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**How Does the Assurance of Salvation in Reformed Theology
Nurture the Christian Psyche for Obedience?**

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Introduction

The notion that people need to be saved presupposes that a defective condition is normally prevalent. Many religious books have presented their views regarding the root of this problem. The Bible has it that since the fall of man, humans are totally depraved, and have become slaves to sin (Romans 5). They have become morally corrupt and unable to think right or do what is good. Their condition is irreparable if God does not help them. They are represented as sunk in a state of sin, misery, and judgment. But God is to be thanked for providing a way out of this hopeless situation of humans. He is the only one who can offer a true salvation. This God's salvation was offered in

¹ Degrees, books, articles ... not more than about 400 words.

both the Old and New Testaments. The cardinal message of the Bible is salvation, and this has become the Christian message.

Many scholars have written on this great salvation that has been offered by God. One of them was John Calvin (1509-1564) who discussed God's intention for the salvation of humans. His idea was strongly held by a good number of evangelical churches and this idea is known today as Reformed theology.

The purpose of this article is to argue that God alone is the author of salvation, which is grounded solely and exclusively in the covenant love and grace of God, and when he saves there is the assurance that his salvation is complete and permanent. To achieve this purpose, I adopt a descriptive method to discuss the concept of salvation in Jonah 2:8-9, to present the position of reformed theologians on salvation and to evaluate how their position nurtures the Christian psyche for obedience.

A. Word Study of עֲשֵׂה in Jonah 2:8-9 as A Basis for Salvation

The term עֲשֵׂה used in Jonah 2:9 actually means ‘bringing help to people in the midst of their trouble’.² Yahweh is always the subject of this term in the Bible. He is portrayed as the one who can bring help to those who are in great trouble and cannot rescue themselves. This term is used in Jonah 2:9 as being grounded on the term אֱמֶנֶת, God’s covenant love (Jonah 2:8). אֱמֶנֶת literally means ‘covenant love’, ‘covenant loyalty’, ‘faithfulness’, ‘goodness’, ‘kindness’ or ‘steadfast love’.³ Most often, the root is operated in association with the covenant. It indicates an actual divine obligation to be loyal within the covenant relationship between God and his people.⁴ The root is used in Jonah 2:8 to show that אֱמֶנֶת is not made available to those who worship worthless idols, but to those who are in covenant relationship with Yahweh and turn to him in faith and repentance for salvation. This implies that salvation is made available to only those who have been elected by God (unconditional election), thus, it is limited to only some people (limited

² Robert L. Hubbard, “עֲשֵׂה,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament & Exegesis* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 211.

³ D.A. Baer and R.P. Gordon, “אֱמֶנֶת,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament & Exegesis*, edited by Willem A. VanGemeren et al. (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 211.

⁴ D.K. Stuart, “Steadfast Love,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988), 613.

atonement), and it is by **חסד**, which is the expression of God's grace in the Old Testament (Irresistible grace).

When **ישיע** is used of God's deliverance, it usually involves more than mere physical survival.⁵ The term may be used to imply the far-reaching purpose of God to save in the fullest sense.⁶ Stuart says that the term honours Yahweh in three ways. First, it extols His work as saviour, reflecting what he has done for the one offering the prayer of the thanksgiving. Second, it implicitly extols Yahweh's position as sole saviour. This implies that salvation belongs to Yahweh in contrast to belonging to any other gods, or coming from any other sources (cf. Jon. 2:8-9). Third, Yahweh alone is in charge of salvation, that is he decides who he will save and how he will save the person? Salvation is his area of authority. He is free to offer it to anybody he wants.⁷ When he saves, the salvation is whole and complete.

It is then glaring that the term **ישיע** indicates the helpless situation of humans (total depravity), which only God can rescue them from. The usage of the term affirms Yahweh as the only one who can save. He is the only one who can bring help to those who are helpless and cannot save themselves. He alone can save and there is no salvation in other gods. His salvation is grounded only on his covenant love and grace, and it is whole and complete. This covenant love and grace is made available to only those whom he has chosen. When he saves them there is the assurance that the salvation is permanent (perseverance of the saints). Thus, one can rightly conclude that the concept of salvation as deduced from the word study of **ישיע** is in agreement with the doctrine of salvation in reformed theology as it is discussed below.

B. Salvation in Reformed Theology

In 1618-19, some reformers at the 'Synod of Dort' in Holland drew up from scriptures five counter points of doctrine against the teachings of Jacob Arminius, which they considered defective teaching on the issue of God's plan of salvation.⁸ Those five theological beliefs were

⁵ Joyce Baldwin, "Jonah," in *An Exegetical and Expository Commentary: The Minor Prophets*, Edited by Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1993), 572.

⁶ Baldwin, 572.

⁷ Douglas Stuart, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hosea – Jonah*, Vol. 31, ed. David A. Hubbard et al. (Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1987), 478.

⁸ John Benton, *Evangelistic Calvinism: Why the Doctrine of Grace Are Good News* (Edinburg: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 3.

first promoted by John Calvin and were affirmed by the Synod of Dort as the doctrines of salvation found in the Bible. The label ‘Calvinism’ was given to those five points. The five points of reformed theology are summarised by the acronym ‘TULIP’; Total depravity; Unconditional election; Limited atonement; Irresistible grace; and Perseverance of the saint. It is believed that those five acronyms found their bases in the Bible. These five acronyms will be examined below, to determine their truth and significance.

1. Total Depravity

The first point is total depravity or total inability. This doctrine presents a description of the spiritual condition of man after the fall. All humans sinned in Adam, and they are without excuse (Rom 2:1). Accordingly, they are sinners, and thus, sunk in the helpless situation that requires only God’s salvation.⁹ In the Westminster Confession, the doctrine is stated as follows, ‘man by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.’¹⁰

In explaining this point, it can be noted that everything in human falls under the denomination of carnal.¹¹ Thus, the human was corrupted when he fell, and consequently, every person born into the world is enslaved to the service of sin. All people cannot choose to follow God morally.

Furthermore, this point indicates that humans were created with free will, but after the fall, they became depraved. It can be deduced that every aspect of human has been affected and vitiated by Adam’s fall into sin.¹² To this view, John Benton notes, ‘at first sight, the doctrine of total depravity may lead some to believe that all human beings are as wicked as they possibly can be. But it does not teach us

⁹ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1932), 61.

¹⁰ Boettner, 61.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Institute: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 249–253.

¹² J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston, *The Bondage of the Will* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 279.

such a thing. Rather, it shows us how sin has polluted and corrupted every part of us; every human faculty bears sin's ugly imprint.'¹³

This implies that humans cannot do anything good before God by or for themselves except through divine intervention. They can only gratify the desires of their sinful nature, and nothing good can come out of this nature, except evil. Thus, the fall only attracts God's anger.

It can be argued that every individual is sinful, and cannot respond to any offer of God's grace. The human condition is morally corrupted and only liable to divine punishment. All humans begin life in this condition (original sin), and cannot convert themselves into doing good or seek God except by the help of God himself (John 6:44; Rom 3:1-23; 2 Cor 4:3; Eph 2:1-3).

2. Unconditional Election

The second point is unconditional election. The doctrine refers to God's initiative in human salvation. This point, according to Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, asserts that God has chosen from eternity those whom he will bring to himself, this is not by any means based on foreseen virtue, merit or faith in those people, but rather it is unconditionally grounded in God's mercy alone. God has chosen from eternity to extend mercy to those he has chosen and to withhold mercy from those he has not chosen.¹⁴ The Westminster Confession states the doctrine thus, "by the decree of God for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestined to everlasting life and others are foreordained to everlasting death."¹⁵

There are many biblical texts, which suggest that God has selected some to be saved and that the response of anybody to the offer of salvation depends on this prior decision by God.¹⁶ Thus, the scriptures represent election as occurring in the past time irrespective of personal merit and altogether sovereign.¹⁷ Some of the biblical texts used in the support of this point are stated below, Matthew 20:3-15 (the parable of the labourers); Romans 9:20, 21 (Paul's metaphor of the potter and the

¹³ Benton, *Evangelistic Calvinism: Why the Doctrine of Grace Are Good News*, 6.

¹⁴ David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended and Documented* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 2004), 54.

¹⁵ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 84.

¹⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2001), 299.

¹⁷ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 86.

clay). Furthermore, John 15:16 is normally used to emphasize the fact that those elected by God and given to Jesus through grace will repent and be saved (cf. Exo 33:19; Rom 9:15). This demonstrates that God knows those who will believe in Jesus, so it is such people whom he elected.

In addition, Thomas R. Schreiner posits that the corporate and individual elections cannot be separated from each other. The individuals and the church as a whole are selected to be saved through Christ. Thus, whoever that accepts the invitation of God is part of the church and will be saved.¹⁸

3. Limited Atonement

The third point is limited atonement. This doctrine is also known as particular redemption or definite atonement. The doctrine, according to Boettner, holds that Jesus did not die to save all humanity; rather he died to save specific people God has elected to be saved. According to him, the question that is to be asked is ‘did Christ offer up himself a sacrifice for all the whole human race, for every individual without distinction or exception; or did his death have special reference to the elect?’¹⁹ The doctrine further asserts that Jesus’ substitutionary atonement was definite and certain in its purpose and in what it accomplished. This implies that only the sins of the elects were atoned for by Jesus’ death.²⁰

Boettner argues that Christ died for the elect only and that his death had only an incidental reference to others as far as they are partakers of common grace. The atonement is an infinite transaction; the limitation comes in the application of the benefits of the atonement that is in redemption.²¹ However, the doctrine does not suggest that the atonement is limited in its value or power, rather, that the atonement is limited in the sense that it is designed for some and not all.²²

One of the scriptures in support of the doctrine is John 17:9, which emphasizes that Christ died for those whom God gave him to save. By

¹⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, “Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election unto Salvation?,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, Grace*, edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), 106.

¹⁹ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 106.

²⁰ Steele, Thomas, and Quinn, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended and Documented*, 68.

²¹ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 150.

²² Boettner, 150.

implication, Christ's death was intended to save only the elect. It did not atone for the sins of the lost. Another scripture is Matthew 26:28, which points out that Christ died for many people but not all. John Benton argues in the light of this passage that Christ died for those who listen to his voice (John 10). The invitation is extended to all people, but it is obvious that not all people will respond to this invitation.²³

The Westminster Confession states the point thus:

wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam, are redeemed in Christ by His Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified and kept by His power through faith unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.²⁴

4. Irresistible Grace

The fourth point is irresistible grace or efficacious grace. The doctrine holds that when God calls a person to salvation, that person will inevitably come to salvation. The doctrine, according to McNeil, asserts that the saving grace of God is effectually applied to those whom he has determined to save, that is, the elect, and in God's timing, it overcomes their resistance to obeying the call of the gospel, bringing them to a saving faith.²⁵ This doctrine does not certainly negate Titus 2:11, which states that '... the grace of God that brings salvation appeared to all men.' That means that when God sovereignly purposes to save someone, that individual certainly will be saved.

The Westminster Confession states the doctrine thus:

all those whom God has predestined unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by His word and Spirit, out of that state of death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ, enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly, to understand the things of God; taking away their heart of stone, and given them a heart of flesh, renewing their wills and by His almighty power determining them to Jesus Christ, ye so as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace. The effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in a man who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy

²³ Benton, *Evangelistic Calvinism: Why the Doctrine of Grace Are Good News*, 14–15.

²⁴ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 150.

²⁵ John Thomas McNeill, *The History, and Character of Calvinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 103.

Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed by it.²⁶

By implication, the purposeful influence of God's Holy Spirit cannot be resisted, but that the Holy Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ. Thus, a believer cannot resist and reject God's call to salvation (John 6:44; Romans 8:14). Every human whom God has elected will inevitably come to the knowledge of God. The doctrine also indicates that no matter how sinful one is, once God elects him/her, the person will come to believe, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 5:10).

5. Perseverance of the Saint

The fifth point is perseverance of the saint. This doctrine emanates from the question, 'can a person who has true faith ever lose that faith?' The word 'saint' is used to refer to all who are set apart by God, and not of those who are exceptionally holy, canonized or in heaven.²⁷ According to McNeill, the doctrine asserts that since God is sovereign and his purpose cannot be frustrated by humans or anything else, those whom God has called into communion with himself will continue in faith until the end. Those who apparently fall away either never had true faith, to begin with or will return.²⁸

The Westminster Confession states the doctrine thus, 'they whom God has accepted in His beloved, effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end and be eternally saved'.²⁹ The basis for the doctrine is God's faithfulness to his promise.

Boettner states that if God has chosen men absolutely and unconditionally to eternal life, and if his Spirit effectively applies to them the benefits of redemption, the inescapable conclusion is that these persons will be saved.³⁰ God will not allow those he has given true faith to fall away from that faith. True believers persevere not because of their strength, but because of God's unchangeable mercy.

²⁶ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 162.

²⁷ McNeill, *The History, and Character of Calvinism*, 138.

²⁸ McNeill, 138.

²⁹ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 182.

³⁰ Boettner, 183.

This does not mean that the believer has nothing to do, he must endure.³¹

Furthermore, the perseverance of the saints has been regarded as the gratuitous gift of God, which is bestowed in proportion to human merit according to the reception which each individual gives to this gift.³² In this light, Wayne Grudem using Hebrews 6:4-6 argues that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God's power and will, they will find grace to persevere until the end of their lives, so that it can be said that only those who persevere until the end are truly born again.³³ This presupposes that the saint will persevere by the power of God (grace) which will help them to do so till the end of their lives. This reiterates the fact that, no one can stand on his own but through divine help. The perseverance of the saints does not suggest that the saints depend on their own good works but they are being preserved by God's grace.

According to Boettner, the doctrine does not mean that Christians do not temporarily fall the victims of sin or backsliding. They may backslide temporarily, but they are never completely defeated, for God, by the exercise of his grace on their hearts infallibly prevents even the weakest saint from final apostasy.³⁴

C. Effect of the Assurance of Salvation in Reformed Theology on Christians

Having discussed the concept of salvation as seen in the word study of **יְשׁוּעָה** and the five distinct doctrines pertaining salvation in reformed theology as seen in the five points of Calvinism, the focus of this section is to present how the assurance of salvation in reformed theology can nurture the Christian psyche for obedience.

1. Personal Assurance of Salvation

The first thing to be discussed here is the personal assurance of salvation as evolved out of the concept of salvation in Jonah and the five points of Calvinism. It has been rightly observed that salvation

³¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 235.

³² Calvin, *Calvin's Institute: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 261.

³³ Wayne Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study From the Warning Passages in Hebrews," in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, Grace*, Edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000), 182.

³⁴ Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 187.

belongs to God. He alone is the Author of salvation, and his salvation is solely grounded on his covenant love and grace. He decides who are to be saved, and makes them true Christians. All true Christians should know that they are among those who have been predestinated to eternal life. Boettner asserts that it is only through faith in Christ that anybody can be saved.³⁵ Faith is a gift from God. It is given to only those who have been chosen for salvation. Thus, anyone who knows that he or she has this faith can be assured that he is among the elect, and it becomes a proof of salvation.³⁶ What is then the relationship between faith and assurance?

For many reformers (Calvin inclusive), assurance was a normative component of faith. So, assurance is inseparable from faith. It is present in the true believer from the very beginning of his or her spiritual life and never leaves him or her in spite of the reality of doubts, fear, and vanity.³⁷ This demonstrates that assurance of personal salvation is included in the concept of faith. According to Viasoki, the faith we are talking about here is not feeling but knowledge achieved through revelation from God. Faith in Christ is the assurance not only of present reconciliation with God but also of future eternal life.³⁸

2. Implication of the Assurance of Salvation

The second important thing to be noted here is the fact that the assurance of salvation in reformed theology has dual implications on the Christians; positive and negative. Both implications are thus presented.

First, the assurance of salvation holds to Christians a great gospel hope. The doctrine of total depravity helps to see the gravity of sin and to hold out to a great gospel hope. With this, no Christian will like to go back to the bondage of sin. With the great hope, this doctrine inspires, Christians will continue to encourage one another to continue in the hope, knowing fully that God cannot fail them. For if at the fallen state, God still loved Christians, how much more will he do when they become his sons and daughters? (Romans 5:1-8).

³⁵ Boettner, 308.

³⁶ Boettner, 308.

³⁷ Yaroslav Viasovski, "A Comparison of the Doctrine of Assurance in Theology of John Calvin and Karl Barth" (Reformed Theological Seminary, 2004), 14.

³⁸ Viasovski, 3.

Second, the assurance of salvation gives every Christian a sign of reverence to God. It points Christians to God, by affirming that everything that surrounds salvation is God. A person cannot attain salvation on his or her own. It points first to the fallen state of the human. Humans are totally depraved. They are unable to think well for themselves, but God has chosen Christians, and saved them to good works. This should help every Christian to see the need to reverence God.

Third, the assurance of salvation encourages Christians to persevere until the end of their lives. Its presentation of perseverance calls every Christian attention, to what he or she has heard and holds to, so that he or she will not drift away (Heb. 2:1; 12:3). Christians are to be careful and guard against the error of lawlessness. This should prompt them to reveal the genuineness of their faith by continuing in the faith (Col. 1:23), and by remaining in their secure position.

Fourth, the assurance of salvation gives Christians a sense of God's presence in the midst of challenges. It assures every Christian of God's presence to help him or her persevere. This is presented by the Canons of Dort in the fifth point: 'The converted, if left to their own resources, would not be able to remain standing in the grace of God. God is faithful, mercifully strengthening them in the grace once conferred on them and powerfully preserving them to the end.'³⁹ This would then encourage Christians to be sure of God's ever presence and faithfulness, and it would help them in carrying out their assignment diligently and fearlessly.

Fifth, the assurance of salvation preserves all that is good and right in the Christian life. The doctrine of grace especially helps to preserve all that is right and good like humility, holiness, thankfulness, and passion for prayer and evangelism in the Christian daily living.⁴⁰ The Christian understanding of God's salvation, which is not by merit, encourages Christians to be obedient and bold to live for Jesus and preach the gospel from their experiences.

Sixth, the assurance of salvation may lead to complacency or moral and spiritual laxity. Those who believe that their perseverance in the faith is guaranteed by God will tend to become careless about the way they live. They will stop fighting against sin and become lukewarm. It

³⁹ Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*, 254.

⁴⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *What Is a True Calvinist* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2003), 6.

is good to note that God does not preserve Christians apart from their watchfulness and persevering faith (1 Cor. 10:12), God's faithfulness in preserving them does not abort their responsibilities as Christians.

Seventh, the assurance of salvation may negate any obedience to the great commission. Calvinism in her concept of unconditional election may seem to negate any missionary impulse. Since God has already chosen those who will be saved, and their number cannot be increased, then, there is no need for evangelism. The elect whether preached to or not will still be saved anyway. This may be a misinterpretation of the point. It is only through evangelism that the elect can be saved.

Conclusion

What has been presented so far in this article is that salvation belongs to God. He alone is the Author of salvation. His salvation is grounded solely and exclusively in his covenant love and grace, and when he saves, his salvation is complete and permanent. The concept of salvation in Jonah has affirmed this truth. God is extolled as the only Saviour who can deliver people from their helpless situation. His salvation is grounded on his covenant love and grace. It is restrictive to only those whom he has chosen and are in a relationship with him.

The doctrine of salvation in reformed theology has further affirmed the truth that salvation belongs to God. It is only God who can deliver humans from their condition of total depravity. He decides whom to save. He saved them by his grace alone. When he saves, the salvation is permanent. This truth that salvation belongs to God is the basis for the Christian assurance of salvation. It should, thus, nurture the Christian psyche for obedience.

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