

WEEK 47

THE MEANS OF GRACE

WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM QUESTION 88

Q | What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption?

A | The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are, his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

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PRAY *May his shed blood make me more thankful for thy mercies, more humble under thy correction, more zealous in thy service, more watchful against temptation, more contented in my circumstances, more useful to others. Amen.*

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WORSHIP GOD BY MEDITATING ON PSALM 73

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COMMIT GOD'S WORD TO MEMORY | ACTS 2:42

DAY 1 | And they devoted themselves
 DAY 2 | to the apostles' teaching
 DAY 3 | and the fellowship,
 DAY 4 | to the breaking of bread
 DAY 5 | and the prayers.

THE SOLDIER

It seems to me a good picture will evoke powerful memories of people, times, and places like nothing else. I'm thinking specifically of a fifty-year-old photo I have, taken of a young soldier who's unaware of the photographer. He's not soldiering at the moment, but resting and intently reading a letter, blessedly forgetful of his circumstances—if only for a moment. The soldier has been away from home now four months, with eight months to go on his tour of duty. His army unit would spend days in the fields and jungles of Vietnam, punctuated by brief breaks for the combatants to rest bodies and nerves. It's during one of these times that the photographer captured the soldier reading that very special letter. Letters from family members and friends were nice, but the ones from his new bride were life giving to his soul.

The newlyweds only had a few days before the war separated them, so their love for each other would have to be sustained by these letters. She was his rock, possessing an inner peace and confidence that she claimed came from a personal, unconditional relationship with God.

Her correspondence spoke constantly of her love for him, her new husband. She regularly encouraged him, reminding him not to be overwhelmed by what he was experiencing, no matter how terrible. *God is in control*, she claimed with an admirable assurance. He drank in every line and especially loved when she told him about herself. Always wanting to know more, he asked her to write even the mundane details of what was happening in her life, and together from afar, they dreamed of what their future could look like. There were many plans: experiences to share, college to finish, babies and careers to nurture. But her primary message was to trust God. *He is protecting you, he loves you, and I am asking him to bring you home to me.*

After their year apart, God did bring the soldier home to be with the love of his life, and joined him to Christ seven years after that.

I know this story so well because the man in the photo is me. I often go back to it because it reminds me of the unseen hand of God in my life, even before I knew him in the personal way my wife did. Through her prayers and the words of scripture she wrote to me through the

war and decades since, I began to think of the Word of God as his love letter, given so I would know him more intimately and be encouraged in my daily spiritual battles—battles just as fierce as those fought fifty years ago in a strange country. Today I still need the promise of a future hope—a homecoming to the One who loves me dearly.

Of all the interesting details this particular photo communicates—the heat of the country, the cramped quarters, and the quiet contentment on my face—what’s most unusual is how unaware I was that the photo was being taken. The photographer’s lens may have been focused on me in that moment, but it was the eye of God that never left me—and never leaves me—even when I’m unaware of his presence.

DAY 1

READ ACTS 2:42-47

“ The “means of grace” are such as Bible reading, private prayer, and regularly worshipping God in Church, wherein one hears the Word taught and participates in the Lord’s Supper. I lay it down as a simple matter of fact that no one who is careless about such things must ever expect to make much progress in sanctification.

J. C. RYLE

“ True spiritual development is something which God himself gives. . . . Our greatest need is to recognize, and to put our lives under, the influences which God uses to produce growth in Christian character.

SINCLAIR FERGUSON

DAY 2

READ MATTHEW 28:16-20

“ No man is so regenerate, but that continually he has need of the means which Christ Jesus has appointed to be used in his church.

RICHARD G. KYLE

“ Akin to the preaching of the gospel, we have another help to our faith in the sacraments in regard to which, it greatly concerns us that some sure doctrine should be delivered, informing us both of the end for which they were instituted, and of their present use. First, we must attend to what a sacrament is. It seems to me, then, a simple and appropriate definition to say, that it is an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of goodwill toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself and before angels as well as men. We may also define more briefly by calling it a testimony of the divine favour toward us, confirmed by an external sign, with a corresponding attestation of our faith towards him.

JOHN CALVIN

DAY 3

READ 1 PETER 1:13-25

“Worship is the strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to the presence of God.

EUGENE PETERSON

“Let us remember that grace is increased, in the exercise of it, not by virtue of the exercise itself, but as Christ by his Spirit flows into the soul and brings us nearer to himself, the fountain, so instilling such comfort that the heart is further enlarged. The heart of a Christian is Christ's garden, and his graces are as so many sweet spices and flowers which, when his Spirit blows upon them, send forth a sweet savor. Therefore keep the soul open to entertain the Holy Ghost, for he will bring in continually fresh forces to subdue corruption.

RICHARD SIBBES

DAY 4

READ EPHESIANS 6:10-20

“ God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving his grace. The Disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us. . . . This is the way it is with the Spiritual Disciplines—they are a way of sowing to the Spirit. The Disciplines are God’s way of getting us into the ground; they put us where he can work within us and transform us. By themselves the Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God’s means of grace. The inner righteousness we seek is not something that is poured on our heads. God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we place ourselves where he can bless us.

In this regard it would be proper to speak of “the path of disciplined grace.” It is “grace” because it is free; it is “disciplined” because there is something for us to do. In *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes it clear that grace is free, but it is not cheap. The grace of God is unearned and unearnable, but if we ever expect to grow in grace, we must pay the price of a consciously chosen course of action which involves both individual and group life. Spiritual growth is the purpose of the Disciplines.

RICHARD J. FOSTER

DAY 5

READ NEHEMIAH 9:1–38

“ I can flip a switch, but I don't provide the electricity. I can turn on a faucet, but I don't make the water flow. There will be no light and no liquid refreshment without someone else providing it. And so it is for the Christian with the ongoing grace of God. His grace is essential for our spiritual lives, but we don't control the supply. We can't make the favor of God flow, but he has given us circuits to connect and pipes to open expectantly. There are paths along which he has promised his favor. . . . Our God is lavish in his grace; he is free to liberally dispense his goodness without even the least bit of cooperation and preparation on our part, and often he does. But he also has regular channels. And we can routinely avail ourselves of these revealed paths of blessing—or neglect them to our detriment.

DAVID MATHIS

“ I must take care above all that I cultivate communion with Christ, for though that can never be the basis of my peace—mark that—yet it will be the channel of it.

CHARLES SPURGEON