

The Way Out

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Psalm 99, Micah 6:1-8, **LD5,Q.12**

Rev. Richard J. deLange

Congregation,

As I speak, Hollywood is gathering this evening to give out the Oscars for the best actors, movies, directors and more. I watched one of the nominated movies called the *Ballad of Buster Scruggs*. Honestly, it was weird. It wasn't one story but 5 or 6 short shows—anthologies—grouped into one movie. But it started with Buster Scruggs which was more funny than anything else. It was a western from the cowboy, gunslinger era. Remember *Gunsmoke*? The Sheriff, Festus, Miss Kitty? Last time I had coffee with the men at Emmanuel Home, someone was reminiscing about that show. Those who don't remember that show, might be more familiar with *Star Wars*? Or many love the super hero movies like *Spiderman* and *Superman*. The plot in the old westerns and the modern sci-fi shows or superhero movies is often the same: bad guys trying to escape justice.

In the westerns, bad guys want to get out of jail. They don't care what it takes. They aren't concerned about breaking another law to do it. They just want to get away from justice. The bad guy tries to escape justice. It's that way in many movies, shows and books still today.

The way out or escape is the concern of the second section of the Heidelberg Catechism. All people are justly imprisoned by our sin. God is justly angry. The last answer of LD 4 says,

God's justice demands that sin, committed against his supreme majesty, be punished with the supreme penalty--eternal punishment of body and soul.

We are imprisoned, whether we like it or not. So how can we get out of it? That's the opening question of section 2 in the catechism. We deserve punishment, but how can we escape and return to God's favour?

One minister said, "That is the question that rises in the heart of the sinner that has begun to come to himself."

Think of *The Titanic*. That so-called unsinkable ship was on her maiden voyage. The ship hits an iceberg and water starts coming in. The pumps work full blast, but the water level keeps rising in the hull. You can see that the ship is slowly sinking. The captain has sent out distress calls but no help is in sight. You say to him, "Is there any hope? Is there no way of escape? Is there any way out of this impending disaster?"

Or, suppose you haven't been feeling well lately. You have a number of different symptoms that have given you cause for concern. They point to something wrong. You go to the doctor and he tells you that what you have is serious and fatal. You have just weeks, maybe months to live. Even though you

realize that your sickness is a direct result of your lifestyle, your face drops, your eyes gaze at him and you say: "Doctor, is there nothing you can do for me? Is there no cure? Is there no way out of this death sentence?"

Or, suppose you know a young man in Texas where the death penalty is legal. He has committed murder and sentenced to die in the electric chair. He fully deserves his punishment. There is no question about his guilt. He has even confessed to it. But longing to live, he desperately pleads with the judge, "Is there no possibility of escape? Is there no way out?"

Knowing Our Misery

This is the heart of LD 5. This is the seriousness of it. The sinner is not making excuses or trying to make a deal with God to let him off easy. We saw that in LD 4. He is not trying to say that the hopelessness of his condition has been over-emphasized. He knows his condition. He's not trying to encourage his heart that all is well or not nearly as bad as some have said. He's not hiding in some artificial bubble so that when it pops he is surprised to find himself seated in the executioner's chair. He is not denying the reality of his sin or crime. In Lord's Day 5, the sinner knows his misery, his guilt, but now he wants to know how to escape from the punishment that he deserves so he can return to God's favour.

God welcomes back the one who returns to Him in repentance. Sadly, we live in a society that is like the engineers and builders of the Titanic. People convince themselves that things can't be as bad as some say. People refuse to admit that they can't do anything about sin. Many people deny the truth. They are closing their eyes to the chasm that exist between God and mankind. They do not want to face the fact that they have no way of escape on their own because they have no way to God on their own. And some are even so proud, thinking they do not even need God. But God has told us that in Adam's sin we are all lost. We deserve punishment both in this world and in the world to come. In our sinful condition, we are in prison now and we will die in prison and go to a hot and eternal lock-up. There our desire for escape and a return to God cannot be satisfied, and our thirst for God will be unquenchable.

Because of sin, the human condition is most hopeless. There are lots of people who realize they are sinful but they look for ways of escape that are not God's way. Many people all around us live in hopelessness and despair. They feel the bondage of sin on their lives. You might say that they see the bars. They feel trapped by their sin. They know only too well that the world is broken by the effects of sin though they may give it a different name.

Put yourself in the shoes of people trying to bury their guilt with a bottle of whiskey, beer, some drugs, cheap wine, or even cheaper cough syrup. Picture yourself as a woman trying to find the elusive happiness she has lost by going from man to man for intimate encounters. Or picture yourself as that person who

escapes reality by becoming absorbed in the fabricated lives of TV characters and somehow living your dreams through their fake world. Such people know they are prisoners, but they try to dull their senses or their consciences to escape the reality of their sinfulness because they see no real way of out. Such is the sorrow and misery of unbelief!

In addition, Satan has also succeeded in convincing many people that sin is not really sin. So rather than people being troubled by a guilty conscience they are told that it isn't their fault or they can't help it. Our society has excelled in explaining away sinful behaviour by saying people are not responsible for their actions. They are just products of their environment. We prefer psychological labels to calling something sinful. In criminal law today, lawyers may try to show that an accused person is simply a product of a bad environment and therefore should not be held liable for the crimes committed.

When that kind of thinking makes its way into the church, we allow people to harbour sinful feelings or engage in sinful activities because they can't help it. What they are doing may be wrong for you but it is not wrong for them. This is the kind of talk one often hears in debates about moral issues. One Christian says to another, "I read Scripture differently than you do." And granted there are times when we should learn from another Christian who thinks differently on certain things but there are plenty of non-negotiable areas as well where we know God has spoken the final word and that word is clear, but we don't like it.

Satan works to dull the reality of sin. For the more sin is minimized the less people look for salvation. Satan wants us to believe that what we have always thought was sin is not, but simply reality. To refer to our sermon this morning, we might argue that our complaining is not really a problem; I'm just stating some facts. And if we believe that, then there is nothing to escape from. All we have to do is accept it. And many people have chosen to believe that lie.

The liberty comes, though, in accepting God's verdict. Those who take the word of God seriously see themselves for what they are apart from Christ: lost sinners. We affirm God's diagnosis of our condition. We have no excuses. We are guilty sinners in the hands of a just and righteous God. Adam's sin has placed us all on the road to hell with no way of escape, no hope of deliverance, except one! That one and only means of escape or deliverance is Jesus Christ.

The second question of LD 1, you recall, asks, "What must you know to live and die in the joy of the comfort" of belonging to Jesus Christ? The answer is: *First how great my sin and misery are.* Unless we realize our guilt and are willing to admit that we are sinners, we will never find comfort. Only when we are ready to take stock of our lives and ask the Holy Spirit to help us see our wretched condition and only when we are willing to search the Scriptures so that God's Word can expose our misery to us, only then will we find the comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ. We must admit that we are in trouble and helpless to do anything

about our situation. We need to be helped by an outside source. That realization is a prerequisite for deliverance, for escape, for the way out. We recognize our helplessness and then look to God for deliverance. So the second thing the HC reminds us we need to know to live and die in the comfort of belonging to Jesus is *How I am set free from my sin and misery.*

Knowing The Way Out

The sinner who recognizes his miserable condition does not look for false solutions. He does not ask, "Is there some way by which God can just forget the seriousness of my sin?" He does not try to prove reasonable doubt, as lawyers do for accused criminals. The sinner who recognizes his miserable condition is not looking for just any escape. He's looking for true deliverance that satisfies God's justice. He is in the sinking ship. He is deathly ill. He is on death row. And the wrath of God is fair. God is just, as Psalm 99 points out. He is holy and awesome, the Ruler of all the earth. He is to be feared.

This is the point Micah makes in vv.6&7 when he says,
Mic 6:6 With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

The answer is obvious to us who know the Scriptures. In it is God's answer. In that beautiful 51st Psalm, David writes,
Ps 51:16 O Lord, ... You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

The pages of Scripture flow with a message of hope for those who listen and respond humbly. There is deliverance available. There is a route of escape. There is a guaranteed way out. We must repent and plead for mercy to God on the basis of Jesus Christ.

The escape is not a human invention. It is not an escape that leads from one hell to another. Those who simply try to break out of the prison of sin by sawing through the bars, as it were, will be disappointed. The people who look to false saviours like alcohol, drugs, sexual pleasure or acceptance by other people or by living in a fantasy world will all see, at some point, that they are still in jail. They have only cut their way from one cell into another. Likewise, those who deny sin will obviously not find release. They will, at best, soothe their guilty consciences with false hopes. They will, as it were, paint the walls of their cell and put in carpet and all the other frills of this world, but in the final analysis they are still in jail.

In the face of the antagonistic Sanhedrin, the Apostle Peter boldly preached Jesus Christ, saying in Acts 4:12,

Acts 4:12 "Salvation is found in no else for there is only one name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

I remember Rev. Henk Bruinsma standing on the floor of Synod some years ago when we were discussing some moral issue. He was quoted in the magazine *Christianity Today* saying, "Our deepest concern is that the very salvation of people is at stake, because people will be misled about the basics of a new life in Christ and the nature of sin, repentance and salvation." (Hendrik Bruinsma, CT, Dec.9, 02, p.19)

You see, dear friends, if we truly wish to be free from the condemnation of sin and return to God's favour, there is only one way: turn from your sin and turn to Jesus. He is the only who can satisfy the demands of God's justice and give people—regardless of the sin they struggle with—the power to overcome their sin. God's justice is at stake. We need to get back to God on God's terms, not ours. He created us. We sinned. And He sets the way for salvation. No one else. He sets the criteria. And by His sovereign grace He even provides the payment for our sin in Christ to satisfy the demands of His justice.

In Christ alone we find freedom from guilt and condemnation as well as deliverance from the chains of sin that continue to weigh us down. Therefore we must come to Jesus in humbleness of heart, pleading for mercy. That's the only way out for us. He is the only way out. And he's the guaranteed way out for us.

Have you come to feel the burden of your sin as guilt? Have you come to see yourself as a sinner locked in Satan's jail or dying of a self-inflicted wound or sailing on a sinking ship with no way of escape, except God? If not, then pray for a softening of your heart. We can be sure that God will not refuse to grant salvation to all who call on Him in the name of Jesus. And if you have found that wonderful deliverance, praise God with the psalmist who said,

Pss 99:8 "O Lord our God. You answered your people. You were to Israel a forgiving God, though you punished their misdeeds."

Dear friends, the comfort of belonging to Jesus comes more fully when we know Him as the guaranteed way of deliverance. Remember that all your sins are punished in Christ. He bore the wrath of God. He paid the price of satisfying God's justice and He gives power to help us in our daily battles with sin. Because of Him, we say with the psalmist,

Pss 99:9 "Exalt the Lord our God and worship at His holy mountain for the Lord our God is holy."

May we ever praise His name for our deliverance in His just, perfect, and holy way.

Part II: Deliverance

Lord's Day 5

Q & A 12

Q. According to God's righteous judgment we deserve punishment both now and in eternity: how then can we escape this punishment and return to God's favor?

A. God requires that his justice be satisfied.¹ Therefore the claims of this justice must be paid in full, either by ourselves or by another.²

¹ Ex. 23:7; Rom. 2:1-11

² Isa. 53:11; Rom. 8:3-4