

**Altavista Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Preservation and Provisions”  
Mark 1:29-34  
Psalm 147:1-11**

**Sixth Sunday after Epiphany  
February 11, 2018**

**Mark 1:29-34**

And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. And the whole city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

**Psalm 147:1-11**

Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting. The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. The Lord lifts up the humble; he casts the wicked to the ground.

Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; make melody to our God on the lyre! He covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that cry. His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love.

**“Preservation and Provisions”**

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Two weeks ago we talked a little about the holiness of God. I mentioned that holiness is a central aspect to God and our central goal as redeemed sons and daughters. Today, we're going to continue in the vein of God's holiness by looking at two aspects of it. Our Psalm this morning is conveniently divisible into three sections. Verses one through six, verses seven through eleven, and verses twelve through twenty. That final section is a further exposition of the first two. Therefore, for today, we're going to look at the two aspects of God known as the Perseverance of the Saints and Natural Theology.

In verses two and three of our Psalm we hear, “The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.” Here, the Psalmist is praising God's eternal care and preservation of his children. God builds up. God gathers. God heals and binds. In the 1640s, when the Westminster Confession of Faith was being put together, those who gathered included the doctrine of Perseverance of the Saints, which is the final of the Five Points of Calvinism. While some may take a literal reading of the Psalmist's praise, the Reformed Christian chooses to look at this praise through the lens of God's holy and eternal decrees. This is the reason why the first section of chapter seventeen of the Westminster Confession reads “Those whom God has accepted in his Son [Jesus Christ] and has effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit can never completely or finally fall out of their state of grace.” We see this truth in our

Scripture lesson when God gathers the outcasts of Israel. Those of his children who were scattered hither and yon are brought back into his blessed presence. You cannot find a better definition of saintly preservation.

I need to say a word about the wording of this particular doctrine. There are those who criticize the Calvinist for allowing damnable behavior to run unchecked in the Church. And, truth be told, there are those who use this doctrine to say, “Once saved, always saved, therefore I can do whatever I want, I can continue in whatever licentious iniquity I desire because I am ultimately going to heaven.” That is an aberration of the doctrine of Perseverance. The reason why is based, like a lot of theology, in the semantics or language of the doctrine. We Reformed Christians do believe that a person’s election, that is their adoption as a son or daughter of God, is indeed eternal and cannot be revoked. In this very building, we have parents with adopted children. Would they reject or deny those children? Never! Then how can a Christian believe God could ever disown one of his redeemed sons or daughters? So we do believe that a person’s salvation is eternally decreed. So yes, once a person is saved by Christ, he or she cannot lose that salvation. But herein lies the distinction. While a person may not lose her salvation, she can, and for many of us we often do, fall for a time. The Confession states that a person “can never *completely or finally* fall out of her state of grace.” The Confession does not state that a person *will never fall*.

Falling is exactly what a lot of people did in the Bible. St. Peter, the rock on whom the church was built, the most dedicated of Jesus’ disciples, vehemently denied Jesus. Not once, not twice, but three times! He knew who Jesus was, but in order to save his own skin, he denied our Lord. That’s as big of a slip up as you can get. Now, for Peter, his fall was extremely temporary, for once he realized what he did, he ran out of that place with deepest remorse. Others took much longer to come to that realization. King David, for example, the chosen leader of Israel, committed adultery and murder. The King of Israel fell from God’s grace. He never lost God’s grace, but for a time, the Bible tells us God was very displeased with him. I don’t know about you, but for me, any amount of displeasure from God frightens me to the core. Sometime after his sinful acts God sent the Prophet Nathan, who used an illustration to condemn David. And at this, he sought forgiveness from God, wrote the Fifty-First Psalm, and was eventually restored into God’s favor. This is why the Psalmist praises that “The Lord lifts up the humble.” God’s people, God’s true children, those whom he has effectually called, will, when they slip and fall, accept a posture of humility, repent, and be restored. This is what it means for the saints to persevere. This endurance of the saints depends on God’s unchangeable love. For without his first loving us, we are unable to do anything.

The second aspect of God’s holiness that this Psalm proclaims is what is sometimes called Natural Theology. We read the Psalmist’s call for thanksgiving at the Lord’s daily and constant provisions. “He covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the beasts their food.” Nature is God’s first and most basic of witnesses. Even Jesus explains to the Pharisees that if his faithful were ever silenced, “then the very stones would cry out.”<sup>1</sup> Regarding our adoption through Christ, Paul says that even “the whole of creation has been groaning.”<sup>2</sup> When we look outside our windows, or survey a breathtaking landscape, or glimpse the glimmer of the stars, we are paying witness to God’s creative power.

Calvin was one who latched onto this truth and fleshed it out in his greatest work *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This tome of a work is divided into four books, the first of which is entitled “The Knowledge of God the Creator.” You see, for Calvin, the “final goal” of the Christian life is to know God and enjoy him forever.<sup>3</sup> And the most elemental way of experiencing God is through

his own creation. Calvin writes that upon God's "individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory," which are so clear and prominent that even those without theological training "cannot plead the excuse of ignorance."<sup>4</sup> Sometimes, Calvin has these very beautiful turns of phrase and I need to share one with you. He says, "You cannot in one glance survey this most vast and beautiful system of the universe, in its wide expanse, without being completely overwhelmed by the boundless force of its brightness." "This skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God."<sup>5</sup>

God's handiwork, God's craftsmanship, God's majesty is inscribed onto every atom, onto every organism, onto every created thing and being. And it is the Holy Spirit who moves within each person, as he or she gazes up at the stars, and reveals God's glory. Now, if we were still in that perfect relationship that Adam and Eve initially had, then we'd be able to see God clearly reflected in his creation and respond rightly to that knowledge. However, since we live in a fallen world and in a broken relationship, sin perverts our focus and blinds us to God's revelation in nature. Calvin elsewhere suggests that sin's prevalence is what causes men and women to seek after other gods.<sup>6</sup> The beauty and awe of nature instills within us a desire to worship nature's Creator, but because of sin, that worship is twisted away from the one true God. This is the reason why nature cannot be the final witness for God. Even nature is corrupted by sin, so we cannot rely on it as a perfect revelation. The only perfect revelation of God is in his Word and in the Word made flesh.

The Psalmist, proclaims that "the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love." The purpose of God's preservation of the saints and his provisions in nature are to move us to respect and hope in him. God wants to have a relationship with you. This is why he provides for your sanctification, why he illuminates before you the path of righteousness. God loves you and calls you by name to be his child forever and ever. We will celebrate this adoption later in the service as we partake in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The Eucharist takes from nature two basic elements, wheat and grapes, and through the working of each we are able to share in this holy meal through bread and cup, the body and blood of Christ. Communion is also a way for God's people to receive renewal and preservation. When we share in the bread and the cup, we are sharing in Jesus' grace and love, which fortifies our own faith and life in him. Bear that in mind as we join together at the Lord's Table.

Let us pray. Most Holy God and Creator of the universe, you provide for us a way to persevere, not only through adversity, but ultimately into blessed life with you. Help us as we walk the narrow journey Christ laid before us. We know that we will stumble and fall, that is our lot as sinners. But we also know that you are there to help lift us up, for you do not disown your children. Keep us from vain boasting in this promise, and instead move us to humility and service. As we worship you, we are reminded of your constant care and provisions that you bestow upon creation. As we awe and marvel at your handiwork, let us also be good and careful stewards of all that you give to us. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, we pray. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 19:40

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:22

<sup>3</sup> *Institutes* I.v.1

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Institutes* I.v.12