

The Fundamental Question

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Corinthians 1:1-11

Heidelberg Catechism: Lord's Day 1

I have titled this sermon...the fundamental question.

What is the fundamental question?

If you can figure that out...

Then you can begin to search for the answer.

Cameron is reading through 'The Hitchhikers guide to the galaxy'.

In there they have the answer...but are searching for the question.

It is the wrong way round.

But what is the question is one that we still need to wrestle with.

I think that the most fundamental question is...what is my only comfort?

What is the one thing that keeps me going...regardless of what life sends my way?

When we are talking about comfort...

we shouldn't confuse that with our word 'comfortable'.

What will make me comfortable?

More money, better job, grander holidays, a bigger house/TV car.

What about the furniture we sit on or the bed we sleep in.

These things might make us more comfortable with life...

But is that what God is on about...our comfort?

No...God is on about his glory.

Is that what the Cato writers are on about in the Heidelberg Catechism in the questions we have asked?

No...the answer has to do with God and our relationship with him.

What comforting words...My only comfort is that I belong to him!

All people need comfort in the ordinary problems of human existence.

Thousands of years ago a man named Lamech named his son Noah, which means comfort.

'He named him Noah and said, 'He will comfort us in our labour and painful toil of our hands.'" (Gen 5:29)

A crying baby is soothed, comforted, at the breast of her mother.

When Asher wakes up in the middle of the night with a nightmare...

It is usually enough for us to say 'It's OK Asher, be quiet, mum and dad are with you.'

When he hears us talking to him he calms down, he is alright, he is comforted.

A teenager also looks for comfort...but in a different way to the baby or small child.

Maybe they want that secret hug from mum...

They want dad to bring the good-night kiss and linger for a talk.

Everyone in our world wants to be comforted...

The people around us are no different than we who sit here in the pews.

But the people in our community go seeking everywhere else...

Some try and drown their sorrows in alcohol.

Some try to escape trouble by running away.

People go looking for new love.

Others try and find comfort in other religions...

Hindu meditation or Muslim rituals.

Notice how so many people use counselors today...

trying to find peace and comfort for a restless soul.

But all these escapes are bound to fail.

Why?

Because they don't tackle the root cause of our problem...

Sin...offenses against a holy God.

It is God we offended against back in the Garden of Eden.

It is God we continue to offend.

To begin to find comfort and peace we need to deal with this problem of sin.

The second question and answer, you will notice starts with this...

Recognizing how great our sin and misery are.

When we recognise that we begin the search for comfort in the right place...

With God.

The golden thread running through the whole Bible is the concept of comfort.

After our fall into sin, the Lord God sought us out, gave up His only Son to pay for sin – *comfort*.

The word comfort basically means to make strong, to invigorate, to fortify.

literally translated it means "with strength."

When the people of God were in exile because of their sin and rebellion God sent Isaiah to speak with them.

To bring a word of comfort...he spoke of God bringing an everlasting comfort.

They did not need Isaiah to shake the finger at that point and say, "I told you so"; they needed to hear that God still cared for them and that there was hope.

And that is the word that came from God to Isaiah, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins" (Isaiah 40:1,2).

God's says he has dealt with their sin...and that brought comfort.

The strength to go on.

The burden of having offended God was lifted.

The situation may not have changed...but the outlook of the people had changed.

God has dealt with our sin through Jesus Christ...and that brings us comfort.

Our situation in this life may not have changed...

We still struggle with sickness and stress and pain...

but our outlook has changed..

Comfort makes us strong.

Comfort gives strength to carry on, comfort is survival power.

What my situation is today?

True we are not in exile as the people of Is 40 were.

But each of us has pain in our lives, each of us faces trouble of some sort, distress.

Specifically in the midst of that distress, of that pain, we say what God has told us in His word, "I am the property of Jesus Christ," and Christ has paid for all my sins so that I'm reconciled to God, the curse of sin is gone from my life, I live under the blessing of the Lord – come what may.

That theme is picked up in the introductory Lord's Day of the Heidelberg Catechism: "what is your only comfort in life and death?"

They don't start by asking the question..., 'What is your only confidence?' 'What is your only stability?' 'What is your only enjoyment?' 'What is your only goal?' 'What is your only reason for existence?' All these things together they wrap it into this term; "What is your only comfort?"

When Anita and I traveled through Europe we went with the tour bus to the ancient city of Heidelberg.

We climbed the stone steps leading from the edge of the old inner city to the castle above.

We arrived at the top for a beautiful sunset through the windows of the ruined castle, with a golden sun warming the city below and the river on which it lies.

The thing that struck me was...

why is this city on the tourist stop for busloads of people?

It is famous, not for its white wine, but the small catechism book published in the city in 1563, and still used throughout the Reformed world.

The message of this Catechism's message is one of comfort.

The only comfort in life and in death.

Even though this is the theme...it is one etched in sweat and tears and even blood.

The city was the capital in an important province in Germany and for many years swung between being a Protestant area and a Catholic one.

People on both sides suffering for their faith.

In 1563 Fredrick III ordered the composition of a new catechism for the Palatinate...

To overcome some doctrinal controversy and church squabbles.

Zacharius Ursinus and Casper Olevianus were the credited as the primary authors, who worked as part of a team to put it together.

It was a catechism that was positive and biblical.

It was to be a framework for catechetical instruction, guide for preaching and confessional form of unity.

In the midst of the struggle for the Protestant faith to grow and blossom...

the authors thought the first question to be dealt with is this one of comfort...

Words that, themselves, have brought so much comfort (used at funerals).

The comfort we have is that we belong to Jesus...

We have the God of all comfort watching over us, caring for us in the nightmare of our lives.

We belong to Jesus...that is the confession of the church...

and it comes out in the Heidelberg catechism.

The fact that we belong to Jesus is the one fact that makes all the difference.

And it makes us different.

All of me belongs to Jesus.

I belong to him for all of time.

How did that happen?

Through the purchase and deliverance of Jesus, 'who has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood'.

How do I know?

Christ, by his Holy Spirit assures me of eternal life.

How do I show it?

By my readiness to live for him.

The people who made this confession at the time of the Reformation were being persecuted for their faith.

They feared for their lives.

But they said...even if I get killed...I belong to Jesus...body and soul.

This confession of the Reformers comes down through the ages to us...

And the thoughts of this confession still bring us comfort.

And we need to recognise it as more than just a historical document that gives us warm fussy feelings as we read the words.

We need to be assured that this comfort of belonging to Jesus is THE answer to life's deepest question.

It is the only real comfort available to us.

Without this comfort...life is senseless and death is hopeless.

We need to be very sure on this...there is only one comfort.

We are confessing to each other and before God that there is only One Way, one Saviour and to know him is your only comfort.

What is so amazing is that we have a God who understands our grief, pain, and suffering.

Christ understands your grief

Paul, in the letter to the Corinthians teaches us that pain...

Whether physical, emotional, whatever...should drive us to trust God for help.

Because he is the Father of compassion, and the God of all comfort.

And He's the God of all comfort because He's been there...

He's done that.

He's known sorrow.

He's seen the pain of losing a loved one.

He's suffered physical pain...

that makes Him able to comfort us as no one else can.

When Jesus stood at the graveside of his friend Lazarus he wept.

It shows Jesus cares enough for us to weep with us in our sorrow.

He entered into the human experience with us.

And the human experience inevitably includes death and suffering.

But, thankfully, God didn't just leave us there.

The apostle Paul noted that troubles in life can help us shift our perspective from the external and temporal...that is, the things we see, and the things that are temporary,

to the internal and eternal...that is, to those things deep inside us, and the things that last forever.

In 2 Cor. 1:9, Paul writes: Indeed in our hearts we felt the sentence of death.

That's pretty deeply felt suffering...

But he goes on to explain:

But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves,
but on God, who raises the dead.

Paul was focusing on the eternal reality of the omnipotent God of the resurrection...
and that was a source of comfort and hope for him.

Then, in verse 10, he notes that "on Him we have set our hope."

One of the seemingly great paradoxes of our Christian life, is that, often, the grace of God is most fully and completely experienced,
not when things are wonderful, when life's circumstances are great,
but when circumstances are the most critical,
in what we might call the worst of times.

But again, Paul reminds us in verse 9: "this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead..."

The same God that Paul earlier gave these important titles: The Father of compassion, the God of all comfort... He's the one Paul is reminding us to rely on.

The source of all comfort – note the word all.

The source of all comfort is God Himself.

God's grace also includes this comfort, received from Him,
which enables us to comfort others.

We can channel that comfort through prayer, we can channel that comfort through practical service,

But God uses us – you and me, to provide comfort, to be the tools of His compassion, to a hurting world.

It starts in our own family, and in our church family.

Sometimes our presence is all that's needed...

because our presence speaks in ways words cannot speak.

This isn't because of something in us...again, God is the source, but He uses us.

Once during Queen Victoria's reign, she heard that the wife of a common labourer had lost her baby. Having experienced deep sorrow herself, she felt moved to express her sympathy. So she called on the bereaved woman one day and spent some time with her. After she left, the neighbours asked what the queen had said. "Nothing," replied the grieving mother. "She simply put her hands on mine, and we silently wept

together."

Another story to help illustrate this idea:

A little girl was sent on an errand by her mother. She took much too long in coming back. Her Mother asked for an explanation when she finally did return. The little girl explained that on her way she had met a little friend who was crying because she had broken her doll. "Oh," said the mother, "then you stopped to help her fix her doll?" "Oh, no," replied the little girl. "I stopped to help her cry."

In our Christian lives, in times of difficulty or suffering, it's often helpful to talk to someone who can relate to your experience.

But even if we can't find that person we can know the source of real compassion, and real comfort.

His compassion and comfort are revealed in His Word. The Word of God is living and active, and it's for this time and this place, whenever and wherever this time and place might be.

Conclusion

I hope you don't spend a wasted lifetime trying to find the source of your only comfort.

Reflect on the words of the Catechism...

Our only comfort...in life and in death...

Is that I belong, body and soul (completely) to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.