

*Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3:
"How Far We've Fallen!"
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Prayer Before Explanation of Catechism: Our Heavenly Father, we ask You to look upon us in grace as we look away from ourselves into the face of Your Son, whom you have appointed our Mediator and Savior. As all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Your Son, guide us by Your Holy Spirit into the true understanding of the doctrines of Christ. May our meditation upon His truth produce in us of all the fruits of righteousness to the glory and exaltation of His name, the instruction and edification of this congregation, and the salvation of the lost through our witness. We pray this in the name and favor of Your well-beloved Son, Jesus Christ, as we depend on His Holy Spirit. Amen.

Primary Scripture Text: Romans 5:12-21

This world is not the way it should be. And we are not the way we should be. Everyone everywhere has a knowledge of this reality. It's a knowledge that gets twisted and denied in various ways. Nonetheless, people know this world shouldn't be this way; and *I* do things I wish I could *undo*. The Heidelberg Catechism captures the biblical imagery of the human condition with one word, and that is, *misery*. As we mentioned last time, the German word behind it conveys the sense of being "out of the land" – like an alien or stranger – disconnected, dislocated. And the Christian, by God's Spirit, comes to know this misery through God's Law. We don't twist or deny the truth anymore. This world is fallen – and so are we. We are sinners, and we have ruined God's good world. It is our sin that results in God's just judgment. Confessing this biblical fact, confirmed by our human experience, we are now in a place to receive the true COMFORT of the Gospel. Knowing our misery, we can live and die in the joy of this comfort: That I am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. But we need to know more about our misery, to grow in this comfort. How did this happen in the first place? And just how *far* have we fallen?

This is what we'll consider this evening from Scripture as summarized in our Catechism:

God made us in His image, but we are now guilty and corrupt in Adam. Three points to unpack:

- 1. We were totally good – at creation.**
- 2. But now we are totally corrupt – in Adam's fall.**
- 3. That means we are totally disabled before God – unless we are born again.**

So our first point: Just how far have we fallen? God made a perfectly wonderful world, and **He made us totally good, in His image**. Lord's Day 3 continues the theme of Lord's Day 2. Last time, we learned that we come to know our *miser*y from God's Law of love. It requires of us *perfect* love for God and *perfect* love for neighbor. But the fact is, we can't live up to the Law perfectly. Because, "...I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbor." So, question 6 naturally follows from that statement: So, "Did God create man so wicked and perverse? Answer: No. God created man good and in His own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that He might truly know God His creator, love Him with all His heart, and live with God in eternal happiness, for His praise and glory."

❖ This is what we were made for, and meant for. We were made and meant to be good – not wicked and perverse, which is our current condition. We were made and meant to reflect and represent God's image. And His image is made up of true righteousness – that we would love and do the right, as God does; and true holiness – that we would live as those set apart for God's service, with perfect purity. We were made and meant to truly love God our Maker – to love Him with the whole-hearted love that is His due. We were made and meant to live with God, in eternal happiness. To live for His praise and glory – to magnify and enjoy who He is, forever.

➤ Genesis 1:26-27 reminds us of our original dignity: ²⁶ *Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."* ²⁷ *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

➤ David also meditates on our original dignity in Psalm 8:3-8: ³ *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,* ⁴ *what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?* ⁵ *Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.* ⁶ *You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet,* ⁷ *all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,* ⁸ *the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

- In both of these passages, we also hear something else we were made and meant for – to represent and rule *under* God, *over* His creatures. But be careful. This does not mean we were meant to rule over one another, as fellow image-bearers, coercively. Coercive human government, as we know it, is now necessary in a *fallen* world. God gives government the *sword* – in the context of a rebellious humanity. But in the original creation, we all would've ruled

together over what God created, as wise and faithful stewards of God's good creation. In light of the Fifth Commandment, we can infer that there would have been order and authority in an unfallen humanity, but no coercion would be necessary.

- In Ephesians 4:23-24, we learn how Christ restores us to the image of God, by His Spirit, in the Gospel: *... to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.* And then Colossians 3:10 also speaks of this new self *...Which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.* This is how we deduce that the original image of God includes righteousness, holiness, knowledge, and our calling to rule under God.
- In Genesis 1 & 2, we also learn that we were made to rule according to God's revelation – His Word. This is another aspect of what it means to be God's image-bearers. We were made to be revelation receivers, to hear, believe, and obey the Word of God, with joy. Adam and Eve were dependent on God's Word-revelation, even *before* the fall. How much more are we now in desperate need of God's Word-revelation *after* the fall. Because in Genesis 3, we see it all go wrong. We see just how *far* is the height from which we have fallen. We are ruined, and we need God to restore us.

And that brings us to our second point: **God made us in His image, but we are guilty and totally corrupt in Adam.** Next, our Christian instructor asks in question 7: "Then where does man's corrupt nature come from?" And as Christians, we confess from Scripture, "From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise. This fall has so poisoned our nature that we are all conceived and born in sin."

- ❖ And so, Genesis 3 records this sad but true story. Our first parents are deceived by the serpent, by Satan, and disobey God's Word. It was a Law Word of probation, of testing. God told them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or they would die. Not only biologically. But also, spiritually – separated from life-giving communion with God. And then they would also be at risk of *eternal* death, if not for the merciful intervention of God – again by His Word, this time of Gospel-promise.
- But first, let's consider this covenantal Law Word. There is a negative sanction, a threat, promised. And implicitly, there is also the promise of life. "*Disobey*, and you will *die*." And implicitly, "*Obey*, and you will *live*." Later Reformed theology would call this the covenant of works, or covenant of life, at creation. This is what God's Law still says: "Do this, and live – forever! Fail to do this, and die – forever!"

- In fact, we are *still* obligated to obey God, with a perfect, never-ceasing obedience. Why? Because we are made in the image of God. We owe our Maker perfect, loving obedience. If we do that, we will inherit eternal life. If we don't, we are doomed to eternal death. Does that mean we can keep the covenant of works? NO. WAY. We *can't* obey – at all – thanks to Adam's sin. We've inherited two seemingly impossible problems from Adam: first, his *guilt*. He acted on our behalf, as a public, covenant person. His sin is our sin. Adam's guilt is imputed to us – and we share in its penalty. And second, we inherit his *corruption*. So here's our misery: We are sinners and so we die, because Adam sinned. We are spiritually dead, because Adam sinned. We are at risk for eternal death, that is, hell, because Adam sinned. We are now sinners, and merit hell for ourselves, and this, too, because Adam sinned.
- Every human being since Adam is not only guilty because of his sin. We are all *conceived* in sin – corrupted by sin from the moment of conception. Except for Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb. In Psalm 51, David repents of his grievous sin with Bathsheba. In verse 5, David confesses that this sin results from his sinfulness. He confesses he was sinful, even from the womb: *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.* David sins because he *is* a sinner, *from* conception. Same for us. Same for every son and daughter of Adam and Eve.
- When God sends the flood to judge the whole world, He reveals His why in Genesis 6:5: *The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every thought of his heart was only evil continually.* Of course, the flood didn't change the sinful nature of man. After the flood waters recede, the LORD declares His mercy in Genesis 8:21, despite that on-going corruption of humanity... *"I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth."* We've got the same heart that provoked God to send the Great Flood. In Jeremiah 17:9, the LORD says this through His prophet, as He condemns Judah for its sin: *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?* We are corrupt at the core of our humanity.
- God's verdict of all of humanity is clear, in Romans 3:10-12: ¹⁰ *as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."* And Romans 8:7-8, from the New King James Version: *...the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor*

indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh (that is, the unregenerate) cannot please God.

- This is our condition in Adam, outside of Christ. We are sinfully rotten to the core. We are, in theological terms, “totally depraved.” That means every part of our humanity is corrupted by sin. Our hearts are sinful, our minds are hostile to God, our wills are bound to our sin – so that we can only choose evil, and *not* the things of God. This is our sinful corruption. Our poisoned nature.
 - And this situation leaves us helpless and hopeless. We have no ability to remedy this ruin. We have no hope to save ourselves from the sin and death which entangles us. And so, we need a second Adam, one who would undo the ruin Adam brought. This is the misery of a once wonderful world, now ruined – but the Gospel brings a certain hope of rescue to us, and of a wonderful world, restored. Misery replaced with everlasting comfort.

- ❖ Our passage from Romans 5 especially makes clear our guilt, because of the ruin of Adam’s sin. But thanks be to God, there is this second Adam – who brings redemption and renewal.
 - Verses 12-14: ¹² *Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—* ¹³ *for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.* ¹⁴ *Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.*
 - Sin came into the world through one man, that is, Adam. His rebellion opened the floodgates of sin and its consequence, death. Thus, the ruin of the world and ourselves. Thus, the MISERY which we confess in Heidelberg. Death spread to *all* men because *all* sinned in Adam. His sin is our sin. And the evidence that this is true is that death *reigned* from Adam to Moses, that is, before the law was formally given by God at Sinai. The Law, as given through Moses, *magnifies* sin. Nonetheless, the evidence that humanity is universally sinful is that everyone, since Adam, *dies*. That’s the miserable, undeniable reality.
 - But Adam, thanks be to God, is not the end of the story. Of course, God had spoken a promise to Adam and Eve in the shadow of their fall, the first Gospel promise. A Seed of the Woman would come, and would crush the serpent’s

head. This would be the reversal of the ruin and misery Adam and Eve brought into God's good world – and upon all of us.

- Verses 15-17: *¹⁵ But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. ¹⁶ And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. ¹⁷ For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.*
 - Here, Jesus is presented as the second Adam. Adam represented the old humanity. Jesus represents the new, elect humanity. He brings the free gift of redemption, to reverse the ruin of Adam's trespass. Jesus brings abounding grace for many. His elect and redeemed through the ages will be a multitude no man can number! Paul describes how this grace of Christ's redemption has super-abounded, to reverse the misery of Adam's ruin. Christ restores us to an even greater height than that from which we fell!
 - Human history since the fall of Adam has been a swarm of countless trespasses, a multitude of sins against God and His glory – misery magnified! But then came the free gift of God, with Jesus Christ. A gift of *grace* for those who deserve God's eternal disfavor; and *righteousness* for those who are worthy of condemnation; and *life* for those who are doomed to eternally die. Adam's sin led to death, but Jesus' righteousness leads to life. And so, Jesus takes our guilt, and gives us His righteousness. He takes our death, and gives us His life. He takes our misery, and gives us His comfort.
- And then verses 18-19: *¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. ¹⁹ For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.*
 - Again, Paul, by the Spirit, gives us the blessed contrast between Adam and Christ, between ruin and redemption, between misery and comfort. Adam's one trespass led to condemnation for all of us. Adam is the covenant head of the old humanity. Christ's one act of righteousness leads to justification and *life* for all of us, who are chosen in Him from eternity, and united to Him by faith. Christ is the covenant head of the new humanity – the elect, those redeemed by the

grace of God. Jesus' one act of righteousness refers to the Cross. And as Philippians 2 makes clear, the Cross is His consummate act of obedience, after an entire human life of *perfect* obedience, as He fulfills all the righteousness of the Law on our behalf. Jesus is the Righteous One, and the Lamb of God, without spot or blemish, that is, without sin.

- By Christ's obedient life and death, we are justified. Remember what the Law demands and promises? It demands a perfect righteousness, and promises the reward of eternal life for it. It also threatens death for those who do not *fulfill* that perfect righteousness. Adam failed. You and I fail. Misery! But, dear Christian, Jesus did it all *for* you. He lived the life of perfect righteousness *for* you, and won the reward of eternal life *for* you. He died the death you deserve, on the Cross. And He rose from the dead – His Father's reward of life for His obedience, which He freely shares with you as a gift! Adam's disobedience made you a guilty sinner. That's your misery. Jesus' obedience makes you a righteous, justified sinner – and heir of eternal life. That's your only comfort, in life and in death.

And so our third point: God made us in His image, but we are now totally *disabled* before God – unless we are born again.

As we have seen, we have that twofold problem, thanks to Adam's sin: guilt AND corruption. Our justification unto life in Christ deals with that first problem. So how does Christ deal with that second problem? That's what question and answer 8 begins to address: "But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do good and inclined to all evil?" (Notice how this question sums up the implications of answer 7.) The answer: "Yes, unless we are born again by the Spirit of God."

- ❖ We've considered how Adam's sin has made us guilty, and corrupted us totally. Another term for "total depravity" is "radical corruption." We are corrupt to the root. And that results in our "total inability" to do good before God, or to choose the things of God. We've considered a slew of Scriptures already to address that reality.
 - We cannot choose to do good. We cannot choose the things of God. We cannot even believe the Gospel. We make choices all the time, but our wills are bound to our fallen nature. Adam uniquely was able to choose the good – but with the possibility of falling. He was "able to sin, and able not to sin." That is not our natural condition after the fall.
 - In our sinful, corrupt, natural state since Adam, we are not able to choose or do good before God. We are dead in our trespasses and sins, Ephesians 2. If our wills

are to choose the good, the things of God, our natures must be changed. I need to be raised from spiritual death, to spiritual life. That's something only God can do, and thanks be to God, He DOES – for those chosen in Christ, at His appointed time. By His Word and Spirit. As Ephesians 2:4-5 reminds us as Christians, *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved.* And Ephesians 2:8-9 reminds us that faith is God's gift, not our doing.

- ❖ This is what we call "regeneration." This is how God, in Christ, by His Spirit, addresses the problem of our corruption, of our wills which are bound to our sinful nature. Jesus addresses it this way in John 3: *...unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God... unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again." The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*
 - God makes us alive. God gives us the gift of faith. The Holy Spirit causes us to be born again – to see and enter the kingdom of God. This is all thanks to the sovereign initiative of God and His grace.
 - You were helplessly bound in your sin. As Jesus says, *Whoever sins is a slave to sin. But if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.* By His Word and Spirit, God made you alive with Christ. He liberated your will by regeneration. Now you've seen and entered the kingdom of God. Now you freely choose and delight in Christ and the things of God.
 - But that doesn't mean that we are restored to Adam's state before the fall. That doesn't mean we are "able to sin and able not to sin." In fact, that's a pretty big mistake some Christians will make. "Now that I'm born again, I can choose not to sin." Not so fast. Stay humble, my friends. Don't forget Romans 7, 13-25. As Heidelberg 115 will remind us much later: "But can those converted to God keep these commandments perfectly? No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God's commandments."
 - Regeneration is not total in this life. Sanctification by the Holy Spirit is the growth of this new life. And glorification will be the perfection of that regeneration – when our bodies and souls are finally freed from all our

corruption. This world will be perfectly renewed and so will we – misery banished for us, to our everlasting comfort. In the mean time, sin remains in us, and still touches every part of our humanity. However, we now delight in the Law of God and the Gospel things of God – even as we struggle against our remaining sin. Our wills are liberated to repent and believe the Gospel, and our God-given faith begins to work through love.

And so, we long for the day when the ruin of Adam’s sin will be completely reversed. When our misery will fully give way to God’s comfort. Christ has redeemed us from the guilt of our sin, He has renewed us by His Word and Spirit. And when Christ returns in glory, He will completely redeem us, body and soul, from sin, death, and misery forever. Then we will dwell with God in a perfectly wonderful world, the new heavens and new earth, the home of righteousness. And so, we pray, “Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus!”

Let’s pray: Father, we thank You for revealing to us the truth of our misery in Your Law, reminding us of the height from which we’ve fallen, and assuring us that Christ is our only comfort, in life, in death, and forever. For we pray in His Name. Amen.