

MY FATHER BECAUSE OF CHRIST

Text: Romans 8;12-17, 28-39

Heidelberg Catechism LD 9

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I want you to imagine the scene of two boys in the street. They are arguing about their dads. One is saying 'My dad is stronger than yours'. And the other replies 'O yeah. Well my dad is smarter than yours.' There is a real sense of pride for a child to think of their dad as the one who is strong and clever. With it comes a sense of security. With a dad like that they will be OK. Dad is smart enough to fix it. He is strong enough to deal with it. In a sense the Catechism here in Lord's Day 9 is like a child boasting about their father. It is a song of rejoicing in "*...my God and Father...*" It is a celebration of trust and security. A careful look at the first half of the answer shows that the central thrust is the boast that "*The eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...is MY God and Father...*" The other parts of the answer are qualifiers that spell out who that God is and how it is we can be God's children. Most of the time when children boast about their dads they exaggerate. 'My dad is so strong he can pick up the front of our car!' 'Oh yeah? Well my dad is so smart he knows more than all the teachers at school!' But there is no exaggeration with the Catechism. How great is our father? Note the qualifier "*...who out of nothing created the heavens and the earth and everything in them, and who still upholds and rules them by his eternal council and providence.*" How great is our Father? He is "*...the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth*". He knows everything and can do anything. And that is the simple truth.

It is interesting to note that this is the only place in the Catechism where the opportunity is given to discuss God's work in creating the world. Our society emphasises the concept of evolution. Everything has come into existence without any god. So it is good to clarify the understanding that this is God's world. We can argue endlessly about evolutionism as a theory or creationism as a theory. But that is not the point that is being emphasised here. The Apostle's Creed, that the Catechism is

expanding on, is simply stating a belief. This world is God's world. It's all here by his creating word. As the hymn says 'This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres. This is my Father's world; I rest me in the thought of rocks and trees, of skies and seas, his hand the wonders wrought.' Based on that belief, the focus of the Catechism is on the care given by God as Father. And the fact that he can because he is Almighty. To see the reasoning here we need to be reminded of the historical context. The Catechism was first published in 1563. At that time there was no question that God was the creator. That was accepted by everyone. Europe was Christian in its world view. The Roman Catholics and Reformers disagreed on many things. But not on this. This being God's world was not the issue of contention. Rather the concern was for a people who were suffering immensely and who needed reassurance. Reassurance that the world was not going crazy.

To help us understand their situation let me read a segment from the Catechism teaching material. I must warn you that some parts are not pleasant. But it is the truth of what happened to Protestants after the Reformation. 'Imagine that you are sitting in church on a 'typical' Sunday morning. As usual you are there with your mother, father, and younger brother. The church is full. Attendance has been especially good lately, in spite of rumours of some acts of violence carried out against people who believe as you do. You have heard that worship services have sometimes been stopped, that people have been threatened and beaten. But all this seems remote just now, in the safety and peace of your church. Your friends and neighbours seem relaxed too, glad to get together, to sing and pray and listen. You settle down comfortably as the sermon begins...The man sitting closest to the door is the first to die. The police charge through the door of the church, weapons flash, people scream in disbelief. The quiet church has been turned into a battlefield. Without mercy the police press forward, attacking everyone in their path. You watch in horror as even helpless children are trampled underfoot and stabbed to death. The men of the church can do little against armed invaders...When it is all over, sixty members of the congregation lie dead, two hundred more lie wounded. Your stomach heaves as you find your little brother's body, throat slit from ear to ear. You and your parents are the fortunate ones. You are alive. But in the next few days you wonder if you would not have been better off dead. You and your family are driven out of your home with only the clothes on your back. In desperation you look for a safe place. Everywhere there is

fighting...and mutilated bodies of Protestants. You hear horror stories of terrible torture, of men being burned alive, of women being buried alive. You don't know what you will do if they catch your mother or father...or you.'

This is not just a gruesome story. There was much persecution of Protestant believers after the Reformation. [POWER POINT PICTURE x2] An example of what happened was the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572 in France. French Calvinists called 'Huguenots' were killed in their thousands in Paris. Many Reformed folk still wear the Huguenot Cross today. Thousands fled France and went to other countries. Many went to the new settlement in Cape Town in South Africa. Which explains why in the Sydney congregation there are many South Africans with French names. e.g. Etienne Jordaan; Jacques Du Plessy, Francois De Villiers. It was to people in these situations that the writers of the Catechism wrote the words of Lord's Day 9. To those who had lost their homes, their businesses, their families, who had to run for their lives. This, together with Lord's Day 1 was their song of security and hope. In their suffering they were able to say 'The Almighty God is my Father'. *"I trust him so much that I do not doubt that he will provide whatever I need for body and soul"*. 'He will turn all evil to our good.' That was the surge of comfort that gave them hope. That is the perspective through which we should see this Lord's Day 9. And as this Lord's Day gave them encouragement, so it intent is still to give encouragement to us.

But some will say 'If God is father to us, if he is so powerful he can create everything out of nothing, then why do people still suffer in this world. Why are there the wars and terrorists and earthquakes and hurricanes and you name it?' Well we need to note very carefully what the Catechism says *"The eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ...is my God and Father for the sake of Christ his son."* You see the love of God the Father is defined in terms of Jesus. Forgetting this distinction is a problem in a lot of thinking. Don Carson in his book 'The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God' points out that most people no longer know what God is really like. They no longer recognise him as almighty, holy, just, a God who is righteous and will see justice done for sin. Many see him as a kindly grandfather, a sentimental old man who is warm and fuzzy to everyone. The result is they think of God in their own terms. God is love and as such he should give everyone a pleasant life, no sickness or family problems and plenty to eat. If God is loving it's all supposed to just come our way. But the realities

of life soon show that is not the way it is. Which leaves people with this wrong understanding asking if God really cares.

But as the Catechism explains here, God is *"...my Father because of Christ his Son."* That means first of all that God is not the loving father of everybody. Only those who belong to Jesus can call God father. God is my loving father only if I believe that for the sake of Christ I am forgiven. Now that can sound elitist and terribly uncaring. The old liberal credo made much about 'the universal fatherhood of God'. They argued that God loves everybody and is father of all. But as nice as it sounds God is not the father of all. He is God over all, even though many don't worship him. He is Lord over all, though many don't submit to him. In one sense he may be called father of all in that all people owe their existence to God. But in the deeper sense of the title, the way Jesus used the word father, *"Αινα"*, God is not the father of all. He is only father to those who have Jesus for their brother. We are children of God not by right of human birth but by virtue of divine adoption. It is those who receive Jesus and believe in his name who are given right to be called children of God. If the idea that God is not everyone's father still irks, think of it this way. If everyone is already God's child and loved by him, why did Jesus need to die on the cross to make us right with God? All our theology, all our hope comes back to the cross. The idea that everyone is God's child does not recognise sin. It forgets that the human race has rebelled against its maker, that we need to be reconciled with him. Note carefully how the sentence goes *"That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... is my Father because of Christ his Son."* The opening phrase *"The eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ..."* is not just a wordy beginning. It is the core of the issue here. It is defining the special relationship here. It is not just referring to God as the creator. As such he is the provider for all that he has created. Rather, the emphasis is on the one who is the Father of our Lord Jesus. The emphasis is on Jesus and on those who are in Christ. God is my father for Christ's sake. Those who refuse to come to the Christ in faith must suffer the consequences of God's judgement for themselves. That's why it's so important we evangelise and bring hope.

Now we may accept what I have just said, that God is our father because of Jesus. We trust Jesus and have been reconciled with God. But we can still beg the question 'Why can Christians go through hard times'? Well again, think of the Catechism answer *"God is my Father for Christ's sake"*. God works in my life for Christ's sake. And if for Christ's

sake and his glory I have to carry a cross God will give that to me. As Christians our lives are not just about being happy. But about bringing glory to Jesus. And when has the church most glorified its Lord? When it built beautiful cathedrals and showed the world its pomp and splendour? [POWER POINT PICTURE x2] Or when it was persecuted, when men and women were burned alive and as they died they sang of praise to their God? When witnesses saw their courage and trust in the Father, they were deeply moved and glorified God. It was then, when the church suffered, that the gospel spread like wild fire. Look at church history. You will see this is the case, again and again. Where is the church growing the fastest today? In Asia, especially in China where for years they were persecuted. It is predicted that by 2030 China could well be the country with the most Christians. Where is the church dying? In the West where they have had it easy.

When is a neighbour most impressed by your faith in Jesus? When you smile when things are going well? Anyone can do that. It's when things are tough and you still stand firm in your faith and are able to care for others: that is what brings honour to Christ from their lips. We should not limit the love of God to the good things in life. We should also see God's love in the difficulties and problems he gives. Like James says in 1:2 *"Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance which leads to maturity so you lack nothing."* If we keep that in mind we won't have as much trouble understanding God's love. We may still react to our suffering and ask 'why'. But deep down we trust that our loving Father is developing things for our best. We may not understand, but we trust him.

There is one more thing to see here. We can trust God as father because when we belong to Jesus through faith we are as-if-we-were Jesus himself. The tremendous love God has for his son, goes to us as well *"...because of Christ..."*. God loves us and handles us as if we were Jesus. Think of that. We sinners as if we were as perfect as Jesus. His father is our father. We are co-heirs with Jesus. His heaven is our home. His angels are our guardians. His glory is our splendour. His kingship is our kingdom. When we have difficulties we may sometimes wonder 'does God love me'? But when we remember Jesus, and remember what he suffered in our place, then we can only respond 'surely God loves me!' What more could he have done. In giving his son he has given us everything. Surely I can trust God as father if I became his child at such a

cost. May I be childish for a moment and boast about my father, my Father in heaven? He is the one "...who out of nothing created heaven and earth and everything in them, who still upholds and rules them by his eternal counsel and providence." And he loves me "...because of Christ his Son". I don't understand all of father's ways. Or what happens in my life, especially when it's tough. But I trust him. Do you?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- What was the historical context in which Lord's Day 9 was written? How did that affect what was written?

- Describe the reassurance it gives you knowing that God is 'almighty' (able to do all things) and a 'faithful father' (desiring to do good for you)?

- What are the implications of God being our Father "for Christ's sake" in terms of:
 - Who experiences the Father's love?
 - How we might bring glory to Jesus?
 - How God sees us as Christ's co-heirs?