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**Divine Grace, Human Will, and Sin's Power:
Can God's Promises Assure us of Final Salvation in the
face of Sin's Power to Weaken the Human Will?**

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Introduction

*In hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies,
promised before the ages began.*

Titus 1:2

A trustworthy promise is usually based on one's character or ability to fulfill it. From the human vantage point when a promise is made, the possibility of its failure due to intruding circumstances cannot be ruled out. Human experience is full of failures, frustrations

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and disappointments, even from people of honest intentions due to circumstances beyond their control. This usually heats up tension on assurance of any promise until proven worthy. But given the Creator-creature distinction, is it justifiable for us to analyze God's promises for our salvation and his ability to fulfill them based on our human experience? How has the history of divine promises fared in order to warrant our belief or unbelief in God's promise of salvation in the face of sin's power to weaken our obedience to God?

This paper assumes the reality of sin as it affects human response to the divine will and the consequences that accompany sin which is the forfeiture of salvation. It thus proceeds to argue that God's promises of salvation depend on his immutable character, his faithfulness and ability to save, so that those that are his cannot be lost even as they still remain sinners. But before we delve more fully into the question of assurance of our salvation, we would first consider the nature of the divine promises in Scripture as the basis of our understanding of the promise of salvation.

A. The Nature of Divine Promises in Scripture

The reliability of God's promises is based on nothing else but on who he is essentially. Three essential qualities define who God is, namely, his omnipotence, omniscience and his benevolence. Candidly, "if he is not essentially trustworthy, then for all we know to the contrary his power may give out, or his knowledge fail, or his goodness falter, or all three may fail, just when we need him most."² It must be observed that the biggest divine promise ever is the redemption of God's church unto eternal blissful communion with God where there will be no more pain, sickness, death and sorrow which means the old order of things will have passed away (Rev. 21:1-4). Yet there are precursory events of divine promises and fulfillments that warrant our belief in this biggest promise. Space cannot allow an exhaustive exploration into the history of divine promises and their fulfillments but we shall deal with selected cases here in order to buttress our point.

² Paul Helm, "The Perfect Trustworthiness of God," *The Trustworthiness of God*, ed. Paul Helm and Carl R. Trueman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 242.

In Gen. 3:15 God promised an offspring that would “bruise” the serpent’s head. The serpent played a role that destroyed the peace that had existed between God and humanity. Paul affirms that “the God of peace would soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom. 16:20) which means he would restore that peace in its perfect state through Christ who is God’s instrument of destruction of the evil one. By his death Christ already destroys the devil, who holds the power of death and his works, but there still remains the final crushing which comes at the end of time (Heb. 2:14; 1Jn. 3:8; Jn. 16:11; Rev. 20:1-3, 10). These New Testament passages attest that what God had promised at the beginning of the fall of humanity has been fulfilled by the coming of Christ. Several of the Old Testament passages have promises that are shadows of Christ, such as the promised offspring to Abraham and to the Davidic throne. The trustworthiness of God in bringing about that which he had promised is the hallmark of Reformation theology. Trueman rightly captures this thrust: “it is this basic understanding of God’s trustworthiness, tying his words to his disposition towards humanity, which lies at the heart of the Reformation understanding of salvation; and it is this that is one of the key factors in focusing the Protestant theological tradition upon the phenomenon of Scripture.”³

The three great promises of God made to Abraham were: the making of Abraham into a great nation, possession of the land of Canaan and Israel becoming a blessing to all nations. Accordingly, it is evident in the covenant history “both in word and act, the absolute monergism of the divine power in accomplishing the things promised; otherwise expressed, the strict supernaturalism of the procedure towards fulfilling the promises. This explains why, in the life of Abraham, so many things proceed contrary to nature.”⁴ For instance, it was not in the power of Abraham to get around with the barrenness of his wife Sarah. It was God’s monergistic duty to fulfill that which he promised through Sarah despite her condition. In Romans 4, Paul used the case of Abraham to testify to the faithfulness of God in keeping his promise to Abraham even when the conditions of

³ Carl R. Trueman, “The Unconditional Promise,” *The Trustworthiness of God*, 177.

⁴ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 2000), 81.

believing such promise were not brilliant. It was not the faith of Abraham that made the promise sure but the divine fulfillment of it so that both faith and fulfillment of the promise find a meeting point in the immutable character of God which culminated in the person of Christ. The promises of God are fulfilled to those who have faith in him, though their faith is not a condition for fulfilling them. Yet how can they receive what is promised if they do not believe it? Accordingly Abraham was “fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised” (Rom. 4:21). Abraham’s faith was anchored in God’s trustworthiness and ability to do what he had promised him, and God’s immutability regarding his promise, purpose and above all his character since he could not lie (Heb. 6:13-20; 10:23).

At every point in the redemptive history God takes steps to ensure that what he had promised is not thwarted by anything else. The coming of Christ looks back to the promise in Eden and looks forward to the consummation of time. Christ is the center-piece holding both the past and the future in him, so that he is the Yes of God’s promises (2Cor. 1:20). Similarly, considering the reality of our response to God’s salvation, the seal of God’s promise for our salvation is the Holy Spirit (2Cor. 1: 21-22; Eph. 1:13, 14).

Peter’s testimony of God’s dependable promises is based on his “divine power which has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2Pet. 1:3). This grant is not a temporary matter that will fizzle out with time, but they are “very great promises” that would change our fallen nature to divine and incorruptible one (2Pet. 1:4). The goal of this reality is God’s “glory and excellence” which he never compromises under any circumstance. Paul admonishes the Philippians 1:6 that “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Christ” and the Thessalonians that “he who calls you is faithful” (1Thess. 5:24). These New Testament data on the faithfulness of God and the reliability of his promises echo some of the Psalms “I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me” (Ps. 57:2) and “The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever” (Ps. 138:8). The people of God have always believed God’s promises against all odds and sin is no exception. Paul categorically states that the finality of our salvation is not our own outworking but solely God working his purpose in us. For it is God who “establishes us” in Christ, who has

“anointed us,” “put his seal on us,” “given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee,” (2Cor. 1:20-22), “made us alive together with Christ,” “raised us up with him,” “seated us with him in the heavenly places” (Eph. 2:5-6).

But is it not possible that God may give up on his people on account of their sinfulness? Based on the promises of God, if we grant that we the elect can lose our salvation in the circumstances of sin, then it is God himself who has lost us. But God has clearly made the distinction between himself and fallen humanity that are liable to failure when he says, “for I am God and not a man” (Hos. 11:9). This ontic distinction is very important so that we do not be too anthropomorphic in doing our theology. In God however, we find the direct contrast in that he does not give up on his own people. This gives us hope and assurance of his love, care and salvation even when it may appear in our human perspective that he has turned against us or he does not care about us anymore. That God never gives up on us derives from his immutable loving character. His compassion and love are unchanging forever because of who he is. In Hosea 11: 7-9 Israel deserves abandonment and devotion to destruction like the cities of Admah and Zeboiim. These were cities that God destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah with great fury and anger at their sinfulness (Deut. 29:23).

Israel behaved in a manner that deserved similar destruction. Israel was in a state of spiritual and political crisis because of unfaithfulness to their God. They followed after other gods or idols with impunity. Yet instead of destroying them like the above cities, God’s heart was moved with amazing compassion – a fatherly compassion. He says, “my heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.” And compassion is at its best in the context of sin on the part of the one receiving it. Without sin or failure, compassion would have no meaning; it would not be revealed. It is when we are undeserving of the good things of God that his compassion comes to us with amazing and heartwarming healing to our souls.

But if God’s heart can recoil from the direction of wrath to love, is it not possible that it can also recoil from love to wrath again depending on the magnitude and frequency of the offence? Does God’s heart always move only in the direction of love toward sinners?

God had told Moses he would destroy Israel for its sin and raise up Moses as a new generation unto himself, but Moses interceded and turned away the Lord's wrath (Exod. 32:10, cf. Deut. 9:25). God's justice is never compromised until an intercession is made. Such intercession does not destroy his compassion because his justice is worked out through his compassion. When it becomes necessary he provides the intercession himself in order to fulfill his purpose in raising up a people to himself.

The biblical account consistently demonstrates that God's heart towards his people is always moving from anger to love even in their sinfulness. God asked how he could give up on his people four times, and these four "hows" express the covenantal impossibility of God giving up on his people. God is not going to give up on Ephraim or Israel. The God who did not give up on Israel and who did not give up on the whole world because of its sinfulness but came to save it will not give up on his elect in Christ today. He is the same yesterday, today and forever which means he is immutable in all his character and promises (Heb. 13:8). David testified that "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind" (Psalm 110:4). What he has established in his eternal covenant will not be changed by anything whether powers or principalities. No human condition can change him or his plans. Rather, God gave up his own Son and even abandoned him on the cross for a moment that we might not be abandoned forever. It is because God could not give us up to his eternal wrath that he chose to give up his own Son. God would rather be cut into halves like the carcasses in Genesis 15 if he fails to keep his promise to redeem and be with his people. Instead of forsaking his people, he forsook himself in the person of Christ. This is the mystery of divine love for undeserving obstinate sinners.

Hence Paul assures us that God's promise of eternal life to us precedes time: "In hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began" (Titus 1:2). What is instructive in the above passage is that the context of the promise precedes the fall which by the nature of things excludes any deficiency such as lies which could amount to failure. The promise was first established in the mind of God by decree as a reality that would take place in the lives of his people in time. The promise of life to Adam before the fall was upon the condition of perfect obedience to the divine command.

The promise of life to the believers in Christ is also upon the condition of faith obedience. While the condition of perfect obedience has not been suspended, it has been fulfilled by Christ on our behalf, for which reason faith in Christ is a necessary requirement. The *purpose* of Christ's death and resurrection is so that we might be justified. Paul says that Christ was crucified “for our trespasses and raised for our justification,” (Romans 4:25), so that by faith union with him, we are no longer under condemnation (Rom. 8:1). The reality of God’s unfailing promise of life stands on the ground that he has provided the foundation for our irrevocable redemption which is Christ. Also by the very nature of God, whatever failure regarding salvation whether from the divine or human angle and the possibility of lies would have serious consequences upon the being of God himself. Paul’s point is that this cannot be the case with God’s nature (cf. Num. 23: 19; 2Tim. 2:13; Heb. 6:18). The coming of Christ is therefore a fulfillment of that promise

B. Can We Keep Our Own Salvation by Faithfully Pleasing God?

The question of whether human will is so free as to make humanity responsible for attaining and maintaining or losing its salvation has been long debated. Aristotle argued that if virtue is in our power, so too vice so that our positive acts also imply the possibility of our negative acts since reason which dictates what to choose is necessarily followed by the will.⁵ For Pelagius, man still retains the ability not to sin or to sin. When man sins, it is not because of his bondage to sin but because he has freely chosen to follow Adam’s behavior which he could have done otherwise. “Exemplo vel forma” so that “Dum ita peccant, et similiter moriuntur.”⁶ We sin by example, which means we could also not have sinned if we chose not to follow Adam’s example. We can therefore choose between the examples of Adam and Christ. The moral example is cardinal in Pelagius’ understanding of how sin affects man, and the issue of human inability to do righteousness is out of the question.

Augustine denied the freedom of the will after the fall. Humanity has lost its free will to do otherwise by the victory of sin over its will.

⁵ Aristotle, *Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. R. McKeon, 972.

⁶ Pelagius’s *Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of St. Paul: Text and Studies*, 2, ed. J. Armitage Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 45.

“For it was by the evil use of his free-will that man destroyed both it and himself. For, as a man who kills himself must, of course, be alive when he kills himself, but after he has killed himself ceases to live, and cannot restore himself to life; so, when man by his own free-will sinned, then sin being victorious over him, the freedom of his will was lost.”⁷ “For he is freely in bondage who does with pleasure the will of his master. Accordingly, he who is the servant of sin is free to sin. And hence he will not be free to do right, until, being freed from sin, he shall begin to be the servant of righteousness.”⁸ Again, “without the Spirit man’s will is not free, since it has been laid under by shackling and conquering desires.”⁹ This means it is only the believer who has been freed by the Spirit that can freely choose to do righteous deeds over ungodliness. Yet the question still remains as to whether salvation can be left in the hands of the believer alone?

Calvin argued that we can only advance in the knowledge of ourselves when we realize the extent of our moral impoverishment. To that end, a person dishonors God when human ability to do good is exalted above the reality of human condition. Calvin admitted that though the spiritual gifts were stripped in the fall, “man’s natural endowments are not wholly extinguished” by sin which is what distinguishes man from brute beasts.¹⁰ He enumerated such spiritual gifts as “faith, love of God, charity toward neighbor, zeal for holiness and for righteousness.”¹¹ And though the natural gifts were not wiped out, they were corrupted in which case we lost “soundness of mind and uprightness of heart.”¹² These are known to have been lost because of their recovery in Christ.

In the Smalcald Articles that Luther wrote in 1537 he explained the effect of sin upon the human nature thus: “This inherited sin has caused such a deep, evil corruption of nature that reason does not comprehend it; rather, it must be believed on the basis of the revelation in the Scriptures (Ps. 51:5 and Rom. 5:12; Exod. 33:20;

⁷ Augustine, *The Enchiridion*, trans. J.H. Shaw Londonderry (Albany: Ages Digital Library, 1997), 30.476.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, *Letters* cxlv.2 (MPL 33.593).

¹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.10, 12.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Gen. 3:6ff).”¹³ He thus condemned all understanding of the ability of the human will to please God.

C. The Biblical Account of Human Inability to Please God

If we take the biblical account of sin in human nature to be the final authority, then it is clear to see that the sinful human nature is fearfully bound only to sinning than pleasing God. Gen. 6:5 represents the most radical picture of the human condition: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was *great* in the earth, and that *every* intention of the thoughts of his heart was *only* evil *continually*.” Here we can see that the human will or nature is conditioned in one direction which is sin. And the nature of this attestation is comprehensive in scope. The description of its magnitude is universally boundless as being *great in the earth*, intensive, inclusive, exclusive and extensive. This presents a hopeless situation in terms of human ability to do what is spiritually acceptable by God’s standards. Paul concurs with this reality that the sinful nature is incapable of pleasing God, “for it cannot,” **oude gar dunatai** (Rom. 8:7-8), and the force of that inability is the conjunction **gar**. The conjunction explains the reason for that inability to please God which is simply that it “cannot,” because it has lost its ability. The freedom of the sinner’s will is asserted when Paul says he is “hostile to God.” The action of the sinner is free indeed but such freedom is still conditioned in a particular direction because of who the sinner is essentially. The relational choice of the sinner toward God is not friendly but hostility.

Paul also argues that sinners who indulge in sin will never inherit the kingdom of God because they contradict the holy character of God and his kingdom (cf. Gal.5:19-21). To be sure, if there is hostility between God and man it is obvious that they cannot live in the same kingdom in heaven even as enemies. Scripture attests that all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory and none does good whether by choice of example or bondage to sin (Rom. 3:10-12; 3:23). All mankind has been declared to be dead in trespasses and objects of divine wrath (Eph. 2:1, 3) except for the divine resurrection in Christ

¹³ Luther, *The Book Of Concord* ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand and others (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), Smalcald Articles 4. 3.1.

and the mercy of God for us. It is only on the ground of the work of the Holy Spirit in applying the accomplished redemption by Christ in human hearts that there can be faith response. Even as we respond in faith to the offer of salvation which may be described as human responsibility, Scripture again makes it plain that faith is not of our own origination; it is the gift of God for our salvation (Eph. 1:17-19; 1Pet. 1:5). As far as life in sin is concerned, which is described as being dead, the sinner can only behave in a certain way that is characteristic of death. The biggest threat to humanity's eternal joy with God is sin.

The nature of the human inability to please God is rooted in the moral weakness and inability to discern the spiritual things of God. The ground of human inability to please God is not the loss of freewill but will that is spiritually in bondage to sin. Paul argues that the human mind is corrupted by sin, and it resonates in contradiction by simultaneously both knowing and not knowing God in a saving way because the things of God are folly to it (Rom. 1:18-21; 1Cor. 2:14). The Lord Jesus emphasizes that salvation is tied to the knowledge of the true God and Christ (John 17:3). However, the noetic effect of sin is so serious that humanity effectively becomes dispossessed of the saving knowledge of God (Eph. 4:18). We therefore become destitute of moral and spiritual sufficiency in and by ourselves except that which comes from Christ (2Cor. 3:5).

The question now remains as to who saves humanity from the power of sin. To be sure, humanity has been called to repentance which implies that humans are "rational creatures, capable of moral obligation, and that they are free moral agents."¹⁴ It appears to grant that humanity is capable of perfection since the Lord himself commands it in keeping with the character of God (Matt. 5:48). However, taken in light of all of Scripture's view of the human moral and spiritual condition such interpretation cannot be sustained. Hodge rightly observes: "Notwithstanding therefore the repeated commands given in the Bible to sinners to love God with all the heart, to repent and believe the gospel, and live without sin, it remains true that the Scriptures nowhere assert or recognize the ability of fallen man to

¹⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 267.

fulfill these requisitions of duty.”¹⁵ To be in God’s presence requires holiness, righteousness and perfection. The standards that God has set cannot be compromised, whether humanity is able or not; they are ideal and must be met. So if humanity cannot obtain eternal life by itself according to those standards then the challenge falls on God himself who is the author of salvation.

D. The Monergistic Nature of the Redemptive Plan

Lutheran theology condemns the Stoic and Manichean determinism, Pelagian auto-soterism, Catholicism and Scholasticism’s native residual ability for salvation, and Synergists’ aided human will to make its own contribution towards its own salvation.¹⁶ Lutheran theology, however, suffers a consistency crisis on the certainty of salvation. It acknowledges both that salvation can be lost on the ground of intentional sin¹⁷ and the certainty of salvation. By the eternal election in Christ and the operations of the Holy Spirit warrants believers to know that “their salvation does not rest in their own hands. Otherwise, at every moment they would lose this salvation more easily than did Adam and Eve in paradise. Instead, their salvation rests in the gracious election of God, which he has revealed to us in Christ, out of whose hand no one can snatch us (John 10:28; 1Tim. 2:19).”¹⁸ Again, it states:

God made the conversion, righteousness, and salvation of each individual Christian such a high personal concern and intended to remain so faithful to it that ‘even before the foundation of the world’ [Eph.1:4] he resolved and ‘according to his own purpose’ [2Tim. 1:9] he preordained how he would bring me to salvation and preserve me in it. Likewise, he desired to guarantee my salvation so completely and certainly – because it could slip through our fingers so easily through the weakness and wickedness of our flesh or be snatched and taken from our hands through the deceit and power of the devil and the world. For he has preordained this salvation through his eternal intention, which cannot fail or be overthrown, and he has placed it for safekeeping into the almighty

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Solid Declaration, Art. II: Freewill,” *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 558- 9.

¹⁷ Ibid, 579.

¹⁸ Ibid, 655.

hand of our Savior Jesus Christ, from which no one can snatch us away (John 10:28).¹⁹

If Lutheran theology grants loss of salvation in the first place, was such salvation genuine in the first place or was it the case of wolves in sheep skins? If the former is the case, then Lutheran theology allows contradiction in its theology except its understanding of monergism as contained in the above declaration is not to be construed in the absolute sense. The position of Scripture concerning those believers who abscond is that they were never of Christ in the first place, though they appeared to be part of the Christian body (1John 2:19).

On the issue of the certainty of our salvation, Turretin explains the position of the Catholicism as expressly stated by the Council of Trent which denies that “anyone can know with certainty of faith, not admitting anything false, that he has obtained the grace of God;” and of the Arminians who deny certainty of life on the grounds that “such certainty may be to sinners a bed of ease on which they may luxuriously pamper themselves and hug the sweet delusion to their breasts.”²⁰ All the denials of certainty of salvation hinge on one fundamental problem. Sin constitutes the biggest threat to our assurance of salvation. This position of Catholicism and Arminians seemingly places the fact of salvation on a scale of God’s justice in which case our sins weigh over and against the grace and power of God for the salvation of sinners. But the Council of Trent in one place says concerning justification of sinners:

Moreover, it must not be maintained, that they who are truly justified must needs, without any doubt whatever, convince themselves that they are justified, and that no one is absolved from sins and justified except he that believes with certainty that he is absolved and justified, and that absolution and justification are effected by this faith alone, as if he who does not believe this, *doubts the promises of God and the efficacy of the death and resurrection of Christ*. For as *no pious person ought to doubt the mercy of God, the merit of Christ and the virtue of the sacraments*, so each one, when he considers himself and his own weakness and indisposition, may have fear and apprehension concerning his

¹⁹ Ibid, 648.

²⁰ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1992), I.14.xiii.1, 373.

own grace, *since no one can know with certainty of faith*, which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God.²¹

Trent mixes issues here concerning the certainty of one's salvation. First, it makes justification or assurance of one's salvation depend on one's faith that one has been justified and absolved rather than such assurance standing on the unshakable and immutable character of God. Does one's uncertainty of salvation change the certainty of what God has done for the one? To believe in Christ is one thing and to be sure of one's salvation due to one's acknowledgement of one's weakness through sin is quite another. Will one's lack of knowledge of what God has specifically done for one cancel what God has already determined about the one? For instance, some primitive believers that cannot read or write may not know anything about the biblical teaching of election and yet may themselves be elect. Will their ignorance of that doctrine change their status before God in spite of their faith in Christ? Second, Trent makes the certainty of salvation on the one hand to depend on what God has done through the death and resurrection of Christ and on another one's faith in the work of the church's sacraments. Third, it denies that any one can know the certainty of salvation. Nevertheless it also decries the attitude of doubt to God's promises.

But does the knowability of the certainty of our salvation depend on any other source or on God's promises in Scripture? Turretin²² argues that the cause of our election, which is Christ, is the ground for our assurance of salvation. Though our faith may fluctuate due to circumstances we can be certain of our salvation according to the "testimony of the Spirit who witnesses that they are sons of God" (Rom. 8:15, 16), as testified also by various Scriptures.²³ He poses the most penetrating question that compels the obvious answer: "But how could he either testify truly that we are sons of God and heirs of the kingdom of heaven or seal us unto the day of redemption, if we had no evidence of it and if his testimony might be false and his sealing

²¹ John H. Leith, ed. "Modern Roman Catholicism," *Creeds of the Churches* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), ch. ix, 413-4. (Emphasis mine).

²² Turretin, *Institutes*, 374.

²³ Ibid. see also *Reformed Creeds*, ch. Xviii.

deceptive?”²⁴ Believers receive the seal of the Holy Spirit which is “indissoluble (*akatalyton*.)” He also argues from the redemptive historical on the certainty of salvation which is “the practice and example of the saints (who were certain of their own election and salvation) teaches that certainty is not only possible, but necessary.”²⁵ Turretin makes an extensive case for this view which is difficult to surmount, and the strength of his argument is rooted in his Scriptural evidence rather than based on philosophical argumentation.

The Reformed Creeds state that our assurance of faith is “founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God: which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.”²⁶

It must be noted that human corruption which destroys human ability to obtain salvation or keep it unto the end is natural, moral and spiritual. All these aspects, though distinct are indivisible aspects of one reality in a sinner. When Scripture describes the sinner as being dead (Eph. 2:1, 5; 4:18; cf. Luke 15:24), all these are taken into consideration. When we understand the analogy of death as it affects the person physically which Paul applies to our spiritual lives, then we acknowledge that we are ineffective in ourselves. As a dead person cannot respond to any situation he can only be acted upon, and if he is to come back to life, there must be an external force that would effect that reality. In the same way the totality of our natural, moral and spiritual actions can only respond positively towards God when we experience change in those aspects through regeneration which its source comes externally to the sinner.

The initial application of the work of redemption in the sinner is not by the sinner himself but by the Holy Spirit. This is an alien effect upon the sinner. This initial application is called regeneration, and on this depends the sinner’s salvation. Expounding John 15:4, 5, Hodge reminds us that “Our Lord compares the relation between himself and his people to that which exists between the vine and its branches. The

²⁴ Ibid, 376.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ John H. Leith, ed. “Reformed Creeds,” *Creeds of the Churches*, 213.

point of analogy is the absolute dependence common to both relations.”²⁷ By this analogy Christ asserts that he is the “only source of spiritual life.”²⁸ As far as God is the author or giver of life, he does not leave the sinner to his own fate. What is required for being in the holy presence of God or for salvation has been paid by God himself, since no one could do it. The Heidelberg Catechism’s answer to Question 1 about our “only comfort in life and in death” says:

That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and death – to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.²⁹

This statement adduces several scriptural passages in its support so that it is not simply framed from a philosophical or bare theological speculation but firmly rooted in the given word of God. This affirmation leaves everything about our salvation solely in the sovereign control of God. The guarantee of our salvation was asserted by Christ himself in a number of places. In John 6:39, Christ declared that those who are given to him by the Father shall not be lost (cf. 17:12; 18:9). In John 10:28-29, Christ assures the finality of salvation for his people – that is their eternal security. Notice what Christ said, **ouvn̄h. apol̄wntai** “they will never perish;” **apol̄wntai** is used as a subjunctive and is preceded by **n̄h**, which functions as a prohibition here. And the negation **ou**vadds force to the fact, which therefore means there is divine prohibition to lose anyone – that is “my flock” that is marked for salvation. This fact rules out the possibility of perishing. As the negation is ruled out then we have only the positive reality which is the unfailing salvation of those that are being saved. The particularity of the flock shows that the Lord already knows his own and he is willing to protect them with his own life (cf. 2Tim. 2:19).

The final seal of this guarantee is the co-working of the Son and the Father, and no one can “snatch” the believer out of their hands. Christ says **oūe ār̄pasei** “no one will snatch” (John. 10:28). The

²⁷ Ibid, 268.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 1.

action of snatching is put in the future tense and being preceded by the negation **ouē** cancels any possible such action from anyone. This is the ground of the assurance of our salvation, namely that as far as it depends on the immutable, sovereign good pleasure and eternal mercy of God to save his people, absolutely nothing can frustrate or defeat that purpose and goal. The language involved in this reality is combatant. It is a graphic analogy of two possible forces trying to undo one another in order to forcefully confiscate something from the other. In the first instance, “no one will snatch” and in the second, “no one is able to snatch” so that the ability of anyone or anything to cause the elect of God to lose salvation whether in the present or future is not recognized or has been ruled out completely. This picture language of “out of my hand” or “out of the Father’s hand” demonstrates the firm grip of the triune God on the salvation of the elect of God because he is determined to save them.

This is the foundational truth upon which Paul develops his understanding of assurance of salvation that is bound to God’s love that is fully expressed in Christ. Paul poses a number of questions that portends possible factors of losing our salvation from the human point of analysis: Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? Who is to condemn? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (Rom. 8:33-35). If these “whos” were to prevail, then we all would lose our salvation. Though Paul provides answers to each question of the “whos” as grounds for the irrevocability of our salvation, Christ had already established a definitive response to them with the “no one” (Jn. 10:28, 29). Therefore, from the divine side of things we are assured of our salvation.

In the Hosea passage above, God describes his feelings towards his people in human terms thus: “my heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.” This is a covenantal feeling of love and compassion by which God does not give up on his people but preserves them. It brings down to our understanding and feelings how God loves and cares for his people. Paul also teaches that “Love bears all things... endures all things” and “love never ends” (1Cor. 13:7, 8). Such love as Paul describes has its foundation in the love of God. God’s love never gives up on us, because nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:35).

A human being may easily let his or her anger or resentment destroy a good relationship due to an offense. This is human tendency and is not commendable, which is why God distinguishes himself from it by saying “for I am God and not a man.” Christ Jesus was moved with the same compassion over Jerusalem when he saw its imminent destruction. Though Jerusalem rejected Christ’s offer of salvation he still loved her compassionately. It is the same compassion that he demonstrated by going to the cross when he saw that we all were coming under the wrath of God. In Christ, God “will not come to us in wrath” because that wrath has fallen upon Jesus Christ, his Son. Though we were by nature children of wrath, in Christ we are children of mercy, great love and grace (Eph. 2: 3f). In Christ God has swallowed his anger. The revelation of God’s unflinching compassion for us should stir up our confidence and faith in his promises about our lives and our salvation. We should keep on learning to trust God’s promises, and in them we should also find our assurance of salvation, peace of mind and the joy of hope of life.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that God’s promise of our salvation is certain because of who he is, namely, that he is essentially good, powerful and trustworthy. God is both the provider of the condition for attaining eternal life and fulfilling the promise of life. God’s plan of salvation is an eternal plan by which all who are being saved are the elect in Christ. Such people cannot lose their salvation because it is in the hands of God himself. Arguments that salvation can be lost are influenced by anthropological philosophy and are far removed from the deep basic structure of the redemptive plan as attested in Scripture. Those who appear to lose their salvation were never truly saved in the first place, even though they confessed their faith in Christ.



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