. Don't let yourself develop a sinful unbelieving heart, he says. Keep your convictions firm to the end, he says. Don't be like the Israelites in the desert who, instead of persevering, wanted to turn around and go back to Egypt.

The call to persevere is also in the Canons of Dort. You heard it in paragraph 2. Paragraph 2 reminds us that even after we belong to Jesus we are subject to weakness, sin and struggle, and so we have "*continual cause to humble ourselves before God,*" to practice "*holy exercises of godliness,*" and "*to strain towards the goal of perfection, until [we] are free from this body of death.*" In short, we are called to persevere.

What kind of virtue is perseverance? Perseverance is a virtue for the middle of our journey.

Perseverance is a virtue for people who've been doing their thing for a long time and now they are tired. People at the beginning of a journey don't need to be told to persevere. Go back to the Israelites in the desert. At the beginning of their journey, after they'd come through the Red Sea and seen their enemies destroyed, they didn't need to be told to persevere. Do you remember what they did after the Egyptian armies were drowned? Miriam grabbed a trumpet and she started to sing and all the people joined in the song, "*The horse and rider are thrown into the sea! The Lord is our strength and our song; he has become our salvation! In your strength you will guide you people to the promised land!*" They can't wait to get to the promised land! They are chomping at the bit to get their journey started. No one has to tell them to persevere. But later on, when the water is running out and the sun is hot and the progress is slow, things change. It's in the middle of the journey when they're kids are complaining and they're tired of the manna that perseverance is required. Perseverance is a virtue for the middle of the journey.

It's virtue for the middle of our journey because it is an antidote, a preventative measure, against some spiritual dangers that threaten us when the journey is wearing us out. What dangers are those? It's the danger of the Slow Leak. You've been trying to be a good person for as long as you remember. You've been doing your Christian duty day after day, year after year, but it doesn't seem to be making any difference. You're still struggling with insecurity and loneliness and temptation. Faith seemed exciting when you were younger; now it feels like a duty. In the middle of our journey these feelings come to us and our commitment starts to leak. It's not a spiritual blowout; it's a slow leak. We used to go to a Bible study every week, but now we do a morning workout instead. Or we used to have family devotions together around the table but now Susie has basketball practice and Johnny is in the play, so you never eat together anymore and family devotions have kind of vanished. You used to volunteer down at the shelter but you got that promotion and that's added about 6 or 7 hours a week to your work schedule and so you had to give that up. You used to love going to church every Sunday, but now you feel like what you really want to do is sleep in. And so it goes. The balloon of your faith doesn't pop, it develops a slow leak. But day by day, the air seeps out until one day you wake up and your heart is empty.

Perseverance is an antidote for that slow leak that develops in worn out people who are in the middle of their journey. Let me say three quick things about it.

First, the horizons of perseverance are small and daily. Perseverance is a virtue for the daily grind. Just as the daily pressures of the journey can cause our faith to leak, so the virtue of perseverance fights against that by calling us to small daily things. Did you notice the language of verse 13? "*Encourage one another daily.*" Perseverance is quotidian. Perseverance putting one foot in front of the other. You persevere by going to the committee meeting. You persevere by turning off the TV, and calling your friend. You persevere by going to youth group when you have homework. Perseverance is always duty done against the grain of your feelings. You persevere when you do something in spite of the fact that you don't feel like doing it. Perseverance always tacks into the wind.

Perseverance is best done in communities. We persevere together. "Encourage one another daily so that none of you might be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." On our own we will grow weary and lose heart. Together we help each other persevere.

So that's one side of perseverance. One horizon. We are in the middle of the daily grind, and perseverance is our small daily acts of faithfulness that we practice in the middle of our journey. But when the

canons talk about the perseverance of the saints, that's not what you are meant to think of. The canons don't want you to look at perseverance from the middle of the daily grind; they have a different horizon. At the beginning of the sermon I made that observation about how fast I'm going, how fast we are all going, and how that all depends on your perspective. The same thing is true about the perseverance of the saints. From our angle down here in the daily grind, perseverance looks like mostly our work, our duty, our challenge, our call. But the canons want to change your angle. Instead of seeing perseverance from the daily grind, the canons lift you up so you can see the work of perseverance from the perspective of Christian hope, and from that angle, things look different. There's a lot less grind and a lot more grace. Turn with me to Article 8 on page 138 and listen to how the preservation of the saints looks like from God's eternal perspective. (Read article 8)

While the Canons of Dort briefly mentions our perseverance in the first two articles of this section, the perseverance that they really want to talk about, the perseverance they really want us to see, is God's perseverance with us. That's why many people including Rich Mouw and Suzanne MacDonald who spoke in our Growing You a couple of months ago, don't like the title 'perseverance of the saints' for this section; they prefer the title preservation of the saints, because the stress of this part of the canons is: when the daily grind gets too much for us, when we fall down, when we fail, when we fall into serious and destructive sin, when we fail to persevere with God, God perseveres with us. He preserves his saints. You may fall, but if you belong to Jesus, he will not give up on you. He will finish his work.

That's the message of Romans 8 too. It's the message of the whole passage, but listen to verse 28-32. Read Romans 8:28-32.

You hear the promise of those passages, right? God doesn't stop a project half way. God does not give up on someone he's chosen. Those he's predestined he's also called, those he's called he's also justified, those he's justified he's also glorified! From the perspective of the daily grind, where we are trying to persevere in the face of our fears and temptations, we feel like we're never going to make it, But Paul, lifts us up above the daily grind. He looks at perseverance from God's perspective and he says, *"Do you have any idea how much God loves you and how he is always working for you! In all things God works for the good for those who love him and who have been called according to his purpose. If God is for you who can be against you! He who did not spare his only son but gave him up for us all who will he not also, along with him graciously give us all things!"* From the daily grind we worry about our faithfulness and the faithfulness of the people we love. But from God's perspective, there is nothing in all creation that can separate God from the people he loves!

We need both perspectives on Perseverance. We need the to think about perseverance from the daily grind perspective. We need to think about that commitment to be faithful to God's ways and to help each other persevere together down God's path. But we also need the certainty of God's perseverance with us. Without the daily grind perspective, we are in danger of complacency. We think that God doesn't care whether or not we are committed to faithfulness and righteousness and justice and love of neighbor. He does. Without the Cosmic perspective, we will despair. Because if it is up to us to finish this race, if it's up to us to free solo the mountain of righteousness, we aren't going to make it.

One of my favorite stories that gets at both sides of this is a story that comes from the day Neal Plantinga was examined at synod before he took his job as Seminary president way back in the 90's. As part of his exam, Neal had a general interview with the selected interviewer, and then delegates were given opportunity to ask him questions from the floor. One man, an elder from somewhere (and I don't know exactly where he was from but I've always imagined him as being from Canada and having a Dutch accent) asked him a very

personal, pastoral question. “Dr Plantinga I have a friend who spent his whole life in the church. He was an elder, and he served on committees. He volunteered and gave his time and money to our congregation. Now he’s dying and after a whole life of service he admits he is full of doubts about faith and fears about death and God. Dominae he is so fearful and anxious, what can I say to him. What would you tell me to say to him? Neal paused for a moment and he said, “I would tell him to rest in the cradle of God’s grace.”

I think that’s a really good answer. I think that’s an answer that gets right at the heart, the pastoral heart of the fifth point of doctrine in the Canons of Dort. There comes a time in all our lives in all our thinking, in all our striving, in all our worrying, in all our praying, where our strength is done. We’re just done. And in that point when our strength fails, when our grip fails, we do not fall to ruin, we fall into the cradle of God’s grace. That’s a message we need at the beginning of our journey. That’s a message we need in the middle of the journey when we are tired. And that’s definitely a message we need at the end of our journey when all our strength is gone. Thanks be to God for his perseverance with us.

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