

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 1

Q. 1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A. That I belong--body and soul, in life and in death--not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Q. 2. How many things must you know that you may live and die in the blessedness of this comfort?

A. Three. First, the greatness of my sin and wretchedness. Second, how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences. Third, what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption.

“It’s not about you.” This is one of the most powerful statements made in Rick Warren’s best seller, “The Purpose Driven Life.” It is a humbling reminder that my life is not about me, not about what I can get, but rather who God is and how I can purposefully live for him in praise and adoration.

Rick Warren wasn’t the first to come up with this idea. In fact, we see it here in the catechism – I belong, body and soul, not to myself but to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ. I am God’s. He has paid for my sins, he has ransomed me from death, and he continues to protect and preserve me according to his great plan for my life. This is a tremendous comfort and hope.

In order for this truth to really sink in, though, there are three things I must accept: that I am a sinner in need of salvation, that I have been saved by grace by faith in Jesus Christ, and that I owe God a life of gratitude and praise. It’s not about me. It’s all about God and what he has done. I only hope I can, in some way, adequately express my thanks.

Prayer

Gracious Heavenly Father, I thank you that I am not on my own in life, that I am not my own master, but that I belong to you. When I was dead in my sinfulness, you purchased me with the blood of Christ, you have set me free for eternal life, and you have given me your promised Holy Spirit that I might grow in the likeness of your Son.

Oh, that I may meditate on your goodness and in my heart be truly thankful for all your grace and mercy all the days of my life.

In Jesus Name. Amen.

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LORD'S DAY 2

Q. 3. Where do you learn of your sin and its wretched consequences?

A. From the Law of God.

Q. 4. What does the Law of God require of us?

A. Jesus Christ teaches this in a summary in Matthew 22:37-40: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." (Cf. Luke 10:27.)

Q. 5. Can you keep all this perfectly?

A. No, for by nature I am prone to hate God and my neighbor.

When you closely examine the human condition, there are really only two conclusions you can reach. The first is that humanity is generally good, that all people mean well, and there is hope for humanity to continually improve upon itself. In this view, evil is a tragic reminder of our lesser being, something we can overcome by enlightened thinking and a more tolerant society.

The other view, which reflects the revelation of Scripture, is that humanity is fallen and broken, sinful in the eyes of God. Quoting the Psalms, Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God." "For all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God."

We have been given a high calling, to love the Lord completely, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. While we all may mean well, we all know that we have fallen short of this calling. The catechism begins here, not to burden us with guilt, but to show us first of our need for salvation, and where that salvation is found.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, I know that I have fallen short of your calling; I want to love you, but I am prone to hate you and my neighbor. Forgive me from my sin in Jesus Christ, that I may be set free to love and serve you. Amen

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LORD'S DAY 3

Q. 6. Did God create man evil and perverse like this?

A. No. On the contrary, God created man good and in his image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, love him with his whole heart, and live with him in eternal blessedness, praising and glorifying him.

Q. 7. Where, then, does this corruption of human nature come from?

A. From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden; whereby our human life is so poisoned that we are all conceived and born in the state of sin.

Q. 8. But are we so perverted that we are altogether unable to do good and prone to do evil?

A. Yes, unless we are born again through the Spirit of God.

Is God to blame for the problem of sin in the world today? Couldn't God have prevented all the sin and evil in the world by just not putting the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden in the first place?

God created us so that we might know Him, love Him, and live with Him. But we were not pre-programmed to do so; we were given a choice. God wants us to come to Him freely, to choose to know Him, love Him, and glorify Him. With the choice comes the tremendous potential for good and evil.

If we are honest with ourselves, each of us knows that, like Adam and Eve, we have placed ourselves in the center of the garden; we have put ourselves in the place of God. Instead of trusting in God to be our source of Knowledge of Good and Evil, we have taken this role upon ourselves. We have, as Satan promised, become like God, in that we are now the center of our universe. But since we are not God, we cannot maintain this charade; we cannot live apart from the source of life so we are cursed with death.

The Reformed Faith is not pessimistic about the state of humanity, neither is it optimistic. It is realistic. We believe that humanity is fallen and in desperate need of a savior. We are so perverted that we are altogether unable to do good and prone to do evil, unless we are born again through the Spirit of God. "Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom 7:24-25)

Prayer

Father God, in the light of your Word, I know who I really am. I am a sinner, broken, in need of your forgiveness and healing. God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner, and grant me peace.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

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LORD'S DAY 4

Q. 9. Is not God unjust in requiring of man in his Law what he cannot do?

A. No, for God so created man that he could do it. But man, upon the instigation of the devil, by deliberate disobedience, has cheated himself and all his descendants out of these gifts.

Q. 10. Will God let man get by with such disobedience and defection?

A. Certainly not, for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven, both against our inborn sinfulness and our actual sins, and he will punish them according to his righteous judgment in time and in eternity, as he has declared: "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, and do them."

Q. 11. But is not God also merciful?

A. God is indeed merciful and gracious, but he is also righteous. It is his righteousness which requires that sin committed against the supreme majesty of God be punished with extreme, that is, with eternal punishment of body and soul.

If God knew it was impossible for us to perfectly uphold His law, isn't it unfair and even cruel of God to expect complete obedience from us?

The truth is, we were created good and able to uphold and fulfill God's righteous law. Indeed, when God created man and woman, he looked and said, "It is good," a pronouncement that was not given easily.

But through willful disobedience, we have been cheated, in fact we cheat ourselves, out of this pristine condition; this right relationship with God. We therefore experience the wrath and judgment of God, the just reward for our sinfulness and our sins.

Keep in mind, however, that the wrath of God is not separated from the mercy and love of God. It is precisely because God is loving and merciful that we experience his wrath. Were God unloving and unmerciful, He would have left us alone in our sins; he never would have spoken a harsh word of correction; He never would have called us to something better.

Prayer

Almighty God, how I have fallen short of your will for my life, that I live in faith and obedience before you. Your word of rebuke and correction are hard to hear, but they remind me of your continued love and mercy. Strengthen me, by your Holy Spirit, to walk in your way of Holiness for your name's sake.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

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LORD'S DAY 5

Q. 12. Since, then, by the righteous judgment of God we have deserved temporal and eternal punishment, how may we escape this punishment, come again to grace, and be reconciled to God?

A. God wills that his righteousness be satisfied; therefore, payment in full must be made to his righteousness, either by ourselves or by another.

Q. 13. Can we make this payment ourselves?

A. By no means. On the contrary, we increase our debt each day.

Q. 14. Can any mere creature make the payment for us?

A. No one. First of all, God does not want to punish any other creature for man's debt. Moreover, no mere creature can bear the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and redeem others from it.

Q. 15. Then what kind of mediator and redeemer must we seek?

A. One who is a true and righteous man and yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is at the same time true God.

There once was a group of believers who were meeting by a river when one of their group fell into the water. It was obvious that the man couldn't swim, as he thrashed about wildly. One of the believers was a strong swimmer and was called on to rescue the drowning man. Though he was able to save him, he just watched until the wild struggles subsided. Then he dove into the water and pulled the man to safety.

When the rescue was over, the rescuer explained his slowness to act. "If I had jumped in immediately, he would have been strong enough to drown us both. Only by waiting until he was too exhausted to try to save himself, could I save him."

It seems to be all too easy for us to be like that drowning man. Our self efforts can actually prevent us from being saved! Unfortunately some people must reach the point of being too exhausted to continue trying to save themselves (by dealing with their own sin) before they become willing to trust in the Savior and accept his gift of salvation.

We cannot save ourselves; the water is too deep, the debt is too great. We need a savior who knows the danger (our sin), but is also stronger than the waves. We need Jesus!

Prayer

Father God, we know our debt is too great to repay. We thank you that in Christ, you have removed our sin as far as the east is from the west. Help us to trust and rely in him alone for our salvation.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

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LORD'S DAY 6

Q. 16. Why must he be a true and righteous man?

A. Because God's righteousness requires that man who has sinned should make reparation for sin, but the man who is himself a sinner cannot pay for others.

Q. 17. Why must he at the same time be true God?

A. So that by the power of his divinity he might bear as a man the burden of God's wrath, and recover for us and restore to us righteousness and life.

Q. 18. Who is this mediator who is at the same time true God and a true and perfectly righteous man?

A. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is freely given to us for complete redemption and righteousness.

Q. 19. Whence do you know this?

A. From the holy gospel, which God himself revealed in the beginning in the Garden of Eden, afterward proclaimed through the holy patriarchs and prophets and foreshadowed through the sacrifices and other rites of the Old Covenant, and finally fulfilled through his own well-beloved Son.

These questions today bring us to the heart of our Christian Faith. If you want to know how Christianity is different from all the other religions in the world, look no further. The Apostle Paul wrote, "God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Cor 5:19). In no other religion will you find God breaking the barrier between the transcendent and the immanent. Only in Christ will you find God bearing our burden of sin and restoring us to righteousness and life. Indeed, Christ alone is "our righteousness, our holiness, our redemption" (1 Cor 1:30).

The entire testimony of Scripture makes this known. From Genesis to Revelation we are promised a deliverer, and we find our deliverer in Christ. The law demonstrated our need, the prophets told us what to expect, the Temple sacrifice foreshadowed how Christ would complete our salvation.

The truth remains, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Prayer

Heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus Christ we come to you, we praise you, and we give you thanks for our righteousness, our holiness, our redemption which is a gift from Christ's own hand. We thank you that there is no other name but Jesus, not even our own, by which we are saved. It is in his name we pray. Amen.

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LORD'S DAY 7

Q. 20. Will all men, then, be saved through Christ as they became lost through Adam?

A. No. Only those who, by true faith, are incorporated into him and accept all his benefits.

Q. 21. What is true faith?

A. It is not only a certain knowledge by which I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word, but also a wholehearted trust which the Holy Spirit creates in me through the gospel, that, not only to others, but to me also God has given the forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, out of sheer grace solely for the sake of Christ's saving work.

Q. 22. What, then, must a Christian believe?

A. All that is promised us in the gospel, a summary of which is taught us in the articles of the Apostles' Creed, our universally acknowledged confession of faith.

Q. 23. What are these articles?

A. I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ, his only-begotten Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.

There is an exclusivity to Christianity. Scripture does teach, "God desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). But the very next sentence goes on to say, "there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5-6). Jesus himself said, "God so loved the world he gave his only begotten, so that whoever believed ... shall have everlasting life." To be saved, we must have a saving knowledge, that is, a saving relationship, with Christ.

Rich Mullins sings of the Creed, "I believe what I believe is what makes me who I am. I did not make it, it is making me, it is the very truth of God, not the invention of any man." Simply and succinctly the creed sums up what we need to know. Let it lead and guide you as you study God's word and grow in your relationship with Christ the Lord.

Prayer

Thank you, Father, for your salvation in Christ alone, and for ancient faith and creeds which show us your truth. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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LORD'S DAY 8

Q. 24. How are these articles divided?

A. Into three parts: The first concerns God the Father and our creation; the second, God the Son and our redemption; and the third, God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification.

Q. 25. Since there is only one Divine Being, why do you speak of three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

A. Because God has thus revealed himself in his Word, that these three distinct persons are the one, true, eternal God.

One of the struggles we have in our understanding of who God is comes when we try to talk about the Trinity. We confess that we believe in One God, but we also say that we believe in the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. How does this work?

R.C. Sproul writes, “The term Trinity describes a relationship not of three gods, but of one God who is three persons.” The doctrine of the Trinity is how we speak about the unity of God who has revealed Himself in three distinct yet communal ways.

Sproul continues,

There is a distinction in the work done by each member of the Trinity. The work of salvation is in one sense common to all three persons of the Trinity. Yet in the manner of activity, there are differing operations assumed by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father initiates creation and redemption; the Son redeems the creation; and the Holy Spirit regenerates and sanctifies, applying redemption to believers... The doctrine of the Trinity does not fully explain the mysterious character of God. Rather, it sets the boundaries outside of which we must not step. It defines the limits of our finite reflection. It demands that we be faithful to the biblical revelation that in one sense God is one and in a different sense He is three.¹

Prayer

Almighty God, we confess that we do not always understand who you are or how you work within us. We believe you are One God, yet we know you as Father, Son, and Spirit. While you remain a deep mystery to us, may we rest in the knowledge that you, O God, have created us, that you sent your Son to redeem us, and that you pour out your Spirit of Holiness to make us new. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Sproul, R.C. Essential Truths of the Christian Faith. (Tyndale House Pub: Wheaton, 1992) pg 35.

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LORD'S DAY 9

Q. 26. What do you believe when you say: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth"?

A. That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth with all that is in them, who also upholds and governs them by his eternal counsel and providence, is for the sake of Christ his Son my God and my Father. I trust in him so completely that I have no doubt that he will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul. Moreover, whatever evil he sends upon me in this troubled life he will turn to my good, for he is able to do it, being almighty God, and is determined to do it, being a faithful Father.

Today's lesson reminds us of something we may frequently overlook. We readily state that we believe that God is Creator; that is, He created all that is, all that was, and all that will ever come to be. We also believe that through Christ we are invited into a relationship with this same God of the universe as "Our Heavenly Father." But how often do we connect these beliefs; confessing that the God who created the universe is my heavenly Father, that He will provide everything I need to live from day to day, and He will use all of his power to turn the evil I now face into good. All things, be they from our perspective good or bad, come from the hand of God in order to draw us into a deeper relationship with Him, to teach us that we can trust Him, and to demonstrate for us that God is ultimately good. In Romans 8:28 the Spirit teaches "that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose." What a blessing to know that he is able to do it, because He is the almighty God, and He is determined, because He is a faithful Father.

Prayer

Almighty and Faithful God, remind me today that you are not only the Great God of all Creation, you are also my Heavenly Father. Teach me in all that I experience, in all that comes my way, that I can trust in you to provide, to turn evil to good, and to be my hope in this troubled world. You are God, you are Almighty, you are Determined, and you are Faithful. In the name of Christ Jesus, I praise you. Amen.

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LORD'S DAY 10

Q. 27. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. The almighty and ever-present power of God whereby he still upholds, as it were by his own hand, heaven and earth together with all creatures, and rules in such a way that leaves and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and unfruitful years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, and everything else, come to us not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

Q. 28. What advantage comes from acknowledging God's creation and providence?

A. We learn that we are to be patient in adversity, grateful in the midst of blessing, and to trust our faithful God and Father for the future, assured that no creature shall separate us from his love, since all creatures are so completely in his hand that without his will they cannot even move.

Have you ever noticed that when the weather is nice, we attribute this to “mother nature,” but if a tragedy occurs, it is an “act of God?” If we believe in the providence of God, then we must believe that everything comes from the hand of our heavenly Father. The storm that knocked out power for a week, the check that came in the mail that you did not expect; are not these both from the hand of God? God has a purpose for all of creation, and He continues to get involved in His creation, directing all things to their appointed ends.

Because we believe that God is working in and through everything that we face, our lives are to be marked by patience in the midst of adversity, gratitude in the midst of blessing, and trust in God for we are in his hands. Even when beset by that which is seemingly evil, we know that God is able to overcome, that His will will be done. The providence of God teaches us that we are never at the mercy of blind forces (nature, fortune, luck, fate), but that we are always in the hands of our loving, merciful, heavenly Father. Each event comes as a new summons to trust, obey and rejoice, with the sure knowledge that everything that happens to us and through us is for our eternal good.

Prayer

Providential God, we know you are creator of all that is, and all that ever will be. Teach us to trust you in all things, not to worry about what the future may hold. Teach us to live patiently in the midst of adversity, to be grateful as we receive your blessings, and to trust in your faithful and never-ending love.

In Christ's name. Amen.

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LORD'S DAY 11

Q. 29. Why is the Son of God called JESUS, which means SAVIOR?

A. Because he saves us from our sins, and because salvation is to be sought or found in no other.

Q. 30. Do those who seek their salvation and well-being from saints, by their own efforts, or by other means really believe in the only Savior Jesus?

A. No. Rather, by such actions they deny Jesus, the only Savior and Redeemer, even though they boast of belonging to him. It therefore follows that either Jesus is not a perfect Savior, or those who receive this Savior with true faith must possess in him all that is necessary for their salvation.

God could have saved us in any way that He could imagine. But God chose to save us exclusively in Christ. Therefore, “salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to me by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Jesus himself taught that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, that no one may come to the Father except through Him (John 14:6).

Any means that we might use to try to find salvation and peace with God outside of the grace of Christ will actually have the opposite affect. In fact, all that we do to come to God apart from Christ works against us. In Philippians 3, Paul recounts how he had completely fulfilled the law, how he had attained perfect righteousness in the eyes of man. Yet after encountering Christ, he considered everything he had done before as a loss, a setback, as rubbish “compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord”.

If you are holding on to some ritual, some method, some sense of duty to assure you of your salvation, you are denying the reality and the power of Christ in your life. If it is Jesus plus something else, then, for you, Jesus must not be enough. The reality is, Jesus is all we need; there is no other name, no other work, no other sacrifice, no other way except through him.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

I thank you that you have given me a savior, my Lord Jesus Christ, who is everything I need to find peace in and with you. By your Holy Spirit, wean me from all that would distract me from Christ, and teach me to trust in Him alone for my salvation.

To your praise and glory. Amen.

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LORD'S DAY 12

Q. 31. Why is he called CHRIST, that is, the ANOINTED ONE?

A. Because he is ordained by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, fully revealing to us the secret purpose and will of God concerning our redemption; to be our only High Priest, having redeemed us by the one sacrifice of his body and ever interceding for us with the Father; and to be our eternal King, governing us by his Word and Spirit, and defending and sustaining us in the redemption he has won for us.

Q. 32. But why are you called a Christian?

A. Because through faith I share in Christ and thus in his anointing, so that I may confess his name, offer myself a living sacrifice of gratitude to him, and fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life and hereafter rule with him in eternity over all creatures.

We believe that Jesus is the Christ, a title that, though widely used, may be little understood today. In Greek, the title “Christ” is the same word as the Hebrew “Messiah,” both of which mean “anointed one.” So what does it mean to be anointed?

Throughout the Old Testament, anointing with oil symbolized God’s selection of a person to a particular office; either prophet, priest, or king. Over time, and because of the failures of man, the people came to expect a messiah who would come from God Himself: a true King and Deliverer; a true High Priest who would atone for their sins and intercede for the people; and a true Prophet who would reveal the will of God.

We know Jesus is the Christ, the true Prophet, Priest, and King who was sent and anointed by God Himself. He has shown us the will of the Father concerning our salvation, we have been purchased by the sacrifice of His blood for our sins, and He defends and sustains us as our eternal King.

As a follower of the Christ, which is the definition of “Christian,” I share in the benefits of His anointing. Because He is Prophet, I know the purpose and will of God for my life. Because He is Priest, I know that my sins are forgiven and that He prays for me. Because He is King, I know I am free and secure, and I may live freely for Him.

Prayer

Almighty God, thank you for sending your Son and for anointing Him as Prophet, Priest, and King; satisfying in Him my every need and making my salvation secure. May I be known as a follower of your anointed one in all that I say and do.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

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LORD'S DAY 13

Q. 33. Why is he called GOD'S ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON, since we also are God's children?

A. Because Christ alone is God's own eternal Son, whereas we are accepted for his sake as children of God by grace.

Q. 34. Why do you call him OUR LORD?

A. Because, not with gold or silver but at the cost of his blood, he has redeemed us body and soul from sin and all the dominion of the devil, and has bought us for his very own.

When we say Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God, this raises the question, "Am I not also a son, or daughter, of God as well?" "What is my relationship with God?" "Why should I call Jesus my Lord?"

Jesus is God's only begotten; that is, the only one to come directly from God. But because He came from God, He made it possible that we might become God's children. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the power to become the children of God" (John 1:1,12). This is why it is crucial we believe Jesus is the only-begotten Son of God.

We call Jesus our Lord because, as the one who was begotten from the Father He came to lead us to the Father. He taught us we must be born again, born from above, if we are to see the Father (John 3:3). He gave His life for us, setting us free from sin and the tyranny of the devil, purchasing us with His own blood, and, through His grace, He has set us apart as the adopted children of God.

Therefore, He is the Only-begotten of God so that we might also be the children of God. He is Lord, that we might live in freedom from sin and death, that we might live for Him. The Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Cor 6:19-20).

Prayer

(from Ephesians 1:3-6)

Almighty God, we praise you, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for you have blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For you chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in your sight. In love you predestined us to be adopted as your sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with your pleasure and will, to the praise of your glorious grace, which you have freely given us in the One whom you love. In Jesus Name. Amen.

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LORD'S DAY 14

Q. 35. What is the meaning of: "Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary"?

A. That the eternal Son of God, who is and remains true and eternal God, took upon himself our true manhood from the flesh and blood of the Virgin Mary through the action of the Holy Spirit, so that he might also be the true seed of David, like his fellow men in all things, except for sin.

Q. 36. What benefit do you receive from the holy conception and birth of Christ?

A. That he is our Mediator, and that, in God's sight, he covers over with his innocence and perfect holiness the sinfulness in which I have been conceived.

Last week's Heidelberg lesson accented the Divinity of Christ. He is the "Only Begotten of the Father," that is, He is truly God because He is from God. This week's lesson focuses on the humanity of Christ.

The Divinity and Humanity of Christ, in union, is a theological concept that is hard to understand but essential to believe. He is both God and Man.

Why is this essential? John Calvin wrote, "since our sins, like a cloud cast between us and Him, had completely separated us from the Kingdom of Heaven, no man, unless he belonged to God, could serve as an intermediary to restore peace." And so we believe as the catechism teaches, that the Son, while remaining truly God, took upon himself our nature of flesh and blood so that he might cover my sinfulness. The Apostle Paul wrote, "For just as through the disobedience of one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Rom 5:19).

Calvin adds, "[Christ's] task was so to restore us to God's grace as to make of the children of men, children of God; of the heirs of Hell, heirs of the Heavenly Kingdom." St. Athanasius put it another way, "He became what we are that he might make us what he is."

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son, who was completely God and completely man. Even though this continues to be a mystery to me, help me to know that because He was like me, I can become like him. Thank you for covering my sinfulness with His righteousness, my disobedience with his obedience, my brokenness with his wholeness. May I live each day to your glory in Christ Jesus my Lord. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 15

Q. 37. What do you understand by the word "suffered"?

A. That throughout his life on earth, but especially at the end of it, he bore in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race, so that by his suffering, as the only expiatory sacrifice, he might redeem our body and soul from everlasting damnation, and might obtain for us God's grace, righteousness, and eternal life.

Q. 38. Why did he suffer "under Pontius Pilate" as his judge?

A. That he, being innocent, might be condemned by an earthly judge, and thereby set us free from the judgment of God which, in all its severity, ought to fall upon us.

Q. 39. Is there something more in his having been crucified than if he had died some other death?

A. Yes, for by this I am assured that he took upon himself the curse which lay upon me, because the death of the cross was cursed by God.

Consider the suffering of Christ. That is the purpose of Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ;" to direct our eyes and thoughts to his suffering. It is the image behind our favorites hymns like "When I survey the Wondrous Cross," "What Wondrous Love is This," and "O Sacred Head Now Wounded."

When we are reminded that Jesus willingly came to be with us, and willingly bore in his body and soul the wrath of God for our sins so that we might be pardoned. 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." This is the summary of the gospel. Christ, who was sinless, accepted the guilt and punishment for our sins on the cross, in order that we might receive his righteousness. In other words, God said of Jesus "This is my beloved," then Jesus took our cross, so that we might also be called the beloved of God.

If you want to know what you must do to be delivered from the guilt of your sins, know this, everything has already been done. Jesus took the burden of the cross; He paid the price; "Christ laid aside His crown for your soul."

Prayer

Almighty God,

Thank you for sending your Son Jesus to take the burden of my sin so that I might receive your grace, righteousness, and eternal life. I know I did not deserve such love, but, by the power of your Holy Spirit, enable me to live each day to give you thanks, praise, and glory. In Jesus name, Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 16

Q. 40. Why did Christ have to suffer "death"?

A. Because the righteousness and truth of God are such that nothing else could make reparation for our sins except the death of the Son of God.

Q. 41. Why was he "buried"?

A. To confirm the fact that he was really dead.

Q. 42. Since, then, Christ died for us, why must we also die?

A. Our death is not a reparation for our sins, but only a dying to sin and an entering into eternal life.

Q. 43. What further benefit do we receive from the sacrifice and death of Christ on the cross?

A. That by his power our old self is crucified, put to death, and buried with him, so that the evil passions of our mortal bodies may reign in us no more, but that we may offer ourselves to him as a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Q. 44. Why is there added: "He descended into hell"?

A. That in my severest tribulations I may be assured that Christ my Lord has redeemed me from hellish anxieties and torment by the unspeakable anguish, pains, and terrors which he suffered in his soul both on the cross and before.

Why Did Jesus Die? It is a question that everyone of us has asked. Romans 6:23 teaches the constant truth of Scripture: The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." The Catechism again reinforces this truth, we deserved to die, but Christ died in our place. He died so that we don't have too. He died to pay the price for our sin. He took the cross to set us free from sin and death (Heb 2:9). Because he died for us, we can live for God (Rom 8:3-4).

But the incredible love of God, evidenced in our deliverance from death through the death of His Son, did not stop at the cross. Rather, as the Apostle's Creed teaches, he also descended into Hell, the very place we deserved to go in our sinfulness. His love for us was so complete; he even experienced the agonies of hell so that we might from them be delivered. He accepted the agony of knowing separation from God so that we would never have to. "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed (Isa. 53:5-6).

Prayer

Heavenly Father, for your never-ending love which has delivered us from sin and death; for the gift of your Son who died for us that we might live for you; for gift of your Holy Spirit who continues to put to death in us the passions for sin and rebellion; for all of this, and for who you are we give you thanks and praise. May our lives reflect our thanksgiving, may we live each day for you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 17

Q. 45. What benefit do we receive from "the resurrection" of Christ?

A. First, by his resurrection he has overcome death that he might make us share in the righteousness which he has obtained for us through his death. Second, we too are now raised by his power to a new life. Third, the resurrection of Christ is a sure pledge to us of our blessed resurrection.

In His resurrection, Jesus overcame death. Essentially, because death could not hold Jesus from life, because the author of life could not be overpowered by death, death has forevermore lost its power over us. So the saying in Corinthians is true, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" Because Jesus has defeated death, we are to no longer live under the fear of death, nor can it be said of us that we are dead in our trespasses. He has put death to death, and has freed us for life, and life in abundance.

This ultimate benefit of Christ's resurrection is seen, according to our catechism, in three ways. First, because He lives, we share in His righteousness which He has obtained for us. The righteousness of God is never something we possess, but a gift from Jesus that is "reckoned" to us, or accounted to us on our behalf. The righteousness is God's alone, but because of the grace of Christ, God considers us justified and at peace.

Secondly, because He lives, we are, even now, raised by his power to a new life. Most people think that the resurrection to eternal life is only something that happens after we die. But if eternal life is actually eternal, then for those who are in Christ it has already begun. By the power of His resurrection, you too are resurrected today from death in sin to life in Christ.

Finally, because He lives, we have a sure and certain pledge of our own resurrection from physical death. Hear again the word of the Spirit from Corinthians "In fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."

Prayer

Almighty God,

For the resurrection of your Son, which brings us victory over death, imparts Christ's righteousness unto us, raises us to new life today, and assures us of our ultimate victory over death, we give you thanks and we praise your name. Keep us ever mindful of your grace and love, and may we live to the glory of your name. In Jesus name. Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 18

Q. 46. How do you understand the words: "He ascended into heaven"?

A. That Christ was taken up from the earth into heaven before the eyes of his disciples and remains there on our behalf until he comes again to judge the living and the dead.

Q. 47. Then, is not Christ with us unto the end of the world, as he has promised us?

A. Christ is true man and true God. As a man he is no longer on earth, but in his divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit, he is never absent from us.

Q. 48. But are not the two natures in Christ separated from each other in this way, if the humanity is not wherever the divinity is?

A. Not at all; for since divinity is incomprehensible and everywhere present, it must follow that the divinity is indeed beyond the bounds of the humanity which it has assumed, and is nonetheless ever in that humanity as well, and remains personally united to it.

Q. 49. What benefit do we receive from Christ's ascension into heaven?

A. First, that he is our Advocate in the presence of his Father in heaven. Second, that we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that he, as the Head, will also take us, his members, up to himself. Third, that he sends us his Spirit as a counterpledge by whose power we seek what is above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God, and not things that are on earth.

We have seen in the Catechism already that Christ was completely man and completely God, that, for our sins and for our salvation, Christ died on the cross for us, and that, after experiencing all the agonies of death on our behalf he rose again from the dead. Today, we are reminded that Christ also ascended into heaven where He now sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

The story is one that we are familiar with, but its implications often escape us. Luke 24:50-51 tells us, "When [Jesus] had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven."

The question now arises, "How can we say that Christ is in heaven and also here living within us?" If we believe that Jesus was really a man, just as we are, how can we believe he is in two places at once?

Remember, Christ was both fully man and fully God. As a man, His physical body is in heaven, seated at the right hand of our Heavenly Father. But Christ is also truly God, and as such, his Spirit can be with us at all times and in all places.

As the Catechism teaches, because he has ascended to heaven, we know that he now intervenes for us continually (Ro 8:34; 1Jn 2:1), that our bodies can be present in heaven (Jn 17:24), and that his spirit will never leave us (Jn 14:16).

Prayer

Almighty God, we lift up our hearts and our voices, giving you all praise and glory, because, in your love and grace, you gave your Son, who not only died for our sins, but rose from the dead, and ascended into Heaven to prepare a place for those whom you call. In Jesus Name, Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 19

Q. 50. Why is there added: "And sits at the right hand of God"?

A. Because Christ ascended into heaven so that he might manifest himself there as the Head of his Church, through whom the Father governs all things.

Q. 51. What benefit do we receive from this glory of Christ, our Head?

A. First, that through his Holy Spirit he pours out heavenly gifts upon us, his members. Second, that by his power he defends and supports us against all our enemies.

Q. 52. What comfort does the return of Christ "to judge the living and the dead" give you?

A. That in all affliction and persecution I may await with head held high the very Judge from heaven who has already submitted himself to the judgment of God for me and has removed all the curse from me; that he will cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation, but he shall take me, together with all his elect, to himself into heavenly joy and glory.

This is the picture of the glory of Christ: ascended into heaven, he now sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from there he shall judge the living and the dead. John Calvin puts it this way, "So it was said that Christ, in whom the Father wills to be exalted and through whose hand he wills to reign, was received at God's right hand. Christ was invested with lordship over heaven and earth... so that both heavenly and earthly creatures may look with admiration upon his majesty, be ruled by his hand, obey his nod, and submit to his power (Eph 1:20-21).

Christ reigns in power over heaven and earth! From the throne of God, he pours out all of God's blessings, in His sovereignty He defends and supports us against all our enemies. He is our advocate and intercessor, turning "the eyes of the Father to His own righteousness to avert God's gaze from our sins. He so reconciles the Father's heart to us that by his intercession he prepares a way and access for us to the Father's throne. He fills with grace and kindness the throne that for miserable sinners would otherwise have been filled with dread" (Calvin).

The reality of Christ's reign also reminds us that He is our judge. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "When the Son of Man comes in glory, and all his angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matt 25:31-33). We cannot escape the coming judgment of Christ, but we can rest assured in the fact that our Judge is also our Redeemer! He who sits in Judgment over us is the very one who took the cross for us. The hands of judgment have been pierced by nails. We need not fear his judgment; rather we await that day with head held high!

Prayer

Almighty God, to think that our judge and redeemer are one and the same, Christ Jesus our Lord, is a comfort to great to comprehend. Thank you for sending your Son, that we may become your sons and daughters through faith in Jesus. May we live to your glory, never fearing what comes from your hand. In Jesus name. Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 20

Q. 53. What do you believe concerning "the Holy Spirit"?

A. First, that, with the Father and the Son, he is equally eternal God; second, that God's Spirit is also given to me, preparing me through a true faith to share in Christ and all his benefits, that he comforts me and will abide with me forever.

The catechism succinctly addresses these questions today. According to the catechism, the Holy Spirit is, with the Father and the Son, really and truly the eternal God. The Spirit is not merely the power of God, neither is the Spirit a lesser entity emerging from God and the Son. Rather, the Spirit is God, just as the Father is God and the Son is God.

Part of our problem comes in the language we use to describe the Holy Spirit. The word for spirit in Scripture is "breath" (Ruah, in the OT; Pneuma, in the NT). In Ezekiel 37, God's life-giving Spirit is equated with the breath of life (see also Job 32:8). In John 20:22, Jesus breathed upon his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This language makes it difficult to understand the nature of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the best way to think about the Spirit is this: the Holy Spirit is the real and powerful, transforming and abiding presence of God with us now. Jesus promised His disciples that He would not leave us as orphans, but that He would send us an encourager, a counselor, a teacher, who would strengthen those who believe. Therefore, there is no distinction between us; we are all filled with His Holy Spirit, even though we may experience His presence in varying degrees.

So what does the Spirit do? Primarily, the Holy Spirit bears witness to our spirits to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Spirit breathes life into our lifeless hearts, regenerating us, filling us with the love of God, so that we may respond to God's love by accepting it in faith in Jesus Christ with thanksgiving. The Holy Spirit teaches us through Scripture, convicts us of our sins, empowers us to repentance, assures us of forgiveness, trains us in righteousness, and unites all Christians as one body in Christ. In other words, the Holy Spirit applies to our lives all the blessings of the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you for sending your Spirit to live within us, to bring us life, and to show us the way to Christ. May we never take your presence with us for granted, and since we live because of the Spirit, may we learn to keep in step with your Spirit. Let your Spirit move fresh upon us even today! In Jesus name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 21

Q. 54. What do you believe concerning "the Holy Catholic Church"?

A. I believe that, from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by his Spirit and his Word, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it.

Q. 55. What do you understand by "the communion of saints"?

A. First, that believers one and all, as partakers of the Lord Christ, and all his treasures and gifts, shall share in one fellowship. Second, that each one ought to know that he is obliged to use his gifts freely and with joy for the benefit and welfare of other members.

Q. 56. What do you believe concerning "the forgiveness of sins"?

A. That, for the sake of Christ's reconciling work, God will no more remember my sins or the sinfulness with which I have to struggle all my life long; but that he graciously imparts to me the righteousness of Christ so that I may never come into condemnation.

As we come to the last five tenets of the Apostle's Creed, we move from our understanding of who God is to how God blesses His people. First we find that God has called into being and given all believers the Church, which is described as Holy (set apart and pure) and Catholic (universal and timeless). The Church, which is the body of Christ, is one. It spans all time and exists in all nations. While, throughout history, we have seen evidence of corruption, exclusion, and division within the church, nevertheless, the true Church in Christ remains protected and preserved in the unity of the true faith for all time. The good news is, because you believe in Christ as your Lord and Savior, you are a member of His true Church.

This leads then to the second blessing from God, the communion of saints. As one body in Christ, we are united not only to our Lord but also to one another. There are no second class citizens in this communion; there is no inner and outer circle. We share in one fellowship. Furthermore, we are not alone in our journey of faith; there are those who have gone before, and those who will follow after. As saints in Christ, we are to walk in the light of the saints who have blazed the trail before us, and shine the light for those to come.

Third, as a member of Christ's true church, I am a saint. This is not something that happens after I am dead and gone, but right now, for God has forgiven me for all my sins and my sinful nature and set free from all condemnation. There is nothing more I have to do to earn His forgiveness, and nothing I can do to lose it. God has forgiven me in Christ, and has made me His Saint in the Light.

Prayer

Almighty God, for your Holy Catholic Church, in which all who believe in Christ are gathered, preserved, and protected; for the communion that all Saints share, here in this life, and in the resurrected life to come; and for the forgiveness of sin, which frees us from condemnation for righteousness' sake; we give you all thanks and praise. In Jesus' name. Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 22

Q. 57. What comfort does "the resurrection of the body" give you?

A. That after this life my soul shall be immediately taken up to Christ, its Head, and that this flesh of mine, raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul, and be conformed to the glorious body of Christ.

Q. 58. What comfort does the article concerning "the life everlasting" give you?

A. That, since I now feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, I shall possess, after this life, perfect blessedness, which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, and thereby praise God forever.

What will happen to me after I die? At some point or another, each of us will ask this question. While the world runs wild with speculations about the after-life and if it even exists, the Bible, and our Confessions, speaks very clearly about what we can expect.

We believe in the resurrection of the body... but what does this mean and how does it bring us comfort? The Catechism teaches that after death, the soul is immediately taken up to Christ, and when Christ returns, there will be a resurrection of the body (see Luke 23:43; Phil 1:21-23). There is no waiting period for the soul, no sleep of the soul. Instead, upon our death, the soul of the believer is immediately and eternally bound to Christ in a conscious and very real existence. This is an intermediate state, better than the life we know on earth, but still not as wonderful as the final state, when our bodies are resurrected as well.

So what happens to our bodies in the mean time? We know that our bodies decay and we do return to dust. But we also believe that our bodies will be resurrected, that this corruptible material will be traded for that which is incorruptible, that we will be well suited for dwelling in the presence of God for all eternity (1 Cor 15:42-44). It is hard to imagine what this will look like, except that we will finally be complete in the likeness of Christ Jesus.

The final and highest blessing we receive from God is the gift of eternal life. Please do not think that eternal life means that we will all get wings, a harp, and a little cloud to sit on for eternity; that is not an appealing picture and is the farthest thing from the truth. Eternal life is more than just endless living; it is the ability to live as we were created to live, living forever in the presence of the triune God. In God's new creation we will enjoy never-ending physical life and perfect communion with God. As believers, we already possess abundant life because we enjoy fellowship with God, but this joy is only a foretaste of what is to come. It is God's will that we should believe in Jesus Christ and begin, even today, to enjoy the gift of eternal life with Him (John 6:40).

Prayer

Almighty God, for the promise that there is more to this life than this earthly existence, that we were created to spend an eternity in your presence, and that you are faithful to complete your work within us, we give you thanks. Prepare our feet for walking in eternity, equip our hearts to love you and worship you without ceasing. May our experience of eternal life with you begin even today, in the joy of knowing Christ our Lord and Savior. In His name we pray, Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 23

Q. 59. But how does it help you now that you believe all this?

A. That I am righteous in Christ before God, and an heir of eternal life.

Q. 60. How are you righteous before God?

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have not kept any one of them, and that I am still ever prone to all that is evil, nevertheless, God, without any merit of my own, out of pure grace, grants me the benefits of the perfect expiation of Christ, imputing to me his righteousness and holiness as if I had never committed a single sin or had ever been sinful, having fulfilled myself all the obedience which Christ has carried out for me, if only I accept such favor with a trusting heart.

Q. 61. Why do you say that you are righteous by faith alone?

A. Not because I please God by virtue of the worthiness of my faith, but because the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ alone are my righteousness before God, and because I can accept it and make it mine in no other way than by faith alone.

For the past 15 weeks, the Heidelberg Catechism has led us through the faith of the Apostle's Creed. Now it asks the question, "What good does it do us to believe all this?" The answer, very simply is, the creed teaches us that we are made right in Christ before God, and thereby we are heirs of eternal life.

You have been made right, or just, before God by faith in Jesus Christ. It is by faith alone that you are saved, and this is a gift from God. There is nothing more you need do. Even though you still may feel the need to earn God's favor, to secure your salvation, Christ has completely paid the price, he has done it all.

Remember, faith isn't just a set of beliefs that we must mentally ascribe to; faith is a way of life. Consider skydiving. When a person jumps from a plane, he has two choices. He may try to slow his descent by flapping his arms as fast as he can. As we know, this will have disastrous results. Or, he may pull the ripcord on his parachute and trust in its ability and design to allow him to land safely. The smart skydiver who chooses this option puts all his trust, his faith, in the parachute to save him. He knows that he can't save himself, he doesn't even try, he simply trusts, and flies.

The Christian life is a tremendous leap of faith because everything in us tells us that we need to earn or work for our salvation on our own. So much of our lives is spent frantically trying to do what is right in order to be right with God. But the truth remains, we can only be saved by trusting in Christ to save us. Don't you think its time you stopped flapping your arms and began to trust in Christ and really living?

Prayer

Almighty God, by your grace you have set us free from sin and death in Jesus Christ our Lord. We are constantly reminded that our works will not save us, for we are saved only by trusting in Christ. Lord, we believe, help our unbelief. Help us to live as though we trusted in Christ completely, without fear, without hesitation, without holding back. In Jesus name we pray, Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 24

Q. 62. But why cannot our good works be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of it?

A. Because the righteousness which can stand before the judgment of God must be absolutely perfect and wholly in conformity with the divine Law. But even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.

Q. 63. Will our good works merit nothing, even when it is God's purpose to reward them in this life, and in the future life as well?

A. This reward is not given because of merit, but out of grace.

Q. 64. But does not this teaching make people careless and sinful?

A. No, for it is impossible for those who are ingrafted into Christ by true faith not to bring forth the fruit of gratitude.

Even though we believe that we are “saved by grace alone through faith and not by works,” there remains a nagging compulsion on our part to contribute something, if anything to our own salvation. We want to feel that we can add to the cause of our righteousness, that we can help secure our cause.

But the truth remains: God’s just requirement is absolute perfection, and the only righteousness that can stand before the judgment of God must be absolutely perfect. We know, beyond any doubt, that everything we do is flawed, if even ever so slightly, and therefore cannot stand before God. Only Christ’s righteousness can make us right with God, and his righteousness is received by faith, not through works.

So what affect do our good works have upon our salvation and heavenly life? In terms of merit, none. God does not offer salvation according to our good works; neither does God reward our good works in heaven. Everything that comes from God is a gift of grace, both our salvation and our reward in heaven.

So doesn’t this promote a lifestyle of laziness, carelessness, and sinfulness? Absolutely not! While we do not earn our salvation, nor our treasures in heaven, once engrafted into Christ, it is our nature to bear much fruit. Once a seed is planted, it is expected to blossom and bear fruit. Once Christ is “planted” within us, the only natural outcome is that we too should blossom and bear spiritual fruits. Our good works, while not meritorious unto salvation, are clear evidence of the salvation that has taken place within.

Prayer

Almighty God,

When, because of our sinfulness, we could not come to you, you came to us, and you offered forgiveness, salvation, and righteousness in your Son Jesus Christ. May we daily learn to trust in his gift of grace, growing and blossoming with the fruit of your Holy Spirit.

In Jesus name, Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 25

Q. 65. Since, then, faith alone makes us share in Christ and all his benefits, where does such faith originate?

A. The Holy Spirit creates it in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it by the use of the holy Sacraments.

Q. 66. What are the Sacraments?

A. They are visible, holy signs and seals instituted by God in order that by their use he may the more fully disclose and seal to us the promise of the gospel, namely, that because of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross he graciously grants us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Q. 67. Are both the Word and the Sacraments designed to direct our faith to the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?

A. Yes, indeed, for the Holy Spirit teaches in the gospel and confirms by the holy Sacraments that our whole salvation is rooted in the one sacrifice of Christ offered for us on the cross.

Q. 68. How many Sacraments has Christ instituted in the New Testament?

A. Two, holy Baptism and the holy Supper.

If we believe we are saved by grace alone through faith, how exactly do we receive this saving faith? Faith is a gift of God given by His Holy Spirit. The Scriptures teach us that “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” So, by the power of God’s Spirit we are taught the faith through the preaching/teaching of the word, but that faith is also confirmed in us through the sacraments.

Sacrament is not a word you will find in your bible. It is derived from the Latin *sacramentum*, which means “obligation.” Webster’s dictionary provides the following definition: “a Christian rite that is believed to have been ordained by Christ and that is held to be a means of divine grace.” In others words, as we celebrate the sacraments, we are doing what Christ commanded us to do.

A sacrament is an act of the Church that has been commanded by Christ, and serves as a visible symbol of God's invisible grace. It is an outward demonstration of what God is doing inwardly through the sacrificial atonement of Christ. The sacraments are given to strengthen our faith, to remind us of what God has done for us, and we are given a seal, a pledge of security that God's promise for us will never be forsaken.

While other Christian traditions hold to many sacraments, the Reformed Tradition teaches that there are only two that were specifically authorized by Christ; Baptism and Communion.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Through your Holy Word we come to saving faith in Christ our Lord, and through your sacraments our faith is confirmed within us. Thank you for giving both signs and symbols to remind us of our salvation. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 26

Q. 69. How does holy Baptism remind and assure you that the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross avails for you?

A. In this way: Christ has instituted this external washing with water and by it has promised that I am as certainly washed with his blood and Spirit from the uncleanness of my soul and from all my sins, as I am washed externally with water which is used to remove the dirt from my body.

Q. 70. What does it mean to be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ?

A. It means to have the forgiveness of sins from God, through grace, for the sake of Christ's blood which he shed for us in his sacrifice on the cross, and also to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified as members of Christ, so that we may more and more die unto sin and live in a consecrated and blameless way.

Q. 71. Where has Christ promised that we are as certainly washed with his blood and Spirit as with the water of baptism?

A. In the institution of Baptism which runs thus: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." "He who believes and is baptized will be saved: but he who does not believe will be condemned." This promise is also repeated where the Scriptures call baptism "the water of rebirth" and the washing away of sins.

I cannot function in the morning without a shower. My body simply will not wake up and get moving without it. Coffee helps, and a good breakfast perhaps; but without a shower, I'm no good. Standing there, under the showerhead, I come alive, ready to face the day. The shower washes away everything from the day before, and invigorates me for the day ahead.

This is the symbol of Baptism. Baptism signifies outwardly what Christ is doing inwardly. As water washes away the stains of dirt, Christ's blood washes away the stain of our sins (Eph 1:7-8). As the water invigorates and awakens us, so also, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the water of baptism renews us and plants within us the seed of holiness, so that we may die to our sinful desires and live with a passion for the things of Christ.

We must never forget, however, that the Sacraments are signs to confirm the Faith we have been given. While the symbolism and significance of Baptism are profound and life giving, Baptism can never stand alone. It is not enough to simply be baptized; Baptism must be accompanied by Faith (Mark 16:16), for "it is by grace alone through faith that we are saved" (Eph 2:8). The beauty of Baptism is that it confirms our Faith and continually reminds us of what we believe (1 Pet 3:21).

Prayer

Almighty God, by your grace and mercy, you cleanse us through the blood of the Lamb, our Savior and Lord Christ Jesus. By your Holy Spirit, may the waters of baptism continually confirm within us our faith in Christ, putting to death our sinful desires, that we may live for you alone. In Jesus name. Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 27

Q. 72. Does merely the outward washing with water itself wash away sins?

A. No; for only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.

Q. 73. Then why does the Holy Spirit call baptism the water of rebirth and the washing away of sins?

A. God does not speak in this way except for a strong reason. Not only does he teach us by Baptism that just as the dirt of the body is taken away by water, so our sins are removed by the blood and Spirit of Christ; but more important still, by the divine pledge and sign he wishes to assure us that we are just as truly washed from our sins spiritually as our bodies are washed with water.

Q. 74. Are infants also to be baptized?

A. Yes, because they, as well as their parents, are included in the covenant and belong to the people of God. Since both redemption from sin through the blood of Christ and the gift of faith from the Holy Spirit are promised to these children no less than to their parents, infants are also by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, to be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Covenant by circumcision. In the New Covenant baptism has been instituted to take its place.

I have my diploma hanging on the wall in my office as a sign that I have completed the requirements for a Master's of Divinity from Princeton Seminary. I graduated from Princeton when I was only 28, God willing, having lived not even a third of my life. Soon after graduation, however, I came to realize that graduation and my nice diploma on the wall did not mean that my education was complete. Instead, they serve as a sign and a seal that I have begun the journey of discipleship, a journey that will continue the rest of my life.

This is how we should understand our Baptism. Whether you were Baptized as an infant or an adult, please don't think that is the end of your journey. It is but the beginning. Baptism is the sign and seal of your new life in Christ. Baptism is the sign of Christ's washing away our sins, and the seal of our incorporation into the Covenant Body of Christ. Age you grow in the likeness of Christ, your faith, your understanding, and your life of discipleship will mature.

Does baptism save us? No. Salvation is by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ. The water does not cleanse you, only the blood of Christ can do that. But through Baptism we are shown that just as water can cleanse you outwardly, so can the blood of Christ cleanse you inwardly.

Prayer

Almighty God, renew within us the sign and seal of your Covenant in Christ Jesus our Lord, signified in our Baptism, lived out every day. May we, by your grace, continue to grow in our likeness of your Son, to your praise and glory. In Jesus name! Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 28

Q. 75. How are you reminded and assured in the Holy Supper that you participate in the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross and in all his benefits?

A. In this way: Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread, and to drink of this cup in remembrance of him. He has thereby promised that his body was offered and broken on the cross for me, and his blood was shed for me, as surely as I see with my eyes that the bread of the Lord is broken for me, and that the cup is shared with me. Also, he has promised that he himself as certainly feeds and nourishes my soul to everlasting life with his crucified body and shed blood as I receive from the hand of the minister and actually taste the bread and the cup of the Lord which are given to me as sure signs of the body and blood of Christ.

Q. 76. What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink his shed blood?

A. It is not only to embrace with a trusting heart the whole passion and death of Christ, and by it to receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In addition, it is to be so united more and more to his blessed body by the Holy Spirit dwelling both in Christ and in us that, although he is in heaven and we are on earth, we are nevertheless flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, always living and being governed by one Spirit, as the members of our bodies are governed by one soul.

Q. 77. Where has Christ promised that he will feed and nourish believers with his body and blood just as surely as they eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup?

A. In the institution of the holy Supper which reads: The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "this is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. This promise is also repeated by the apostle Paul: When we bless "the cup of blessing," is it not a means of sharing in the blood of Christ? When we break the bread, is it not a means of sharing the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, many as we are, are one body; for it is one loaf of which we all partake.

The sacrament of Baptism demonstrates a visible sign of the Spiritual work of God; as we are washed in the water, the blood of Christ washes us of our sins. But what does the Lord's Supper signify?

There are two signs present at the Lord's Table: Sacrifice and Sustenance. When Jesus commanded us to celebrate His supper, he promised that His broken body, and His shed blood were for me. He suffered and died for my sake, on my behalf. The Lord's Supper celebrates Jesus' love for me and claims His perfect sacrifice for my life today. Thus, all sacrifices have ceased, for His was complete and sufficient for all. When I take the Supper of the Lord, I embrace his passion, and trust in him alone for our Salvation.

At the Table I also receive the nourishment I desperately need. Just as food and drink give strength to my body, so will Christ, as I come to His Table, strengthen my soul unto eternal life. This nourishment comes not from some magical meal, but from my Communion with Christ, for when I "eat of His body," I am Spiritually united with Him; Christ dwells in me. I am one with Christ, and with all who come to His table.

Prayer

Holy God, by your grace, you have offered the bread of life, who has come from heaven to give life and health to all who will eat. So strengthen me in Christ that I may live for your glory and praise. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 29

Q. 78. Do the bread and wine become the very body and blood of Christ?

A. No, for as the water in baptism is not changed into the blood of Christ, nor becomes the washing away of sins by itself, but is only a divine sign and confirmation of it, so also in the Lord's Supper the sacred bread does not become the body of Christ itself, although, in accordance with the nature and usage of sacraments, it is called the body of Christ.

Q. 79. Then why does Christ call the bread his body, and the cup his blood, or the New Covenant in his blood, and why does the apostle Paul call the Supper "a means of sharing" in the body and blood of Christ?

A. Christ does not speak in this way except for a strong reason. He wishes to teach us by it that as bread and wine sustain this temporal life so his crucified body and shed blood are the true food and drink of our souls for eternal life. Even more, he wishes to assure us by this visible sign and pledge that we come to share in his true body and blood through the working of the Holy Spirit as surely as we receive with our mouth these holy tokens in remembrance of him, and that all his sufferings and his death are our own as certainly as if we had ourselves suffered and rendered satisfaction in our own persons.

Is Christ really present in the Lord's Supper? There is a wide range of beliefs in regard to this question, ranging from the idea that the bread and wine really become the actual body and blood of Jesus, to the idea that communion is nothing more than a memorial, very special, but only symbolic.

The Reformed perspective on the Lord's Supper takes a middle ground. There is no physical transformation of the bread and juice, but Christ is still really present. We believe that the physical body of Christ is in Heaven, where He intercedes for us before the throne of God. His body was broken once, and that was enough. Christ's presence at the table (no longer an altar) is spiritual, which is very real and powerful.

The Lord's Supper is also much more than a memorial; for we believe that Christ actually **does** what the meal signifies, that is, we are spiritually fed even as we are physically fed. We are fed by His word when we hear and meditate upon it, and we are fed by his presence when he dwells with us. When we say in the Lord's Supper that Christ's body is broken and his blood is spilled, this should lead us to the cross where he paid for our sins, where Christ's body was actually broken, and His blood poured out, for there alone, in Christ's death, is where the life-giving promise was performed and fulfilled.

Prayer

Almighty God, in His death on the cross, Christ paid for all my sins, that I might be reconciled with you. In His Supper, I know that He will never leave me, and that by your Holy Spirit, I am given the strength to live the life you have set before me. Thanks be to God. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 30

Q. 80. What difference is there between the Lord's Supper and the papal Mass?

A. The Lord's Supper testifies to us that we have complete forgiveness of all our sins through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ which he himself has accomplished on the cross once for all; (and that through the Holy Spirit we are incorporated into Christ, who is now in heaven with his true body at the right hand of the Father and is there to be worshiped). But the Mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have forgiveness of sins through the sufferings of Christ unless Christ is again offered for them daily by the priest (and that Christ is bodily under the form of bread and wine and is therefore to be worshiped in them). Therefore the Mass is fundamentally a complete denial of the once for all sacrifice and passion of Jesus Christ (and as such an idolatry to be condemned).

Q. 81. Who ought to come to the table of the Lord?

A. Those who are displeased with themselves for their sins, and who nevertheless trust that these sins have been forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the passion and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and improve their life. The impenitent and hypocrites, however, eat and drink judgment to themselves.

Q. 82. Should those who show themselves to be unbelievers and enemies of God by their confession and life be admitted to this Supper?

A. No, for then the covenant of God would be profaned and his wrath provoked against the whole congregation. According to the ordinance of Christ and his apostles, therefore, the Christian church is under obligation, by the office of the keys, to exclude such persons until they amend their lives.

The differences between denominational understandings of the Lord's Supper can be confusing and divisive; and after all is said and done, people still don't know what to believe about the sacrament. Part of the problem has to do with our language; we call things the wrong thing. For example, the Table is not an Altar in the Reformed tradition. Christ's sacrifice ended all sacrifices, therefore we gather at the table for the Heavenly banquet, not at an altar for a sacrifice. Moreover, when we say, "This is the body of Christ," we have to ask, "What does 'is' mean?" The best way to understand it is this: Just as the bread was broken, so was Christ's body, and just as the bread feeds us physically, so does Christ feed us spiritually. Remember, we are saved by Faith in Christ alone, not by the sacraments. They only demonstrate what Christ has done and is doing in our lives.

So who should receive the Sacrament of communion? The catechism reminds us that to be united with Christ in Communion is not something to be taken lightly. Those who deny Christ, who take pleasure in sinful behavior, and refuse to submit to the authority of His Word receive the sacrament at their own peril, "sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27). But all those who humbly put their trust in Christ, and desire his help to lead a holy life, all who are truly sorry for their sins and would be delivered from the burden of them, are invited and encouraged in His name to come to this sacrament.

Prayer

Almighty God, you have prepared a banquet before me and invited me by name in your Son Jesus Christ. I know I am not worthy to receive this, but say the word and I will be healed. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 31

Q. 83. What is the office of the keys?

A. The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline. By these two means the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and shut against unbelievers.

Q. 84. How is the kingdom of heaven opened and shut by the preaching of the holy gospel?

A. In this way: The kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and openly testified to believers, one and all, according to the command of Christ, that as often as they accept the promise of the gospel with true faith all their sins are truly forgiven them by God for the sake of Christ's gracious work. On the contrary, the wrath of God and eternal condemnation fall upon all unbelievers and hypocrites as long as they do not repent. It is according to this witness of the gospel that God will judge the one and the other in this life and in the life to come.

Q. 85. How is the kingdom of heaven shut and opened by Christian discipline?

A. In this way: Christ commanded that those who bear the Christian name in an unchristian way either in doctrine or in life should be given brotherly admonition. If they do not give up their errors or evil ways, notification is given to the church or to those ordained for this by the church. Then, if they do not change after this warning, they are forbidden to partake of the holy Sacraments and are thus excluded from the communion of the church and by God himself from the kingdom of Christ. However, if they promise and show real amendment, they are received again as members of Christ and of the church.

“The Keys of the Kingdom” refers to the discipline mentioned in last week’s lesson regarding who should and who should not receive the sacrament of the Lord’s Table. The image comes from Matthew 16:19, when Jesus says to Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

The church has a calling to gate keeping, opening and closing the kingdom of God. Today we call this Discipline. We see this take place when our preaching freely offers the grace of God which covers our sins to those who believe and accept the Gospel, while at the same time reminding those who do not believe and do not repent of the truth of God’s eternal judgment. We also see it in forms of Christian discipline that gently and lovingly rebuke, correct, and encourage Christians to grow in their walk with Christ.

Too often we see cases of discipline gone wrong, with persons being ostracized and rejected by the community of faith. However, it is our responsibility as Christians to hold one another accountable, and to be held accountable, for our lives before the Lord. No one can do this but another Christian. We must remember, the purpose of discipline is never to condemn or divide, but to, in all love and gentleness, save our brothers and sisters from the road that leads to destruction, to lead them to reconciliation and righteousness, and to build one another up as the body of Christ.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, build us up as your church, when we hear your word proclaimed, and when we live life as your disciples. Hold us accountable in love that we may glorify you in all we do. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 32

Q. 86. Since we are redeemed from our sin and its wretched consequences by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why must we do good works?

A. Because just as Christ has redeemed us with his blood he also renews us through his Holy Spirit according to his own image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves grateful to God for his goodness and that he may be glorified through us; and further, so that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits and by our reverent behavior may win our neighbors to Christ.

Q. 87. Can those who do not turn to God from their ungrateful, impenitent life be saved?

A. Certainly not! Scripture says, "Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God."

If we are saved by grace alone through faith in Christ Jesus, should we to continue to practice good works? Are we to try to live lives pleasing to God, even though we are saved apart from any work of our own? By all means, yes!

The necessity of our works has not changed, only the motivation has. Our good works are a sign of our gratitude and thanksgiving, not a means of earning God's favor. God loves you completely, so much that He sent His only begotten to die for you. Therefore, nothing you can do will cause God to love you any more or any less than He loves you now.

Instead, the things that we do, the way that we live, now that we have been redeemed by the grace of Christ, are deep expressions of our thanksgiving for all of God's mercies. How can we show God that we love Him and trust in Him, by living according to His word, by doing that which pleases God.

Furthermore, we bring glory to God through what we do. By abstaining from that which dishonors God, and reveling in that which honors Him, we may, through our bodies, glorify God (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Finally, reverent behavior and goodness bring us an assurance of salvation. We know we are saved because the goodness of God comes forth in what we do. The Bible teaches that "We know that we have come to know God if we obey His commands" (1 John 2:3). Obedience, goodness, these are the attributes and fruits of a life transformed by the grace of God, and by them we will win our neighbors to Christ.

We must always remember, however, that our salvation is in Christ alone, and is not based upon what we do. Sinful behavior, especially within the church, disgraces the name of God, and turns people off to Christ. Those who do not turn away from their sins with penitence and thanksgiving, trusting in the grace of Christ, will never be saved, regardless of their good works.

Prayer

Almighty God, Thank you for the salvation that comes in Christ alone. May I, everyday, learn to live in gratitude, to the praise of your glorious name, trusting always and only in the name of Christ to save me. It is in His name that I pray. Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 33

Q. 88. How many parts are there to the true repentance or conversion of man?

A. Two: the dying of the old self and the birth of the new.

Q. 89. What is the dying of the old self?

A. Sincere sorrow over our sins and more and more to hate them and to flee from them.

Q. 90. What is the birth of the new self?

A. Complete joy in God through Christ and a strong desire to live according to the will of God in all good works.

Q. 91. But what are good works?

A. Only those which are done out of true faith, in accordance with the Law of God, and for his glory, and not those based on our own opinion or on the traditions of men.

The Biblical word repentance literally means to turn around. To repent from your sins is to turn away, to flee from them (Gen 39:12; 1Ki 8:35). Far too often, we either deny the reality or presence of sin in our lives, or we confess our sins, but do not turn away from them. To truly repent of our sinfulness, we must come to realize the pain that our sins cause God and others, we must deeply regret what we have done, who we have become, growing to hate our sins and flee from them.

This Biblical repentance is only possible through the work of the Holy Spirit, who convicts us of our sins, and equips us in the battle against them. As the Holy Spirit draws us closer and continues to transform us in the image of Christ, we will grow more aware of our sinfulness, and we will despise even the slightest stain of sin within us.

This is, by the power of the same Spirit, the birth of the new self. As the old self fades away, we are filled with the joy of the presence of God through Jesus Christ and we grow in our desire to live according to God's will, doing all good works. These works, done as the Spirit leads us, are performed in faith, trusting in our Lord Jesus Christ to complete the work He has begun in us, in accordance with the Law of God, and in all things, bring glory, honor, and praise to the name of God alone.

Prayer

Almighty God, by the grace of our Lord Jesus, and by the power of your Holy Spirit, you convict us of our sinful ways, and you lead us in the paths of righteousness for your name's sake. Teach us to despise our sins, to flee from them, and to grow in the joy of knowing your Holy presence. For your glory, and for the sake of Christ our Lord. Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 34

Q. 92. What is the law of God?

A. The 10 Commandments*

Q. 93. How are the commandments divided?

A. Into two tables, the first of which teaches us in four commandments how we ought to live in relation to God; the other, in six commandments, what we owe to our neighbor.

FIRST COMMANDMENT

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me."

Q. 94. What does the Lord require in the first commandment?

A. That I must avoid and flee all idolatry, sorcery, enchantments, invocation of saints or other creatures because of the risk of losing my salvation. Indeed, I ought properly to acknowledge the only true God, trust in him alone, in humility and patience expect all good from him only, and love, fear and honor him with my whole heart. In short, I should rather turn my back on all creatures than do the least thing against his will.

Q. 95. What is idolatry?

A. It is to imagine or possess something in which to put one's trust in place of or beside the one true God who has revealed himself in his Word.

God's first commandment is that we have no other god's before Him, that is, that we avoid and flee from all forms of idolatry. At first glance, this might seem to be an easy thing to do. Living in a predominantly Christian community, being raised in a Christian home, one really isn't ever challenged by the thoughts of other gods to worship or follow.

However, there are more subtle forms of idolatry which require our careful attention. In the recently published "Ethical Imperatives" document of the New Wineskins Initiative of the Presbyterian church, the issue of idolatry is described as follows:

Idolatry: Love of God requires that the Lord alone be adored and worshipped. The Lord our God is our ultimate source of joy and contentment. We reject the worship of anything other than God, including: work; wealth; health; success; progress; family; race; nation; political ideologies; economic systems; religious institutions and structures. We reject the practice of tolerance that refuses to discriminate between good and evil and of embracing sin in the name of diversity. We reject those forms of pluralism and syncretism that misrepresent God as revealed in Scripture.

We must always guard our hearts, for we are prone to replace the one true God with something created in our image. Place your trust in God alone, for He is our only hope for salvation.

Prayer

Almighty God, I am prone to wander from the truth that is found only in you. Set my feet upon the rock of your salvation, Christ Jesus, and never let me leave. In Jesus name. Amen!

* (Note: The Catechism here lists the entire text of the 10 Commandments. For the sake of space, for the following weeks, only the commandment addressed in the daily catechism will be listed. For a full reading of the 10 Commandments, see Exodus 21:2-17).

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 35

SECOND COMMANDMENT

"You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love Me and keep My commandments."

Q. 96. What does God require in the second commandment?

A. That we should not represent him or worship him in any other manner than he has commanded in his word.

Q. 97. Should we, then, not make any images at all?

A. God cannot and should not be pictured in any way. As for creatures, although they may indeed be portrayed, God forbids making or having any likeness of them in order to worship them, or to use them to serve him.

Q. 98. But may not pictures be tolerated in churches in place of books for unlearned people?

A. No, for we must not try to be wiser than God who does not want his people to be taught by means of lifeless idols, but through the living preaching of his Word.

In the first commandment, God declares Himself to be the one true God, whom alone is worthy of our worship and dedication. Now, in the second commandment, God "declares more openly what sort of God he is, and with what kind of worship he should be honored" (Calvin).

God desires that our worship of Him remain pure and spiritual (John 4:23-24), unpolluted by superstitious rites and idols that distract us from knowing the one true God. As created beings, we are prone to focus on things that can be seen and touched. Ancient religions, and even some forms of Christianity, created images of animals and humans which represented the gods they worshiped. Those images became the object of worship, and the things of the hands of man became gods (see Rom 1:21-23).

But God is a jealous God, and would not have us worship any image or likeness, so that our worship may remain true and undefiled. It is God's intention that we be taught by the living Word, His Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit, as we worship and meditate on God's Holy Word – the Scriptures. God will not be confined or reduced by the hand of man's creations, be they images, statues, or rites; but instead will be known as He has gloriously revealed Himself in His Word. And by His Word alone shall we know Him.

Prayer

Almighty God, in your Son Jesus Christ, and in your Holy Word you have shown us who you are, and how we are to worship you. Restore our worship, remove from our lives any idols, images, or superstitions that would keep us from worshipping you in spirit and truth. May we be taught by the preaching of your word, may we be holy even as you are holy. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 36

THIRD COMMANDMENT

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."

Q. 99. What is required in the third commandment?

A. That we must not profane or abuse the name of God by cursing, by perjury, or by unnecessary oaths. Nor are we to participate in such horrible sins by keeping quiet and thus giving silent consent. In a word, we must not use the holy name of God except with fear and reverence so that he may be rightly confessed and addressed by us, and be glorified in all our words and works.

Q. 100. Is it, therefore, so great a sin to blaspheme God's name by cursing and swearing that God is also angry with those who do not try to prevent and forbid it as much as they can?

A. Yes, indeed; for no sin is greater or provokes his wrath more than the profaning of his name. That is why he commanded it to be punished with death.

What does it mean to take the Lord's name in vain?

Throughout Scripture, the word vanity means "empty, worthless, nothing." Therefore, to take the Lord's name in vain would imply that we are making God's name to be hollow, empty, worthless, powerless, in other words, to make God's name mean nothing. To do this would be in direct opposition to the very purpose of our lives, which is: "To glorify God and to enjoy Him forever" (Westminster Shorter Catechism).

The obvious ways in which this is done we know; swearing and cursing using God's name. However, the requirements of this commandment go much deeper than just our language. If you say you believe in Jesus, and yet deny His Lordship and His authority to change your life, are you not making his name powerless? If you make a vow before God and the witness of the church, to be faithful and committed to your spouse until death do you part, then walk away from your marriage, are you not taking the Lord's name in vain? When you claim to be a Christian, but do not live, love, think, or act like Christ, are you not making His name meaningless?

The third commandment requires that by our words and deeds God may be made known and in all we say and do, He may be honored and glorified forever.

Prayer

Almighty God, for all the times we have not lived up to the glory of your name, we seek your forgiveness. We ask, that by the grace of Christ our Lord, we may, in all we say and do, reflect your glory and honor, and bring you praise forevermore. In Jesus name. Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 37

Q. 101. But may we not swear oaths by the name of God in a devout manner?

A. Yes, when the civil authorities require it of their subjects, or when it is otherwise needed to maintain and promote fidelity and truth, to the glory of God and the welfare of our neighbor. Such oath-taking is grounded in God's Word and has therefore been rightly used by God's people under the Old and New Covenants.

Q. 102. May we also swear by the saints or other creatures?

A. No; for a lawful oath is a calling upon God, as the only searcher of hearts, to bear witness to the truth, and to punish me if I swear falsely. No creature deserves such honor.

So help me God... It used to be that when you were sworn in to testify in court, you would place your hand upon the Bible and make an oath before God that everything you said would be the truth. This was significant for several reasons. The Bible is the revelation of God, in it we discover the Holiness and Justice of God. To swear on God's Word, "which is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, penetrating even to dividing soul and spirit... judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb 4:12), is to say that before God I will be accountable for what I say. To call upon God's name when making an oath is to ask for the God of all truth to bear witness that what is say is true.

Sadly, this practice is no longer used in the courts today. An individual is still asked to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but no mention of God is ever made. In fact, there are several cases pending today, brought to the courts by the ACLU, arguing that individuals be given the right to swear on the Koran or any other "sacred book" such as the Book of Wicca and the Book of Mormon.

Is an oath or promise binding if there is no God to uphold it? British philosopher John Locke, who helped forge the Fundamental Constitutions in the Carolinas in the 1660s, believed that atheists should not even hold office or testify. After all, Locke wondered, how could anyone believe what they said if they carried no fear of God?

It is far to easy today to make an oath only to break it. We must always remember that God keeps watch when we make an oath (Gen 31:49), and that only God alone has the power to hold us accountable to our word.

Prayer

Almighty God, make us men and women of truth, who stand by our words and fulfill our vows. Fill us with the truth that is Jesus Christ, that we may live with integrity, glorifying your name at all times. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 38

FOURTH COMMANDMENT

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it."

Q. 103. What does God require in the fourth commandment?

A. First, that the ministry of the gospel and Christian education be maintained, and that I diligently attend church, especially on the Lord's Day, to hear the Word of God, to participate in the holy Sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian service to those in need. Second, that I cease from my evil works all the days of my life, allow the Lord to work in me through his Spirit, and thus begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.

Why are we told to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy? Because, by doing so we may live our lives according to the pattern that God has given us.

The idea of the Sabbath is rooted in the story of Genesis, when, in the beginning God made the heavens and the earth. God labored for six days, and on the seventh day, God rested (Gen 2:2-3). We, then, are to model our lives after God's pattern.

Sabbath keeping implies work. The first man was placed in the garden and told to care for it, to work the ground and make it produce. Work came before the fall. Work is not a curse it is a blessing. Still, we are reminded to rest from our labors, lest we come to trust only in them and not in God. Too much work and the absence of a Sabbath rest is destructive. Sabbath rest brings order to our lives. On our own we would go to the extremes, never working, or never resting.

The Sabbath rest, however, is not for idleness. There is something we are to do; we are to keep this day holy. Holiness means to be "set apart," to be designated for a special use. Keeping the Sabbath holy means that we protect our day of rest, that we do not let our work creep into the time that is supposed to be set apart for God. The Sabbath day is intended for us as a time to hear the Word of God, to study the Word, and to receive the sacraments, which are the Word of God made visible. It is a day when we are to gather as one body in Christ (Heb 10:23-25), to pray for one another, and to serve one another. Moreover, the practices of the Sabbath are to carry over into the rest of the week, so that we may cease from all evil works and allow the Lord to work in us, and thus begin in this life the eternal Sabbath (Heb 4:9-11).

Prayer

Almighty God, help me, in everything I do, to live according to your pattern of life. May my work bring you glory, but teach me to rest in you, that the work of Christ may be my only source of strength and salvation. In Jesus name. Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 39

FIFTH COMMANDMENT

"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you."

Q. 104. What does God require in the fifth commandment?

A. That I show honor, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all who are set in authority over me; that I submit myself with respectful obedience to all their careful instruction and discipline; and that I also bear patiently their failures, since it is God's will to govern us by their hand.

As I write this devotional, my three-year-old son is sitting in my office. This is his punishment for not obeying his mother while they were at the store. I am unsure of the effectiveness of this punishment, but I know he's not happy, and it makes it hard to write a devotional. I know this must be some divine repayment for all the times I was disobedient when I was a child, but surely I couldn't have been this bad.

Honoring those who are in authority over us is a fundamental requirement for godly living; indeed, it is the basis for the rest of the Ten Commandments. We show honor, love, and faithfulness to our parents and those in authority not just because God has placed these people in a position of authority over us, but also because by doing so we learn to submit to the authority of God. Submission to someone else, whether it's your parents, your boss, your teacher, or even God, does not come easy. It goes against every natural instinct for self-assertion and preservation that we have. However, the promise attached to this command is one of blessing; do this, and you will prosper long in the land that God is giving you.

At the same time, the seriousness of not keeping this commandment is quite real, for the opposite of submission is rebellion. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, casts an indictment against the world, making the point that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. In doing so, he says this, "They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; **they disobey their parents**; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Rom 1:29-31). There it is, disobedience, counted as an equal with all the other sins.

If we are to be the people of God, we must begin with the practice of honoring Him, and all whom he has set over us by submitting to God and one another in love and faithfulness.

Prayer

Almighty God, for our fathers and mothers, and all whom you have placed in authority over us, we give you thanks, and we pray that they may teach, counsel, and lead us with your wisdom and grace. Teach us to be obedient, to show them honor, love and faithfulness, so that in all we say and do we may bring glory to your Holy name. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 40

SIXTH COMMANDMENT

"You shall not kill."

Q. 105. What does God require in the sixth commandment?

A. That I am not to abuse, hate, injure, or kill my neighbor, either with thought, or by word or gesture, much less by deed, whether by myself or through another, but to lay aside all desire for revenge; and that I do not harm myself or willfully expose myself to danger. This is why the authorities are armed with the means to prevent murder.

Q. 106. But does this commandment speak only of killing?

A. In forbidding murder God means to teach us that he abhors the root of murder, which is envy, hatred, anger, and desire for revenge, and that he regards all these as hidden murder.

Q. 107. Is it enough, then, if we do not kill our neighbor in any of these ways?

A. No; for when God condemns envy, hatred, and anger, he requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward him, to prevent injury to him as much as we can, also to do good to our enemies.

The obvious injunction of the sixth commandment is that we are not to commit murder, but as we clearly see in the catechism, the command has deeper implications. It is not enough that we should go through life without ever being directly responsible for the death of another individual. Rather, the sixth commandment teaches us that we are not to abuse, hate, injure, kill, seek revenge, harbor anger or malice, either in thought or deed toward our neighbors. Indeed, Jesus expanded this commandment saying, "You have heard it said... 'Do not murder'... but I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (Matt 5:22).

There is no room for hatred, for as 1 John 2:9 teaches, "anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness." Instead, we are to walk in the light, just as He is in the light.

The positive side of this commandment is that we are to love one another, to preserve all life, cherish it, and to honor all life with love. Those who seek to honor God will take a stand for life, will protect the defenseless, and will shelter the homeless. 1 John 3:17-18 says, "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth." To say you love your brother or sister, and yet do nothing to help them in their need, to say nothing when their heading into sin, to do nothing to help them in their walk with Christ; this is not love, it is a passive hatred. Let us love one another just as Christ has loved us.

Prayer

Almighty God, for the murder that we commit in thought, word, and gesture, we seek your forgiveness. Strengthen us in your love, that we may love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward all. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 41

SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

"You shall not commit adultery."

Q. 108. What does the seventh commandment teach us?

A. That all unchastity is condemned by God, and that we should therefore detest it from the heart, and live chaste and disciplined lives, whether in holy wedlock or in single life.

Q. 109. Does God forbid nothing more than adultery and such gross sins in this commandment?

A. Since both our body and soul are a temple of the Holy Spirit, it is his will that we keep both pure and holy. Therefore he forbids all unchaste actions, gestures, words, thoughts, desires and whatever may excite another person to them.

The underlying intent of the seventh commandment is to call us to a life of purity and integrity in our personal relationships. In forbidding the act of adultery (sexual relationships with someone other than your spouse), God is urging his children to live chaste, disciplined, and upright lives.

Chastity applies to both the single and the married individual. Chastity is more than just sexual restraint, it is purity in conduct and intention, restraint and simplicity in design or expression, personal integrity in all that I do. The Westminster Catechism teaches that this commandment of chastity applies to our bodies, our minds, our work, our behavior; that we keep chaste friends, live modestly, and shun all occasions of uncleanness and temptation.

At the heart of this commandment is the discipline of self-denial. When a man marries, he forsakes all other women because he has chosen to be faithful to one woman. When you choose to follow Christ, you forsake all other callings in your life. Our calling in marriage, and in Christian Discipleship, is to rise above the base and sinful desires and passions of the flesh which would separate us from faithfully fulfilling our vows of marriage, and faithfully following our Lord and Savior.

We are the temple of the Spirit of God. We need to guard our eyes, our ears, our mouths, our hands, our feet. We need to guard our hearts, that God may keep us pure and holy.

Prayer

Almighty God, by the strength of your Spirit within us, enable us to live chaste lives, pure and holy, that we may glorify you. Keep us faithful and upright in our relationships with one another, and help us to walk faithfully and upright before you. For Jesus' sake. Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 42

EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

"You shall not steal."

Q. 110. What does God forbid in the eighth commandment?

A. He forbids not only the theft and robbery which civil authorities punish, but God also labels as theft all wicked tricks and schemes by which we seek to get for ourselves our neighbor's goods, whether by force or under the pretext of right, such as false weights and measures, deceptive advertising or merchandising, counterfeit money, exorbitant interest, or any other means forbidden by God. He also forbids all greed and misuse and waste of his gifts.

Q. 111. But what does God require of you in this commandment?

A. That I work for the good of my neighbor wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would have others deal with me, and do my work well so that I may be able to help the poor in their need.

The eighth commandment forbids us from stealing from others, in every sense of the word. This includes the various schemes and tricks that we see so often today. How often do we hear of fraudulent companies taking advantage of those who have been traumatized by natural disaster, or of people milking the system for their personal benefit? Scam artists flock to those in desperate need, taking advantage of their situation, not only robbing them of the help they need, but actually contributing to their pain and desperation.

God forbids all such deception and ill-gotten gain, and calls his people to work diligently, contribute to the needs of our neighbors, and deal honestly with all.

Scripture speaks plainly about this. Paul says in Ephesians 4:28, "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need." Proverbs urges us to defend the rights of the poor and needy, not to take advantage of them, or to crush them with interest and fees. Jesus taught that we are to earn our keep (Luke 10:7), and that what we earn is to be used to benefit others (Luke 18:18-22).

Money is not the root of all evil, but the love of money is. Our focus in life is to live and work in such a way as to glorify God with all our gifts, and to be a blessing to our neighbors.

Prayer

Almighty God, teach me to be content in all things, whether rich or poor, fed or hungry, in plenty or in want. Strengthen me that I might be able to give a good day's work, so I can provide for my family and care for my neighbor. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 43

NINTH COMMANDMENT

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."

Q. 112. What is required in the ninth commandment?

A. That I do not bear false witness against anyone, twist anyone's words, be a gossip or a slanderer, or condemn anyone lightly without a hearing. Rather I am required to avoid, under penalty of God's wrath, all lying and deceit as the works of the devil himself. In judicial and all other matters I am to love the truth, and to speak and confess it honestly. Indeed, insofar as I am able, I am to defend and promote my neighbor's good name.

Up to this point, the commandments have dealt expressly with how we worship and honor God in our lives, and what we are to do to love and uphold our neighbors. They have dealt with our actions and intentions, relational issues that hold us together. The 9th Commandment, however, is aimed not at what do for or against God and our neighbor, but what we say.

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor," or, in other words, you shall not lie! There can be no clearer command for us to control our tongues and to speak only that which builds one another up. James expands upon this thought when he writes, "the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts... it corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, it is itself set on fire by hell" (James 5-8). Indeed, the tongue reveals what is truly within us, for Scriptures say "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mat 12:34).

Our God is a God of truth (Ps 25:5) and God abhors a lie; therefore we must love the truth and do all that we can to practice it and preserve it. Gossip, slander, and vicious backbiting injures our neighbors and takes away the honor we owe to those who have been made in God's likeness (James 3:9).

Positively, the 9th Commandment encourages us to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15, 25), upholding the good reputation and advantage of our neighbors. John Calvin adds in his commentary, "Therefore, if there is any true fear and love of God in us, let us take care, as far as is possible and expedient and as love requires, not to yield our tongue or our ears to evil-speaking and sarcastic wit, and not to give our minds without cause to sly suspicion. But as fair interpreters of the words and deeds of all, let us sincerely keep their honor safe in our judgment, our ears, and our tongue."

Prayer

Almighty God, may we worship you in spirit and in truth, and may our words and deeds reflect your truth as well. Teach us to control our tongues, that what we say may be said in truth and love, with Christ as our rule and guide.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 44

TENTH COMMANDMENT

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.

Q. 113. What is required in the tenth commandment?

A. That there should never enter our heart even the least inclination or thought contrary to any commandment of God, but that we should always hate sin with our whole heart and find satisfaction and joy in all righteousness.

Q. 114. But can those who are converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?

A. No, for even the holiest of them make only a small beginning in obedience in this life. Nevertheless, they begin with serious purpose to conform not only to some, but to all the commandments of God.

Q. 115. Why, then, does God have the ten commandments preached so strictly since no one can keep them in this life?

A. First, that all our life long we may become increasingly aware of our sinfulness, and therefore more eagerly seek forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ. Second, that we may constantly and diligently pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that more and more we may be renewed in the image of God, until we attain the goal of full perfection after this life.

Coveting is wanting more than God has given. This is easily recognized on the material level, desiring your neighbor's property, possessions, and relationships. But this covetous behavior always stems from a lack of contentment in Spirit, and Spiritual covetousness is fatal. We must learn to echo the Apostle Paul, who wrote, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Phil 4:11-13).

The catechism sums up its teaching on the commandments saying that we should never allow in our hearts or thoughts anything that is contrary to God's commandments, but we should always hate sin and find satisfaction and joy in all righteousness. We know, through the Word and through experience, that we cannot keep these commandments perfectly. The Apostle Paul reminds us in Galatians, "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse... no one is justified before God by the law, because 'The righteous shall live by faith'" (Gal 3:10-11).

However, we are also called to obedience to God's law, as Paul says later in Galatians, "Do not use your freedom [from condemnation of the law] to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:13-14). The law of God then serves those who are in Christ in two ways: first, it convicts us of our sinfulness and drives us to the throne of God's grace and mercy to seek forgiveness and righteousness through Christ alone; and second, it teaches us how we are to be renewed in the image of Christ, which will only be perfected when we see Him face to face.

Prayer

Almighty God, even though we are unable to perfectly keep your law, continue to transform us in the image of your son, that we may live always to your glory and praise, trusting in Christ alone for our salvation and righteousness. In His name we pray. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 45

Q. 116. Why is prayer necessary for Christians?

A. Because it is the chief part of the gratitude which God requires of us, and because God will give his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who sincerely beseech him in prayer without ceasing, and who thank him for these gifts.

Q. 117. What is contained in a prayer which pleases God and is heard by him?

A. First, that we sincerely call upon the one true God, who has revealed himself to us in his Word, for all that he has commanded us to ask of him. Then, that we thoroughly acknowledge our need and evil condition so that we may humble ourselves in the presence of his majesty. Third, that we rest assured that, in spite of our unworthiness, he will certainly hear our prayer for the sake of Christ our Lord, as he has promised us in his Word.

Q. 118. What has God commanded us to ask of him?

A. All things necessary for soul and body which Christ the Lord has included in the prayer which he himself taught us.

Q. 119. What is the Lord's Prayer?

A. "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

The God whom we worship through our Lord Jesus Christ is not an impersonal spirit who exists removed, hidden, and completely transcendent. Rather, God is deeply personal. Jesus called God "Abba, Father," and taught us to do the same. Throughout Scripture, God has made himself known by stepping into time and space, redeeming, restoring, and delivering his people. God wants us to know Him, and wants us to be known by Him, so God invites us to prayer. Charles Hodge wrote, "Prayer is the converse of the soul with God." This kind of intimacy in relationship is impossible with an impersonal, unknowable God.

So why do we pray? We pray to God because that is the longing of our souls; to be in relationship with our creator, to praise Him for our salvation, and to know beyond a shadow of doubt that we are in His hands and that God will provide.

How do we pray? There are many guides and forms for prayer, but the prayer that pleases God and is heard by Him must have three things. First, that we call upon the one true God and no one else for all that we need. We are to be dependant upon God alone for our daily bread; that is, all that we need to make it through the day. Second, that we honestly confess our brokenness and our absolute need for God's grace and mercy in our lives; for as long as we deny this reality, we deny our need for God at all. Finally, our prayers should be made in complete trust and faith, that regardless of our worthiness, our Heavenly Father will hear us for the sake of His son our Lord.

Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 46

Q. 120. Why has Christ commanded us to address God: "Our Father"?

A. That at the very beginning of our prayer he may awaken in us the childlike reverence and trust toward God which should be the motivation of our prayer, which is that God has become our Father through Christ and will much less deny us what we ask him in faith than our human fathers will refuse us earthly things.

Q. 121. Why is there added: "who art in heaven"?

A. That we may have no earthly conception of the heavenly majesty of God, but that we may expect from his almighty power all things that are needed for body and soul.

Jesus introduced us to God in a way that had never been done before. When Moses proclaimed God's Word to the Israelites in captivity, he said "'YAHWEH (I AM)' has sent me to you," using the cryptic and elusive name of God. The prophets called upon the Lord God Almighty, envisioning a mighty God of judgment and deliverance. The priests revered God as the Holy One of Israel, who remained separated from all that was unclean and unholy.

But Jesus called upon God as "Abba, Father," and he taught us as his disciples to do the same. In doing so, we are invited to share in the personal relationship of a father and his children with YAHWEH, the Lord God Almighty, the Holy One of Israel. Jesus invites us to come as little children (Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it – Mark 10:15), with all the wonder and reverence that children have.

As a father, I love praying with my children at night; listening to the things they ask for, and knowing that they fully expect God to hear them and answer their prayers. It is with such simplicity and honesty that we are to come before our heavenly Father in prayer, trusting in Him to provide our every need. For we know that if we, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more will our Father in heaven gift good gifts to those who ask him (Mat 7:9-11)!

Finally, we pray to our *heavenly* father, knowing that "the God who made the world and everything in it is Lord of heaven and earth... he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:24-25). There is no need too great, no matter too small, that our Heavenly Father cannot provide for. There is not a promise given that God does not also require us to ask. So in wonder and faith, seek his kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you (Mat 6:33).

Prayer

Almighty God, Abba Father, you know the needs of our hearts before we even pray them, and you are eager that we would come to you in prayer and find our all in all. Teach us to come to you and trust you as your beloved children, and help us to seek your kingdom and righteousness before all else. In Jesus' name, and for his sake. Amen!

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 47

Q. 122. What is the first petition?

A. "Hallowed be thy name." That is: help us first of all to know thee rightly, and to hallow, glorify, and praise thee in all thy works through which there shine thine almighty power, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, mercy, and truth. And so order our whole life in thought, word, and deed that thy name may never be blasphemed on our account, but may always be honored and praised.

There are six petitions in the Lord's prayer, six things that we ask of God. The first petition asks that the nature of God's character be revealed to us, and that we in turn, might live appropriately in response to who He is.

To "hallow" means "to make holy," and when we begin our prayer in this way, we are adoring and praising God for who He is, and we ask that God will help us to know Him as holy. Think of the time when Moses asked to see the glory of God. He wanted to know God, to see him, to be transformed by His glory. He wanted God to be completely revealed, but all God could show Moses was His back, because any more exposure to the glory of God would be too much for any man to bear. When God passed by, He revealed his name "The Lord the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, forgiving sin, and rendering justice" (Ex 34:6-7). At the revelation of God's name and character, Moses bowed in worship. When we pray, we need to be reminded of the Holiness, the Majesty, the character of God, so that we may rightly glorify and praise Him. While we may not have an experience like Moses, being hid in the cleft of the rock, we can assuredly see his glory revealed in his almighty power, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, mercy, and truth.

Furthermore, when we ask that God's name be hallowed, we are asking that our lives might be transformed so that in every thought, word, and deed, God's name may be honored. When we call ourselves Christians, we carry God's name with us, and people attribute what we do to His name. We will then, either glorify and praise God's name, or blaspheme His name, through what we think, say, and do. Jesus said to his disciples in Matthew 5:16, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

Prayer

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, your name is holy, and we pray that your holiness might be revealed to us, so that we can rightly glorify and praise you. By your word and by your Spirit, form and reform our lives that our every thought, word, and deed may, be to your honor as well. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 48

Q. 123. What is the second petition?

A. "Thy kingdom come." That is: so govern us by thy Word and Spirit that we may more and more submit ourselves unto thee. Uphold and increase thy church. Destroy the works of the devil, every power that raises itself against thee, and all wicked schemes thought up against thy holy Word, until the full coming of thy kingdom in which thou shalt be all in all.

As Christians, we must remember that we are members of the Kingdom of God. Like Abraham we are "strangers in a foreign country... looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb 11:9-10). Jesus' message was that of the Kingdom of God, and His life, death, and resurrection made it possible that we might enter into His Kingdom and live as worthy citizens.

When we pray, "Thy kingdom come..." we are first of all acknowledging that Christ is our King, and asking that He might order our lives in such a way that we may be obedient to His word and command. We live as His subjects, obedient to His word. In Matthew 28, Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Christ's Lordship and authority over us is not oppressive or burdensome, but life-giving. In John 17, Jesus prayed to the Father, "You granted [your Son] authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life" that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

This petition also places our trust in Christ alone for the defense of the Church. The Church is always under the attack of the devil, who seeks to twist, pervert, and silence the message of the Gospel; but it is also continually under the protection of the Son, who by God's immutable decree, is our eternal King. As Calvin wrote, "The devil, with all the resources of the world, can never destroy the church, founded as it is on the eternal throne of Christ" (Institutes II.XV.4).

Moreover, when we pray, "Thy Kingdom Come..." we are also literally praying for the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus' first sermon was "The time has come, the Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15)! His ministry initiated the dawning of the Kingdom of God, and we await its coming in full. There is, with God's Kingdom, a sense of the "now and not yet." We live now in the Kingdom of God, waiting for that time when, as Corinthians says, Christ will "hand over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

Prayer

Almighty God,

You are the King of Kings, the Lord of Lord. Teach us to live worthy of the Gospel of Christ, as faithful citizens of your Kingdom. Protect and defend your church, and keep us ever watchful for the coming of your Kingdom in full. In Jesus' name. Amen

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 49

Q. 124. What is the third petition?

A. "Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." That is: grant that we and all men may renounce our own will and obey thy will, which alone is good, without grumbling, so that everyone may carry out his office and calling as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven.

The third thing we ask in the Lord's Prayer is that God's will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven. In the first two petitions ("Hallowed be Thy Name, Thy Kingdom Come), we have asked that our lives may hallow, or honor, God's name, and that we might live as worthy citizens of God's Kingdom. Today's prayer goes one step further, for we are asking that God give us the strength to deny our self-determination, to mortify our passions, so that we might submit to His will for our lives.

According to Jesus, this is essential to the life of the disciple. In Matthew 7:21, we hear Jesus say, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.'" Elsewhere, Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Furthermore, Jesus modeled submission to God's will in his prayer in Gethsemane, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

Some will contend that we cannot know God's will for our lives, but God's will is clearly described in His Word. For instance, 1 Thess. 4:3 says, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable...For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life." The Bible also teaches us to be faithful and obedient, careful how we live, "understanding what the Lord's will is" (Eph 5:1-20).

The difficulty of submission is knowing whether we can trust the will of the one to whom we submit. Can we trust God's will, that his plan is good and sure? Paul writes in Romans 12:2, God's will is "good, pleasing, and perfect." His will is for our salvation, in other words, God is determined to do what it takes for our redemption and salvation. And He has in Jesus.

As disciples, then, we are to submit to God's will, without grumbling or any back talk, but willingly and faithfully, trusting in the one to whom we submit to save and sustain us. Only then will we find the freedom and fullness of the life God has in mind for us, and only then may we carry out the work He has called us to do.

Prayer

Almighty God, so often my desire, my determination, my will, is in conflict with yours, and I struggle to obey and be faithful to my calling. Lord, show me clearly what your will is through your word, may your will be done in my life, and may it be my joy and my passion to follow your will. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 50

Q. 125. What is the fourth petition?

A. "Give us this day our daily bread." That is: be pleased to provide for all our bodily needs so that thereby we may acknowledge that thou art the only source of all that is good, and that without thy blessing neither our care and labor nor thy gifts can do us any good. Therefore, may we withdraw our trust from all creatures and place it in thee alone.

One of the hallmarks of Reformed Christianity is its teaching on our total dependence on God who is the sovereign creator and sustainer of all things. The Psalmist attests to this, saying, "[All of creation looks] to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. When you hide your face, they are terrified; when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (Ps 104:26-30)

We are to look to God for all our needs, physical and spiritual, for nothing else can satisfy (Ps 145:15-16). All that we have, whether we have received it as a gift, or worked our way to achieve it, comes from the hand of God, and God is to be praised. Jesus illustrated this, saying that, if our Heavenly Father feeds the birds and dresses the flowers of the field, will he not also watch over your every need? "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'what shall we drink?' or 'what shall we wear?'" For the pagans run after all these things, and your Heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you" (Mat 6:31-33).

And so this petition teaches us to turn to God for all that we need. You can frantically try to secure your own necessities, to plan for every possibility, but the scriptures teach that "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Ps 127:1). But if we turn to God, and seek His kingdom and His provision, we can trust that God will provide. James 1:17 says, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights."

Ultimately, "Give us our daily bread..." is a cry of trust, placing our hope and our eternal security in God's hands. Hear again the words of the Psalmist, "Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge" (Ps 62:5-8).

Prayer

Almighty God, you alone are the giver of all good gifts, everything we have comes from you. You send the rain from heaven and the crops in season, you provide food and fill our hearts with joy. Give us today all that we need to live for your glory, the food to sustain us, your word to guide us, but most of all, the grace of our Lord Jesus and the presence of your Holy Spirit to redeem and renew us. In Jesus' name, and for his sake. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 51

Q. 126. What is the fifth petition?

A. "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." That is: be pleased, for the sake of Christ's blood, not to charge to us, miserable sinners, our many transgressions, nor the evil which still clings to us. We also find this witness of thy grace in us, that it is our sincere intention heartily to forgive our neighbor.

The fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer is summed up in two words: grace and thanksgiving. The message of the gospel is this, We are sinners who have been forgiven by the grace of God. When we were dead in sin, God sent his son to die for us, so that we might be made alive in Christ, forgiven and reconciled to God, with the promise of eternal life. Romans 5:8 says it best, "God shows his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Why then, if our sins are forgiven in Christ, did Christ teach his disciples to pray for the forgiveness of our debts as we forgive our debtors? Someone once suggested that "we continue to pray 'forgive us' not because our past sins are unforgiven, but because Jesus knew that sin would continue to interfere with the closeness of the relationship between his disciples and their Father in heaven. There is great truth, and great comfort, in the saying 'Christians are not perfect, just forgiven.'" To continue to seek forgiveness from the hand of God helps us to return to the grace of God as the foundation of all that we are. To pray, "forgive us our sins" continually reminds us of our brokenness and our need for the life-giving grace of God.

However, the question arises from this prayer, "do I have to forgive others before God will forgive me?" We must always remember that our forgiveness depends not upon our ability to forgive others, but solely upon God's grace.

In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus told the parable of the unmerciful servant, who after having his debt of millions of dollars forgiven would not forgive the debt someone owed him of a few mere dollars. When the king heard this, he said to the servant, "I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"

The forgiveness which we receive by the grace of God transforms us, and is made manifest in our sincere intention to forgive others. Let me put it another way: We are not forgiven because we are forgiving. We are forgiving because we are forgiven. But if we are not forgiving, how can we be sure we are forgiven?

Prayer

Almighty God, I thank you that in Jesus Christ I am forgiven, that my sins are washed away, and that you do not charge me for them, but instead consider me righteous by faith. Grant, I pray, the grace to live each day filled with thanksgiving and praise for your grace that I may learn to likewise forgive others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

What We Believe – A Devotional

LORD'S DAY 52

Q. 127. What is the sixth petition?

A. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." That is: since we are so weak that we cannot stand by ourselves for one moment, and besides, since our sworn enemies, the devil, the world, and our own sin, ceaselessly assail us, be pleased to preserve and strengthen us through the power of thy Holy Spirit so that we may stand firm against them, and not be defeated in this spiritual warfare, until at last we obtain complete victory.

Q. 128. How do you close this prayer?

A. "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever." That is: we ask all this of thee because, as our King, thou art willing and able to give us all that is good since thou hast power over all things, and that by this not we ourselves but thy holy name may be glorified forever.

Q. 129. What is the meaning of the little word "Amen"?

A. Amen means: this shall truly and certainly be. For my prayer is much more certainly heard by God than I am persuaded in my heart that I desire such things from him.

"I need thee every hour, Stay Thou near-by; Temptations lose their power, When Thou art nigh..." So goes the old hymn "I Need Thee Every Hour," and it is a reminder, as is the final petition of the Lord's Prayer, of our desperate need for God to keep us from falling into temptation and evil. Without God's sustaining presence, we are unable to stand and our enemy, from without and from within, is always seeking the opportune moment to bring us down. In Genesis 4, God warned Cain, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you." James warns us to stay out of temptation, for temptation leads to desire, desire gives birth to sin, and sin produces death (James 1:15).

So how do we avoid temptation? Only by the power of God's Holy Spirit who strengthens and preserves us, enabling us to stand firm unto victory. Satan's desire is to sift Christ's disciples like wheat (Luke 22:31), but by Christ's prayers, our faith is made to endure any attack of the enemy. Depending solely on the strength of Christ and his preserving intercession, we are able to persevere, and that perseverance in the Spirit brings maturity and completion (James 1:3-4), so that we are more and more able to overcome temptation.

And so we close the Lord's Prayer and our Catechism ascribing to God the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory; for we know that God alone is our King, that God alone is able to do all that He has promised to do (not only is He able, He is faithful and will do it 1 Thes 5:24), and to God alone is due all praise, all glory, all honor. The apostle made it clear, "So whether you eat or drink [when you are at home or at work, at church or at play] or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Prayer

Almighty God, through this catechism we have studied your Word, and been reminded of your grace and mercy which have saved us from our sin and delivered us from all evil. Strengthen us, O Father, by the presence of your Spirit, that in all we say and all we do, we might always live for your glory and praise. May our lives be a living Amen, as we live in accordance with your will and your Word. We ask this in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen!