

Hy 49:1,2  
Hy 1A  
Ps 3:1,2  
Ps 119:27,29  
Hy 27:1,2,3,4  
Romans 8:28-39  
Lamentations 3:19-39  
Lord's Day 1

Yarrow, September 20, 2009

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We're modern Canadians, bending our minds again over the *Heidelberg Catechism*. That seems a bit odd, because this Catechism was written nearly 4½ centuries ago in a far-off land and culture – and that reality surely puts this Catechism out of touch – does it not? – with our real needs....

It turns out that we're wrong on the point. The Lord God had given His Word to people on earth, with the intent that the human race would know Him, trust Him, find comfort and encouragement in life's tears and struggles. 500 years ago (and for many years before that too) the Bible was a closed book in Europe. It's not that people did not know about the Lord God; they did, but had a very warped perception of Him in their minds, and that in turn robbed them of so much comfort. It was understood, for example, that you through your works had to earn God's favour. So when things went wrong in your home (be it sickness, be it a bad crop, be it family tension) you had to do more good works, had to try harder in His service.... We understand that this sort of teaching brought its own unsettledness.

By the grace of the Lord, a wave of change began to sweep through Europe. Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, William Tyndale translated it into English, John Calvin's cousin translated it into French. The invention of the printing press allowed for the distribution of the Bible among the plain people, so that in turn they could read it for themselves.

But to find their way through the Bible and oversee its contents needed its own form of assistance. In the district of the Palatinate, Elector Frederick III wanted the young people of his kingdom (and the not so young) taught in the way of the Lord God, and so he instructed two brilliant young men to write up a Catechism. These two men, Caspar Olevianus and Zachariah Ursinus, plundered the writings of people like John Calvin (he was born exactly 500 years ago this past summer) and drew up the *Heidelberg Catechism*. This document was distributed throughout Frederick's kingdom (and beyond), and eagerly consumed by the people – not only because it provided a reliable overview of what the Bible teaches but even more because it presented the Bible's wealth in such a comforting manner. Here was encouragement in the midst of life's big struggles!

Life continues to have its struggles, even for very modern people as we are. We too need encouragement, more, we too need a perspective on life that gives us reason to be optimistic when we feel down and nothing goes our way. The *Heidelberg Catechism* may be old, but it can still give us delightful perspective for life's trials, and so we readily set ourselves again to its study.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

## **THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST GIVES GREAT OPTIMISM IN LIFE'S VALLEYS.**

1. Who embraces the optimism,
2. When is the optimism valid,
3. What does the optimism produce.

### **1. Who embraces the optimism**

The key concept in Lord's Day 1 is surely the term 'comfort'. In the context of this Lord's Day, that well-known word catches the notion of security, of assurance, encouragement. That's why I speak in my theme of 'optimism'. Being optimistic and upbeat is the mood this Lord's Day conveys.

Optimistic and upbeat: how we wish we could always share that mood! In point of fact, that's a sense that seems far removed from our daily reality, and that's why the first question we need to address today revolves around the question of Who. Specifically, this Lord's Day uses repeatedly the pronoun 'I' and 'my' and 'me'. But: who is meant by those pronouns? Would it be right for me to put my name where the pronoun 'me' is written in the Lord's Day? Could you put your name there??

Of course, the 'I' and the 'my' in this Lord's Day refers in first instance to the persons who wrote the Catechism. We read in our Lord's Day the personal faith of Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus. Yet there was a reason why they wrote the Catechism in Question and Answer style. The idea was that teachers throughout the kingdom teach the material of the Lord's Day to the people of the nation, and then ask their students the questions written in this Catechism – to which the students were to reply with the words of the answers. That is: the individual young people of the Palatinate were to memorize the words of Lord's Day 1 and then be able to feed back an answer when the teacher asked them Question 1: "What is your only comfort in life and death?"

But there's the question again. Our Young People at school have to memorize, say, a bit of Shakespeare. The lines they have to learn includes pronouns like "I" and "me" and "my" – and yet we all understand that the lines our students recite are not about themselves; they couldn't put their name where the pronoun 'me' is written. The memory work is more of an academic thing than a personal confession. Well, is that true in relation to the Catechism also? As we get our YP to learn this Lord's Day, are they to put their own name into it or are we simply getting them to learn some lines? As we read Lord's Day 1 together, are we uttering the faith of men who died long ago *or* we talking here about ourselves? Who is this Lord's Day really about?

The question is critically important. When the Lord God created the human race back in the time of Genesis 1, He established a bond of love with all mankind; Adam and Eve (and in them the whole human race) was on God's side. But we rejected God, disobeyed Him, and joined the Devil's side in the great Antithesis. The Lord, though, did not leave all people in the misery into which we plunged ourselves, but He chose some for Himself and then gave up His only Son so that He might atone for their

sins, redeem these chosen from Satan's side and restore them to God's side. And see: that's exactly the vocabulary of Lord's Day 1. "I am not my own, but belong with body and soul ... to ..." –not the devil anymore, but "to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ" who "has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil." This is powerful language, and it's saying that I'm restored to God's side, am back in His favour. Well now, can you take those words on your lips as *a reality for yourself*, or must we quote these lines as we would quote Shakespeare – an academic exercise without personal value? In other words, are you still on Satan's side *or* may you confess that you are back on God's side?? More: *how do you know??*

We realize: not everyone in the Palatinate who was taught the *Heidelberg Catechism* and could recite Lord's Day 1 stick their own name in that Lord's Day – and so make the claim that he belonged to Jesus Christ and had been set free from Satan's power. At a minimum that is true only for believers. For that's what Jesus said, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever *believes in Him* should not perish but have life everlasting" (John 3:16). Yet the fact of the matter is that we have our questions and doubts in relation to our faith. Is my faith strong enough? How come I have so many doubts today? That's *life* in this fallen world: our 'faith level' (may I say it that way) goes up and down like a yoyo. When we're on the crest we may feel comfortable to put our own name in Lord's Day 1 and so confess that "I" belong to Jesus Christ, but when we're in the trough we feel that can't be true..., and we push Lord's Day 1 away as nice-sounding and something we know academically, but it surely isn't true for me....

Yet the Lord, congregation, would not have us doubt whether the rich gospel of Lord's Day 1 is in fact for you or me. We can put our name in that Lord's Day *not* on grounds of how we feel about our faith, nor on grounds that we are more obedient people than others (if that in fact might be true) but on grounds that *God has said so Himself*. Abraham belonged to God because God told him in plain language, "I establish My covenant between Me and you, ... to be God to you" (Genesis 17:7). The question was not how Abraham felt about God; the question was first of all *what God said about Abraham*. More, God's covenant was with Abraham *and the children God in wisdom entrusted to His care*. So Isaac should not wonder either whether he belonged to God; he was simply meant to take God's word at face value. And so it is with all the people of Israel; they belonged to God on grounds of God saying so. *They* were God's people, and the Philistines were not. *Their children* were God's children, and the Philistine children were not. For God claims for Himself *believers and the children of believers*, and He signifies and seals that glorious reality in the sacrament of holy baptism. That is the reason why each of us may recite the words of Lord's Day 1 as *true for myself*. God has claimed me for Himself, and now I *am obliged* to embrace God's words as true (for He doesn't lie), and so *dare* to stick my name in the rich confession of Lord's Day 1 – and then confess it eagerly, "Yes, I belong ... to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ! He has fully paid for all *my* sins with His precious blood, and has set *me* free from all the power of the devil." How rich, how delightfully rich!! On God's authority, this is about *me!!*

We come to our second point:

## 2. When is this optimism valid.

When can I draw comfort from the confession that I belong to Jesus Christ? Lord's Day 1 points us in the right direction with its first question: "What is your only comfort in life and death?" What, congregation, does that little phrase "in life and death" refer to? We hear that phrase, and our thoughts go to a funeral – for we well realize that we need comfort and reassurance at the death of a loved one. And so it is. But not all of us were at a funeral this past summer – and we all, I dare say, needed comfort, encouragement.

The reference to the phrase 'life and death', brothers and sisters, goes beyond the day of death. This particular phrase would catch every moment of our existence, from cradle to grave. Our daily existence is characterized by trouble, pain, frustration – and that's something we experience day by day. Then the question jumps at us: if I really belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ (and no longer to the devil), why do bad things still happen to me? Does my Saviour not love me after all? Or is He perhaps not powerful enough to stop Satan's attacks? And the long and short of our thinking is: the confession of Lord's Day 1 isn't of much value in the grunt of real life....

Who, congregation, is the Saviour to whom you belong? The revelation of Scripture is that this Saviour has defeated Satan on the cross of Calvary. More, Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven so that He is today King of kings, Ruler over God's entire world. So much is this Saviour sovereign that not a hair can fall from your head without the will of God. So, when things happen to us that we call 'bad', we need to recognize that the Lord allowed it, indeed, directed that it happen. So Joseph in Egypt could say to his brothers, "Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that *God sent me ahead of you*" (Genesis 45:5). Moses can say that when mould appears in your bathroom it is God who puts it there (Leviticus 14:34). Jeremiah adds, "Who can speak and have it happen if the LORD has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?" (Lamentations 3:37f). Hence Jesus' word to His disciples, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father" (Matthew 10:29). So: no hornet bites you without the Saviour-to-whom-you-belong permitting it. You cannot fail a test without that being the will of your heavenly Father. No cancer besets your body, no bone of yours breaks, no painful word is spoken in your hearing, unless your God allows it.

We don't like it that God allows bad things to happen to us, and we get puzzled: isn't God strong enough to stop it? What have I done wrong to deserve this? And the thought arises in our hearts: I have to try harder to win brownie points with Him.... The Great Reformation that washed over Europe nearly 500 years ago represented a wonderful *change* exactly because it offered Biblical answers to precisely such questions. If in fact the gospel is that Christ shed His blood to pay for my sins and deliver me from the power of the devil, if in fact I now belong to Him-who-is-sovereign-over-all, then *all the things He allows to happen in my life must be good for me!* To quote Joseph again, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). Paul echoes that same sentiment in Romans 8, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose" (vs 28).

I grant: we people look at the things that are happening in our lives, and we wonder how in the world that can work for good. We see cancer in the congregation, and we're convinced that that's simply bad – for the sick brother, for his family, for us all. But here, congregation, we need to remember that we are *creatures*. Then yes, people can understand more than frogs; God has blessed us with great ability. But the fact of the matter is that we shall never get our minds around the thoughts and plans of *God*; how shall we *creatures* ever understand the *Creator*?! God is adamant through Isaiah: "... My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8f). Instead of trying to understand the details of why the Lord lets cancer happen in my family or lets the potatoes burn on the stove or lets me go to school with people who tease the micky out of me, I'm instructed –and therefore allowed– to entrust myself to my Saviour's faithful care in the conviction that He makes no mistake. I may *believe* that the bad things happening in my life work for good – though today I see no good in it whatsoever.

This, brothers and sisters, is the attitude of Scripture. Joseph undoubtedly struggled in Egypt with the enormous question of "*why*". Years later, when his brothers came to visit, Joseph finally understood something of how God was working all things for good, including his kidnapping and sale as a slave. Jeremiah grieved at the fall of the city of Jerusalem, but he had hope and perspective and could be optimistic in disaster because of Who his God was – and so he could confess that "it is good for a man to bear the yoke while his is young" (Lamentations 3:27). He knew: God was busy in His infinitely wise way to bring about growth in His people Israel. In *that* situation the hand of God pressed upon His people so that they might repent of their sins and return to the LORD (cf 3:39ff). The apostle to the Hebrews encourages his readers to accept humbly the instruction the Lord lays on their path in the school of life because, he says, "our God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness" (Hebrews 12:10). Instead, then, of us knocking our heads on trying to understand the details of why bad things happen to us (and there's negative things happening in every family living on this fallen earth), the Lord would have us be optimistic and positive as He teaches us lessons in the school of life. When bad things happen, my reaction isn't to be: God mustn't love me; it must instead be: my God is so interested in me that He's forcing me to grow! You see, that's the thrust of Lord's Day 1: "He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, *all things must work together for my salvation.*" Talk about a positive way to look at things!! Here's *optimism* for the life of the Christian!

And let me add right away, congregation: when God gives trouble in a brother's or sister's life, He does that not simply for the benefit of that particular child of His. By giving cancer in a household the Lord obviously touches more than the patient himself, but He reaches also into the lives and thinking of the family members. Equally, by giving cancer to a young member God reaches into the lives of all the young people so that they all are made to recognize that life and health is not to be taken for granted but is very much a gift of His grace. Here's encouragement for us all: our God does not ignore us or reject us as damned sinners; instead, in the events as they unfold in our congregation He graciously busies Himself with us all, in one way or the other, to make us grow in Him, to prepare us for future service in His kingdom. That He involves Himself with us for our good: *how delightfully exciting!*

That's His mercy in Jesus Christ – to whom we belong! No wonder David could sing as he did in Ps 119: "It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees" (vs 71). And no wonder too that Paul could be so enthusiastic in that passage from Romans 8 when he says that there's nothing in all creation able to separate him from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Troubles and hardships and persecution and famine and nakedness and danger and sword can all happen to the child of God – and they do too. But none of it can separate us from the Lord of God in Jesus Christ, for the Lord our God is always working all things for our good – including the troubles and hardships and nakedness and swords of life. In the midst of life's concrete troubles, here is comfort, is encouragement indeed! In the words of Jeremiah: "I have *hope*," more, "His compassions never fail; they are new every morning" – even when disaster hits us squarely in the face.

This is the glorious gospel of the Bible. The gospel is not about how to enter heaven (though that is certainly part of it), but the gospel is about how to cope with the concrete struggles and aches of this broken life. Here, daily, where life hurts, *that's* where God meets us with His encouragement, and *that's* where the Christian confesses the delightful perspective of Lord's Day 1. *Here* we may be optimistic and positive!

It all leads to a delightful consequence, and that's our last point:

### 3. What does this optimism produce?

That's easy: *thankfulness*, and a *life* of thankfulness. We leave this building shortly and return to the real aches and pains of this broken life. Nothing you heard today takes away your cancer, and nothing you heard today will insure you against a traffic accident tomorrow.

But you do have perspective now in life's trials, and therefore optimism: your Saviour is at work in your life for your good, and that's a decidedly stimulating and invigorating prospect! Despair in the face of life's trials?? Not if I know my God is behind the trials for my good! Give up when I'm feeling down? Not if I know that my Father has me safe in His hands and He's preparing me today for greater service in His kingdom tomorrow! No, I need not understand the ins and outs of why this or that must happen to me or to a loved one. But it's enough to know that I belong to such a God, and that perspective stimulates to greater service. It's the confession of Lord's Day 1: "therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life" –I'll certainly receive the crown of glory one day; even trouble won't separate me from God's love!– and meanwhile He "makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him." That perspective, the optimism of faith, *drives to thankful service of such a God!*

So then: shall modern Canadians bend their minds over an ancient, foreign Catechism?? Of course we shall! This Catechism catches the wealth of Scripture so wonderfully, and so in today's broken world I shall buy into the Catechism's optimism – and tackle life with renewed fervour.

I belong!! How rich I am!