



Mar/Apr 2019

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**BEDROCK
BELIEFS**

ALSO: PROPHET, PRIEST, AND KING

Friends:

Debate, discussion, and declaration shaped the Protestant Reformation. Church leaders sought to understand again all that God has done for us, so they searched the Scriptures and aimed to speak the truth to their contemporaries. The Synod of Dort in 1618-1619 was a months-long conversation. It produced helpful statements about salvation and a sort of policy manual (church order) of how churches might best be organized, as well as a mandate to translate the Scriptures into people's everyday language.



Two things shaped the foundation of their vision: first, how thoroughly God is in charge of everything, and, second, how much God loves and cares about each one of us. The King of the universe embraces us! And nothing, not even our own failures, can take us away from him!

This April, George Vink looks into the bedrock beliefs articulated at the Synod of Dort regarding our salvation. They are powerful reminders of how God loves us as we celebrate Easter.

But first, in March, Pete Byma leads us into our journey toward Easter as the season of Lent begins. Together we will consider the biblical offices of prophet, priest, and king, how Jesus fulfills all of these roles, and how he commissions us to follow in his footsteps.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Steven Koster".

—Steven Koster

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“Prophet, Priest, and King”
Pete Byma



“Bedrock Beliefs”
George Vink

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ReFrame
Media

april

Bedrock Beliefs

George Vink

Across the centuries, followers of Jesus have found that it's not always easy to understand the Bible as our guide for living. And, at times, there have been disagreements over faulty interpretations and false teachings. The 16th-century Reformation in Europe was a time like that. Some leaders saw that the church needed reform because it had added teachings outside the truth of the Bible. Turning back to the truth, a number of churches formed in various parts of Europe. But then they too ran into different interpretations of the Bible. So churches had gatherings that they called "synods" to sort out teachings that were true from those that were false.

This year we are celebrating the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dort, which held meetings in 1618-19. That synod helped many churches to clear up questions on five main teachings about salvation, all based on the Bible: (1) we are miserably lost in sin; (2) we are chosen by God to be saved; (3) we are saved through Christ's death for our sake; (4) we are renewed and transformed by the Holy Spirit; and (5) we are held safe in God's care forever. The Synod of Dort's decisions on these points are known as the Canons of Dort.

Back to God Ministries International, the parent ministry of ReFrame Media and these *Today* devotions, holds to these five teachings as bedrock beliefs of the Christian faith. As we reflect on these insights together this month, may they help us all gain or regain a firm foundation for our faith in Christ. To God be the glory!

George Vink served as a church pastor for over 40 years in Michigan, British Columbia, Montana, and California. Since retirement, he and his wife, Shirley, have continued to serve churches in interim ministry. The Vinks have four sons and eleven grandchildren.

BASED ON THE BIBLE

They received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

—Acts 17:11

The people in Berea, as our text explains, carefully examined the Scriptures to make sure Paul's teaching was true.

When I was a young pastor, I liked to think I knew a lot about Scripture. I had studied, and I knew many of the important teachings of the Bible. Today I am older and hopefully a little wiser. I know now how little I knew back then, and I realize how little I still know today, after years of studying and teaching. The Bible has so much to teach us that we keep learning as we grow in faith.

In Paul's day, the people in Berea didn't have the Bible as we know it. They had the Hebrew Scriptures that make up the Old Testament in our Bibles today. So, to examine Paul's teaching about Jesus as Savior (Messiah), they had to do some heavy study of Isaiah

and other prophecies. I picture them pondering and having discussions at tables with scrolls unrolled—and then exclaiming, "Paul's right—listen to this!"

Many years later, in 1618-19, a gathering of church leaders searched God's Word as the Bereans had done. They needed to know if some teachings by other leaders were true. And their findings, known as the Canons of Dort, still help us today in stating the bedrock truths about salvation from sin. So let's revisit those truths this month as a way of celebrating that helpful work—and especially God's gift of salvation!

Lord, thank you for your Word of truth. Help us to seek the truth and to share your good news of salvation everywhere. Amen.

CHOSEN, LOVED, CALLED

[God] chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.
—Ephesians 1:4

Did you know that God's gift of salvation for us started even before he created the world? Incredible!

This basic truth can really stretch our minds, and it shows us that God's thinking is far beyond ours. Even when we think of all that God did to create our world—from the universe, to our galaxy, to our planet, to all the plant and animal life around us, and to us humans—we are filled with awe and wonder. But then, to think that God chose us one by one to be saved in Christ even before he made all of this—it goes beyond our ability to understand.

So there is great mystery here. But this doesn't mean we are left confused or without understanding. As our Creator, God knows our minds, and God knows we can understand what it means to be chosen, and loved, and called to be holy.

So he tells us those things in his Word to us—and much more. And even though we can't understand all that God does, or why, we can be sure that he loves us and wants what is best for us. Far back in eternity God made plans to adopt us into his family so that we can have full life forever instead of dying in our sin and misery.

This month, as we reflect on the Canons of Dort, we'll be thinking a lot about our sin and God's gift of salvation for us. So it's important to know that before all of that happened, God chose us in love to be his children.

Gracious God, thank for calling us to be your beloved children in a world that is broken and burdened with sin. Help us to share your love everywhere. In Jesus, Amen.

MESSED UP

They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised.
—Romans 1:25

Viewing a stunning panorama from a mountaintop, gazing up at a sky filled with stars, or admiring a glorious sunset, we are often filled with awe and wonder at our Creator. Even many people who don't acknowledge the God of the Bible will exclaim, "Such beauty didn't just happen by accident!"

In Romans 1, the apostle Paul explains that God made his "eternal power and divine nature" clear since the creation of the world, so there is no excuse for anyone who may claim they are not aware of God.

It's a matter of opening eyes of faith and focusing on God instead of ourselves. God made us to glorify him and look to the needs of others, as he does for us. But too often we follow our own desires and ignore God, exchanging the truth for a lie (see Genesis 3:6). When we

push God aside and pour all our energy into other things—career, sports, pleasure, politics, hobbies, trends, and more—we serve those things rather than the Creator. We glorify them instead of the God who made us. We mess up the good life he created us to enjoy.

If God didn't step in to save us, we would have been lost forever. So in response to God's love, let's not listen to lies like "There is no God" or "I am number one." Instead, knowing the truth revealed in Jesus, we can shout our praise: "Thanks be to God, our Savior!"

Creator God, we know we are inclined to sin and to focus on ourselves. Thank you for sending Jesus to save us, and help us to live to your glory. Amen.

OUR CORRUPTION

"I don't know," [Cain] replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" The LORD said, "What have you done?" —Genesis 4:9-10

In its opening chapters, the Bible makes clear that God created the world and all its creatures. And as the crown of his creation God made human beings—us!—in his own image. Back then we had a unique holiness. But it didn't take long for us to experience a fall and corruption. (See Genesis 1-3.)

Cain and Abel sadly illustrate the results of our fall into sin and its deadly corruption. The Canons of Dort say, "Human beings brought forth children of the same nature as themselves after the fall. . . . Being corrupt they brought forth corrupt children. The corruption spread . . . from Adam and Eve to all their descendants—except for Christ alone. . . ."

As our story today shows, Abel gave God the best from his flock, but Cain gave only "some of the fruits" of his work. So God "looked with favor" on

Abel's offering, but not Cain's. Cain could not tolerate that. So in envy he took his brother's life, doing as he pleased. Cain ignored God's plea to do what is right. Even though Abel was also sinful, Cain had no right to kill an imagebearer of God.

Calling Cain to account, God thundered, "What have you done?" God still asks us that today when we do as we please and hurt others: "What have you done? Has not my Son, Jesus, shown you how to live?"

Creator God, thank you for the grace and favor you have shown us in Christ. Fill us with your wisdom, and guide us not to give in to temptation to please ourselves. Help us to be like Jesus. Amen.

NOAH AND THE LORD

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become. . . . But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

—Genesis 6:5, 8

Today's story takes place many centuries after the time of Cain and Abel. Human nature hasn't improved! The Canons of Dort expand on humanity's corruption, saying, "All people are . . . inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin." These are discouraging and upsetting words!

Lamenting "the wickedness of the human race," Genesis describes God as regretting that he ever made human beings. Deeply troubled, God said, "I will wipe [them] from the face of the earth." And yet a ray of hope follows: "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD." The word "but" signals a change of direction. We are corrupt, but there is hope for us. We fall into sin, but God lifts us up. We despair, but God brings joy.

The Canons of Dort sound so harsh in their assessment of

our corruption, but they also add that it's possible for us to turn back to God by "the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit." We cannot reform our corrupted nature or even begin to renew ourselves, but God can.

God can work in us to do good. Somehow Noah "walked faithfully with God," and when the Lord told Noah to build an ark and prepare for a flood, Noah did "as God commanded him." Today let us thank God for working in us even more by his Spirit through Christ our Savior!

Lord, thank you for not destroying humanity then and now. May the gift of your Spirit today move us to become more like Jesus daily. In his name, Amen.

BY GRACE AND THROUGH FAITH

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.
—Romans 3:23-24

As the Canons of Dort say, “God would have done no one an injustice” if he had left all people “in sin and under the curse” of death. For “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” says Paul in our reading for today, and in Romans 6:23 Paul adds, “For the wages of sin is death. . . .”

It’s clear, whether you’re a designer in New York, a tour boat operator in Amsterdam, a farmer in Kenya, or a factory worker in Brazil—you’re a sinner who falls short, deprived of God’s glory. We are all incapable of saving ourselves from the quagmire of sin. We are stuck in this misery and totally unable to do any good that could help us earn our way out.

Yet there’s hope. There’s more to be learned as we read God’s Word. There’s a righteousness that we can’t earn but that “is

given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

This good news is also announced in Romans 6:23, which reads in full, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” John 3:16 also declares the good news of God’s grace and mercy: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Hear these words and let them sink in. Repeat them often. God’s gifts in Jesus give us life!

Lord Jesus, thank you for making us right with God through your loving sacrifice for us. Help us to live for you and share this good news with others. Amen.

LIGHT HAS COME

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. . . . This is the verdict: Light has come into the world. . . .
—John 3:17-19

A message on a rancher's barn by the highway said, "Jesus Is the Answer!" I wondered, "But do we know the question?"

Even if people hear the words "Jesus is the Savior," do they know what we need to be saved from? Or why it matters?

The apostle John wrote, "The true light that gives light to everyone . . . was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him" (John 1:9-10).

The need for Jesus as the answer to our problem of sin and death may not seem obvious. We have to recognize our miserable condition. People who bring God's Word to others have to explain what our sin is and why it's a problem. As the Canons of Dort say, "In order that people may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends messengers of this very joyful

message to the people and at the time he wills. By this ministry people are called to repentance and faith in Christ," who gave his own perfect life to pay the debt for all our sin.

God still sends messengers to explain why we need salvation and how Jesus alone made it possible for us to be saved. The gift of salvation is for all who believe and recognize Jesus as the Savior, the true light of the world. His light helps us see plainly that we have sinned and we are stuck in sin. And he provides the only way out. Is he lighting your way today?

Jesus, thank you for coming to save us from sin and death. Light our way and help us to shine your light for others. Amen.

BEAUTIFUL FEET

How can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? . . . "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" —Romans 10:14-15

I grew up in a family that went to church every Sunday. And I remember how my parents insisted that our Sunday shoes should always be clean and polished. As the youngest boy, I had the Saturday duty of polishing many pairs of shoes. When I preach, I still make sure my shoes are shiny. But that's not what Paul is referring to when he talks about beautiful feet bringing good news.

Paul quotes a line from Isaiah that has to do with bringing news throughout the land. In ancient times, messengers were sent to the king and to major cities to bring news about battles or attacks from other nations. The messengers often ran a long way, and their feet got dirty and bloody. But when the message was good news, those tortured and bleeding feet were considered beautiful. So Isaiah used that imag-

ery to describe a messenger who brought the good news of salvation and peace, announcing, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7).

In our world of bullets and bombs, we need messengers of good news. There can be peace. Being reconciled with God and one another is possible! Jesus, the Savior, sends us with his good news, saying, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

We have good news to bring! People won't look at our feet, but they will see the joy on our faces as we share that God reigns and loves us.

Lord, empower us to share with joy the good news of your love for your world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

RESPONSE NEEDED!

Did they not hear? Of course they did: "Their voice has gone out into all the earth. . . ."
—Romans 10:18

Once in a while my wife asks, "Didn't you hear me?" As an aging retiree, I could probably use an excuse about hearing loss. But that's not the kind of hearing Paul is talking about.

In our verse for today, Paul is quoting Psalm 19, which speaks of the heavens declaring God's glory. But, as we know, not everyone pays attention to that message. The same happens when messengers bring the good news of God's salvation. People don't always listen. So it's not just a matter of hearing. Paul puts it plainly: "Did they not hear? Of course they did." It's a matter of paying attention and responding!

We must understand there's a "Twofold Response to the Gospel," as the Canons of Dort put it. People respond with belief and acceptance, or they refuse to believe. Those who accept the gospel and embrace

Jesus as Savior in true faith respond with genuine worship, grateful living, and a sure hope for eternal life. It's humbling and important to realize this truth: "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The gift of true faith leads to praise and worship. Will you worship the Lord and Savior today?

Lord, forgive us when we fail to respond in worship, giving thanks for your gifts of life and love. Lead us to recognize you and to see the signs of your love everywhere. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WORTHY OF SUFFERING?

It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him. —Philippians 1:29

In our Scripture for today, the apostle Paul is not sure whether he will be able to visit his readers in Philippi. But “whatever happens,” he says, “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Accepting the gift of faith in Christ means more than having a reservation in heaven. God calls us into an eternal relationship with consequences.

The life of the believer is not designed to be one of leisure or merely looking forward to an eternal reward. We’re here on a mission, chosen by God to do his will and his work in this world. We must realize that this is serious business. It’s more than holding to certain beliefs to escape total destruction. It’s a way of life calling for sacrifice. It may include suffering. Living for Christ can be costly!

Paul experienced joy as he shared the gospel, but he also endured painful rejection and physical suffering. Following Jesus is a call to obedience, a discipleship of duty. Conducting ourselves in a “manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” means serving him in all areas of life, no matter what consequences we might face. It applies every hour, every day.

Being given an opportunity to suffer for Jesus sounds unusual. And yet it’s a gift. We have to experience it before we can understand. Are we willing?

Jesus, help me to realize that you suffered for my sake. Empower me to be willing to suffer for you and your kingdom, no matter what. In your name I pray. Amen.

COMPASSION

“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.”
—Isaiah 42:3

The Canons of Dort note that “our merciful God has promised not to snuff out a smoldering wick or break a bruised reed.” It says this to show God’s compassion and to encourage anyone who feels they are not doing very well in the new life they have in Christ. Anyone who is dealing with doubts or feeling like a failure should not despair and think they might lose their salvation. God’s mercy and grace go deeper than we could imagine.

Remember always, as Romans 5:10 points out, that we were reconciled to God and saved in Christ “while we were God’s enemies.” And “if God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? . . . No one” (Romans 8:31-34).

In the book of Isaiah, God is speaking to a worn-out, dis-

tressed people who need hope and encouragement. He wants to assure them of a change coming with the promised Messiah. This echoes an earlier image: “He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart” (Isaiah 40:11).

This shows what our nature must be toward anyone who is struggling in faith. Jesus had compassion for the weak and hurting. And if people had doubts and confusion, he gave assurance and encouragement. Compassion isn’t a weakness. It’s the power of grace that we too have received. So let’s share the assurance of God’s love!

Lord, empower us with your compassion and mercy—to share it with others. In the Savior’s name we pray. Amen.

OUR GOOD SHEPHERD

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."
—John 10:11

When Jesus taught that he is the good shepherd, people had different reactions. Many said, "He is demon-possessed and raving mad." But others said that didn't make sense—and they asked, "Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

The Bible's teachings and Jesus himself still get different reactions today. We understand that we may have to send soldiers into battle to protect our country, but people struggle with the idea that someone would have to die to pay for our sin.

Over the centuries, Christ's church has struggled with how to present the message that one person—Jesus—died to pay the price for human sin. The Canons of Dort say, "This death of God's Son is the only and entirely complete sacrifice and satisfaction for sins; it is of infinite value and worth, more

than sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world." This too gets different reactions.

Jesus himself taught that as the good shepherd, he was willing to lay down his life for us, the sheep that he loves. He was not like a hired hand, who would run away from danger, caring nothing for the sheep.

The good shepherd's death has "infinite value and worth" for all who believe in him and trust in his care.

How can you share Jesus' love and care today?

Jesus, thank you for being willing to die for us even though we deserve to die for our sin. Guide us to live in a way that brings honor to your gift of laying down your life for us. In your name, Amen.

OUR REJOICING

"Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them."
—Romans 4:8

Looking back to God's covenant with Abraham, Paul shows there is no reason for us to do any boasting. Believing and accepting God's gift is totally different from working for wages. Faith leads to righteousness, and this is credited to us as a gift. We could not possibly earn it or work for any part of it.

The Canons of Dort explain: "All who genuinely believe and are delivered and saved by Christ's death from their sins and from destruction receive this favor solely from God's grace—which God owes to no one—given to them in Christ from eternity." It's an eternal, divine plan.

As believers who are delivered and saved by Christ's death, we are blessed! As a hymn puts it beautifully, "Great is thy faithfulness, O God . . . blessings all mine, with ten thousand

beside!" God has had our best interests at heart from eternity. Because of Jesus' self-sacrificing love, we receive the gift of never having our sins count against us! Now, there's a reason for rejoicing!

Based on the truths of God's Word, the Canons of Dort help us understand God's gifts of grace and our reasons for rejoicing. How do you show your gratitude for God's gifts in Christ? What do you do to share your joy in all this with others?

Father in heaven, thank you for the joy of having our sins washed away forever. May our lives ring with rejoicing, inspiring others to believe in your breathtaking gift of salvation. Make us righteous in Jesus' name! Amen.

GOD'S ETERNAL PLAN

"Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."
—John 12:15

Sometimes God's plan may seem rather plain, but at other times we wonder what he is trying to say or do.

Today is Palm Sunday, when we celebrate Christ's coming as King. On this day Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a young donkey, and we may well wonder what that is supposed to mean. So it's good to be reminded that God had a plan, whether we understand it or not. Writing about this event, John quotes an old prophecy (Zechariah 9:9) about a king coming on a donkey's colt—and this applies to Jesus. God definitely had a plan!

The Canons of Dort describe the Lord's planning and promise this way: "This plan, arising out of God's eternal love for the elect, from the beginning of the world to the present time has been powerfully carried out and will also be car-

ried out in the future, the gates of hell seeking vainly to prevail against it."

As Jesus rode in on a donkey, the crowd cried, "Hosanna!" calling for salvation. But not everyone there was happy. The religious leaders saw Jesus as a threat to their power, and they wanted to get rid of him.

As we celebrate Jesus, the one who came "in the name of the Lord," we must also remember that God calls us to respond with more than shouting, more than excitement. Our response to Christ's coming, dying, and rising again calls for a believing heart and living faithfully as God's children.

Lord Jesus, help us to celebrate your gifts by living faithfully for you, showing that we believe and trust in you as Savior. Amen.

JUSTIFIED

[Jesus] was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.
—Romans 4:25

Jesus was not caught by surprise. Riding a donkey into Jerusalem (John 12:12-15), he knew he would soon be arrested, sentenced, and executed, although he was innocent. And then he would rise to life again! Jesus had predicted all this to his disciples (Luke 18:31-33).

As we think about these things, let's remember that Jesus did all this for our salvation—so that we could be made right before God. Because of Jesus' death to pay the price of our sin, God credits us with Jesus' righteousness—making us justified—when we believe in his promise to save. In this way we become the spiritual descendants of Abraham, who believed “that God had the power to do what he had promised.”

Because he had such faith, Abraham is called “the father of all who believe” (Romans 4:11).

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563), approved by the Synod of Dort in 1619, describes faith this way: “True faith is not only a sure knowledge by which I hold as true all that God has revealed to us in Scripture; it is also a wholehearted trust, which the Holy Spirit creates in me by the gospel.”

This is the good news: God sent his only Son. He lived, was crucified and buried, and rose from the dead so that we too may live. Believe it, and be right with God. Believe it, and be credited with righteousness (justified). Believe it, and live as God's children today!

Gracious God, thank you for the gifts of righteousness and faith in Christ. We want to live as your children in this world. Empower us with your Spirit, in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."
—Matthew 16:16

Whoever we are, the main question for each of us is the one Jesus asks in this passage: "Who do *you* say I am?"

If we have faith in Christ as our Savior, our answer will be something like Peter's.

And, as Jesus told Peter, it is God who reveals this to us. The Spirit of God gives us the faith to believe. This is the gift to Abraham and to all who believe God's promises (Romans 4). As the Canons of Dort put it, God produces in us "both the will to believe and the belief itself."

What's more, when we believe, we receive, like Peter, the promise of a future with Christ. Jesus says he will build his church—that is, the body of all believers—and the powers of death and hell will not overcome it.

The main thing to remember here is that Jesus says, "I will

build *my* church. . . ." It's not ours or anyone else's. Jesus calls us to work with him by spreading the good news to all nations, discipling believers, baptizing them, and teaching them all he has commanded (Matthew 28:19-20). But we may never forget that it's *his* church that *he* is building.

The Canons of Dort say, "There is always a church of believers founded on Christ's blood," and this church "steadfastly loves . . . worships, and . . . praises him" forever as the Savior "who laid down his life for her on the cross." So let's love, praise, and worship our Lord in all we do!

Dear Jesus, thank you for making us your church. Keep building us to praise and honor you always. In your name, Amen.

CHRIST IN ME

I have been crucified with Christ. . . . The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.
—Galatians 2:20

Today's verses give a testimony of what it means to be a believer. Here Paul gets deeply personal about his relationship with Christ. He uses "I" several times to describe his own faith and trust in the Savior.

Paul explains earlier that he was once a severe legalist. He believed he could keep the law perfectly and be righteous before God, but that was impossible. There's no way we can ever make ourselves right with God. We are made righteous only through believing a promise—that Jesus' blood, shed on the cross, pays the whole debt of our sin. Jesus fulfilled all the requirements of the law for us, and he is the only One who could do that because he never broke the law. He was totally without sin.

So Paul learned, by grace, that he had to stop thinking he could

earn salvation by trying to keep the law. Instead, he said, he had to die to the law in order to live for God. And he identified so closely with Jesus that he testified, "I have been crucified with Christ"—as if his own body had been stretched on the cross. So now, said Paul, his old way of life was dead: "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." This is the good news! We are not our own but are grafted into him who lives in us (see John 15).

So let's join with the Canons of Dort again today by saying we are justified (made righteous) by faith in Christ alone! Can others see that Jesus is living in us?

God of grace, by your Spirit, fill us with new life in Christ so that we may live as believers grafted into him forever. Amen.

THE LOOK OF LOVE

The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him. . . . —Luke 22:61

Peter was one of Jesus' closest followers. A natural leader, Peter was a doer who often spoke up and motivated others when it was time to get things done. But sometimes Peter spoke when he should have kept quiet. Brave Peter promised loyalty and then didn't follow through. Earlier he said, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (Luke 22:33). But in the priest's courtyard he denied even knowing Jesus. Still, I think Peter deserves some credit for coming around and being there that night.

While this account tells of Peter's denial, it also shows the Savior's love. In all that Jesus did here—allowing himself to be arrested and mocked, healing a soldier's ear, and even looking Peter in the eye—we can see the heart of Jesus, who shows us his Father's heart.

When we get to know Jesus, we learn—often slowly—that his way of doing things is different from ours. It is not with swords or in trying to get even with people who have hurt us. Instead, it's the way of compassion and forgiveness.

The look and love of Jesus are a marvelous message! It was not a look of condemnation that melted Peter's heart. It was the loving look of a Father caring for his wayward child. It was an inviting look of grace, a look that brought remorse and repentance. It was the look of the redeeming, restoring love of God.

He's looking at us with that same redeeming love today!

Father, thank you for your look of love, and fill us today with the love you have shown in your Son. Amen.

ULTIMATE LOVE

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”
—John 15:13

Jesus spoke these words to his disciples just a few hours before he was arrested. And the next day, which we celebrate today as Good Friday, he laid down his life for us all. He gave up his life willingly on the cross to pay the price for our sin.

Jesus clarifies his definition of ultimate love by adding, “You are my friends if you do what I command.” And that command is “Love each other as I have loved you.” Earlier that evening, as he ate his last supper with the disciples, Jesus had said the same thing, calling it a new command (John 13:34).

I sometimes wonder, “Do I have even a beginning of love like that? How does it show?”

Loving others by dying for them is not expected from each of us. But loving others by giving of our time and money and by sharing of our gifts and talents

is a start. There’s more involved than being kind and patient. Love always trusts and always perseveres (see 1 Corinthians 13). In our gratitude for all that Jesus has done for us, we want to share his good news wherever we can. For as the Canons of Dort remind us, “God showed his love” by sending his only Son so “that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9).

We look to Jesus as our example. He went willingly and obediently. He laid down his life for his friends. Do you see Jesus as your friend?

Lord Jesus, thank you for giving your own life as a sacrifice for ours. May our responses of joy and gratitude show and tell others how we are your friends, to the Father’s glory. Amen.

THE TEMPORARY TOMB

Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. —John 19:42

When people get older, they think about arranging for a burial place or making funeral plans. After all, we are mortal, and our bodies break down and die.

Executed on a cross, Jesus had made no preparations for his burial, and most of his followers had scattered. Was his body simply to be dumped in a common grave for prisoners and debtors? The body of the Son of Man, who had “no place to lay his head” while he was alive (Luke 9:58), needed a tomb to borrow. This called for the help of Joseph and Nicodemus. Earlier these men were afraid to be known as Jesus’ followers, but now they came forward to give his body an honorable resting place. They used their connections with the governor, Pilate, to ask permission to take Jesus’ body for burial.

Pilate approved. After all, Jesus was dead and had to be bur-

ied. Joseph and Nicodemus had resources to prepare the body, and they had a place to bury it. So they wrapped Jesus’ body in linen and with burial spices and set it in Joseph’s own tomb nearby (see Matthew 27:57-60). They did all this quickly before sunset on Friday, because it was the “day of Preparation” for the weekly Sabbath on Saturday.

Imagine the fear and sadness of Jesus’ followers hiding behind closed doors that day. What a cheerless Sabbath!

But we know that tomb was just a temporary resting place. And by faith in Jesus, we know that’s true for us too!

God, thank you for the assurance that, like Jesus, we too will be raised. Lord Jesus, come quickly! Amen.

PEACE!

The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you!"
—John 20:20-21

Can we even imagine the disciples' state of mind? Many of Jesus' followers had scattered, and his closest disciples were hiding behind closed doors in fear of the religious authorities. Their Rabbi ("Teacher") had been crucified. They had believed in him as the Messiah (the "Anointed One"), their promised deliverer. Had it all been "too good to be true"?

Sure, they had heard Mary's message that Jesus had risen. Peter and John had run to see the now-empty tomb, but that wasn't the same as seeing Jesus alive. Was Mary mistaken? Had she imagined seeing Jesus in the garden? Had others taken the body? Good news can seem so unbelievable! Crucified and buried men don't walk out of graves! Were they being asked to believe the impossible?

Jesus didn't keep his disciples waiting long. That evening,

"Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!'" He stood, and he spoke. He showed them his wounds. He greeted them with a familiar blessing. Jesus gave them the peace and presence they had been missing. And they were overjoyed. Things had not been the way they were supposed to be, but now they were!

Today we too celebrate that God is with us! Christ has risen! He is alive, and he lives in us! Hallelujah! Peace is possible!

With whom can you share this good news today?

Resurrected Savior, as we rejoice in your victory over death, please inspire us to share the good news of peace and new life with God forevermore. In your powerful name, Amen!

KEEP SINGING!

In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.
—Romans 8:37

It seems to me that we often stop celebrating Christ's resurrection too soon. Yesterday, as we celebrated Easter, many of us sang, or even shouted, with excitement, "Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes," and, "Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia!"

What are we excited about today? Does our worship on the first day of the week motivate us to live for the risen Lord in the other days of the week? Does it help us focus on what life is all about? How can we share this good news with the people around us today?

As we have seen earlier this month, the book of Romans includes lots of life-giving truths. It's also a letter in which Paul often breaks into a *doxology*—a hymn of praise to God. Our reading today from Romans 8 is an example. Paul piles reason upon reason for our re-

joicing: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" And "who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" No one! "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." And we remember this is all based on Christ's triumph over sin, death, and the grave for us.

Again, as the Canons of Dort say, "It is the promise of the gospel that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life." So let's keep rejoicing this week, knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God shown in the risen Jesus. We can keep singing today too! There are people who need to hear it.

Jesus, help us to rejoice each day in all you have done for us. We thank and praise you, Lord! Amen.

GOD'S DOING!

You also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. . . . You were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. . . . —Ephesians 1:13

Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians with great praise to God for all the blessings we receive in Jesus. Back in eternity before he created the world, God worked out “the mystery of his will” with “all wisdom and understanding.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three persons in one God working together—designed a way to include us humans in their family. Though we are imperfect and weak and even sinful, Christ came to give up his perfect life to pay the debt of our sin. And when we believe in him as Savior, we receive the Spirit of God himself to work in us as the guarantee of our inheritance with God forever.

One cannot read words like “the mystery of his will” without wondering, “Can we even begin to understand God’s will?” Books have been written in attempts to understand

the will of God. And when it comes to ideas like “predestined” and “adoption” into God’s family, we have to admit this is a mystery. We cannot comprehend it.

Still, we have the assurance of knowing we’re included—in Christ—having heard the message of truth, the gospel of salvation! We have received the Holy Spirit as a seal of our salvation. And with joy and delight we can see the work of the Spirit bearing fruit in us—“to the praise of his glory”!

Almighty God, we live in awe of the mystery of your will. Grant us the assurance of living in joyful obedience and delighting in your perfect purpose. Amen.

GLORY TO GOD!

"This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."
—John 15:8

There's an old song with the words "Do you know, O Christian, you're a sermon in shoes?" These words have stuck with me as a powerful illustration for life. Throughout my years as a pastor, I worked diligently to deliver sermons that help people hear God's Word, but what about showing myself to *be* a sermon?

When Jesus taught, "I am the true vine," he made clear that all the work of fruitbearing was to the glory of God, his Father. As Jesus' followers, we're called to bear fruit for God's glory also. This means showing that we are Jesus' followers, connected to him by the promised Holy Spirit. And by the power of the Spirit working in us, we will "bear much fruit." This fruit takes shape in a variety of ways, always motivated by our love for our Lord.

Many of us cannot tell an apple tree from a pear tree, but we can taste the difference in their fruit. The fruit that shows we are Jesus' disciples also assures us of our relationship with God. The Canons of Dort describe this fruit as faith in Christ, humble love for God, sorrow for sin, hunger and thirst for righteousness, wonder and praise at the depths of God's mercy, and more (see also 1 Corinthians 13; Galatians 5:22-23).

Bearing fruit, by the power of the Spirit working in us, we are assured of God's love and can bring him glory.

Jesus, empower us with your Spirit so that we will always bear fruit for God's glory. In your name we pray. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT—A HEART CHANGER

“I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”
—Ezekiel 36:27

Hundreds of years before Jesus’ birth, God’s prophet Ezekiel addressed the exiles of Israel with promises of change and improvement. The Lord would replace their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. The giving of God’s Spirit would move the people to live obediently, careful to do things God’s way. The gift of God’s Spirit would lead to repentance.

Four hundred years ago, church leaders gathered at the Synod of Dort to describe the Holy Spirit’s work in our conversion, from being dead in sin to being alive in Christ. Their words echo the passage we have read in Ezekiel today. “The regenerating Spirit,” they wrote, “. . . penetrates into the inmost being, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart. . . . God activates and strengthens the will so that, like a good tree, it may be enabled

to produce the fruits of good deeds.”

The Spirit of God helps people to discern and understand the truth of the good news of salvation. The closed, hardened heart of stone becomes a heart of flesh. And even though “in this life believers cannot fully understand the way this work occurs,” we can be assured that by God’s grace we do believe with our hearts and love our Savior.

Is God’s promise alive and well in your heart?

Lord, thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit, guiding us to follow your ways, to your praise and glory. In the name of Christ, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

GROWING TO KNOW OUR LORD

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.
—2 Peter 1:3

In this letter we hear the voice of Peter, restored to being “a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ.” (See April 18.) Peter states plainly that he has received a precious faith. And it’s not just his; others enjoy it too. He adds a greeting of “grace and peace” that comes only “through the knowledge of God and of Jesus.” This is the result of God’s Spirit at work, and Peter knows it.

The Canons of Dort explain that rebirth and restoration to life in Christ are entirely God’s work. Though our will may be spiritually dead and lost in sin, the Spirit of God “revives, heals, reforms, and—in a manner at once pleasing and powerful—bends it back.” As a result, we want to grow in obedience to God rather than resisting God’s will.

Noting that God “has given us everything we need for a godly life,” Peter urges his listeners to build on their faith with the spiritual fruit of goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual friendship, and love. Of course, growing in all these qualities is possible only by the work of God’s Spirit in us, and in these ways we will continue to grow in knowing our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our Lord wants us to know him and to grow to be like him fully. In what ways do you see the Spirit of God changing and regenerating you?

Spirit of God, thank you for working so powerfully in us to know Jesus. Help us to tell others all that you have done in our lives—to your glory! Amen.

WE CAN PERSEVERE

Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!
—Romans 7:25

In Romans 7, Paul talks about his own struggles with sin and the requirements of the law. But he is able to end on a joyful note. He exclaims, “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Paul’s struggle is our struggle. Who would even begin to claim that they did not fall short? Who could claim to go a whole day without stumbling into one sin or another?

With Paul we can say honestly, “I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”

The Canons of Dort assure us, “But God is faithful, mercifully strengthening” us in grace and “powerfully preserving [us] in it to the end.” And as Paul writes in Philippians 1:6, we can be

confident “that he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

God does not and will not fail. He has his world in his hands, and he has engraved us on his palms (Isaiah 49:16). This comforting assurance leads believers to shout, “Thanks be to God!”

Let’s make that claim today, in praise to our God, who has redeemed us and loves us with a love that will never die!

Author of salvation, we come with thanksgiving for the deliverance you have given us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. You are worthy of all praise, honor, and glory! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

TO BE FAITHFUL

God is faithful: he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.
—1 Corinthians 10:13

In our Bible reading for today, Paul gives examples from Israel's history to remind us to be faithful as God is faithful. These are grim warnings.

The people of Israel committed many sins, despite their privileged position as God's people. Does the church today need similar reminders? It certainly is easy for us to sin. Ask yourself, "How often do I act as if I don't have God's love in me?"

Paul wrote a strong letter to the Corinthian church. We know about church challenges and marriage struggles because of the people's failure to live in harmony (chap. 1, 3, 7). We learn about observing the Lord's Supper because it was misused (chap. 10, 11). Paul also deals with sexual sin (chap. 5, 6) and with problems that came up in worship (chap. 11, 14). But we also find inspiring teaching on spiritual gifts in the body of

Christ (chap. 12) and a beautiful picture of Christian love (chap. 13). Truly a pastoral letter!

The Canons of Dort echo the Bible's teaching. We know that we often fail. But through his Spirit, our forever faithful God reassures us that in his strength we will endure. We will persevere. He holds us safe.

Paul points out that we are not unique. Whatever might tempt us today has tempted people always. What's more, "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." And "when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it." Thanks be to God!

Faithful Father, thank you for your patience and love. Guide us to be faithful. In Christ we pray. Amen.

NEVER, NEVER!

"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand."
—John 10:28

Jesus had his challengers! In today's reading we find people who refuse to believe he is the Christ, their Messiah. And he teaches them: "My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me. . . . No one will snatch them out of my hand."

The Canons of Dort aim to assure us of this teaching too. "This teaching about the perseverance of true believers and saints, and about their assurance of it—a teaching which God has very richly revealed in the Word for the glory of his name and for the comfort of the godly, and which God impresses on the hearts of believers—is something which the flesh does not understand, Satan hates, the world ridicules, the ignorant and the hypocrites abuse, and the spirits of error attack." God's enemies will always be at odds with the truth of God's love and mercy for us.

The Canons go on to say that the church of Christ, "on the other hand, has always loved this teaching very tenderly and defended it steadfastly as a priceless treasure; and God, against whom no plan . . . and no strength can prevail, will ensure that the church will continue to do this. To this God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honor and glory forever. Amen."

We have the Messiah's promise. He will never lose us! Nothing and no one can snatch us from his hand. What assurance!

Lord Jesus, we praise you for holding us faithfully, now and forever! Help us to live faithfully for you each day, displaying your love to all. In your power, Amen.

A PASSIONATE PRAYER

"[Father,] my prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." —John 17:15

On the night he was arrested, Jesus prayed this prayer to his Father, interceding for his disciples and all believers. This prayer is filled with compassion, revealing Christ's mission for himself and his followers.

Does he ask that we may never face hardships? No, he asks that we may persevere. It's a prayer for unity among believers so that others will believe. It's a prayer of deep love, asking that all people may grow to believe in him.

Reflecting on this prayer of Jesus, we can see that as believers we have a mission—and we will accomplish it only by remaining in him who is the vine (John 15:5). The Bible's message is designed to draw us into relationship with our Creator, who has revealed himself in his Son, Jesus Christ, and by his Holy Spirit.

It is appropriate that we close this month of lessons with this closing prayer of the Canons of Dort: "May God's Son Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of God and gives gifts to humanity, sanctify us in the truth, lead to the truth those who err, silence the mouths of those who lay false accusations against sound teaching, and equip faithful ministers of God's Word with a spirit of wisdom and discretion, that all they say may be to the glory of God and the building up of their hearers. Amen."

Following Jesus' example, let's be faithful in prayer. May we love as God loves—and share his good news everywhere.

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, guide us in truth so that we may walk with you now and forever. Amen.

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