

THE DEAD MADE ALIVE

Text: John 3:1-8
Heidelberg Catechism - Lord's Day 3
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Date: January 31, 2016

We are considering the question 'Why do we need Jesus?' Our Mission Statement says we are *'...called to bring hope to the hills community by sharing the good news of Jesus ...'*. We are here to help our communities find Jesus and become his disciples. But for people to look for Jesus they have to see why they need him. As we said last week it has to do with the human condition.

When I was a theological student my lecturer in preaching was quite concerned about my articulation. So he had me spend time with a speech therapist. I used to practice my articulation by standing in front of a wardrobe and preaching at it. It was a useful exercise to sound out words properly. The draw back was that the cupboard never gave me any feed back. No matter how well I spoke, or the content of my sermon, or how I appealed for a response to the gospel, there was no reaction from that cupboard! Now the reason is of course very obvious! It had no life! Now here is something not so obvious. You may be trying to share the gospel with someone. You try all sorts of new evangelism techniques. But it seems to go no where. There is no interest in what you say. No response to the wonderful news of forgiveness through Jesus. Why not? Have you considered that it may be that the person is spiritually dead? It's what Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1 *"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world ..."* Here is a stark reality we need to be aware of. There are many people in our communities, in churches, even in our own families who are spiritually dead. They are unable to respond to what you may say about Jesus. Unless a miracle occurs!

Let me set the scene here. God's law requires that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. In other words with every thought and breath, with every fibre of

our being. And we are to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Now instead of doing that we do the opposite. We have a *'natural tendency to hate God and ... neighbour'*. The phrase 'natural tendency' begs the question as to whether God created us that way. The response to that is 'no'. We have a corrupt nature because of the *"fall and disobedience of our first parents Adam and Eve"*. They were our representatives and their fall so *"...poisoned our nature that we are born sinners, corrupt from conception on"*. I have a food intolerance condition which is passed on genetically. In a similar way Adam passed on a corrupt human nature. Over the generations each person that is born also has this poisoned human nature. So our human failure is not just due to us getting a bad example from our parents and others as Pelagius argued. Our human problem is much deeper than that. Fixing our situation is not just a matter of trying harder to do the right things. It needs something far more radical. If our very nature is poisoned then it will affect every thought and action. As James writes (3:12) *"Can a salt spring produce fresh water?"* If the source of a spring itself is bitter then all the water flowing out of it will be bitter. If we are born sinners then everything we think and do is affected. A corrupt nature produces corrupt results. That is what is behind the question *"Are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil?"* To which a blunt answer is given: *"Yes..."*

Theologians have labelled this 'unable to do any good' as 'total depravity'. Now this term is almost always misunderstood, and I would suggest, like others have, that it is time it was replaced. Let's clear up what it does not mean. It does not mean that every human being is as totally bad as they possibly could be. We often use the word 'depraved' in the sense of evil monsters, sick perverts, paedophiles and so on. We can understand people objecting when a preacher says you are 'totally depraved'. There are many acts of kindness, many brave and wonderful things done by non Christians. There are many generous hard working people who are not believers in God. And there are plenty of non Christians who are 'nicer' than some Christians. So what are we getting at when we use that term? It means this, because of our poisoned natures, every area of our lives is affected by sin. Whether its work or studies, families and marriages, entertainment or sports, politics and business, church and theology, everything is affected by sin. It is the logical consequence of having a poisoned nature. Now, an honest look at ourselves makes this obvious. Think about it. What area is there in your life that you can say is not affected by sin? Can you think of any part of your life where everything is pure and good? Even if things appear good on the

surface, what about the motives involved? My research on the 'shadow side of ministry' makes clear how even the desire to reach lots of people and grow a big church can be driven by very selfish motives.

The Catechism, without actually using the term 'total depravity' defines it as being 'totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil'. Now again we are inclined to react to that and go really- '...inclined toward all evil'? Well it depends how you define those things and how you measure them. If we measure ourselves by the standards of how we think and act as decent middle class, law abiding citizens, then we are inclined to say that we, and most people we know, are quite reasonable. We are 'good' and certainly not 'inclined toward all evil'. But that is not the standard. The standard we are to be measured against is God's law, against God and his perfection. If you compare shades of grey then you won't see much contrast. But if you have black next to pure white you will certainly see the difference. Think of it this way. How often don't we live as if God didn't exist? So often life is about us being our own little gods with our own agenda, deciding what we want, and how we will do it, forgetting that we are but creatures of the Almighty. All of life does not revolve around us. It revolves around God. Any thought, word or action that is done without acknowledging God and for his glory is an act of disobedience. Even if it is a wonderful humanitarian act done for the welfare of others. Such can glorify the human spirit at the expense of the honour of God. It is an act of disobedience because God's law says to love him *"with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength"*. That is what God wants: every thought and word and act done in love and worship and praise for him our creator. When we do things as if God is not there, it is an 'inclination toward evil'. It is an act of rebellion against our maker. It is because we are made in God's image that we are capable of loving and doing good for each other. Such good acts are reflections of God. But if we ignore the one who made us capable of great good, while we do that good, we rebel against God and act with evil intent. If we buy or sell a car as if it is simply a thing, one of our things, without acknowledging that all the earth is the Lord's then we sin. If we enjoy a beautiful day with family and friends, basking in the sun and feasting, and we do not praise the Lord for his abundant mercies, it is a display of our inclination toward evil. It is living before the face of God as if he wasn't there. It is to spurn him. It is stubborn rebellion. Now, from that perspective we have to admit we are inclined toward all evil.

Now because of our corrupt sinful nature, that is inclined to deny God, we are spiritually dead. So on our own we cannot respond to the message of the gospel. If we have a 'natural tendency' to hate God why would we want to restore our relationship with God? We want to be god ourselves, not be second fiddle to the Almighty. The natural human nature cannot respond to the Word of God. This brings us back to my preaching to the cupboard. Our natural human nature, poisoned by sin is dead to the callings of God. Again, as Paul says *"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world..."* That is the crux of the human condition. A person on their own cannot do anything to resolve their alienation from God. He is spiritually dead. As we well know a person who has died cannot get up and sort out his stuff. So a spiritually dead person cannot respond to the call of God. Unless, and here is the grace of God in all this, unless that person is 'born again'. By that we mean a person has new life instilled in them. They are 're-generated'. They *"...are born again by the Spirit of God."* You see the wonder of God's love. Just when we realise how bad we are, God shows the size of his love by providing a way forward.

The idea of being born or born again illustrates the relationship between God and the sinner when that person is converted. As you know when a baby is about to be born, she has no say in the matter. She has no choice about when it is time for her arrival. Yet, she is totally involved in the whole process of birth. So it is with a person's spiritual rebirth. It comes about by the Spirit of God. John 3:6 *"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to the spirit...the wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."* Our spiritually dead nature is made alive by the Holy Spirit. How? No one knows. It is the secret work of the Spirit. But the rebirth is seen when the person responds to the friend's witnessing. When they respond to the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. You see it when the person admits to their sinful nature. The spiritual nature that died with the fall and disobedience of Adam and Eve is revitalised, it is regenerated.

Now what we see here has important implications for our mission as a church to bring 'hope in the hills'. There are important implications for our children, that family member, that friend or work mate we would love to see come to know Jesus. Our outreach is not just a matter of learning the right techniques. There are evangelism strategies that presume the Pelagian idea that a human being is basically good. In that

approach you need to reach out to their basically good nature and appeal to the person's logic and convince them to accept Jesus. The teaching of the Bible says that is not true. Unless a person is born again, they are inclined toward evil. Unless the person is re-generated all the best strategy in the world will not convince them. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:14: *"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."*

You see the implications for outreach don't you? If a person cannot respond unless they are born again by the Spirit, does it mean we sit back and wait for the Spirit to do his thing? No. So what do we do? We pray! We plead with God to work with his Spirit in the hearts of those we love and are reaching out to. So as we think about our mission to 'make disciples' and bring 'hope to the hills' we need to be thinking in terms of a partnership with God. We need to think very carefully about how we present the gospel to others. We need to be trained and develop our skills and courage to approach people. If we are serious about making disciples for Jesus we will be using every opportunity to learn how to share the gospel and then go out and do it. At the same time, we will have a vigorous time of prayer. We must be alert to God doing his work in the lives of the people we are relating with and reaching out to. If we understand the issue of total depravity, of spiritual deadness, we should of all Christians be the ones who pray the most. The most important part of evangelism is prayer- pounding on heaven's door, pleading the Spirit to work on the lives of our children, our neighbours, our hills communities.

Talking about the human condition, our misery and depravity is not meant to hammer us with no sense of hope. It's to help us see why we need Jesus. Yes, sin is worse than we are inclined to think. But salvation is bigger than any church or preacher can tell. We confess our sin and look at Jesus. For in Jesus we are restored. We are able to do good as God wants it. This is the message of God to a fallen and broken world. In Jesus all is forgiven. By his Spirit we are born anew. We able to start being what we were meant to be. What we could not do in our spiritual deadness, God has done for us through his Son and Spirit. That's grace for you! That's God for you! That's the hope we are called to bring to the hills.