

# The Heidelberg Catechism

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# Our Comfort, Then Our Misery

## (Q. 1–11)

### Scripture

**1 Corinthians 6:19** The famous opening of the Heidelberg Catechism bases our “comfort” in the fact that we belong to Christ, rather than to ourselves.

**Romans 8:7** The catechism presents the misery of sin as our damaged nature, which can no longer live as God intends us to live.

**Hebrews 9:27** The catechism presents the second consequence of sin—guilt before God our just judge.

### Prayer

Loving God, be with us and guide us as we study the Heidelberg Catechism. Guide us to deeper understanding of our own faith by helping us understand this document. Help us to bring our experience and knowledge into conversation with the countless millions of Christians who have used and loved this catechism. Give us a richer understanding of what you have taught in your Word, that we may know with full assurance that in life and death we belong to our faithful Savior. Amen.

### Introduction

As we begin, let’s look at how the Heidelberg Catechism is organized. Actually, it has several different patterns. The first, and most obvious, is the question-and-answer format. This makes the whole document flow as a conversation, with each answer prompting the next question. It is also a teaching device. A minister could have members of a class memorize the answers section by section. This would be the beginning, not the end of the process. By memorizing the catechism’s answer, you wrap your mind around one way to deal with a topic. Then you know the catechism’s answer well enough that you can engage in discussion on it, whether you agree with it or not. You can also begin to put it to the test as an interpretation of Scripture, looking up the texts in the notes and thinking of other relevant passages.

Second, and a somewhat later addition, is the division of the catechism into fifty-two “Lord’s Days.” This is another teaching device: in weekly increments the whole catechism can be taught over the course of a year. In the Dutch Reformed tradition, the week’s section of the catechism was the focus of the sermon in the Sunday evening service. Year after year, the congregation thought through the basic teachings of the faith, making for a well-rounded Christian education.

Third and most important, it is divided into a brief introduction and three main sections. The first is “Misery” or the human problem caused by sin. Second is “Deliverance” or God’s solution to that problem through Jesus Christ. The third is “Gratitude” or the life we live once Jesus delivers us. That three-part structure is a useful thing in itself. If anybody ever asks what Christians believe, you could hardly do better than “Misery due to sin, deliverance by Jesus Christ, and a life of gratitude toward God.” Some make the catechism’s three parts even catchier, calling them “guilt, grace, and gratitude.” The introduction and the section on misery are so short that we will deal with them both in this first session.

### **“You are not your own”**

“What is your only comfort in life and in death?” This much-beloved first question sets the catechism’s tone. This is not going to be a dry discussion of abstract ideas. Topic by topic the Heidelberg Catechism will deal with things that matter for our lives. Listen for the personal emphasis as you read along, as when the catechism considers how the teachings of the Apostles’ Creed “help” and “benefit” us.

When I asked a group of church officers what they found comforting about their faith, many of the top answers sounded a lot like the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism. Today, as in 1563, Christians feel deeply the benefit that comes through the work of Christ, whose sacrifice brings us forgiveness. Comforting too is the fact that God lovingly guides our lives and shapes the things that happen so we come to salvation and live the Christian life. This changes us in ways subtle and profound and we begin to want to please God.

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not to ourselves. We have actually lost our own claim to our lives. This idea is so opposite to our culture's priorities on autonomy and individual freedom that it is almost surprising we find it comforting!

Modern readers can stumble on the assertion that God guides all the events of life, even the painful ones. The catechism is not trying to claim that the bad things that happen are actually good, nor that God is cruel toward us. Rather, the authors want us to see God's loving hand working eternal good behind the scenes of both joy and pain. Without using the problematic word *predestination*, this question asserts traditional Reformed teachings, showing God as the source of our salvation and as the Lord of history. It is also echoing words of Jesus and Paul, as notes seven and eight show.

The second question points ahead to the outline of the catechism, which summarizes the whole of biblical faith. We need to know three things to live into the comfort our faith promises. First, briefly, we need to know our misery due to sin. Second, much more expansively, we need to know how Christ delivers us from that misery. Third, once we are freed, we need to know how to live in gratitude to God for this amazing gift. That structure is, in itself, one of the catechism's gifts to us. If you find it hard to articulate what you believe, here is a manageable summary of the Christian life: in Christ we move from guilt, through grace, to gratitude. Notice it does not ask what we need to know in order to be saved. As we will see later, faith is not primarily a matter of agreeing with points of doctrine. Faith is wholehearted trust in God. So, not *to have* faith, but *because* we have faith, we need to know these things.

### **“The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God”**

When the Heidelberg Catechism moves to the topic of sin, many readers are taken aback. We work hard to maintain positive self-esteem, assuring ourselves that we are good people. We treat guilt as a psychological problem, not our true spiritual state. Some churches have even given up the prayer of confession in their worship services. Listen to what we say when someone apologizes—“Don't worry about it! It's no problem!” We deny the sin instead of offering forgiveness. If this section seems too negative, the catechism says “Keep reading!” This is by far the shortest of the three main sections, but it is necessary. Sin is the problem Jesus came to solve. Lest readers despair at the problem, the catechism makes it a sort of misery sandwich, a thin slice of sin between rich slices of bread: comfort and deliverance.

According to the catechism, sin creates two problems, and both leave us miserable. First, sin damages our nature. After summarizing God's law in the command to love our neighbor, Question 5 asks us if we are able to do this

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“perfectly.” The response is a plaintive *no*. We may love God, but the commandment calls us to love with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind. Much of our attention and affection are often given to other things. We may love our neighbors, at least some of them, some of the time. Loving them all as we love ourselves, with the pure desire to seek their best, is another matter. Only perfection meets the standard, and anything less (which is everything we do) amounts to sin. The answer goes much further than many are comfortable with, having us say we actually “hate God and my neighbor.” The catechism is not trying to articulate our personal views of ourselves. It is trying to form our views according to biblical teaching, as the passages they cite will show (Romans 8:7; Ephesians 2:3).

The catechism is clear that this is not how God created us. Our inability to obey is brokenness, and the catechism attributes the damage to Adam and Eve. Whether one believes in a historical Eden or not, Genesis provides a biblical way to talk about God's good creation and the problems created by bad human choices. Question 9 says they “robbed themselves” of the ability to keep God's law, supporting this with one of the catechism's most surprising biblical citations: the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. This parable, you might note, says nothing about the fall or damaged free will. However, in the early church, in the Middle Ages, and even in Martin Luther's preaching, the one beaten and robbed was understood as humanity. In the fall, we were left, as the parable says, “half dead” and what was stolen was our ability to live as God commands. Christ is the Good Samaritan who rescued us and restored our ability. Here and in many other cases, the biblical citations are not proof texts; they bring faith into rich conversation with the Bible.

### **“And after that the judgment”**

Since today free will is a core value, the theological idea that we have lost the ability to obey God has fallen on hard times. We think we

have the ability to obey God perfectly, despite the annoying fact that we do not actually do it. The catechism's second source of our misery has fared no better, and this too is a matter of biblical teaching.

This second source of misery is that sin has changed our legal status before God. This is at least hinted at in the beginning of the section when the catechism says we know our misery by contrasting our lives with God's law. The metaphorical picture is that we are felons standing before our judge. God made fair laws; we broke them; we stand condemned. It is no excuse, according to the

catechism, that we have lost the ability to obey perfectly. God created us fully able—we human beings messed up our own abilities by disobeying. We who are reading the catechism did not start the problem ourselves, but our first parents did, and we all inherit the consequences.

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Here again we have a counter-cultural point. Few feel it is fair or just to condemn one person for something another person did. However, the idea is certainly not foreign to Scripture, or to Western theology since Augustine in the fifth century. In Question 11, when the catechism asserts that God is just to punish sin, notice that it cites Exodus 20:5, from the Ten Commandments, which includes the statement that “I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me.” Moreover, whoever caused the original problem, we shoulder the blame for all the sinning we ourselves do.

Troubling as well is the catechism's portrait of God as “terribly angry” and a “just judge,” ready to punish harshly. It might help to note that the catechism shows God angry with sin, rather than with the people who do the sinning—but maybe that will not help enough, since clearly the people receive the punishment. It is quite common for Christians to think that since, as Scripture puts it, God is love, wrath is out of the question. If we expect the Heidelberg Catechism to attribute to God the very modern psychological concept of unconditional love, we will be disappointed. Rather, the catechism will assert that God loves so much that forgiveness is readily available. However, there is a clear sense that God has expectations

of us, and that conditions are attached to living life in Christ. The Scripture citations invite us to begin exploring this issue as a biblical theme. The things to note in the text of the catechism, however, are the beautiful picture of the life God created us for before sin (Question 6) and the remarkable promise of redemption in Christ that fills the next, much larger section.

### **Spiritual Practice**

Take twenty or thirty minutes with your journal or some blank paper and write about your past or present experience with themes from this session's portion of the catechism. What in your faith provides comfort? What helps you to feel you belong to Christ? What feels like misery?

### **Questions for Reflection**

How does your own experience of the faith feel similar to or different from the comfort described in the opening question?

As you think about the world around us, which of the Heidelberg Catechism's descriptions of misery, or the consequences of sin, seems most realistic? Explain.

Look up three of the biblical citations from the notes to Questions 1–11. Discuss whether each one seems to clearly support the relevant lines of the catechism and, if any seem like a stretch, see if you can figure out why the passages were cited.