

FROM THE AUTHOR

AS I PUT THE FINISHING touches on this study of the Heidelberg Catechism, the 2012 Summer Olympic Games are beginning. As always at Olympics time, I find myself in front of the television, night after night. As always, I marvel at what human beings can do with their bodies. And as always, I have to remind myself that what the athletes are doing is *not* easy; they only make it *appear* that way.

The reality is that, to get to the Olympics for those few moments—in some cases, seconds—of glory, athletes exercise, struggle, and sacrifice for years. The human interest features make us care about the competitors we cheer for. They provide glimpses into the lives of these athletes, showing us how rigorous, even grueling, their training has been. We see film clips of very young boys taking their first swimming lessons and little girls in beginning gymnastic competitions. In the interviews, we hear what they have chosen and what, consequently, they have *not* chosen, for the perfecting of their sport. They have each spent a lifetime preparing themselves for their performances on the Olympic stage.

Our children face a future for which we must adequately prepare them. Our children will encounter times when they will desperately need a deep and vigorous grasp of the truths of God's Word. They will face temptations and long to give in. They will confront the horrors of a fallen world and question all they've been taught. They will know disappointment; they will feel grief so profound that it consumes their desire to go on living; and they will ache with the weariness of staying strong day by day in the face of grinding routine.

Why would we think that, in such demanding circumstances, our children will be able to live in the comfort God's Word provides if they have not trained for it? Why should we expect our children to remain rooted in the basics of the Christian faith if they do not know those basics well? How can we assume our children will have what they need in the face of temptation when there's been no disciplined practice in learning those things that would help them resist?

Our world is fallen. Suffering for our children is inevitable. The question is only how severely they will suffer and for how long. And not only is the world fallen, but our children themselves are sinners. Inside all of them is a traitor seeking to turn them from our God.

As parents, we long to protect our children from hurt and heartache. But we cannot. All we can do is to prepare them for it. How? What can we give our children that will enable them to go on clinging to God when they have no desire for him? What can we give them to guard their faith when there seems to be no way, in the light of what they're living, that the Christian faith could possibly be true? What can we give them heavy enough to counterbalance the weight of temptation when they feel desperate to give in?

We begin by giving them a profound familiarity with the rich truths of our faith. Christianity has answers for the agonizing questions posed by a sin-cursed world. The answers may not always be as detailed or as specific as we would like; but the answers are adequate. Those answers can only *be* adequate, though, when they are known. And those answers must be known so well that they are there to fall back on when our children are suffering too much to even ask the questions, let alone go digging for the answers.

How can we be sure that our children will know the truths of Scripture and the promises of God as well as all that? We can be sure of it by training, drilling, exercising our children in those truths and promises when they are young, when memorizing comes easily for them. In other words, we can do a great deal to prepare our children for real life by teaching them the great catechisms of the Protestant faith. A catechism takes the basic truths of Christianity and presents them in a careful, concise, question-and-answer format. The great catechisms were written by godly men who knew the Word of God well. These catechisms have stood the test of time. The Heidelberg Catechism, on which this book is based, is one of the oldest and the best.

We can train our children for life with all its uncertainties by having them memorize the answers to the catechism questions. We can discuss the catechisms with our children and compare them to Scripture. We can practice the catechisms together. We can review the questions again and again, until the answers come automatically. Then the rich truths of our faith are there for our children for the rest of their lives. They are there to undergird them when trials overwhelm, when temptations attack. Those truths become, for those who are profoundly familiar with

them, the foundation of a comfort big enough to see them through all of life and through death itself.

Does memorizing a catechism require hard work? Does discussing it thoroughly take time and discipline? Of course. Will working through catechisms always be fun? Will your children—or you for that matter—always feel like doing it? Of course not. Olympic athletes don't always feel like training either. But they know the reward it *might* bring. Even though that reward is perishable and uncertain, the athletes believe it to be of great enough value to make all their sacrifice and training well worth it. Of how much more value is it to train our children to stand strong in the face of life's greatest demands?

A catechism cannot and should not replace Scripture. But it is an invaluable aid in summarizing and remembering the most important teaching of Scripture. Learning a catechism doesn't guarantee a child's conversion. Knowing truth well is not the same as responding to truth and living in the light of it. But our children cannot respond to truth they don't know. They can't live in the light of truth with which they are unfamiliar. Helping children to learn well the truth of Scripture is where we begin. Knowing a good catechism is one of the best beginnings we can provide for our children.

This particular catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism, was arranged by its authors to be covered in a year. The questions and answers are divided into fifty-two Lord's Days. My personal opinion is that some of those Lord's Day sections are awfully ambitious—there is too much material to memorize in just one week. And all that material means a huge amount of biblical content to cover as well. For these reasons, although I have kept the basic arrangement of fifty-two sections, I have, in a few cases, made a Lord's Day section into a part one and a part two. If you are committed to working through the book in exactly one year, you will need to double up readings when you get to those Lord's Days that are divided into two parts.

The Heidelberg Catechism is a beautiful, rich, deeply devotional, and highly challenging resource for families. It has been a great joy for me to meditate on it enough to be able to create this book. I heartily recommend to you the memorization of this catechism, but I am confident that, to whatever degree you become more familiar with it than you have been, your life in Christ will be greatly enriched.

LORD'S DAY 1

Q1. WHAT IS YOUR ONLY COMFORT IN LIFE AND IN DEATH?

A. That I am not my own,
but belong—
body and soul,
in life and in death—
to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,
and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.
He also watches over me in such a way
that not a hair can fall from my head
without the will of my Father in heaven;
in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him,
Christ, by his Holy Spirit,
assures me of eternal life
and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready
from now on to live for him.

Q2. WHAT MUST YOU KNOW TO LIVE AND DIE IN THE JOY OF THIS COMFORT?

A. Three things:
first, how great my sin and misery are;
second, how I am set free from all my sins and misery;
third, how I am to thank God for such deliverance.

MONDAY

Do you ever imagine “what if—?” What if things went horribly wrong? What if you were seriously ill and were not going to get better? What if something happened to your home or to your parents? Because of sin, all kinds of bad things can happen in our world. Is there anything that is big enough to comfort us if the worst “what if’s” should happen?

The psalmist imagined “what if” in Psalm 46. He imagined: what if the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the sea? The psalmist comforted himself by remembering that, even then, God would still be our refuge, the place where we can go to be safe. God would still be our strength, and our “very present help,” even in the greatest trouble.

We aren’t ready to face life unafraid and live it fully until we know we have something big enough to comfort us in any “what if.” **Read Psalm 46:1–3.**

TUESDAY

To whom do you belong? If you belong to yourself, there is no one but you to make sure you have all you need. If you belong to yourself, you have to make all the choices about what is best for you. You have to keep yourself well and safe. If you belong to yourself, you have to find some way on your own to pay for all your sin and to be so good that you please God. What a dreadful burden it would be to belong to yourself alone.

It is so much better to know we belong to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He loved us and willingly suffered God’s wrath at sin so we wouldn’t have to. If we belong to Jesus, he has bought us, paying for us with his own blood. Having paid so great a price, he will never allow us to perish. Our bodies and our souls, whether we live or whether we die, are safe in the hands of one who loves us with so great a love. **Read Isaiah 43:1b–3a and 1 Corinthians 6:19–20.**

WEDNESDAY

We know that our faithful Savior Jesus Christ will provide everything we need because of what he has already done for us. Our very greatest problem is that we are sinners. We can never solve that problem by ourselves. That’s a problem for us in two ways: first, because God hates sin. God is a just judge who can’t simply ignore sin; he must punish it. On the cross, Jesus fully paid for all the sins of all his people, no matter

how many sins they have and no matter how bad those sins are. Jesus' death could do this because he is the perfect, sinless Son of God; his blood is of very great value. **Read Romans 5:6-9.**

It's also a problem to be a sinner because it means that the devil, who hates us, is our ruler. The Lord Jesus Christ transfers his people from the kingdom of Satan to his own kingdom of light. Jesus breaks the power over us that Satan had. **Read 1 John 5:18.** If Jesus has met our greatest needs in this way, surely he is able to take care of us in every way.

THURSDAY

When we belong to Jesus, we know that he has done two wonderful things for us in the past. He has fully paid for all our sins, and he has set us free from the tyranny of the devil. But our faithful Savior Jesus Christ continues to do wonderful things for us. He watches over us to protect us. Because he is the Lord of all, nothing is outside of his control. He will only allow those things to happen to us that will be for our good and his glory.

Because our sins are pardoned and God the Father sees us through the perfect righteousness of his beloved Son, God the Father loves us too. Jesus taught that not a single hair could fall out of our heads unless it was the good will of the Father. The Bible doesn't promise that sad and hurtful things won't happen to God's children. It promises that, when those things happen, they have been sent by God for our good. Sad, hurtful things will never turn us from God or cause us to perish eternally. **Read John 10:11, 27-29 and Romans 8:28.**

FRIDAY

Another of the wonderful things Jesus does for those who belong to him is to give them his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the third person in the one God. The other two persons are God the Father and God the Son. The Holy Spirit comes to live inside those who belong to Jesus. He causes them to know and to feel certain that they are God's children and will live forever with God. The person who belongs to Jesus is still a sinner, and will be as long as he or she lives on this earth. But with the Holy Spirit living in them, God's children have a new desire to live for Jesus. They won't do it perfectly in this life, but the Holy Spirit will make them able to live a new life of obedience they could never have lived on their own. **Read Romans 8:2-3a, 16.**

SATURDAY

Only those who know they are in danger want someone to save them. The first thing we need to know to enjoy the comfort our Savior brings is that we need to be saved! We need to be made aware of our sin and misery so we will receive what Jesus offers.

Then we need to know what Jesus has done to save us and how it becomes ours. Once we are saved from such great misery and danger, we will want to know what we can do to show how thankful we are. God tells us in his Word how to live in a way that is pleasing to him. This is not so that we can save ourselves, but so that, having been saved by Jesus, we can live a life of gratitude to God. All the rest of this catechism was written to help us understand (1) our sin and misery, (2) how we are saved from it, and (3) how to live in a way that gives God thanks. **Read Titus 3:3–8.**