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THE KNOWLEDGE OF MISERY

(Lord's Day 2, Question 3)

Psalter 326:1, 2, 4

Scripture: Romans 3:19-31

Psalter 438:3, 4

Psalter 103:2, 4

Psalter 140 (second tune)

Dear congregation,

We ask your attention for Lord's Day 2, Question 3, of our Heidelberg Catechism:

*Question 3: Whence
knowest
thou thy
misery?*

Answer: Out of the law of God.

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

The Knowledge of Misery

1. What is Misery?
2. What is Law?
3. How Do We Know our Misery by the Law?

I repeat: The Knowledge of Misery: first, What is Misery; secondly, What is Law; and thirdly, How Do we Know our Misery by the Law.

Today, congregation, we begin the first major section of our Heidelberg Catechism, the section called "Of the Misery of Man." Our instructor begins this section in a very personal way. He says, "Whence knowest thou thy misery?" No one may exclude himself. Boys and girls, young people, parents, grandparents, singles — everyone is included. How do you know your misery? He is not asking if you know someone else's misery; he is not asking you to look into the conscience of another but into

your own heart: "Whence do *you* know *your* misery?" He is talking about each one of us and our own personal misery.

This question infers that you and I must know our misery. The word "know" here is not just a speculative knowledge, but an inward heart acquaintance. We must experience our misery. Our misery must touch our hearts. Thus, "Whence do you know by a personal experience your own misery?"

You may say, "That question is well and good, but actually what does he mean by the word 'misery'?" Misery comes from a Latin word which signifies wretchedness. Its root meaning is the same as that word used by Paul in Romans 7 when he cried out, "O wretched man (O miserable man) that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" It is used again in Revelation 3:17, "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable." The German and Dutch root meanings of the word "misery," "ellende" or "ellend," contain the idea of being exiled or banished. The root meaning of misery in these languages is to be cast out, to be banished, to be exiled to a foreign country. Thus the idea of misery is that you and I by nature are all exiles; we are all in a foreign country; we are all banished from our original home in Paradise. We are not at home even though we try to convince ourselves we are at home. We live alienated, exiled, banished from God.

The word "misery" is broader than the word "sin," for misery involves both the guilt of sin as well as all the consequences and punishment of sin. Thus, misery is a broad-sweeping term that includes all our sin and guilt and all the miserable consequences that flow out of our sin and guilt. Misery strikes at the very core of our sinful nature because it is sin that has made separation between God and us; sin destroyed the harmony of Paradise and continues to destroy harmony in all spheres of life until this very day. Misery includes all the results of sin, all that flows out of that corruption we chose in Paradise.

This is now our state, dear congregation, by nature. We are wretched because we are exiled, wandering far from God, filled with sin, in danger of destruction, and worst of all, do not know our misery. We may talk about our misery, yes, even confess our misery, when we have a conservative outlook upon life and believe in the Bible. But what our instructor says to us is

this: It is not enough to talk about it and to confess it; we must know it with our heart, and understand it by the light of the Holy Spirit. The reason why is not — I repeat, *is not* — because our instructor wants to simply make us miserable. That is not the point. The point is, we are miserable. Our instructor only wants us to see what we are so that that in turn may drive us to the Lord Jesus Christ. The experience of our misery is never an end in itself, but is a way or means by which we may be lead to need Christ as the only comfort in life and death. The purpose of our instructor is not to be negative. It is never his intention to separate Lord's Days 2 through 5, the section on misery, from Lord's Days 5 through 31, the section on deliverance. His intention is that the Holy Spirit may bless his teaching to make room for that great Deliverer, so that our poor, miserable souls, seeing what we are and what we need, may be driven to Him who is the righteousness, sanctification, wisdom and redemption of His people.

Perhaps you ask, "But how deep must my sense of misery become before there is room made for Jesus Christ?" Deep enough, so that we experience the God-provoking nature of sin so that sin becomes exceeding sinful, and that we realize that our sin brings us justly under the wrath of a righteous and a holy God. But we ought not think that we must experience misery in its total reality in our lives. That is impossible. Jeremiah said, "The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked above all things. Who can know it?" No man can know the full extent of the misery of his heart. That is not the point. The point is that we must know it sufficiently to know that we are lost sinners who cannot save ourselves in any way, and that we are driven out of ourselves unto the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must learn that all our misery in this world is inseparably linked to sin itself and not to secondary causes as modern man is so fond of affirming. Today there are many who say, "Well, my misery is just my misfortune," or, "It is just the result of my enemies," or, "It is due to my upbringing," or, "According to my horoscope, it is due to my date of birth," or some other bizarre thing. We need more reliable instruction. We have to see that the cause of all the misery of this world lies in our sin.

On the other hand, though we may never know all the misery of our life, our conviction of misery must go deeper than a mere acknowledgment that we are miserable. Everyone in this world experiences times of misery. Misery is a universal experience. Everyone knows what it is to feel miserable, to be miserable. Everyone will admit that he has committed some sin, that he has done things that are wrong in his life, and that those wrong things have caused him problems, trouble, and misery. The consciousness of some degree of misery is universal. Every day we pick up a newspaper we realize that something is seriously wrong with humanity. There is something miserable about sinful man. Our instructor is not asking, "Are you experiencing any misery?" but he is asking, "Whence knowest thou thy misery?" What is the source of your misery? What is the norm by which you judge yourself and see that you are miserable? If the norm by which we judge ourselves is simply our consciences or what other people think about us, then we think we will come out pretty good and will say, "Well, I have moments of misery but I am not altogether a miserable sinner." Then we will never experience, "I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes." There has to be a different norm, congregation. You will never become a totally lost sinner before a holy, righteous God, you will never need the only Redeemer if you use as your norm, as your criteria of judgment, the opinions of men or your conscience which is always seeking to justify itself.

Thus, Question 3 asks: What is the norm that teaches and shows you your misery? Then our instructor answers, "I learn my misery, not from human comparisons, not from my conscience, but 'out of the law of God.'" The law of God is God's norm; it is God's standard; it is God's will. The law is God's will concerning the nature, the position, the operation, and the life of every creature, but especially of fallen man. The law of God is God's revealed will. It comes forth out of the heart of God. God uses that law as the norm by which you and I are called to judge our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. Thus, whatever is in agreement with that law is normal and whatever is not according to this norm of God, this law of God, is abnormal, and therefore miserable. For whatever is abnormal is sinful and whatever is sinful bears fruits of misery. This law determines what is normal and what is abnormal. This law is God's divine standard to show us what we should be and what we should do. It

reflects God's sovereignty and His holiness; it reveals His heart; it reveals who He is and what He expects us to be. God is the law-giver. He has the divine right to proclaim this law, to set down this norm, and to say, "Cursed be everyone that continues not in all things written in the book of the law to do them." He has every right to demand perfect obedience to this law from you and from me, because He created us in Adam perfectly capable of obeying this norm, this law of God.

Adam and Eve, as long as they were in the state of rectitude and had not fallen, were obeying the law of God. They were normal before they fell. Their life was according to God's holy, sovereign will. It was absolutely perfect. They lived in harmony with God and His law. There was nothing between God and them. They were normal.

We read in Romans 3:20, "Therefore, by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin." The law is used by the Holy Spirit to confront us on every side. As long as we live normally, which is obediently (for obedience is the real definition of being normal), the law will not speak against us. But when we sin, when we become abnormal, the law will crush us and curse us the very moment we transgress against God. It is this that our instructor says we must experience, that crushing, cursing power of the law against our sin and misery.

Today, of course, since everyone is sinful, we are prone to think that it is normal to be sinful, but that does not hold true, congregation, because our nature before we fell was sinless. We were created free of sin. Is it normal for a fish to be out of water? You say, "No, it is abnormal and that fish will die." That is like you and me. By nature we are living abnormal lives, we are spiritually dead; we are like fish out of water when we sin. God made us righteous and holy. The law demands obedience.

When we speak of the law in Lord's Day 2, we mean especially the moral law, the ten commandments. Ceremonial laws, civil laws, we will address later. They have certain principles which may serve as good guidelines, but in terms of their particular commands they are abolished in Jesus Christ. But this moral law abides. God wrote it in stone, and it is this law that must also abide in our lives and hearts. This law demands love above all. God insists that we perfectly obey this law, that we are perfectly loving to Him above all and to our neighbor as ourselves. God sets this law before us, this holy law that we read every

Sabbath from Exodus 20, and He says as it were, "This law is to be your norm. This is to be your judgment stick. This is to be your mirror in which you look to see what you are. Do you obey the commands of this law? Do you avoid the prohibitions of this law? Do you love Me above all? Do you love your neighbor as yourself?"

This is how we are to compare ourselves — by means of the law of God. "Whence knowest thou thy misery?" Not from human comparison, not from my fickle conscience, but from the unchangeable, objective, concrete standard — the holy law of God.

You see, congregation, if we judge ourselves by anything else, we will come out as rich young rulers, self-justified; or we will be like Pharisees who look down on others and say, "God, I thank Thee that I am not like that man, or like that person, or like that other person." We will become something in our own eyes. If we judge ourselves by our consciences and disassociate our consciences to some degree from this holy law, we develop our own set of rights and wrongs. That is what is happening in society today. People say, "Well, if *you* feel it is right, go ahead and do it." If there are two mutually consenting adults who are not within the bonds of marriage, but feel it is in accord with their consciences to engage in physical intimacy, modern society will hardly condemn it. Modern humanism says, "It is up to your conscience." The fruit of such humanism is that our society has taken the law of God out of the classroom and ultimately out of the hearts of the people by convincing everyone that they are a law unto themselves. If you are a Buddhist, you live according to your Buddhist laws; if you are a Christian, you live according to your Christian laws. Everyone has to decide for himself. That is the philosophy of our day. There is no objective standard; there is no law by which you may examine yourself and be declared guilty or acquitted. As soon as a society takes away the mirror of God's holy law and no longer looks at itself in that mirror, congregation, chaos is the result. Yesterday I was riding behind a car which had a bumper sticker that read, "Are you against abortion? Then don't *you* have one." This is our modern, supposedly liberating, philosophy: It is up to you. If you do not want an abortion, do not have one, but do not try to tell other people they cannot have one. Why not? Because there is no law. As in the days of the judges, every man may do that which is right in his

own eyes.

Consequently, we as a nation can continue to sanction the murdering of unborn babies in the womb. What a sad and tragic commentary this is, congregation, that our society no longer knows its misery from out of the law of God! We pour billions of dollars into crime prevention programs and into all kinds of other things. We have to build bigger jails; we have to multiply our police forces. Those things may be good in themselves, but we do not see the root problem — that we have abandoned the one standard of criteria, the holy law of God.

What society needs, you and I need individually. How can you and I know our personal misery? By the law. The Holy Spirit sets the law as a mirror before our hearts, and by His enlightening power turns on so to speak the light in the darkness of our hearts, that we may see who we are in the mirror of this holy law. Then it will become real, "I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes."

We will see that further, in our third thought, after we sing first from Psalter 103, stanzas 2 and 4.

How does the Lord set this mirror before us and convince us of our sin and misery? He especially does so, congregation, under the preaching of the gospel, when by His Holy Spirit He takes the holy law and lays it before the heart of every individual hearer. When the Holy Spirit convicts by that law through showing the individual hearer the broad significance of that law, the far-reaching consequences of that law, the probing depth of that law, the spiritual character of that law that demands pure love to God above all and to my neighbor as myself, that sinner confesses, "My life is not like that; my life is fundamentally different. Instead of living to God's glory and to my neighbor's welfare, I am essentially living to myself." The law pricks the conscience, it silences the sinner, it leaves him without excuse, and he cries out, "I am guilty, I am unclean, I am a sinner in the sight of a holy and a righteous God." The law speaks by the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit with authority, and the sinner is slain in the presence of almighty God. The law uncovers the nature of sin. It discovers the strength of sin. It unveils the guilt of sin. This bows the sinner in the dust and makes him confess before a holy God who is always obedient to His

own law, "I am worthy of death. I am worthy to be cast out from the presence of this holy and righteous God." Then we can no longer plead that sin is ignorance, but we learn sin is the transgression of the law. Then the law brings home to me my own sin, transgression, and guilt, and I learn to pray with David, "Blot out my transgressions now; wash me, make me pure within, cleanse, O cleanse me from my sin."

I must ask you and myself, has the law in the hands of the Spirit ever convicted you of sin, ever shown you that your whole being is corrupt, that the whole direction and foundation of your life is altogether wrong, yes, that everything is sinful? Have you ever learned that not for one moment are you loving God above all, and thus are never obeying the first table of the law? Have you learned that not for one moment are you loving your neighbor truly as yourself, and thus are never obeying the second table of the law? Thus, you are always a sinner in the presence of a holy and a righteous God. Has that truth ever sunk deeply into your heart? Have you experienced its reality?

"Whence knowest thou thy misery?" Has the law been God's convicting tool to strip you of all of your righteousness? This convicting law is, of course, in its deepest sense the work of the Spirit of Christ and is sent forth from Christ. We shall preach about that next time, the Lord willing, from Question 4. But that does not mean to say, as some do in our day, that we know our misery only by coming to Calvary's cross and beholding the crucified, dying Christ, and thus we may bypass the conviction of the law as the means God normally uses to drive sinners to the cross. God's people are convicted of their sin at Golgotha in the way of sanctification. Once they have come to know salvation in Christ, they are convicted by their ongoing pollution when they behold the wounds of Jesus. But here our instructor is not that far yet. He is talking about the way to Jesus.

"Whence knowest thou thy misery? Out of the law of God." As the law does its work the sinner begins to realize more and more his helplessness. He begins to feel that he needs an alien righteousness, a righteousness outside of himself (that was one of Luther's favorite expressions — an alien righteousness). This must be a righteousness that he has nothing to do with because he will stain everything with sin — a righteousness, in other words, that flows out of Jesus Christ. As he begins to

realize these things, the law is beginning to lead him as a schoolmaster, as a teacher, to the only Savior. That is what we need, congregation. That law must plow into our hearts deeply enough so that our heart is broken and we cry out, "My transgression I confess." Then there is room for the seed of the gospel to be sown in all its fullness in Jesus Christ. Then there is room for the precious promises of God's Word. Then there is room for the proclamation to be received into the heart — that lost sinners are the ones that are welcome at the throne of grace. Then there is room for deliverance.

But what is often a great struggle in the lives of concerned people is, "Is my conviction really deep enough?" Sometimes I have met people who say, "I have been convinced of my sin deeply enough to know that I am a lost sinner, that I deserve to go to hell, and I know that I need a Savior. My heart is being drawn out to Him because there is no righteousness in me. What I am so deeply troubled about is that my conviction of sin in the past has not been long enough nor deep enough." What must we answer such a person? We must say, congregation, that if the law has convicted us of sin to that extent that we indeed believe and experience that we are hell-worthy and feel our need for a Savior, then the law has met its first goal. That is the first goal of the law in the hands of God. The goal of the law is to convict us sufficiently of our sin in order drive us as poor, lost sinners to the cross. There are always some people who say, "I am afraid even that is not sufficient. I feel, as some of the autobiographies of past generations, that some are driven to utter despair, and I have never been driven to total despair. I am not able to receive the freedom of the gospel until I feel my convictions are as deep as those I have read about in these books." By Satan's temptations these people rob their own souls of the comforts which are lawfully allotted to them as poor sinners who are brought to trust in the righteousness of Christ. J. C. Philpot said, "Satan will never keep a soul out of heaven, but he will keep the comfort of heaven out of the soul." That is what Satan does, congregation, when he short-changes the believer by telling him, "You have to come to a point where you feel you are convicted deep enough before you can hope in Jesus Christ." My dear friend, the greatest danger is that you would ever come to that point, because anyone who ever feels they are

convicted deep enough has not been convicted deep enough. Jeremiah 17:9 tells us that you and I can never know the full extent of our misery. You can never be convicted deep enough in your own estimation. You will always come short. Hopefully your conviction of your lack of conviction will remain all your life. But why do I say that? Because as soon as you think you are convicted deep enough, what are you going to do? You are going to build your salvation, not on the free grace of Christ alone but on the depth of your own conviction. Then you will become saved *with* your misery. You will be one of those people who will speak a lot about misery on family visitation. And when the office-bearers ask you, "Where did your misery lead you to? What was the solution of that great burden of sin?" you will have nothing to say. Then, congregation, we can only conclude that all that so-called deep conviction that you thought to have experienced is but common grace, common convictions, because where there is truly the work of the Holy Spirit, where the law slays the sinner, then that sinner needs a solution. He cannot go on without a Savior. He needs an answer. He needs a Redeemer. He needs someone to deliver him from the horrible pit and the miry clay of sin, to set his feet upon a rock, and to establish his goings (Ps. 40:2).

Thus, what am I saying? I am saying there are two dangers when it comes to the conviction of the law. The one danger is that a lost, cut-off sinner gets caught in Satan's trap — that his conviction still is not deep enough. Thus he keeps himself in darkness and bondage for many, many years. The other danger is that a sinner who has not been convicted by the law but is attracted to the message of the gospel thinks to go directly to the cross in his own strength. He thinks because he feels some love for Jesus that he is saved and has the forgiveness of his sin, when sin has never become sin to him; when he has never abhorred himself, never repented in dust and ashes, never become hell-worthy, never experienced law work as a plow to overturn his soul. Thus no genuine room has ever been made for Christ. When that is the case, then the experience of Christ also is usually artificial and will never have much substance, any depth, any reality to it. What we need is not to be driven to despair. What we need is for the law to become our norm, and that that norm by the Holy Spirit may convict us of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment, so that we become a lost sinner before a holy and a righteous God, and that we learn then no

longer to justify ourselves but to say, "Lord, Thy law is normal, but I am abnormal; I am worthy that Thou shouldst cast me away forever. I am not worthy of the least of all Thy blessings." What we need is that the law may break our heart, that we may learn to sorrow over sin, and then be led with that sorrow to the cross alone. We need to experience what John the Baptist preached, "Repent ye, repent ye Behold, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world!"

Oh congregation, godly repentance strips the sinner of all his righteousness in order to lead him to the cross, where he learns an even deeper repentance, a more pure evangelical repentance. Repentance is the need of our hour, that sinners may bow in the dust, be drawn to the cross, experience the deliverance of the Lamb of God, and then learn to repent over sins committed after received grace. In the Lamb of God, a sinner who is abnormal on account of sin is made normal by the active and passive obedience of the Lord Jesus to the law, and is received by the Father as righteous in His sight. It is only in this way, when we take refuge by faith to a Savior who has fulfilled the law, who has done everything, that our abnormal souls may find normalcy, may find perfect obedience, may find righteousness in the righteousness of Jesus. Then we shall experience, "The law of God has led me as a schoolmaster unto Jesus Christ."

Congregation, "Whence knowest thou thy misery?" Can you say, "The source of my misery is out of the law of God. God has taught me to see my sins in the mirror of the law, and where the law has exposed me, He has driven me to the mirror of Jesus Christ to see, in the words of Calvin, 'my righteousness mirrored in the obedience of the Lamb of God.'" You and I must know our sin in order to know the gospel grace of God in Jesus Christ, so that we become nothing and He becomes all in all. Amen.

Psalter 140:All stanzas (second tune)