Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Book titles and sermon titles can tell you a lot about the author and the audience. For example, one very popular book in Christians stores in recent years is titled: ‘Your Best Life Now.’ And when another author wanted to describe who God is and how He can help us with our pain, he wrote a novel called ‘The Shack.’ And even though very well-known and godly pastors publicly described the novel as including "undiluted heresy," and being "unorthodox", "false", "non-rational", "doctrinally harmful", and "very dangerous," this didn’t stop it being awarded the "Diamond Award" for sales of over 10 million copies by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. And you will still find it on the bestseller shelf at your local Christian Bookstore today. Many professing Christians just lap this sort of stuff up.

Now, contrast that with this sermon title from the 18th century: ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.’ And the reaction of many professing Christians, today, would be, Woah! Hold on a minute. That sounds very legalistic! Why would you portray God as angry? Isn’t God love? And why refer to us as sinners? Isn’t there much about us that is good and worth celebrating? No thank you! Give me ‘Your Best Life Now,’ any day!

Well, which is it? Which truth is foundational for the gospel? If we want to understand the gospel, are we better off reading ‘Your Best Life Now’? or the sermon, ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’? Which one would we be better off giving to our unbelieving neighbour or workmate?

Well, Q/A 1 of our Catechism lays out the believer’s comfort. And as we just read in Q/A 2, there are three things that we *must* know to live and die in the joy of this comfort. And just in case you have not noticed this before, the rest of the Catechism is divided up into the three parts of Answer 2: Man’s Misery, Man’s Deliverance, and Man’s Thankfulness. And this first section, “Man’s Misery,” is the shortest of the three; it is just Lord’s Days 2-4. But it is foundational for the gospel. To live and die in the joy of belonging to Jesus, I must understand “how great my sin and misery are.” And that is why we consider Lord’s Day 2 under this theme: **Gospel Comfort begins with Great Misery**.

And our text today is the passage we read in Romans 3. Paul’s purpose in this part of his letter is to demonstrate why *all* people need the gospel. So, he began by explaining why the Gentiles or Non-Jewish people needed the gospel. And a key part of Paul’s argument is **conscience**. God has written His law on the hearts of all people. So, even if someone has no access to the Bible, they still know in their hearts that there is a God and that there is right and wrong. And conscience alone is enough to make us guilty law-breakers in God’s sight.

Now, Paul knew how the Jewish mind of his day worked. They would have been thinking, Yup, those Gentiles sure do need the gospel. They are terribly guilty. But we don’t because we have circumcision and the Law, and we keep the Law. And this is why Paul presses on immediately to demonstrate that **Jews were also guilty law-breakers who needed the gospel**. And what we want to do today is to follow Paul’s argument about the law and how it functions.

So again, our theme today is **Gospel Comfort Begins with Great Misery**. And we will see this under three headings: The **Function** of the Law, the **Demand** of the Law, and the **Effect** of the Law.

1. So, first of all, we consider the **function** of the law.
   1. We saw this morning that the law of God says obey and you will be blessed, disobey and you will be cursed. And the Old Testament, by and large, is a record of Israel’s **disobedience**. What they should have understood is that they could *not* keep the law and that they needed someone who could keep it for them and who could remove their guilt. In other words, the law should have led them to long for God’s promised Messiah. Sadly though, and especially in the days leading up to and including when Jesus came to earth, the common understanding of the Jewish people was that they were law-keepers. So, they didn’t see themselves as needing a Messiah who could save them from their sins; the Messiah they wanted was one who would smash the Romans and help the Jews to rule the world!
   2. And it is this way of thinking that Paul is criticizing and exposing in chapters 2-3. Look back at **Romans 2:17**: he says, “*But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know His will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth- you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonour God by breaking the law*.” Do you see what Paul was saying? You claim to be special because you have been given God’s law, but you break it!
   3. And so, as we come to our text, Paul’s point is that **having the law actually made the Jews *more* guilty** and worthy of condemnation than the Gentiles.
      1. And we all know how this works. Ignorance of the law or the rules makes a huge difference to how we treat someone who has broken the rules. Parents, for example, may excuse the actions of their children if the child did not know that they should not do whatever it is that they did. But if the child knew what the rule was, and still broke it, well, then the punishment will be more severe.
      2. And the Jews knew the rules. They had God’s covenant law. So that made their law-breaking even worse.
   4. And to show why this is so, in verse 20, Paul speaks about the function of the law.
      1. The first part of it is **what the law is** ***not* designed to do**: “*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight.”* In other words,the law cannot save us; it cannot justify us; it cannot make us righteous and deserving of heaven. And we will see why this is so in our second point.
      2. But Paul continues with **what the law *is* designed to do**: “*Through the law comes knowledge of sin*.” So, the function of the law is to help us see how far short we fall of what God’s law requires.
         1. This isn’t a perfect illustration, but hopefully it is helpful. If you go to a theme park of some sort, they sometimes have minimum height limits for the rides. So, if you are not yay tall, you cannot go on the ride. Well, a person who is shorter than the required height is like a sinner, and that mark is like the law. That mark cannot get someone who is too short onto the ride. All it can do is show them that they don’t measure up. And it is the same with the Law. It shows us how far short we fall of God’s standard.
      3. And we will come back to this in our third and last point, but brothers and sisters, young people and boys and girls, when we understand this about the law and about ourselves, then we are ready for the gospel! When we realize that we are guilty sinners who have broken God’s law, then we are ready to see that our only hope for salvation is Jesus!
2. So, the **function** of the law is to reveal our sin and guilt. And it does this, as our second point, by the **demand** of the Law.
   1. And it is important to state here that **the Law is good**. **Romans 7:12** says, “*So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good*.” And **1 Timothy 1:8** says, “*Now we know that the law is good*.” So, it is not as though there is something wrong with the law; that if we only had a better law, we would be ok. No, “*the law is good*.”
   2. But another thing worth pondering here is **what do we mean by the Law**? We often talk about the law, but what specifically is in view? Well, you may have heard before that the Jewish experts on the Old Testament Law count **613 specific commandments** – 245 positive commands and 368 negative ones. And you might be thinking, 613?! That’s a lot of commandments! It would be very difficult to keep 613 commandments. Well, how about we boil it all down to the **10 Commandments** then? Worship God alone, no idols, no using His name in vain, keep the sabbath, Honour parents, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not lie, do not covet. Do you think you could keep those 10 Commandments? Well, if that still seems a little steep for you, we have the passage in **Matthew 22** that we read earlier and that is quoted in Question and Answer 4. For there, Jesus boiled the law down to just ***2* commandments**: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. So, what do you reckon, could you keep just these 2 commandment?
      1. And before you answer that question, let me remind you of what Jesus said in **Matthew 5:48**, “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*.”
      2. And listen also to these words from **James 2:10**: “*For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it*.”
      3. So, now look again at those two commandments: “Love the Lord your God with *ALL* your heart and with *ALL* your soul and with *ALL* your mind,” to which we could add, *always*, and “Love your neighbour *AS YOURSELF*.”
         1. Do you really love God with every fibre of your being? And have you done so, always? Have you never put anything or any person ahead of God? Have you never been angry with God or ignored Him? Has every day of your life included Bible reading and prayer, and was it always sincere and free of distraction? Have you never trusted in something else, instead of God? Has there been no discontentment in your heart, ever? Have you always poured yourself out in devoted service and worship?
         2. And do you really love your neighbour *as yourself*? Are you always working for his or her advancement and good, always putting his or her needs ahead of your own, and always treating him or her as you would like to be treated yourself? Have you always put in as much effort to serve your neighbour as you would to serve yourself?
            1. I have used this example before, but I needed to hear it again and I am sure I am not alone: One article about loving your neighbour said:

*Christian, if you love your neighbour, do not use your cell phone while driving. No one ever means to cause a crash because they were texting while driving. But it happens. And such crashes can cause others serious injury or death. So, setting aside the fact that cell-phone use while driving is illegal, which has implications for the command to love God as well as neighbour, not using your cell-phone while driving is putting the safety of your neighbour ahead of your desire to see what the text message says.*

* + 1. Dear friends, are you beginning to see our problem? We cannot keep 613 commandments, perfectly. We cannot keep *10* Commandments, perfectly. We can’t even keep *2* commandments, perfectly. According to the demand of the law, we are law-breakers.

1. And this brings us, thirdly and lastly, to the **Effect** of the Law.
   1. I mentioned earlier that the law is kind of like a height measure at a theme park and we are like a person who is too short to go on the ride. But the effect of the Law is actually much more powerful then just a measurement or a diagnosis of how far we fall short of God’s standard. If you turn ahead to **Romans 7:7-8**, Paul explains there that the Law actually **produces sin** in us. He says “*What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness*.”
      1. We all know how **magnets** work. The closer you put something made of iron to a magnet, the stronger the pull. Well, think of the Law as like a giant magnet and our sinful desires as iron. And the closer we get to the law, the stronger the pull on our sinful desires.
         1. You might remember that on a previous occasion when we were discussing this topic, I illustrated this reality by saying that if I told you not to look at the hymn board to check if all the numbers from 0-9 are there, whether it is immediately or later in the service or next week, we will all look at the board to see if those numbers are there! What is the old saying? Laws are made to be broken.
      2. And again, this is not the law’s fault. The problem is our sinful hearts, which are drawn to disobey the law like iron is drawn to a magnet.
   2. And so, if we are honest about ourselves and the Law, we should have no problem agreeing with the effect of the law described in **Question 5** of our Catechism: “Can I live up to all this perfectly? No. I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbour.” And this is why, as we read down in **verse 23**, “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*.” And this is why, as **verse 19** says, “*the whole world may be held accountable to God*.” We are all guilty law-breakers.
   3. So, where does this leave us? How should we respond to this reality? Well, we have many examples in the Bible of how God’s people responded when they understood their sin and guilt. And I want to list several of these for us:
      1. Let’s start with **Adam**? When he became aware that he was naked and he heard the sound of God walking in the garden, what did He do? Did he run to God and say, Hi, I may have mucked things up a bit. Sorry! No, He hid from God? Why? Because he knew he was a guilty law-breaker who deserved to die.
      2. And what did **Abraham** do when God appeared to Him? He “*Fell on his face*.” Why? Because he knew that he did not deserve to be in God’s presence as a guilty law-breaker.
      3. And what happened when God appeared to **Moses** in the burning bush? God said to Him, “*Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God*.” Why? Because God is perfect and holy, and Moses knew that He was imperfect and unholy.
      4. And how did **Isaiah** react when He saw the Lord? He said, "*Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!*"
      5. And **Ezekiel** saw a vision of the Lord’s glory. And Ezekiel said, “*And when I saw it, I fell on my face*.”
      6. And **three disciples** saw the Lord Jesus transfigured and heard the Father speak from heaven. And we read, “*When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified*.”
      7. And in Revelation 1, we read about **John** seeing a vision of Jesus. And John said, “*When I saw Him, I fell at his feet as though dead*.”
      8. Each of these persons saw themselves as sinners in the hands of an angry God.
   4. Now, the Lord will not appear like this to you or me, and we will not see a vision of Him. What He has given us is His law. So, you and I need to be like the Apostle Paul who writes about how the law affected him in **Romans 7**. He said that the things he wanted to do, he did not do, and the things he did not want to do, these he did. And this led him to cry, “*Wretched man that I am. Who will rescue me free from this body of death?*” So, the law had done its work in Paul. He rightly saw himself as a sinner in the hands of an angry God. He knew that he deserved death and eternal condemnation. He understood his great misery.
   5. But he also understood **the gospel**. In **Galatians 3:24** Paul said, “*So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith*.” And this is the gospel that Paul lays out in Romans 3:21*ff* – what the law cannot do, Christ has done! We can be justified *by faith in Jesus Christ*. The moment we believe in Him and His work on the cross, our sin and guilt is taken away and we receive His perfect in our spiritual bank account. And that is what we are going to explore in the second and largest section of the Catechism.
   6. But my question to you, today, is: Has the *law* done this to you? Have you or do you now see yourself as a sinner in the hands of an angry God. Do you understand that you deserve death and eternal condemnation? Do you understand your great misery? And I ask you to seriously consider this because in the Bible there is one more response to the appearance of the Lord that I did not mention earlier. And that is the Second Coming of Jesus. For Revelation tells us that on that day, unbelievers will try to hide “*in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb."*” So, they will know then that they are sinners in the hands of an angry God, but it will be too late to respond in repentance and faith.

So, today is the day to take hold of Jesus, to trust in Jesus, to follow Jesus. For then you can say, as John Newton, the composer of the hymn Amazing Grace, said, “I am a great sinner; Christ is a great Saviour!” Amen.