

A Good Confession

DAILY REFLECTIONS ON THE

WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM

.....

*Written and collected
by the members and affiliates of
Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church,
Birmingham, AL*

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*This work was created and
curated with love and devotion
to the Lord Jesus Christ
by the members and affiliates of
Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church,
Birmingham, Alabama.*

FOREWORD

GRACE IS: *the only hope we have for growing in intimacy with God.*

THE MEANS OF GRACE: *the sustaining part of growing in intimacy with God, including spiritual practices such as reading and memorizing the Word of God, spending time in prayer, having fellowship, lifting our hearts in worship, giving generously, and fasting regularly, as well as participating in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.*

After almost forty years of ministry, I've never met anyone actively growing in intimacy with God who is not regularly taking advantage of the means of grace. This means they are particularly exemplified in the Word of God, focused in prayer, devoted in worship, and soaked in fellowship. These practices that draw us close to the Father began in the first century church (Acts 2:42–47) and are as timeless and integral to our faith today as they were then.

I had the privilege of planting Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church in 1989 and have served as its senior pastor for almost thirty years. I've experienced the power of the means of grace in my own life and have also seen the life-changing grace of those means in the lives of others. However, I've also witnessed the struggle that many in the church experience to spend regular, meaningful time with Jesus. It seems that most Christians *know* they need to have regular devotional times and even *desire* to have that time, but they struggle to follow through.

Part of discipleship in the local church is helping God's people with the how-to's. Several years ago, our pastoral staff discovered that many in our congregation were not spending quality time with God on a daily basis, including many of our leaders. As we discussed how to create an atmosphere for changing that pattern, we landed on finding a devotional for the entire congregation to participate in together—one that would give a daily reading plan that would engage our thoughts, feelings, desires, and choices.

After implementing this plan, we soon discovered a dramatic increase in the number of people having a meaningful devotional

time. We also learned that a congregation-wide devotional was a great motivator and provided weekly accountability for the body as we entered into the same scriptures and texts together. Furthermore, congregants had a common experience that manifested itself during various small group gatherings at lunches, Bible studies, fellowship groups, and brief encounters throughout the week. In thirty years of ministry at Oak Mountain, few practices have had the spiritual growth impact that a church-wide devotional experience has given us.

We have a saying around Oak Mountain: “Small things done slowly over a long period of time change the world.” It has been incredible to see what God has done in our congregation throughout years of emphasizing the grace of God as the motivation for enabling greater faith and obedience.

It has been so fulfilling for me as a pastor to see the gospel fruit of grace expressed through the many contributors to *A Good Confession*. These contributors are not super-saints, and many of them are not church staff, elders, or deacons. They are fellow journeymen and women walking side by side on the path of sanctification, still in the process of becoming who God created and called them to be. They are people who realize that grace doesn’t fix us. Rather, they understand that grace is simply how broken people with broken lives live in a broken world, yet continually wait with hope and expectancy for redemption, both present and future, as we long for Christ’s return.

Our prayer and hope is that you would use this devotional to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). Perhaps God might lead you and your faith community to begin an annual congregational devotional. But even if he doesn’t do that, we hope you find yourself personally growing in intimacy with the Father, and with his Son, through the Spirit. Begin now. Remember that small things done slowly over a long period of time change the world . . . beginning with your own heart.

Enjoy.

Dr. Bob Flayhart,

Senior Pastor, Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church

INTRODUCTION

I'm a runner. I enjoy the simple pleasure of running. The experience is mentally grounding and settling for me. It's the feel of the wind on my face, the sense of stepping away from the pressure and weight of life, and the space to let my mind roam from one thought to another without distraction. Because of my love for the sport, I'm even willing to experience pain and discomfort in order to run faster or farther, and to see what my body can do. In other words, I like to grow as a runner. But over time, I've learned I need a plan as well as an understanding of the nuances of the sport to create one that works. I need to know how to schedule the right mix of fast runs, easy runs, and long runs. I need to know my dietary requirements and the needs of my body in regard to rest.

Obviously, there is a lot to know about running if one is to do it well. How did I learn so much? I observed those who went before me, read running magazines, and simply ran—sometimes poorly and slowly—but I ran. Without a plan, I'd still be a runner, but I would miss out on so much delight. I am a runner because it's something I was made to be.

So it goes with being a follower of Jesus. When it comes to a growing spiritual life, we need the desire, the plan, and the know-how. A healthy aim requires both the reality of the gift of grace as well as its persevering disciplines.

We see this most plainly stated in the first question and answer of the subject of this devotional, the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*:

Q: What is man's chief end?

A: Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

The catechism authors recognized that the spiritual life is not a split between head and heart, but rather an integration of the two, resulting in gratitude to the Father and grace to others and ourselves. Both the intentional glorification of God with one's will and the enjoyment of God with one's heart combine to connect us to the Father on a

personal and intimate level. Yet, so often, believers miss this and fall heavy-handed on one side or the other.

After over thirty years of pastoral work, I've become increasingly aware of my own tendency to falter in both my desire and discipline when it comes to my spiritual life. I don't think I'm alone. Many Christians say they believe great things about God, but their lives say something else. Because our actions flow out of our beliefs, how do we foster an atmosphere of daily devotional study that connects us to deep and lasting communion with God and moves outward in our practical daily living? Our wish is that *A Good Confession: Daily Reflections on the Westminster Shorter Catechism* will do just that: connect our confessions of faith from the mouth with our doing of faith from a wellspring of love and devotion to God and neighbor.

Throughout this devotional you will find a theological framework, key passages of scripture, modeled prayers, and spiritual insights from true life stories and powerful quotes. The hope is that these elements will open a new space in your heart and mind in which to welcome the Holy Spirit to engage you with God at more than just a rational level, but in a deep, multifaceted, whole-hearted way.

Why the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*?

The theological framework for this book is provided by the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, which was written over 350 years ago for the purpose of clarifying doctrinal standards and offering a broad theological understanding of what the Bible teaches. In 1643, the British Parliament convened a gathering of pastors and biblical scholars, known as the Westminster Assembly, with the charge to develop a statement of faith and tools for instruction for the church in Britain. One of those tools was the *Shorter Catechism*, published in 1646, which was originally written for use with children, but is used today with all ages in a variety of denominations around the world. Designed in a question and answer format, the *Shorter Catechism* is composed of 107 questions and answers, fifty-two of which we've chosen as a devotional focus for each week of the year.

God has been, and will continue to be, faithful to believers across time and space. His promises apply to his people regardless of era, location, birthright, or any other qualifying factors man has placed on himself. With grateful hearts, Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church celebrates the work of the Westminster Assembly and its adherence to the truth of the Bible in creating a succinct, doctrinally clarifying document to aid even us, as modern-day believers, as we seek to know Jesus.

HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL

This devotional is designed for use individually. However, because God made us to live in community, you might consider using it as a family, a small group, or even as a church body. Several of each week's elements could be used in corporate worship and could give friends, couples, or congregations a common vocabulary, just as the Westminster Assembly intended.

Below lists the variety of components offered to help enrich your time with the Lord each day.

Weekly and Daily Elements

Each week begins with an introductory story to prepare your heart and mind for the theme of the week. There are six daily elements which include a memory verse (to be learned incrementally during the week), a prayer, a psalm, and the catechism question and answer. Also, there is a unique Scripture passage plus reflective readings for each of the five days.

Personal Story

Real-life stories, each from a different person, are given on the first day of the week to demonstrate how someone has experienced the broader topic of the week's catechism question theme in everyday life. We hope these stories will give practicality to theological concepts you study, helping you remember and connect with them in a personal way.

Catechism Question and Answer

For churches using this devotional congregationally, we encourage you to incorporate the question and answer as a responsive reading during your worship service each week. For individual study, seek to find the spiritual truth they provide and meditate on it throughout the week.

Prayer

All prayers included in this text are from *Valley of Vision*, and are used with the kind permission of Banner of Truth Trust. The full book, *Valley of Vision*, is available from banneroftruth.org. Our hope is that this prayer will awaken and direct your heart as you approach the Lord each day.

Memory Verse

The week starts with a short memory verse (intended for daily practice) to complement the catechism question. The discipline of storing up God's word in your mind produces readily available fruit to meditate on and recall when you are faced with doubts, struggles and temptation. The verse is broken down into brief phrases, so you can memorize a small piece of the verse on Monday, add another phrase Tuesday, and so forth, so that by the end of the week it is familiar and easy to recall.

Scripture Reading

Each day provides a brief passage of scripture that ties in with that week's question and answer. By providing five days of material instead of seven, we hope you experience freedom to spend extra time on certain readings but that you won't feel as though you're falling behind if you miss a day.

Reflections

Each day ends with one or two reflections from a variety of authors—past and present, male and female, theological and secular—selected because they bring understanding, insight, and creative reflection on the catechism question at hand.

I've been a runner for many years now. I've learned that whenever I stop following a plan, I get hurt more easily, lose motivation, and don't make progress. It's been the same way in my devotional life. Whenever I've taken the "wing it" approach, I've wound up spiritually limping, losing delight in and enjoyment of God, and not experiencing the growth God desires. But reading the Bible is about more than just building spiritual muscles. Although it certainly does strengthen our hearts, it's ultimately about understanding why we would want to build those muscles at all and to see that we must look at Who it is that's asking us to run. Devotion is delight because of the deep goodness and unwavering heart of the One asking for it. That's the kind of invitation that draws our hearts near to his own and brings us into true and sincere worship.

We invite you to join with us on this devotional journey as we seek to reach back to take the torch from the Westminster Assembly and confess with them as the communion of saints: yes, we were created to both glorify God and enjoy him forever. Because the torch doesn't ultimately stay with us—it was created to be passed along. Lord, equip us to do so.

Soli Deo Gloria.

Greg Poole

Associate Pastor, Oak Mountain Presbyterian Church
with Cara Johnson, Holly Mackle, Matt Redmond,
and Elisabeth Welty



How To Use This Devotional

QUICK START GUIDE

EACH DAY OF THE WEEK

- First, read and recite the catechism question and answer.
- Pray the weekly prayer.
- Worship God as you read the Psalm selection for the week.
- Reflect on the memory verse, and practice the portion of that day's memory work.
- For the first day of the week, read the story that introduces the theological truth.
- Read the specific daily Scripture reading.
- Read the daily reflections from various writers.

