



Comfort for the New Year (1)

Exodus 19:1-6

1 Corinthians 6:18-20

1 Peter 2:9-10

Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 1

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Today is the first Lord's Day of 2018 and I thought we would have two New Year's sermons based on the biblical subjects that come before us in Q/A 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism. This is what the pastor did at the church we attended last Sunday, and I thought that it was a good idea. The idea is his. The sermons are mine.

Q/A 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism is a beautiful summary of the good news of the gospel. "Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I am not by own, but belong body and soul in life and in 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. Because I belong to him, Christ by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." Generations of Christians have treasured these words and thinking through them is an appropriate way to begin a new year.

We face a new year. We do not know what it will bring. We live with great uncertainty. It could be a great year. It could be a difficult year. It could be something in between. This Q/A of the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of a comfort that covers both life and death. This is a comfort that will sustain us come what may. The comfort that is rooted in our salvation in Jesus Christ is a reality in good times and hard times.

Reflecting on it will give us a biblical perspective as we enter a new year with all its possibilities and uncertainties.

The word “comfort” can be used in a number of different ways – not all of which are applicable here. The Catechism is not speaking about the kind of comfort you feel first minute after laying down in bed and the last minute before you get up. Those moments, for me, are the moments of great comfort. I lay down in bed and savor the comfort. The same with the last minute before getting up. The Catechism is not speaking about that kind of comfort. Neither is the Catechism speaking about what we mean when we use the word “comfortable” to refer to our financial situation. Someone who is not rich, or poor is sometimes said to be financially comfortable. These ways of speaking about comfort are not a great priority in the Bible and that is reflected in this answer of the Catechism.

I think we can best get at the kind of comfort the Catechism is speaking about here by considering the way the word “comfort” is used in the Bible. A text that comes close to speaking about the kind of comfort that the Catechism is speaking about is found in Psalm 23. Verse 4, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” Here the comfort has to do with God being our Shepherd as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Another key instance of the word “comfort” is found in Matthew 5:4 where Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.” Jesus here is speaking about mourning for sin and the comfort of forgiveness.

Comfort in the Bible has to do with positive feelings that Christians have or can have because of their relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We have comfort because our sins are forgiven. We have comfort because God is our Shepherd. We have comfort even in very painful situations because nothing can separate us from God’s love and he has promised to work everything out for our good. And the Catechism is following Scripture by pointing to these kind of biblical truths as our only comfort in life and in death.

We can get more insight into the comfort that the Catechism is speaking about by listing some of the “comfort-words” of Scripture, such as peace

and joy and hope. All of those are included in the biblical idea of comfort for Christians. The reality of salvation in Jesus Christ is something that leads to many positive feelings such as comfort and peace and joy and hope. This does not mean that all negative experiences and feelings disappear. We still suffer. We still sorrow. We still experience hard things. But we can find comfort and peace and joy and hope both in good times and in bad because of the wonderful things that continue to be true no matter what.

Now the Catechism refers to this comfort as our **only** comfort. It asks the question, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” It is not denying the reality of a comfortable chair or a comfortable house. It is rather referring to the only comfort that is good for both life and death. It is referring to the kind of comfort that can be experienced in both good times and bad. The comfort that comes from salvation in Christ is the only comfort that abides when “other helpers fail, and comforts flee.” The only comfort that the Catechism is speaking about is a no-matter-what comfort.

The question is “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” The first part of the answer is rather striking, “That I am not my own but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ.” I say that this is striking because it is the exact opposite of the answer of our culture. The way to comfort according to the majority of our society is to be as free as it is possible to be. We belong to no-one, but ourselves. The thought of belonging to God is anathema to many people. God does not own us. We are as independent as possible. It has now come to the point where we claim the right to define ourselves and define our own reality. Justice Kennedy of the US Supreme Court has written, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define our own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe and of the mystery of life.”

Now, as Christians, we agree with some of what the world says about freedom. We should have religious freedom from the state. Political freedom is a precious thing and consistent with biblical teaching. God has made us as responsible beings and in order for us to be the kind of people he created us to be we need to be free to make many decisions

without interference from other people. But the people of our society take this much further and declare themselves to be free from God. The Bible has a very different perspective here than the people of the world and indeed, than we all have by nature.

The Bible teaches that we all belong either to God or to the devil. In 1 John 3:8, we read, "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil." Later on, in verse 10 he contrasts the "children of God" and the "children of the devil." Jesus teaches that "everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34).

The Bible teaches that true freedom has to do with living as God designed us to live and that those who think that they are free from God are in fact slaves of sin and of Satan. According to biblical teaching then, those who declare themselves free to live as they please, are in fact slaves to their own passions and lusts and ultimately are slaves of Satan. And for such people, there is no comfort of the kind that the Bible and the Catechism are speaking about. There may be this-worldly comforts, but there is nothing like this "only comfort in life and in death." There is nothing of the comfort of being right with God and secure in his love.

So, the comfort and peace and joy and hope of which the Bible speaks are rooted in not being our own, but rather belonging to Jesus Christ. Christians belong to Jesus Christ. Christians belong to God. And this is at the heart of our comfort in life and in death. Because we belong to Jesus Christ we have comfort and peace and joy and hope.

Now the language that the Catechism uses is rooted in Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Paul writes, "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price." This is the language of redemption. The idea of redemption is being set free from slavery. In this case, Paul speaks of being redeemed by means of the payment of a price. The price is the death of Christ and by it believers are set free from slavery to sin and to Satan. The price, however, is not paid to Satan, but to God the Father. And those who are so redeemed become slaves of God. They are not their own. They belong to God. "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price." Paul actually uses the phrase "slaves of God" in Romans 6:22.

This is a reason for comfort. We are set free from the kind of freedom that the world thinks it has. We are set free from the freedom to decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. We are set free from the freedom to choose for ourselves how we are going to live. We are set free from the freedom of following our own hearts. We are set free from the freedom of deciding for ourselves the meaning and purpose of our lives. The reality that we embrace and confess is that we are not our own. We belong to Jesus Christ. We are his slaves. He is our master. Our will is subject to his will. He tells us how to live. He tells us the goals for our lives. He decides what is important and what is trivial. Our purpose in life is to serve him and do what pleases him.

That could not be further from our natural inclination and it could not be further from the spirit of our age. Our natural inclination is to live for ourselves and to live as we please and that is the way that most of the world lives. But that changes when we become Christians through faith and repentance. That changes when the Holy Spirit renews our hearts. We embrace our position as slaves of Jesus Christ. This is now our identity. This is our confession. We are not our own, but belong to Jesus Christ.

There are a number of other ways that this reality is expressed in the Bible. One of the ways that the Bible describes believers in God is as the people of God. This is rooted in the OT and is carried over into the NT. In Deuteronomy 14:2, God says to Israel, "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the people who are on the face of the earth." This referred to Israel in the OT. Those who believe in Jesus Christ are the continuation of OT Israel in the NT. We are the people of God. We have been chosen by God to be his treasured possession. Peter uses this language in 1 Peter 2 to refer to NT Christians. Verse 9, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession...." Verse 10, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people...." This is also a belonging-to-God idea. As Christians we are God's people and part of what that means is that we belong to God.

Then there is the idea of adoption. We belong to God because God adopts us as his children. 1 John 3:1 says, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called the children of God; and so we are." We belong to God because we are his children.

So, we face a new year, a new year of life, a new year of opportunities, but also a new year of uncertainty and potential for loss, sickness, and suffering. Here is a biblical truth to comfort and encourage us if we are followers of Jesus Christ. We are not our own. We belong to Jesus. We belong to God. The Catechism points to this truth as the heart of our only comfort in life and in death.

Just think of this idea of belonging to Jesus Christ and belonging to God the Father! We are slaves of Jesus Christ. We are chosen by God to be his treasured possession. We are adopted by God to be his beloved children. We belong. Just think of that idea of belonging.

It is a basic human need. It is painful not to belong. It is a problem in our society that many people are alone and belong to almost no one. Many people have few relationships and few places where they really belong. The individualism of our time contributes to that. You give up some of your independence by belonging to others. But belonging is important for our well-being. We need to be accepted by others. We need to be valued by others. We need to be significant to others. That is important on a human level.

But it is even more important as far as a relationship with God is concerned. There is something very precious about belonging to Jesus Christ and belonging to God the Father. When we belong to God, we matter to God. Jesus bought us with a price. God the Father chose us to be his treasured possession. He has adopted us into his own family. We are important to God. We are significant to God. We are loved by God. Because we belong to him in these different ways we know that we have value in his sight. And this is something that matters a great deal.

It is necessary for our true and comprehensive well-being. This is part of what it means to be made in the image of God. We have a fundamental need for a relationship with God and the idea of belonging is one of the ways that the Bible describes the relationship between God and his

people. Even if we have a wonderful sense of belonging to family and friends, we are made for more. This is a higher level of joy and satisfaction. Many people do not miss it because they are satisfied with their relationships with other people, but the Bible teaches that we are made for more. Jesus said he came to bring abundant life. John 10:10, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." There he was speaking about belonging to himself as sheep belong to a shepherd. Verse 14, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me...." The abundant life that Jesus speaks about comes from belonging to him – knowing him and being known by him.

So, we face a new year. There is a wonderful comfort if we are followers of Jesus. We belong to him. By belonging to him we belong to the Father. This belonging means that we matter to God. It means that we are related to God in profound ways – slaves of God, people belonging to God, children of God. Our purpose is given to us – as slaves we exist to please and serve God. As people belonging to him we are his treasured possession. As children of God, we are loved as a father loves his children. As we head into the future we are not alone. We are not unattached. We belong to the One, who matters more than anyone or anything in the world. And he treasures all those who belong to him.

Now the Catechism goes on to elaborate on this only comfort in life and in death We will look at the next sentence now, and the rest we will consider this afternoon. A significant and essential part of the only comfort in life and in death for Christians is that Jesus "has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood."

We all have feelings of guilt. I read an article lately by a guy named, Wilfred McClay which is called "The Strange Persistence of Guilt." It is a secular article. Here is his first paragraph. "Those of us living in the developed countries of the West find ourselves in the tightening grip of a paradox, one whose shape and character have so far largely eluded our understanding. It is the strange persistence of guilt as a psychological force in modern life. If anything, the word *persistence* understates the matter. Guilt has not merely lingered. It has grown, even metastasized, into an ever more powerful and pervasive element in the life of the contemporary West, even as the rich language formerly used

to define it has withered and faded from discourse, and the means of containing its effects, let alone obtaining relief from it, have become ever more elusive.”

McClay is talking about the modern West. He is talking about the world that is living without God. He is saying that feelings of guilt persist in a world that does not believe in God. He is analyzing guilt from a secular perspective and he speaks about the “strange persistence of guilt as a psychological force in modern life.” Guilt feelings remain even when people deny God and the morality that is rooted in him.

These feelings of guilt are not strange from a biblical perspective. Human beings are made in the image of God whether we believe in God or not. We have consciences that are calibrated to the law of God. Even if we deny God and his law, we cannot completely suppress our consciences, and so we feel guilt. We have broken God’s law. We do not live as we ought to live. We are not the kind of people that we know we should be. In Romans 2 Paul writes about the people who do not know God, “They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them....” Guilt. It is painful. Even if it is not acknowledged it is often there like a low-grade fever. There is inner disquiet. There is unrest. There is a sense that we are in the wrong.

But the biblical message is that there is relief from guilt through forgiveness from God. It begins by acknowledging God and his law. It begins by acknowledging that we have broken God’s law and are guilty before God. For those who confess their sins there is a way of forgiveness by which the guilt of sin is removed. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 2:1 says of Jesus, “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” The word “propitiation” means that Jesus satisfied the wrath of God against the sins of his people. Jesus died the death that we deserve to die because of our sins. Jesus exhausted the penalty that we deserve to pay.

And so, for believers, our guilt is gone. It is objectively gone. It is gone because its penalty has been paid. It is gone because God has declared

us to be not guilty. And that registers in our hearts as comfort and peace and joy. The reality of guilt is gone. And so, the feelings of guilt can also be gone if we rightly understand the good news. Romans 5:1 says, “[S]ince we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” That is, first of all, an objective peace. God no longer holds our sins against us. He is no longer angry with us. He forgives us because of what Jesus has done for us. But that will also register in our feelings if we really understand what it means. And this is part of the comfort that the Catechism is speaking about – our only comfort in life and in death. Jesus “has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood.” That mean that we can travel through the months and days of 2018 with consciences that are clear and with hearts that are at peace because our sins are forgiven and the favor of God is resting upon us.

One more thing for this morning. Another part of the only comfort in life and in death is that Jesus “has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.” Colossians 1:13 says of believers in Jesus, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son....” The domain of darkness is the domain of the evil one and it is a tyranny. Either way we are under a ruler. We are either subject to God or subject to Satan. The difference is that Satan is a tyrant and God is pure goodness and love. Satan seeks our destruction. God seeks our true and eternal good.

We must understand this about Satan. He is the leader of sinners. He is the god of this world. He tempts people to sin. He tempts people to rebel against God. He makes sin look good. He makes sinners think that they are free. But it is all a cruel lie. Listen to what Jesus says about Satan in John 8:44. He is speaking to the religious leaders of Israel. They were the leaders of opposition to Jesus. And Jesus said to them, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and he does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” Satan is a murderer because he leads people on the way of death. Those who follow him are his slaves and he is a tyrant.

One of the great comforts for followers of Jesus is that we are delivered from that. We are delivered from the domain of darkness. We are transferred to the kingdom of Christ. Part of the biblical comfort for believers is that we are set “free from the tyranny of the devil.”

So, we face a new year to continue our work on the most important project of all – to become more like Jesus – to grow in our love for God and our neighbor – to learn to enter more deeply into the abundant life of living not for ourselves, but for our Saviour Jesus Christ. We can embrace that project with hope because we have been set free from the tyranny of the devil. The great task of fighting against sin and striving for holiness is a turning away from the way of death and embracing the way of the abundant life of pleasing God.

That too is a comfort as we face a new year. We do so as slaves of God, but that slavery to God is the essence of freedom. We are a people who have been set free from tyranny of sin leading to death into the liberty of the sons of God. We have a wonderful task before us as we face a new year – to enter more fully into the freedom that Jesus has obtained for us. This task, this project awaits us as we consider the year that is to come – to grow in Christlikeness and this is the freedom that is ours because we have been set free from the tyranny of the devil.

So, as we enter 2018, this is part of the comfort that is ours as we consider what the future might bring. “That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me from the tyranny of the devil.”