

## **My Only Comfort** **2018-08-05**

Submitted by Sandy Huttenga on Monday, January 27, 2014 - 1:48pm

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**Sermon Date:** Monday, January 27, 2014

Rev. John H. Noordhof

**Scripture:** Psalms 46:0, 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

**Text:** Lord's Day One (QA 1 and 2) from the Heidelberg Catechism

Dear people of God,

There is so much misery and suffering in the world today that we desperately need to speak of comfort and yet at the same time it seems despairingly futile to speak of comfort.

We desperately need to speak of comfort because the world groans in agony. There always seems to be the latest natural disaster that captures the headlines: the typhoon that struck the Philippines, or the earthquake that devastated Haiti or the tsunami that leveled whole towns in Asia, back in 2005. And what about the injustices caused by war and civil strife? The list here too is long: Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, genocide in Rwanda, southern Sudan, and on it goes. The world groans in need of comfort.

Then we look to our own lives. Whether in our immediate family or close friends, in the church or in the community, we know of those struggling with disease, even facing death. We know of broken relationships within marriages, addictions causing heartache, and cases of abuse that scar people for life. As a result, we need to speak of comfort.

At the same time, it seems almost futile to speak of comfort, because there is no end to trouble. The problems of the world have always been there. The history of the world seems to be one endless litany of disasters, wars, and injustices. How can we ever speak of comfort?

And there is nothing new with people struggling with sickness. Every human being ever born has had to face death. Psalm 90 says: "The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away." Eliphaz, in the book of Job, seems right on

target when he said, “Man is born to trouble.” Or as a Chinese proverb puts it: “The years of a lifetime do not reach a hundred, yet they contain a thousand years of sorrow.” Because of this, it seems futile to speak of comfort.

And yet that is what the catechism does, when it asks: What is your only comfort in life and in death? This question is one that the writers of the catechism had to struggle with personally. Its’ powerful answer did not come easy. Nor should it.

The year was 1563. In that year, Olevianus, a preacher and Ursinus, a theology professor, got together to write this document at the request of Prince Fredrick of Heidelberg. It was a difficult time, especially when we compare that era to the modern world. Infant mortality rates were high and life expectancy was short. There was no electricity, no modern medicine, no quick means of transportation. Most of what we take for granted to live a very good life was unknown back then. Life was hard and tough.

In addition to the usual hardships of the 16th century, there were the religious and political upheavals because of the Reformation. The world was turned upside down. As the catechism was being written, reports came to the city of Heidelberg that dozens of Huguenots, French followers of John Calvin, had been massacred while worshipping in church. Sixty people had been killed, two hundred wounded. In the years that followed, over ten thousand Huguenots would die for their faith.

And so the authors of the catechism knew what they were asking when they asked: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

As we begin to answer this question, we need to come to terms with what we mean by the word “comfort.” What image does the word comfort bring to your mind? Is it being able to snuggle into a lazy-boy chair, reading a book, before a warm fire on a cold wintry night? Is it enjoying the comforts of home, from the microwave to the dishwasher? For most of us, when we think of being comfortable, we think of being relaxed and at ease--far away from the strains and pressures of life. Is that the kind of comfort God provides for us? A type of vacation like one can enjoy on a cruise ship?

No, that's not exactly what the Bible has in mind when it uses the word comfort. Far from being a superficial idea to ease us through life, comfort in the biblical sense is a firm anchor in the midst of the storms of life. The image to have of comfort is not a warm feather quilt but a fortress. It's a comfort that is described in Psalm 46, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble...The Lord almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

Comfort is having a source of strength in the midst of weakness. It is having a place to flee to when hardships fall upon us. It is having help in the midst of trouble. It is having a fortress, a place of security and safety in the midst of the storms of life. Comfort is not achieved when we get away from it all; rather, it is something we can have in the midst of it all.

This type of comfort is desperately needed. Psalm 46 does not hide the difficulties of life. Rather it presents the challenges of life with the image of creation itself disintegrating, “though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.”

The mountains for the people of God in the Old Testament were a symbol of security and stability. After all, they last for generations. Water, on the other hand, was a symbol of chaos and disorder. In Psalm 46, the Psalmist pictures the mountains falling into the waters. A world coming apart. Who or what are you going to turn to in such a situation?

The Psalmist points us to God. He can be our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. He is, in the words of II Corinthians, “the God of all comforts, who comforts us in all of our troubles.”

But what determines the best form of comfort? What makes the biblical answer better than the answers of the world? Well, there are a number of criteria by which we can judge which form of comfort is the best and superior to all others.

The first criteria is whether the answer fits with the reality of life. Does it make sense? Does it ring true to how we experience things? This first criteria demands that the problems of humanity be properly identified and then a sufficient solution is found. Otherwise, there can be no lasting comfort.

The second criteria is whether the answer addresses the whole person. Does it deal with who I am and how I fit into this world? Does it adequately deal with human nature? Does it take care of all your real needs? If it doesn't, then the answer falls short.

The third criteria deals with the question of time. Does the solution offered provide an answer all of the time or just some of the time? Is it just as true for those who live in Asia as it is true for those who live in this community? Does it make any difference whether you are rich or poor, sick or healthy, young or old? Does it just deal with the present, or can it account for the past and offer hope for

the future? If the answer doesn't apply all the time, then there is something lacking.

The world tries to offer many different answers to the problems humanity faces. People turn to various forms of comfort to get them through the misery life can bring. Some turn to television, sports or the Internet as a means of distractions and withdrawal. Others use alcohol or some other drug to get rid of their problems. But we can quickly tell how superficial and inadequate these answers are. They don't meet the criteria. They don't solve the problems of life, they just cover them up. In the end, the problem is still there. There's no real comfort in that.

Others look to science and technology as the solution to all of humanity's woes. Medicine will eventually solve every disease. New inventions will solve our environmental problems. Human reason will overcome any obstacle we will face. This sounds so promising, but does it fit the criteria? Has science really solved the problem of the human heart? We have seen huge advances in the last hundred years, but we have also seen the slaughter of millions of people, from the Holocaust to the massacres in Rwanda. If technology is an answer to everything, why do find more and more relationships experiencing brokenness and discord? And has science solved the problem of death?

But in recent years we have seen a turning away from an emphasis on human reason and science and a turning towards a renewed emphasis on spirituality. The trend is to take the practice of Yoga that developed from the religions of India, perhaps add in some mediation practices from Buddhism, add some fasting from the Islamic tradition, and even throw in some Christian practices, like Sabbath keeping—mix it altogether and you have your own spiritual routine to suit you. But without any grounding, will such spiritual habits last?

Or perhaps, a person does seek to follow one of the other religions of the world faithfully. Do these religions provide a coherent view of the world? Do they adequately deal with the problem of human sin and misery? Do they offer a realistic hope for the future?

In contrast to the answers of the world and other religions comes the gospel message of Jesus Christ. The catechism summarizes this message by saying that my only comfort in life and in death is that I am not my own but belong—body and soul, in life and in death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

But does this answer really fit the criteria we set out earlier? Does it fit with reality we experience in the world? Does it deal with the whole person? Does it provide an answer no matter what life's situation? Can it really provide the comfort we need?

It has to be conceded that at times the gospel is presented in such a way that it does not fit these criteria. Too often the gospel is presented as merely saving souls from hell so that we can live forever in heaven. There is little concern about the present, about our life on earth, about caring for the creation, about seeking justice in society.

But the church is not in the business of saving souls. Our goal is not for our souls to enter into heaven. That's short-changing the gospel. Jesus came to save both body and soul. He was interested in both the physical needs of humanity as well as the spiritual needs. The healing of disease is just as important as the forgiveness of sins.

Nor is the gospel message just a remedy for death, as if we can be so heavenly oriented that we are no earthly good. Yes, the gospel offers hope for the future. In fact, the gospel is the only answer to death. But it is also the only answer for life right now on earth. Many Christians are shocked to learn that heaven is not our final destination. It's a renewed creation. That means the present creation must be precious in the sight of God.

The Bible does offer an all-embracing comfort to our troubled world. The catechism reflects that biblical answer when it confesses: I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

This answer fits the criteria of true comfort. It deals with the reality of life. The root problem of humanity is uncovered; namely, sin. In addition, it focuses on both body and soul—on both the spiritual and material sides of life. As well, it touches upon both life and death. It is a very comprehensive answer.

As a result, it is just as appropriate today as it was in 1563 when it was first written. It is just as true for a Canadian as it is for an Asian person. That's because it is solidly rooted in God's Word and in the Bible description of comfort. As Psalm 46 describes it, "God is our refuge and strength and therefore we will not fear even though the world is falling apart all around us." We can find security in God. As II Corinthians puts it, "The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, comforts us in all our troubles."

It's a comfort that tackles the problems of life. It's a comfort that reaches to the whole person. It's a comfort that is true all of the time. We don't have to add to it. It is sufficient. As a result, it is the only true comfort there is. I belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

If that is the case, if the only comfort we need is Jesus Christ then we better know what this comfort is all about. What is all involved in this comfort? That's what the second question and answer of the catechism seeks to address. It says we need to know three things in order to really enjoy this comfort.

First, we must know our sin and misery. How have we drifted from God? Why is the world groaning under so much injustice and turmoil? Second, we need to know how we are set free from our sin and misery. How does belonging to Christ set us free? Why did Christ have to die on the cross? Third, we need to know how to express our thankfulness to God. How do we show in our lives that we belong to Christ? What is God's will for our lives?

These three aspects can be easily remembered by three words that begin with the letter S: sin, salvation, service; or to put it differently by three words that begin with the letter G: guilt, grace, and gratitude; and even by the letter D: death, deliverance, and discipleship. It's a basic way of presenting the gospel message, to those who do not know of this comfort.

People of God, what is your only comfort? In the midst of the trials and troubles of life, in the midst of death, what is your refuge and strength? When faced with the horrors of natural disasters shown on television can you still make this confession: I am not my own but belong, body and soul, in the life and in death, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ?

Is this confession a last remedy or a daily vitamin? This confession is often quoted at funerals. That is appropriate. This is our ultimate comfort. But this comfort is not meant to be reserved as some last remedy, to be offered only at the end of life. Rather, it is intended to be a daily vitamin. It is meant to give us strength as we live each day. As we head into a troubled world, we have a comfort in Jesus Christ that will get us through. Amen.

### **Prayer of response**

Father in heaven, we thank you for that comfort that we may have in Jesus Christ—a comfort spoken of already by your people in the Old Testament, by the Apostle Paul in the New Testament, and discovered a new in the Reformation. May we truly have that comfort as we confess our sin and misery, celebrate your

salvation in Christ, and live for your service by your Spirit. May your name be praised! In Jesus name we pray. Amen.