

Foreword by Sinclair B. Ferguson

*The*  
Preacher's  
Catechism

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Lewis Allen

“Our age is fixated on techniques. Yet the beautifully crafted sermon that exalts the preacher over Christ is actually the ugliest sermon of all. Adapting the wisdom of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, *The Preacher’s Catechism* draws us back to what really matters. But make no mistake: the result is profoundly practical. You can read it as a primer or dip in for fresh insight or inspiration. All the way, you’ll find plenty to inform, challenge, and encourage your preaching.”

**Tim Chester**, Pastor, Grace Church Boroughbridge, North Yorkshire;  
Faculty Member, Crosslands Training

“*The Preacher’s Catechism* is a book from the heart that candidly reflects Allen’s own experience of the ups and downs of the preaching ministry. He writes in an engaging and fresh style that provokes thought. Here we find that preachers are ‘heavy lifters’ who need the ‘Monday gospel.’ This book will repay slow and reflective reading by preachers. It will foster the joyful obedience of a preacher, but also expose the activity of his flesh in all its ugliness. Take a little dose at a time and ponder it. Find in it pointers to the remedy for both pride and discouragement. I pray that the Lord will use it to bring down the proud in us all, and then to lift up the humble.”

**Garry J. Williams**, Director, The Pastor’s Academy, London Seminary;  
author, *His Love Endures Forever* and *Silent Witnesses*

“This book is entirely different from any other. It is directed at the preacher himself rather than the art and craft of preaching, and is all the more useful for it. For too long we have focused on the method at the expense of the man. Allen’s creative and content-rich volume goes a long way toward redressing the balance while marrying a familiar format with fresh insight. Every preacher of the Word of God will benefit from spending time in this volume and letting its lessons seep into his bloodstream.”

**Adrian Reynolds**, Training Director, The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches

“These warmhearted and practical devotions could also be titled *The Preacher’s Comfort*. Allen gets inside the pastor’s head and points him to Jesus Christ in a way that will soothe and strengthen many a weary preacher’s soul.”

**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; Pastor, Heritage Reformed Congregation, Grand Rapids, Michigan

“We live in a Corinthian society, where preaching is regarded as foolishness by both the religious and the nonreligious. We also live in a quick-fix society, where even preaching is considered something that can easily be done. Lewis Allen’s ingenious book is an antidote to both of those perspectives—insightful, realistic, biblical, clear, and contemporary. I will buy it and use it with preachers I train!”

**David Robertson**, Minister, St. Peter’s Free Church, Dundee, Scotland;  
Editor, *The Record*; Associate Director, Solas Centre for Public  
Christianity

“Preaching is soul business, and the souls of godly preachers are under continual assault from the world, the flesh, and the Devil. In my last ten years of ministry, I have not read any resource that has so convicted and challenged my soul as has Lewis Allen’s *The Preacher’s Catechism*. His creative and detailed application of the theological riches of the Westminster Shorter Catechism to every area of a preacher’s soul and practice will continue to feed and protect my ministry for years to come. I will return to it again and again.”

**Andy Davis**, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church, Durham,  
North Carolina

“The weakness of much contemporary preaching stems not primarily from a lack of exegetical technique or presentational skill but from the inadequate spiritual preparation and flawed motives of the preacher. Lewis Allen’s new book will challenge preachers to ensure that they proclaim the Word of God with a prayerful desire to see God faithfully disclosed and glorified for who he is, out of a love for his people. Forty-three short chapters apply the core teaching of the Westminster Shorter Catechism specifically to preachers with clarity and insight. Any preacher who reads this book will be humbled, stimulated, challenged, and equipped for the glorious task of preaching, and encouraged to have a deep trust in the power of the Word and the sufficiency of God in this labor. The format is designed for preachers to read alone, perhaps as a daily meditation, but would also be ideal for use by preaching groups, ministers fraternal, or staff teams that want to improve the quality of their preaching.”

**John Stevens**, National Director, The Fellowship of Independent  
Evangelical Churches

“Preachers often work hard to catechize others, but rarely think about being catechized themselves. This is an excellent resource to help us do just that, and I commend it warmly. It’s just the kind of book I will use with my preaching team.”

**Robin Weekes**, Minister, Emmanuel Church, Wimbledon

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Lewis Allen

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Sinclair B. Ferguson

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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To Sarah



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# Foreword

If you are a pastor picking up *The Preacher's Catechism*, intrigued by the title, your first reaction may be: “Do preachers need to be catechized? I thought that was for children—in ye olden days!” But that reaction may soon turn to: “What a great idea! Why didn’t I think of it?” For in these pages you will find not only instruction but also a kind of traveling companion along the pilgrimage of ministry—one that, like a child, will keep asking you fundamental questions but then, like a wise friend, will point you to biblical answers, and in this way encourage you to reflect on what it means to be a preacher of the gospel.

Composing a catechism is no mean accomplishment (try it; you will find it much more difficult than you imagined). Where do you begin—with God, with Scripture, with Christ, or with the human predicament? And how do you answer one question in a way that leads logically to the next? It is because the great catechisms express both biblical and theological logic so well that one of their remarkable effects is to teach catechumens how to think. This explains in part why the Christian communities that have used them have often been the seedbeds for men and women who have made remarkable contributions to a great many aspects of life.

I mention this because in our contemporary world, where we suffer from information overload, there is a tremendous need

for us—yes, pastors included (and perhaps pastors especially)—to learn how to stop and think, and to be able to think things through from biblical first principles. I hope that Lewis Allen’s *The Preacher’s Catechism* will be an encouragement in that direction and a real help to all of us who preach. It asks the questions we should have asked ourselves—if only we had thought about it!

Lewis Allen may be less well known to readers in North America than he is in the United Kingdom. Following his studies in classics and theology at the University of Cambridge, he served for twelve years in Gunnersbury Baptist Church in West London. In 2010 he and his wife, Sarah, sensed a call to a very different sphere of ministry and became church planters in Huddersfield in Yorkshire. Over the years, he has been heavily involved in the leadership of various “gospel partnerships,” as they have become known, especially in England. He therefore brings a wide and varied experience of pastoral ministry and ministers, a keen intellect, and infectious enthusiasm to these pages. Above all, he brings to them a desire to help others as he himself has been helped by others—both by personal conversation with preachers in the present day and by reading preachers from the past.

*The Preacher’s Catechism* is not merely a book to be speed-read in one sitting—although doing so proves worthwhile. Rather, it is a book for a whole lifetime of ministry, one to which the preacher can turn again and again to be refreshed, strengthened, challenged, instructed, corrected, and encouraged to keep on going, and to seek to do better for the Lord. There are surely few more challenging words for the preacher than Paul’s to Timothy, “Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, *so that all may see your progress*” (1 Tim. 4:15). *The Preacher’s Catechism* should help us do precisely that.

Some years ago, I watched a BBC documentary about a distinguished microbiologist honored by the Queen for her services to medical science. She had devoted her research to studying the mutation of one particular virus. As a result of her work, the UK government had given permission for experimental medical injec-

tion procedures to be carried out on people who, because of inoperable conditions, had only a few weeks left to live. The results were remarkable—in some instances verging on the miraculous. She was also a long-standing friend and a member of the congregation I served. When I congratulated her on the documentary, I said how satisfying it must be to have devoted her career to something that had accomplished so much good. She responded in a way that spoke volumes about her priorities: “What I do isn’t really all that important. But *what you do, that’s really important.*”

Preaching, more important than making a life-extending contribution to medical science? My friend thought so. So should I. So should you. My hope and prayer for *The Preacher’s Catechism* is that it will sustain, refresh, and, if necessary, recover that vision.

Sinclair B. Ferguson



# Introduction

*The Preacher's Catechism* is a book for busy preachers, young and experienced, whether bursting with enthusiasm or fighting cynicism, full-time or part-time. Preaching, the declaring of God's eternal Word to time-bound but eternal creatures, is serious work, and its triumphs and disasters echo into eternity. We have the most glorious calling on earth, but it's maybe also the hardest. Preaching really matters.

Every preacher needs to improve his preaching. We should work at our exegesis of the text of Scripture and aim to teach practically and helpfully. We must learn to present Christ in all of the Scriptures in ways that encourage faith and joy in him. We need to work hard with our choice of words and illustrations in order to serve the message we are bringing people. Preachers who don't commit to keeping on learning will end up saying the same things in the same ways. Predictable sermons bless few, if any.

You can, by God's grace, learn to do all these things necessary to improve. And yet, having all of these tools will not ensure that you are a preacher after God's own heart, someone who is really serving those who listen to you. Skills have an essential place, but more essential to our calling are a heart and mind captivated by God and his gospel. Know and enjoy him, and you will really be

sharing a lasting legacy through your preaching. People will see that the God you speak of is real. This book is an attempt to add to that equipping.

### **Three Basic Convictions**

What we're doing here is based on three convictions, which we'll explore briefly before they're worked through in the chapters. The first is that preaching is a commission to a life of fruitful and joyful service in declaring the whole counsel of God. The second is that we will best fulfill our commission by becoming better acquainted with the work of preaching and our own inner lives. The third is that help for preachers is at hand in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Put them together, and you have the Preacher's Catechism.

*Conviction 1: The church needs preachers who last and thrive.*

We live in a short-term world. The modern workplace gives no guarantee of any job, let alone the jobs-for-life our grandparents had. We are mobile, and most people are looking for the next thing. Sticking to the task of preaching, year in, year out, and maybe in the same place, is seen as a bit quaint, an acceptable lifestyle for the old-fashioned or the risk-averse. And yet, this is the very thing we are called to. We must last, and more than last, we must thrive.

We must learn to outlive our conflicting feelings in ministry, including the urges to take ourselves elsewhere when ministry gets tedious or troublesome. We need to make it a top priority to work out how we will stay faithful to the task and to the congregation the Lord has assigned to us.

A fruitful ministry comes from the heart of a contented preacher. It's not about getting your life circumstances right (be that church, salary, peer recognition, or work-life balance). Some of the most impacting ministries have been carried out through truly wretched situations, filled with years of stress and opposition. So many preachers have stood firm and persevered

with fruit owing to their deep heart contentment in the God of the gospel. Christ must be a treasure of ever-deepening worth to us.

We know this, don't we? Jesus must be everything to us. Don't we preach to others that he, not success or recognition or comfort, is what discipleship is all about? Of course we do. And yet, this truth can so easily get lost in the joys as well as the disasters of preaching. Every preacher wrestles with life's struggles, but every preacher is called to find a joy in Jesus Christ that grows as the years go on. A dry and joyless preacher is a burden, at best. A preacher whose pulpit freshness comes from a living relationship with Jesus is a great blessing to the church. Our catechism seeks to help us make sure that Jesus is the center of our lives, and then of our ministry.

*Conviction 2: Preachers must understand how preaching works, and how their own souls work.* Our work as preachers is devilishly difficult. Satan hates all of God's servants, maybe preachers most of all. Satan has always attacked those who bring God's Word. He began his assaults in the garden of Eden, on Adam and Eve, who were charged to listen to and bring God's word to the world, and the signs are that he has not given up. Of all his subtle attacks against us, two stand out: the temptation we have to undervalue the majesty and power of preaching, and the temptation to overlook the deep needs of our own souls.

It seems surprising that we preachers, of all people, should undervalue our calling. The evidence bears out that we do, though. We put plenty of effort into our preaching, but the rewards of radically transformed lives among our hearers are just not what we have hoped, prayed, and worked for. Sermons disappoint us, they miss their marks, and they sometimes fail to achieve much, if anything. Christians seem to change little, and unbelievers aren't converted. We pray, preach, preach again (and again), and anxiously wait for fruit. When nothing appears to happen,

what preacher doesn't struggle with discouragement, and doesn't wonder if all this preaching is really worth it? The Devil loves a discouraged preacher, and his infernal crosshairs are always trained on us.

So we press on as best we can. God gloriously uses these hard seasons of ministry to strengthen us. There is another power at work, though: the power of discouragement. Under the surface, hidden even from our fretting thoughts, there are unseen currents working to erode our spiritual joy and assurance. John Bunyan once sensed that the Devil was speaking to him. Satan was very happy with his youthful zeal and wasn't at all intimidated by it. Satan's plan, Bunyan heard, was to cool him "by degrees," slowly but surely. As long as this young enthusiast ended up cold, cynical, and self-protecting, the Tempter would be happy. "Though you be burning hot at present, yet, if I can pull you from this fire, I shall have you cool before it be long."<sup>1</sup> Does he have a different strategy for God's servants today? No. This one works so well. If we are to be effective, we must be aware of it.

Even in our hectic age, we need to remember that almost all spiritual work—whether from heaven or hell—works slowly. We are changed over time. Preaching does work, but so often it works slowly. We need to make sure that we will still be around to be part of that work of God and to see its fruits. We must be content to press on.

Those who keep going in their preaching ministry do so only as they learn to nurture their own souls. Even the strongest of us are fragile men. It's not enough to preach grace; we need it ourselves. We need to understand our souls so that we can look after them. Our calling isn't primarily to preach to others. Like every other Christian, we preachers must preach to ourselves. If we are to do this well, we must learn to recognize the dangers that lurk, even in the work of ministering the Word. Exhaustion, elation, personal

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1. John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 1, *Experimental, Doctrinal and Practical*, ed. George Offor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 19.

spiritual growth, pride, and despair all feature in our work. How do we recognize them? How do we respond to them? This is what we'll be looking at.

*Conviction 3: The Westminster Shorter Catechism is an outstanding resource for the heart needs of every preacher.* Catechisms are almost as old as Christianity. In the early Christian centuries a catechism (from the Greek word meaning “teaching”) was a body of Bible truths to be taught to children and new converts. The form developed into a series of questions and answers, often to be recited aloud and committed to memory. The Reformation saw numbers of catechisms produced, and a good number of them are still used around the world today, as they put essential gospel teaching in clear and memorable language.

A catechism is an excellent way of helping people to engage with and reflect on Christian truth. Pithily worded questions and answers lodge in the mind and sink into the heart. There they can take root, and over the years a believer can appreciate their meaning more deeply. It is interesting that in our word-crowded world, more churches are seeking out historic catechisms, or are writing their own, to enable them to enjoy and to pass on the message of the gospel.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (yes, there is a larger one) was published in 1647. Over one hundred pastors and educators met in London for sessions of study and conversation in order to frame doctrinal statements and directives for church government that they hoped would serve the national church in Great Britain. The achievements from the eventual ten years of meetings were far-reaching: the gatherings (known collectively as the Westminster Assembly), produced a confession of faith, two catechisms, and documents on public worship and church government. These have formed the governing documents of almost every English-speaking Presbyterian church, and have been used across the world since their first publication. Arguably the most used of them today is the Shorter Catechism.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism was written to meet the needs of the whole church. For centuries it has been used to train children and adults in their gospel faith. How about us preachers? We have much to learn from the catechism, both as disciples and as disciples with a particular calling to preach the Word of God.

## **A Catechism for Preachers**

The Preacher's Catechism is indebted to the Westminster Shorter Catechism in its question-and-answer format and its overall structure. But it's also significantly different. The 107 Westminster questions become 43. Every one of our questions and answers is reworded, in order to explore the priority of preaching and of the preacher's own needs. What we have is an entirely new catechism, though one much indebted to its noble ancestor.

The Preacher's Catechism is a catechism for preachers. I have in my sights those called to full-time Word ministry. I also want to engage the whole range of preachers, including those starting out and testing a call, ministry students, and those gifted to preach but not called to the pastorate. The focus is mainly on Sunday pulpit ministry. Preaching has its many forms, of course, and this catechism is for all of us who handle God's Word in a variety of contexts. If you pick up the Bible with the aim of bringing its message to others in some sort of public setting, this book is for you. In it we take time to explore what it looks and feels like to be a preacher of God's Word.

I've tried to preach for nearly as long as I've been a Christian. Some of the disasters of those early years are forever etched into my memory. "Keen but clueless" would describe at least my first fifty church sermons. Still, my hearers exercised the grace of forgiveness, and because no one actually forced me to stop, I didn't, and haven't. A call to the pastorate in my midtwenties began twelve and a half years' very happy pastoring in London. The Lord then surprised me, my family, and the church by issuing us a clear call to leave that happy community and cross cultures to Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, to plant what was to become

Hope Church from scratch in 2010. All the way the preaching of God's Word has been at the center of my ministry and at the heart of changed lives through that ministry.

One of the deep joys of ministry is that we get to share the task with fellow preachers. Three friends whose preaching I gladly sit under have read this book in its later stages. Sinclair Ferguson, Robin Weekes, and Garry Williams each gave their time to read my chapters and offered very astute comments. They deserve a huge debt of thanks for their wise heads and generous hearts. I'm also very grateful to Thom Notaro and the whole Crossway team, whose enthusiasm for the book and hard work have been such an encouragement to me.

My family has made a lot of sacrifices in supporting my calling to proclaim God's Word. I am so grateful to each of my five children, as I am to my wife, Sarah. Our children can certainly spot both good and bad preaching, and they all look forward to preaching they can really feed on. Sarah's prayers and love for me are an unfailing encouragement, and to her I give this book, with love.





*Part 1*

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The Glory  
of God and  
the Greatness  
of Preaching



## Preaching, above All

Q. What is God's chief end in preaching?

A. God's chief end in preaching is to glorify his name.



The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."

*Exodus 34:6*

Above everything else, those of us who are called to preach need to know that God is love (1 John 4:8). The church's great news to a dying world is that there is a living God, whose love for his creation is inexhaustible. Could we ever love and serve anyone else before him?

Without this conviction our preaching will shrivel and die, and we preachers will soon go the same way. With it, we can believe and do all things. The church has no other and no better message. This is her great declaration.

“God is love” is actually not the same as “God is loving” or “God shows love,” though both of these are, of course, true. A God who is loving might be a God who decides to be loving only at times, but no more. The same would be true of a God who shows love. The apostle John means neither. What he is saying in 1 John 4:8 is far bigger and far more exciting. God loves, and shows that love, because he *is* love. Love is of God’s essence. And so the source of all reality is a God of ardent, consuming, and delighting love. This is who he is.

Can we speak too much of God’s love, though? We all know how the love of God has been pitted against the other divine attributes, as if it somehow neutralizes them. On the one side, there are those who feel that the doctrine of God’s love, unless given a myriad of qualifications, might lead to theological liberalism. On the other, the voices insisting that “love wins” effectively state that everything else loses. God’s justice, holiness, and sovereignty have all been made to bow to love, as if God’s love somehow triumphs over them. Thankfully, such views are wrong. God’s love neither conquers nor is crushed by the other attributes. Each exists maximally in the Godhead, for his glory and our good. Let God be a lover, and every man a liar.

God’s attributes are never to be viewed as in some sort of tension with each other. We are never in danger of seeing God as being, for example, too sovereign, any more than we might see him as being too merciful or too holy. That is not biblical thinking. God is holy, merciful, sovereign, and loving. He is each one, utterly and completely. He is all of his attributes in their fullest expression, all at the same time. Our preaching about God, as we explore one of his attributes, never needs qualifying or rebalancing by talking about another attribute. Preaching is declaring all that God is.

And God is a preacher. He declares himself the loving Lord. He commanded creation into existence and upholds it all by his Word. His Word governs the planets, and he speaks to our consciences. In his book, the Bible, he shows us what he is like and how we should live. He preaches, in other words. He preaches all the time.

God speaks many words, but he has only one ultimate purpose in the world. As our catechism says, “God’s chief end in preaching is to glorify his name.” He draws people to discover delight in his Son, Jesus Christ. That is the delight the Father has. He says of his Son,

Behold my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my Spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Isa. 42:1)

Those words are echoed at Christ’s baptism and transfiguration, when the voice from heaven says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matt. 3:17; 17:5). “The infinite happiness of the Father,” said Jonathan Edwards, “consists in the enjoyment of his Son.”<sup>1</sup> Our infinite happiness, as saved sinners, consists in enjoying the Son of God. Delight in Jesus is distinctly godlike, and is God’s redemption purpose for the world. The Father is redeeming sinners to be delighters in his Son.

Our salvation involves experiencing the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Moments before Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane, he spoke to the Father in prayer: “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). Knowing Jesus also means knowing the Father.

The God who is, is triune. The Trinity is the revelation of the God who is love. The persons of the Trinity love one another. Delight and mutual honor characterize the persons. The never-lonely, never-needy, majestic and holy God is triune love.

Delighting, serving, being contented, and sharing all things are basic to all authentic love. We long for this sort of commitment and this sort of contentment. Our hearts were created for it, and we know it as love. Augustine said: “Love is the delight of the lover in his beloved. Love’s heartbeat is its delight in something else.”<sup>2</sup>

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1. Cited in Steven M. Studebaker and Robert W. Caldwell III, *The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards: Text, Context, and Application* (London: Routledge, 2012), 27.

2. Cited in John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 2, *On Communion with God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968), 25n (my translation from the Latin).

The “something else” for each person of the Trinity is the other two persons. Our salvation involves the outreaching of that triune love to bring us into this eternally loving life. Christian discipleship and Christian ministry are life lived in Jesus. Mike Reeves comments:

We not only come to share the Father’s pleasure in him [Christ]; we come to share the life he enjoys before the Father. We stand in him with his own unspotted confidence before his Father—and there the Spirit draws us to live out his life and sonship. That is why he lived and died in our place, that we might live (and die) in his.<sup>3</sup>

What is your heartbeat? Do you love to preach, or do you love the One you preach? Do you love to prep your sermons, enjoying the hard mental and spiritual work, or do you love the One you are discovering more about? As Sunday comes, do you long to lift up the name of the triune God in your preaching, declaring the wonder of the three persons, or is your heart set on getting a bit more congregational love in your direction?

Our challenge as preachers is to remain lovers, to refuse to let our calling, however important and exciting, obscure our primary calling to be captivated ourselves by God’s love in Jesus Christ. We must teach others that God is love, and that life on earth is an invitation from heaven to know that love and to live in the light of it. Sermons that are mere information downloads are dry discourses and make for dry Christians, if Christians at all. Rather, we preach so that our hearers discover that the God of love has come to meet them in his Son.

You can only preach what you love. You can only truly love if you know and are daily fed by the love of God. God is always preaching himself, as the God of love. He has no greater message, no other gospel, and no greater purpose. Neither do we.

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3. Michael Reeves, *Christ Our Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2014), 76.

## Enjoying God

Q. How do we enjoy God?

A. We enjoy God as we submit our hearts to all that he tells us.



With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

*Isaiah 12:3*

God loves a cheerful preacher. Our ever-blessed, ever-joyful God wants to be proclaimed by those who are brimful of the joy his grace in Christ brings. He calls us to delight in him and, out of that joy, to call others to the feast. Preacher and sermon must be filled with gospel joy. “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Isa. 12:3). Preachers who taste, teach, and share the joy of the gospel are truly fulfilling their calling as they serve those who listen.

What I’ve just said causes some to smart. Life can be so hard, and surely joy is just one of our experiences among the whole range of what we encounter. What about the tears, the heartaches—for some, the months and even years of numbing grief or debilitating

illness? It's true, we preachers are often deeply sad—just as everyone else can be. So, why single out joy when joy is so often crowded out by almost anything else?

The reason is that joy, like nothing else, shows whether we really believe the gospel. Joy is gospel authenticity. Joy is not an emotional buzz, an escape from the difficulties we face. To know Jesus Christ means to taste, and to want to taste more, the delights of peace with God the Father, who cares for and smiles on us, the Son, who journeys with us, and the Spirit, who empowers us. Crushing hard days come, and conscious fellowship with God may be overshadowed for a season; but the triune God is with us. He is our joy.

Joy in Christ and his grace is the most convincing sign that the gospel has won our hearts. If we say we've been brought to Jesus and are his willing servants but live joyless lives, then there is a problem. If we preach out of a heavy sense of obligation, we are in trouble. And if we honestly believe that people will be won for Christ through our dutiful, even faithful and conscientious—but actually joyless—preaching, then we are deceiving ourselves. The whole world is looking for joy. The church is looking for it, too. And everyone's looking at you. You're the preacher, who's supposed to have a message, even a life-transforming one. Are you being changed, then, in this one area that everyone longs for most of all? Are you a joyful preacher, whose words match the revolution you're experiencing?

The men who framed the Westminster Shorter Catechism knew that we are redeemed in Christ to know the joy of God's love. That is life's purpose. As they put it, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."<sup>1</sup> Life in Christ is not, above all, a set of commands to obey externally but the inward work of the Holy Spirit to remake our minds and hearts. Only then does faith express itself in glad obedience. As those who are led by the Spirit, we are to be led into a life of deepening and joy-filled contentment in Christ.

The Christian life begins with hearing the Word of God in the power of the Spirit and responding to Jesus Christ in repentance

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1. Answer to Q. 1 in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2015), 5.

and faith. Christian maturity is an ongoing experience of the same: we see Christ in his Word, and we worship him, gladly giving our hearts to his lordship. We repent of the ways in which we deny his rule of grace over our lives, and we recommit ourselves to him.

The discovery our astonished hearts make as we live the Christian life is that discipleship is an invitation to taste joy. Jesus gives his disciples the promise, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). That first step with Christ is a step into understanding, reality, truth, and freedom. All the world is looking for those things but failing, as we once were. Now we’ve been brought by grace to encounter them all in a person, Jesus Christ. Sin once controlled our hearts, but the invasion of God’s forgiveness has brought us into a new life of forgiveness and peace. And joy. Joy is offered to us in Jesus (John 15:11; 16:24). Those of us who preach must be eagerly seeking out joy in Christ.

True joy in Christ has many distractions and opponents. One of its greatest opponents is ministry. At times in my own ministry, my heart has felt like a wind tunnel, with prayers and sermon prep all focused on the needs of others rushing through it, while I was struggling to give enough time to ministering to my own spiritual needs. Sunday and midweek deadlines may focus the mind and will, but they can also be the slow (and stressful) death of even the keenest preacher. Jesus ceases to be the delight we’re knowing and commending to others and becomes the one whose sweetness has faded. Preaching his Word is no longer the overflowing of joy-captured hearts. If that is the situation we’ve fallen into, we need to take time out, and begin over again.

So what do we do? We need to give our hearts time and space, and bring them, distraction free, back to the gospel. We need a fresh discovery of just how loved we are in Christ. In life’s busyness we need to fight for the time to listen to God’s Word. If we don’t, the thistles and thorns of work, ministry, and worry will choke our souls. Our hearts need time—time for the Word. We must pray, sing, and worship. Joy-crushing sins and patterns of ungodly behavior must be identified and confessed. There are the many, many

blessings that unmerited grace has brought us to reflect on and much joy to be found in our Savior. “Joy in God is a duty of great consequence in the Christian life; and Christians need to be again and again called to it,” wrote Matthew Henry.<sup>2</sup> God designs that his church be served by Word-soaked, joy-seeking, and joy-sharing preachers of his delightful gospel. He purposes that those same preachers be mastered by his Word, preaching out of experience.

For that to become reality, the sermon prep will have to wait, and some areas of our lives need a careful and principled neglect. The lawn can grow long, and the bike can rust a little. There are wells of salvation to draw from, and our joy in Christ is at stake. This heart work (as the Puritans would call it) is not an extra duty to add to the many in your busy life. It is the preacher’s first responsibility, and not an optional extra.

Martin Bucer, friend and mentor to John Calvin, gave this counsel to ministers of the Word:

The health and life of the inner man consists in a true living faith in the mercy of God and a sure confidence in the forgiveness of sins which Christ the Lord has acquired and earned for us. This faith and confidence make us truly love God and everything which pleases Him, and bring us his good Spirit, who effects in us a right will and ability to avoid everything that is evil and to do everything that is good.<sup>3</sup>

Good advice. Our crowded age needs to rediscover the wonder of going to God empty-handed but with expectant hearts. Before we would dare to preach his Word, we must ask him to preach it to us, for our growing delight in his Word. “Our joy in the word is the litmus test of the value we actually place on that word.”<sup>4</sup>

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2. Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 6:599.

3. Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2008), 103–4.

4. Christopher Ash, *Bible Delight: Heartbeat of the Word of God* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2008), 191.

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