



Comfort for the New Year (2)

Romans 8:1-17; 28
Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 1

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This is part-two of our consideration of Q/A 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism as a biblical perspective for us as we enter the New Year. This evening we will look at the second half of the Catechism's answer to the question, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" This morning we saw that the word comfort, as the Catechism uses it, reflects the biblical teaching about comfort and that has to do with spiritual comforts that are rooted in the relationship with God that Christians have as a result of what Jesus has done for us. This comfort is not a comfortable lifestyle, but rather the spiritual comfort of knowing that we are right with God and that we belong to God. This kind of comfort also includes other biblical words for positive inner feelings such as peace and joy and hope. So, what we are doing is reviewing a number of biblical truths that make it possible to face an uncertain future with comfort and with peace and with joy and with hope.

Having this perspective concerning the future is always a challenge because there is so much that is beyond our control. There are many things that can go wrong. There are the big things like wars and the possibility of our society descending into chaos because the conditions for peace and stability are gradually being eroded as our society moves further and further away from biblical principles. The economy is always as fragile as a house of cards. We live with the possibility of a nuclear war. There is the gradual weakening of religious freedom. And then there are the dangers that we all face every day. We or a loved one could come down with serious life-changing or life-threatening or life-taking illness. We could get in a serious accident. We could lose our job. There is no end to the things that could go wrong in our lives.

But in spite of all that, the Bible gives reasons for Christians to face the future with confidence and hope and with peaceful hearts. The next biblical reason that the Catechism gives for the comfort that sustains us in both life and death is that God, “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.” That is quite a sentence! Nothing can happen to us apart from the will of the God who is also our Father and he has promised that he will work everything together for our salvation. So, nothing can ultimately harm us. That does not mean that we will not suffer. But it does mean that God will work everything together for our salvation, which is for our ultimate good.

Now the words of this sentence reflect especially two passages of Scripture and the basic truth that is asserted is based on many more passages of Scripture. The first part of this sentence is almost a quote from Matthew 10:29-31 where Jesus says to his disciples, “²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.” And the second part of the sentence is almost a quote from Romans 8:28, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

So, a sparrow will not fall to the ground apart from the will of our Father. Our Father’s knowledge of us is so exhaustive that he knows how many hairs are on our head and nothing happens to one of them apart from his will. And Jesus’ application is, “Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

We must remember, of course, that this is only true for followers of Jesus. Everyone else should fear because apart from Christ they are under the wrath of God. God is willing to save those who turn to him, but for those who refuse him, there is no escape from his wrath. God knows the number of the hairs on your head too. You cannot hide. You cannot escape from the God who is committed to the destruction of all who continue to defy him. Jesus, just a few verses earlier, has said, “Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

The assurance that we do not have to fear applies only to those who belong to Jesus Christ and are trusting him and submitting to him. And for them that is a wonderful assurance. "Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

Now we have to understand what this means and what it does not mean. God promises that nothing will happen to us apart from his will. And he promises that he will work all things together for our good. The good that he is talking about is our ultimate good in the light of our relationship with him and in the light of the final judgment. He most emphatically does not mean that we will not suffer. Both of these passages that speak so comfortingly of how nothing can harm God's people are passages that deal with persecution. In Matthew 10:28, Jesus says to his disciples, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." Jesus is saying that the world will hate you and want to harm and even kill you. He has made it clear that his disciples can expect the hatred of the world and that they will suffer because of that hatred. Jesus is saying even though you will suffer you should not fear because that suffering is part of the will of your Father for you and that suffering will not ultimately harm you in the light of what matters most.

Romans 8:28 is also given in the context of suffering and persecution. In Romans 8:35, Paul asks the rhetorical question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger or sword?" Paul's point is that even though you might face tribulation or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword, - none of that will mean that you are separated from the love of Christ. And that is the comfort. The biblical comfort for God's people is emphatically not that God will order our lives in such a way that we will escape suffering.

The biblical teaching about the affect of belonging to God on our life has two sides to it. One the one hand, following the commands of God often leads to peace and prosperity because this is how God has designed life to work. If we have God first in our lives and try to please him that will often lead to a prosperous and happy life. If we work hard, and learn self control, and serve our families and others, and keep from unlawful sex and do not steal and so on, that will often result in prosperity and a

happy home life and physical comfort and well-being. That is one side of the biblical teaching about following God. But the other side is that we will not be spared all suffering. God does not promise us a life without suffering. The Bible speaks a lot about persecution for God's people. But it also teaches that Christians get sick and die. They lose loved ones. They may experience financial hardships. We do not escape the suffering that comes from living in a fallen world.

These verses that say that nothing happens to God's children without the will of their Father, and that God works everything together for our good, do not mean that we will be spared all suffering. Sometimes it seems that God's people suffer even more than the wicked, as the author of Psalm 73 experienced. Listen to what he said: Psalm 73:12–14, ¹²"Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. ¹³All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. ¹⁴For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning."

So, whatever these verses mean that speak about God working all things together for our good, they do not mean that we can face the future with the assurance that everything will be easy for us and that we will not suffer. We could lose loved ones. We could experience financial ruin. We could get in a terrible accident. All kinds of bad things could happen to us and the Bible no-where promises that belonging to God will spare us from these things. As I already said, following God will spare us some of the painful results of sin. There are blessings associated with a God-honoring lifestyle. But, God's care for us does not mean that we will not face some of the different hardships and losses that are part of life in a creation that the Bible says is in "bondage to corruption" and is therefore groaning (Romans 8:20-22). Sometimes we groan along with it.

The Catechism gives the biblical perspective when it says that "all things must work together for my salvation." God works all things together for our ultimate good. And our ultimate good is not a life of ease and this-worldly comfort. Our ultimate good is being right with God and growth in holiness and godliness. Our ultimate good has to do with growing in the knowledge of God and in faith and love and submission to God. Our

ultimate good has to do with learning not to be overly attached to the comforts and pleasures of this life and learning to enjoy the greater and deeper pleasures of loving God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength. When the Catechism says that God is working all things together for our salvation, it is talking about God working all things together for our spiritual and eternal well-being.

Hebrews 12 has a passage that makes this point very clearly. It is about discipline, and it says that God disciplines his people like a faithful, loving father disciplines his children. One of the worst things that a father can do for his children is to give them everything that they want. God the Father does not do that because doing that would destroy us. Hebrews 12:10 says that God “disciplines us for our good.” That is the good that Paul is talking about when he says that God works everything together for our good. It is not the good of this-worldly ease and comfort. It is the good of “sharing in God’s holiness” according to Hebrews 12:10. It is the good of being trained in righteousness, according to Hebrews 12:11.

Now this does not mean that God does not often bless us with things that we enjoy. There are many things about life that are enjoyable and they all come from God. And it is right for us to hope for more of the same and to look to God to continue to give us pleasant lives and to ask for and to work towards things that we would like to have in our lives. So, we can look to the coming year and hope that we will meet our goals and that we will obtain some of the things that we are hoping for. And certainly, it is right and good that we ask God to give us success in our endeavors.

But we cannot count on that because God does not promise that kind of success. He may and often does give it because he is a generous God, but his promises are that he will work all things together for our salvation – our ultimate spiritual good – our good in the light of eternity.

What this means is that we will need to have our priorities straight before we can really face the future with comfort and peace and joy and hope. We need to align our priorities with God’s priorities. We need to trust that whatever God sends our way, be it suffering or pleasant things, it will be the best for us – it will be for our good.

Comfort then, when we are talking about comfort as the Bible and the Catechism speak of it, is rooted in trust in God and submission to God. We can face the future with peace in our hearts and hope for the future if we are willing to trust that God knows what is best for us and if we are willing to submit to his will for us. We can only do that if we have learned to align our priorities with God's priorities and God's priorities for his people always have to do with spiritual growth. His goal for us is to become more like Christ. His goal for us is that we learn to have our treasure in heaven rather than having our treasure on earth. His priority for us is that we will become more like the man in Jesus' parable who sold all that he had in order to obtain the pearl of great value. His priority for us is that we learn to seek first the kingdom of God.

The great comfort in life and in death is that no matter what we may have to suffer, we will still have what is most precious and most valuable – the love of Christ and the promise he is committed to our truest and ultimate good.

So, we look to the future. Who knows what is going to happen? Where is our most significant comfort? It is in this wonderful truth that God "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."

But there is more in this wonderful summary of the reasons for the great comfort that is ours as Christians. The Catechism goes on to say, "Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit assures me of eternal life...."

This is necessary, isn't it, in order to have a comfort that gives us peace and confidence in both life and death. One of the greatest discomforts that we face is the reality of death. Life is precious. Death is certain. Our lives will end. We will lose everything that must remain behind. We can take none of our stuff. Our relationships with our loved ones will come to an end as far as this earthly existence is concerned. We live in the valley of the shadow of death. The reality of our coming death is a cause for unease and disquiet. But the comfort for the people of God is that they have eternal life.

The life that they have in Christ is a life that will survive the grave. It is the life of the age to come. And so, God's people have a future beyond death which is the culmination of salvation and which will be the ultimate in joy and well-being. What God has in store for his people is a life with all the results of sin removed – so a life of consummate joy and satisfaction and delight and blessedness. Paul writes in Romans 8:18, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Isaiah describes it in Old Testament language in Isaiah 35:10, “And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

The Catechism says, “Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life.” What a wonderful thought that is! In all the struggles and uncertainties of life; in all the questions that arise because of our remaining sin, Christ wants his people to be assured of eternal life. He sends his Holy Spirit into the hearts of his people and one of the things that he does is assure us of eternal life. That is a wonderful part of the only comfort in life and in death.

Listen to this point directly from the Word of God. Romans 8:15–16. Paul is speaking to Christians. ¹⁵“For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...” Christians receive the Spirit of adoption. The Holy Spirit is also the Spirit of adoption. And he works in us to give us the confidence that God is our Father. He bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. That does not mean that we never have doubts. It does not mean that we never have questions. But it does mean that through prayer and through meditating on God's promises and through living the life that God calls us to live and through faith, we can live with a confidence given by the Holy Spirit that we are already now partakers of eternal life and that we will one day enter into its fullness.

Jesus also shows us his desire for his people to have assurance of eternal life in the teaching that he gives about how we can receive eternal life.

Consider these words from John 6:40. Jesus is speaking, and he says, “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” By these words, Jesus seeks to assure his people that they have received eternal life through believing in him and he seeks to convince those who are not yet his followers that they can live with the confidence in eternal life through believing in him. So, the Catechism is reflecting the teaching of the Bible when it says encourages believers to say, “Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life....”

What a comfort that is! If we are trusting in Jesus, we can walk through 2018 assured by Jesus, through his Spirit that we will live forever with God in that glorious place that God has prepared for his people. The more real that that is to us, the more we will experience comfort and peace and joy and hope as we face our future here on earth because we know that, wonderful as life on earth can be, our future beyond this life will be so much better. A vivid hope for the future gives us a wonderful comfort in the present as we live with the spirit of anticipation for the glorious future that God has in store for us. “Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit assures me of eternal life.” That is comfort as we head into the future.

Finally, the only comfort in life and in death includes this wonderful truth that “Christ, by his Holy Spirit ... makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.” For Christians this is part of our comfort as we contemplate entering a new year. We have comfort and peace and joy and hope because Jesus Christ has given us his Spirit and he gives us hearts that are “wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.” We can enter the new year with comfort and peace and joy and hope because we have received the Holy Spirit who makes it possible for us to live lives that are worth living, lives that are lived for Jesus.

You see part of what we receive when we are saved is the Holy Spirit to live within us and to change us from the inside out so that we gradually come to desire nothing more than to live not for ourselves, but for

Jesus. This is very exciting because living for Jesus is the way we were meant to live, and it is the way of great joy and satisfaction.

Some of the verses that we read in the first part of Romans 8 show how the Holy Spirit makes us willing to live for Jesus. Paul in these verses makes a contrast between living according to the flesh or living according to the Spirit. The term “flesh” refers to our fallen sinful nature and the word “Spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit. Listen to what Paul writes in verses 5-6. “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”

When we are unsaved, we set our minds on the things of the flesh. That means that we set our minds on the kinds of things that our sinful fallen nature enjoys – ourselves, sinful pleasures, life without God and the like. That, Paul is saying, is the way of death. But when we receive the Holy Spirit we are changed so that we set our minds on the things of the Spirit – that is, things like pleasing God, becoming more like Jesus, living holy and virtuous lives, living for Jesus. And Paul is saying that to “set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”

Jesus came and lived and died and rose again so that his people might experience this inner change through the work of the Holy Spirit in them. 2 Corinthians 5:15 says that Jesus, “died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” This is the good life according to the Bible. It is the way of life and peace. It is the way of joy and flourishing. It is so much better to live for Jesus than to live for ourselves. It is so much better to serve others in love than to serve ourselves in selfishness. It is so much better to be striving to grow in holiness rather than to be ruled by sinful passions. It is so much better to serve the mission of the church than to be greedy and self-centered. It is so much better to control our sinful passions than to give into them. It is so much better to speak the truth in love than to tear others down by our words.

So, this truth, that Jesus by his Holy Spirit makes us “wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for [Jesus],” is very exciting as it means that we head into a new year equipped by the Holy Spirit to live a

life that is pleasing to God – a life for Jesus – a life of nurturing our true humanity – a life of that is truly good and that really matters. It means that we do not have to live a life that is the waste of a life, that is pointless and empty, that is useless and destructive. Because Jesus by his Spirit makes us “wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him,” we can look to 2018 with hope and expectation looking forward to what we may be able to accomplish for Jesus because he has given us his Spirit to enable us to do what we would never be able to do on our own.

It is quite something to be a Christian. We can face the future with comfort, peace, joy and hope because Jesus “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.”

That is what we confess as Christians and it makes it possible for us to head into an uncertain future with comfort, peace, joy, and hope.