

Dr. J. R. Beeke

THE WAY TO THE ONLY COMFORT

(Lord's Day 1, Question 2)

Psalter 227

Scripture: Psalm 40

Psalter 362

Psalter 384:1, 5

Psalter 417

Dear congregation,

We ask your attention for Lord's Day 1, Question 2, of our Heidelberg Catechism:

Question 2: How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou, enjoying this comfort, mayest live and die happily?

Answer: Three; the first, how great my sins and miseries are; the second, how I may be delivered from all my sins and miseries; the third, how I shall express my gratitude to God for such deliverance.

With God's help, we want to consider with you:

The Way to the Only Comfort

Through:

1. Experiential Misery
2. Experiential Deliverance
3. Experiential Gratitude

I repeat: The Way to the Only Comfort: Experiential Misery, Deliverance, and Gratitude.

Today it is not our intention, because it is not the Catechism's intention, to explain misery, deliverance, and gratitude in depth, as that is what the instructor will be doing for the next fifty-one Lord's Days, but today we want to give some basic thoughts and try to unravel some misconceptions about the experience of misery, deliverance, and gratitude. We have in mind

to lay before you a number of thoughts about these three things.

The first thing we want to notice about misery, deliverance, and gratitude, is of course that this is the structure, the division, of our entire Catechism. Questions 3 through 11 deal with the misery of man, Questions 12 through 85 deal with the deliverance of a sinner, and Questions 86 through 129 deal with a life of gratitude.

What our instructor will tell us is that these three things he is about to unveil before our eyes for fifty-one Lord's Days, are God's secret way to happiness. "How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou, enjoying this comfort (that is, that comfort we have considered for three times from Question 1), mayest live and die happily?" "Happily": The division he is about to lay before us in fifty-one more Lord's Days is designed not only to serve God's glory, as we have seen, but is designed in serving God's glory and also our happiness. "How many things," he is really asking, "do you need to know to be truly happy?" Everyone wants to be happy. Boys and girls want to be happy, teenagers want to be happy, parents want to be happy, seniors want to be happy. There are three things — whether you are three years old or eighty-five years old — there are three things that you need to know to be happy.

The second thing we want to notice about this division — misery, deliverance, and gratitude — is that this three-ingredient recipe for happiness is not just something that our instructors have pulled out of thin air. It is not something they have figured out. It is something that is biblical. These three marks, congregation, are again and again given in Scripture as a recipe for true happiness. This division is based on the Word of God — sometimes on whole books of the Bible, the most notable example being the book of Romans. In Romans 1 through Romans 3:21, Paul speaks to the Romans about their misery, and he convinces Jews and Gentiles alike that they are all under sin and misery by nature. In chapters 3:22 through 11:36, he teaches redemption, deliverance through Jesus Christ. And in chapters 12 through 16, Paul exhorts the Romans to live out of gratitude. You see the same thing in the Psalm we have read to you, Psalm 40. David says that he waited for God, "and He brought me up also out of an horrible pit,

out of the miry clay." That is his sin and misery, congregation. David feels that his nature is so corrupt, that his whole heart is like a horrible pit and all that he does to deliver himself from iniquity is only to slip deeper into the miry clay of sin. But he says, as it were, "Thou, O God, dost deliver me out of the horrible pit" — that is deliverance — "by setting my feet upon a rock, the Lord Jesus Christ, and establishing my goings." That is gratitude. Thou doth guide my walk of life upon the Rock, Jesus Christ. This division, in the first place, is in accord with the outline of the Catechism. In the second place, it is in accord with the whole Word of God, sometimes entire books of the Bible, sometimes individual texts, and this finds an echo, congregation — and that can well be our next point — an echo in the lives and hearts of God's people. God's people are able to identify with these three things. "Call upon Me in the day of trouble," — misery; "and I will deliver thee," — deliverance; "and thou shalt glorify Me" — gratitude (Ps. 50:15). Again and again that is the experience of God's people during their entire earthly pilgrimage.

A fourth point that our instructor wants to emphasize here is that this misery, deliverance, and gratitude, if it is truly going to reap a happy life for us, is something we have to experience personally. He does not say, "What do others have to experience?" He does not even say, "What does a sinner have to experience?", but he says, "How many things are necessary for *thee* to know," for *you* to know, "that thou," *you*, "enjoying this comfort, mayest live and die happily?" Thus the question today which opens the door to the rest of the entire Catechism, is a personal question. Our instructor would be acutely aware throughout the entire Catechism that he is dealing with personal souls. He will bring to you a personal message. And although he will speak in the ideal sense, that is, he will speak in the language of faith throughout the Catechism, using the language of God's children, still he lets us know at the very beginning that all of us must come to this only comfort in life and in death. We are all passing on to eternity. Every headache, every toothache, every pain, every physical symptom is a reminder that we are headed for our long home. What you and I need, congregation, is a personal comfort that is good for life and death, time and eternity. We need something that can take us through the valley of tears, through this perishing world, for that moment is surely coming for everyone of us when, with no exception, we must die and enter into judgment with God.

The first Question of the Catechism already lays before us this reality. But the first Question and the second Question do something very different from each other. The first Question sets before us the prize, the great benefits, the great salvation, the great eternal life that lies in Jesus Christ and the shedding of His blood for poor sinners. But that begs the second Question. How may a sinner come to that high prize? How may a sinner lay hold upon those great benefits? That is what the second Question does. It tells us how we may reach the contents of the first Question. That is something which many overlook today. There are many today who like to talk about comfort, like to even talk about the blood of Jesus, many who want to hear and speak about the wonderful things we have tried to stammer in the explanation of the first Question, and yet they do not know the way in which God brings a sinner to those rich contents. It is one thing, congregation, to know or to hear something about the splendor or the beauty of a distant locality, but it is quite another to know the directions and to travel the road to get there. Question 2 is God's map. It is God's way. It is the means by which God leads a sinner to get to the only comfort. We cannot separate Question 2 from Question 1. We need to know what the prize is, but we also need to know of the way, the road, to get there. We need to know how God brings His people into need for that prize, how He brings them to embrace that prize, and how He brings them to live out of that prize. Thus, our instructor says there are three things we need to know: misery, deliverance, and gratitude.

Today that is often skipped over. The "what" of Christianity is preached, but the "how" of Christianity is neglected. The destination is proclaimed, but the way is missing many times. In Psalm 40 there are many who want to skip from verse 1 to verse 3. They want to hear just a little bit of waiting for God, and then they want to say, "and He put a new song in my mouth." But they do not want to hear what lies in between, the way down into the horrible pit, the way up unto the Rock, and the way out upon the establishment of our goings. And yet this is so important, congregation. We must learn to ask, "How can I find the way? What is necessary for me personally to obtain and embrace that only comfort?"

Then we must say that these three words — misery, deliverance, and gratitude — are a beautiful summary of the

way to God, of the way to salvation. When the prodigal son experienced his sin and misery in that distant field far from his father, he said, "I will arise and return to my father." There the conviction of sin and misery was working repentance, working a seeking of his father's house and a confession of his wrongdoings. As he went back to his father, he said, "I will say to my father, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." But when he came within sight of home, his father ran out to meet him and fell on his neck and gave him his lips of mercy with kisses, his arms of mercy with embracement, and his feet of mercy to run to him. He fell upon his neck with mercy. He gave him deliverance. He said, Slay the fatted calf, that blood may be shed, "for this my son was dead, and is alive again And they began to be merry." You can be sure, my dear friend, that that prodigal never again left his father's house but desired from henceforth to live out of gratitude according to the will of his father.

Misery, deliverance, and gratitude also correspond with the offices of Jesus. There are many things in the Bible that unveil themselves in a three-step process that parallels misery, deliverance, and gratitude. The offices of Jesus is another one of these parallels. Now, we must not confine his prophetic office only, of course, to conviction of sin and misery, but generally speaking, Jesus especially uses His prophetic office to teach, by His Spirit, conviction of sin and of misery; He uses His priestly office to unfold deliverance, as the sacrifice of His people and as their Intercessor, to keep them close to Him; and as King, He guides and rules His people in a lifestyle of Christian obedience and gratitude.

Thus, these three things all reflect the threefold office of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we speak of the three offices of Jesus, but it is more accurate to speak of Christ's threefold office, for Christ's office is one as given by His Father, though it is manifested to us in three different perspectives. That too is a parallel to these three marks of misery, deliverance, and gratitude. Our instructor says there are three things we need to know, but we must not think that if we know one of these things it will be acceptable and we can get to heaven without knowing the other two. These three things, just like the offices of Jesus, if I may say it with reverence, are in one package, in one group; they belong together, so these three things are like links of one chain

which cannot be separated. That is why they are so often mentioned together in the Bible. You cannot have just true conviction of sin and misery, and never taste deliverance; and you cannot taste deliverance without showing gratitude. Misery, deliverance, and gratitude are inseparable from one another. They are bound together. Paul says in Romans 7, "O wretched man that I am!" — misery; "who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" — deliverance; "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" — gratitude. David says in Psalm 130, "Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord" — misery. "If Thou, LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, O LORD, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with Thee" — deliverance; "that Thou mayest be feared" — gratitude. These three belong together.

Now, when God's people backslide and these three things are not present reality in their heart, their spiritual life suffers. Today, if you listen to what God's people are speaking about, many times their experience and present condition falls far below the great standard of the first and second questions of our Catechism. Many times they feel inside closer to what we read in Isaiah 54, "O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted!" Many times they miss that life-death comfort. One of the great reasons why they miss it, congregation, is because they are prone to separate what belongs together. They are prone to either rest in their misery, or to rest in their deliverance, or to rest in their gratitude, without realizing that they need a constant experience of all three of these things in their daily life, in their shop, in the kitchen, in their work, in their office, in their home. They need a life-death comfort that works itself out in a practical way through a continual awareness of their sin and misery, a continual taking refuge to Jesus Christ, and a continual desire to live to the honor and glory of God out of gratitude.

Now, may I ask you, do these three things come together in your life — misery, deliverance, and gratitude? The longer you live and the more you experience in the world, are you more and more convinced of your own sin, your own foolishness, your own dependency upon God? Are you more and more convinced of the fullness, the beauty, the suitability, the sufficiency, the finished work of Jesus Christ? Are you more and more convinced of the need to lose your own lives and to lay

them down for the name, service and cause of Jesus Christ out of gratitude? Can you say these three things so belong together that it is as if they are one, that they are so enmeshed with one another, so cyclical, being experienced over and over in your life, that you have a deeper conviction of sin and misery against the grace received, which leads to a greater appreciation of the gospel and a more firm determination to live out of gratitude? Do these things cyclically continue in your life? These three things belong together continually in the life of the true Christian. That is not to say that the true Christian always sees these three things clearly in his own life, or that he is always content with what he sees of these three things. That, actually, would be very unusual. In fact, it can be a bad sign. The true Christian cannot deny that he is experimentally acquainted with these three things. He cannot deny them, but he confesses that he does not know them as he ought. He counts himself to have not apprehended. He has not arrived. No matter how deep his convictions of sin are, he realizes he knows but very little of his own heart. He cries out with Jeremiah, "The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked above all things. Who can know it?" He is aware he does not know the depths of his corruption. He grieves over how little he knows of Jesus. He is embarrassed at how little he lives to the honor and glory of God. And yet, this is his only comfort, that these things lead him to end in Jesus Christ. This alone can give his conscience rest and peace, when his sin and misery drive him to Calvary and to the New Testament mercy seat at the right hand of the Father, there to find in a humiliated and exalted Jesus his only refuge and salvation.

Thus congregation, the knowledge of these three things — I trust you can feel what I am about to say now — is not just a mere head knowledge, but they must be known in the heart. "What three things must I know?" asks our instructor. The word "to know" here certainly means something very similar to what the Hebrew word for "know" originally meant in the Bible, and that was to know intimately, to know by personal experience. We call that "experiential" knowledge, from the word "experience," or sometimes "experimental" knowledge, from the word "experiment." The idea of both words is exactly the same, for the word "experimental" means that as you test an experiment, so you must test your experience by the Word of God. That is the original meaning of the word "experimental," to test your experience by the Word of God. "To the law and to the testimony,

if they speak not according to this Word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20). These three things we must know. We must bring our experience to the touchstone of Holy Scripture. We must experience these things scripturally. Experiential knowledge that is unscriptural is false mysticism. But experiential knowledge that is scriptural is the genuine way of salvation, the way in which God leads His people to know His dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me illustrate. It is one thing to talk about pain, and it is another thing to experience pain. Boys and girls, if you have a brother or sister, and they are crying because they have a stomach ache or headache, you will feel sorry for your brother or sister, but you cannot take over his or her pain. You do not experience his or her pain. You know a little bit what it is like because you have had pain yourself, but that is different from feeling it that very moment yourself. You can talk about a stomach ache, you can talk about what it feels like, but you do not know it at that moment, you do not experience it at that moment. Well, what our instructor says is this: We must know the pain of sin. We must know the joy of Christ. We must know the commitment to live to the honor and glory of God. We can talk much about misery, deliverance, and gratitude, and yet never experience it.

There are some people who do a lot of talking about experience, but usually if they talk about it without experiencing it, you will notice that they talk about it in an unbalanced way. There is something wrong. You must ask yourself, "Is this the way of the Bible? Does this sound like Paul in the New Testament? Does this sound like David in the Old Testament? Is this biblical experience?" Some people only want to talk about their sin and misery. On family visitation or in the hospital, they will freely talk about how miserable, hopeless, and sinful they are. You visit them ten years later and they talk exactly the same way. But you never meet them *in* their misery. You never meet them with a broken heart and a contrite spirit. You never hear of a felt need for Christ. There is no room made for Jesus. They talk about the sin of their heart, but it never drives them to Christ. They talk about the experience of misery and sin that their father or grandfather had, or another friend or minister had, but it never leads them to Christ. Something is missing, congregation.

Other people always talk about Jesus. They believe in Jesus and Him crucified; they know His redemptive work; they talk about His grace and mercy, about His willingness, about His power, but you never hear from them that they have need for Jesus. The fruits of their lives do not manifest humble gratitude. They become great Christians in their own eyes. Their talk is a substitute for genuine experience. They talk about being on the Rock, but have never been in the horrible pit or the miry clay.

Still others talk only about gratitude and sanctification. They may even show it with their lifestyle in some seemingly wonderful, admirable ways. They are busy and active people, who have much to thank the Lord for in their prayers. They have much to do; they lend a helping hand to others and there is much of which you must say that they put others to shame, and yet you get an uncomfortable feeling because their talk and their walk sound too much like the Pharisee in Luke 18, "Father, I thank Thee that I am not like this publican. I do this, and I do that two times a week." You miss the lowly, humble, self-condemning gratitude whereby the believer abhors himself and repents in dust and ashes before a gracious Redeemer.

Thus, congregation, it is quite possible to talk about misery, deliverance, and gratitude, and to be altogether missing the experience, the cyclical, continual experience of these things.

Where these things are truly known as a recipe for genuine happiness, they will continually be experienced. There are some people who think that misery, deliverance, and gratitude are watertight compartments, so to speak, that at some point you are done with misery, then you can begin deliverance; and when you get done with deliverance, you can begin gratitude. No, congregation, that is not at all what our instructor means to say. These three overlap one another. These three follow one upon another. They crowd into one another. They coexist in the heart. This is their natural order, yes — misery, deliverance, gratitude — but they coexist. Is there no knowledge of deliverance, do you think, when a sinner experiences the depths of his misery? My friend, if you were to experience a hundred percent misery and zero percent deliverance, you would come to utter despair. Who can stand before God as a holy God, as a consuming fire, in all his misery, apart from Jesus Christ? Judas knew his misery. He knew he betrayed innocent blood. He knew his misery without knowing anything of deliverance, and he went out

and committed suicide. These things belong together, even when a child of God does not realize that he is tasting something of deliverance already in his misery. Think about it a moment. When Saul was cut down on the way to Damascus (you remember that, boys and girls), he began to pray. Now, if there is nothing but misery, if there is not even a hope of deliverance, would Saul really pray? At regeneration, congregation, which is the initial moment that God puts the seed of the new life there, three precious jewels which are often hidden beneath the rubble of sin but can never die, are also planted in the heart, namely, faith, hope, and love. The moment that Saul fell on the ground and cried out, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?", the seed of faith was already active. Faith does not begin a year after we are born again. Faith does not begin with the believer's first revelation of Christ through the Word flowing into the heart, but faith begins at the moment of regeneration. Then the heart begins already to go out to God. Though it thinks it sees nothing but misery, there is an outgoing of the heart to God; there can be a beginning of the workings of deliverance already secretly in the inner man without the soul's express consciousness. There is a hope deep inside that God will be a God of mercy in Jesus Christ. And is that not the first seeds of deliverance — going out to God for mercy? When the prodigal, whom I mentioned before, said, "I will arise and go to my father," was there not hope? Even though he was only going to plead to be made a hired servant, was there not hope that there would be some mercy from his father?

It is the same thing with gratitude. Sometimes we say, "Well, but where is my gratitude?" If the Lord has given us something, we feel so unthankful sometimes, and we say, "My hands are empty. What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits bestowed upon me? Oh, that I could show gratitude!" But still, even as we complain over our lack of gratitude, that very complaint shows a humble thanksgiving, for deep in the heart of that poor sinner who yet cannot claim Christ with freedom, there is a humble seed of gratitude, "Oh Lord, why hast Thou not cast me away?" That already is a seed of gratitude. "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man." That is the seed of gratitude. God's people, from the moment of regeneration already have the seeds of misery, deliverance, and gratitude.

Oh congregation, do you know something of these things — misery, deliverance, and gratitude? Are you convinced that you are never done with any of the three? You need that knowledge in your heart again and again and again.

Let us sing first from Psalter 384, stanzas 1 and 5, before a few closing words of application.

Three things are necessary for you to know — not one, not two, but three. My dear friends, shall we meet God in peace on the day of days, we cannot be a stranger of any one of these three things. If you come before God on the day of judgment, and you say, "Lord, here is my religion, a religion of conviction of misery, of conviction of sin," and that is all you have to say, God will say to you, "But what about My Son? Where is your deliverance? Did I not tell you that this is life eternal, to know God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent? Did I not send My Son to knock upon your heart? Did I not reveal Him in the preaching of the gospel? Did I not unveil Him to be all and in all for a poor, miserable sinner? Why did you never do anything with My Son? How could you live with your sin and misery without My Son?" Congregation, without a knowledge of Jesus, we *will* perish — we will *perish*! Do you realize that? Have you never cried out, "Give me Jesus, else I die"? My friend, if you can appear before God without needing a Savior, God shall say to you, "Depart from Me, ye worker of iniquity," and your place shall be in the bottom of hell with all your sin and all your misery.

But on the other hand, if you appear before God and speak to Him about Christ, saying, "We have prophesied in Thy Name; we have done miracles in Thy Name," the Judge of heaven and earth shall say to you, "But why did you need Him? From what did He deliver you, sinner?" Then, if you cannot answer, "Oh Lord, He delivered me from the swine husks as the prodigal, He delivered me from the horrible pit and the miry clay as a lost, wretched sinner," if you have nothing to say of His redeeming grace, He will have nothing to say of mercy to you.

Again, if you come to God on that day of days with only self-activated gratitude, but you had a Christless Christianity, God shall say, "Sinner, I have never known you." If you find your comfort in only one or two of these three things, self will be glorified. You will be the most important person with your sin, with your conviction, with your sense of misery; you will be the

most important person with your Christ-centeredness, or you will be the most important person with your life of gratitude. If one or two of these things are important to you and not the third, you may talk much about your religious experience, but God will not be glorified.

The beauty of our Heidelberg Catechism is that it is a well-balanced Catechism. It brings together that which God brings together in His Word, and it tells us that these three things must be brought together shall we truly glorify God and live as poor sinners out of His riches, be humble at His footstool, and long to glorify Him. That is the only recipe for true happiness, congregation, that we may live as poor sinners, drawing out of the fullness of Immanuel by faith what we need for time and for eternity. Oh, there is no other life worth living, no other happiness worth pursuing, no other joy in this world compared to the joy of a triune God manifesting Himself to a sinner through an experiential sense of misery, deliverance, and gratitude. Then we may know the only comfort of not belonging to ourselves but of belonging to the faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

Thus, congregation, we are never done in this world with any of these three things. Sin and misery are never put behind the Christian while he is in this world. The old man is always within us, always causing trouble, always bringing the new man to grief and sorrow. Even the great apostle, who had been caught up into the third heavens, had to say of himself, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me?" Paul too had to wait until his last breath before the old man would die forever. The old man nature is buried with the believer in the grave. The gates of heaven shall not allow any sinner that defileth to enter in. God's people shall arise from the dead purified. Then misery shall be done away, and deliverance and gratitude shall abide forever. Then faith and hope shall be done away, and everlasting love shall abide forever.

But that is the life to come. In this life there are three things you and I must know. Some will learn them deeper than others. We must not put our experiences on a yardstick and measure them, and say, "Well, if so and so does not have as much misery as I do, or as much deliverance as I do, or as much gratitude as I do, he is not a child of God." That is nonsense, congregation. That is audacity. We are not meant to be blueprint readers, to be measurers of our neighbor, but we must know

conviction of sin, we must know the biblical marks of grace, we must know what it means to lose our righteousness, we must know what it means to cry out, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me?" We must know something of a way of escape in Jesus Christ, and we must know something of a heart that longs and pants to live to the glory of God and no longer desires to belong unto myself but unto the faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

Now then, do you have a better recipe for happiness? Have you ever met one child of God who could speak in a balanced way of misery, deliverance, and gratitude who was not truly happy deep down inside — not with themselves, but happy with God? In the beginning of the way, when a sense of misery has the upper hand, then there are times when the convicted sinner is the most unhappy person in the whole world because he cannot see his deliverance and his gratitude lying in Jesus Christ. He sends out his doves, but the dove comes back empty-handed. There is no olive leaf. But once he has seen the olive leaf lying in the Messiah, then there is an inward joy that the world cannot pretend to match.

Oh my dear young friends, I hope and pray that you will seek that God who alone can give true happiness. You will not find true happiness, young people, in bars; you will not find happiness in theaters; you will not find happiness in front of television sets; you will not find true happiness with the secular, shallow reading material of this world. You will find true happiness only in the Bible, when this Book is brought home to your heart and you learn to abhor yourself and to love Jesus Christ and to long for the glory of God. There is no better recipe for happiness. Do not rest until you too know these three things — misery, deliverance, and gratitude. Amen.

Psalter 417: All stanzas