

Calvin Speaks



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BLESSINGS AND CURSES*

(Part 1)

**Title not in original edition.*

Sermon 150.28 February 1558. Deuteronomy 27:11-15.

11. Moses also charged the people on that day, saying,

12. When you cross the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon and Levi and Judah and Issachar and Joseph and Benjamin.

13. And for the curse, these shall stand on Mount Ebal: Reuben and Gad and Asher and Zebulun and Dan and Naphtali.

14. And then the Levites shall answer and say to all the men of Israel with a loud voice

15. "Cursed be the man who makes a graven image or a molten image, an abomination to the LORD, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and sets it up in secret." And all the people shall answer and say, "Amen [So be it]."

We saw yesterday how God intended that the favor which He showed unto the people of Israel should be acknowledged first by solemn sacrifice, and secondly by a monument set up, so that it might be known that this land was not purchased by man's hand, but was given by God to that people for an inheritance. But now we have another commandment, by which God meant to bind the people unto Himself in another manner. Indeed, He had done so already, but because men are so difficult to root down, and because they cannot be bound by too many bands and cords, to hold them to obedience, God had ample reason to add what is set down here, in order to keep them better under obedience.

The Usefulness of Blessings and Curses

We have already dealt with the fact that when God gave His law, it was a mutual covenant, and just as He bound Himself unto the children of Israel to be their God, so also the people of Israel bound themselves to be His people. Here, however, an additional confirmation is given, to ratify that first bond the better: God ordained that when they had passed over Jordan, the people should part themselves in two companies, and that six tribes should stand upon Mount Gerizim, and the other six should stand upon Mount

Ebal over against them, so that the Ark of the Covenant and the priests should stand in the midst; and that those who were on Gerizim should bless, and those who were on the side of Ebal should curse.

Now we shall look into the content of the curses and blessings later on, as we deal with the chapter. Note at this point, though, that God, in order to encourage the people, did not only deliver to them His will and say, "You shall walk thus," but also added to it, "You will not serve Me in vain, and your pains will not be lost, for I will cause you to prosper, and it is for your own welfare that I would have you to be subject unto Me. I seek after no profit or advantage by this, but it is for your own benefit and ease that you should cleave unto Me in keeping My commandments." Behold what blessings God gave, intending that the people should serve Him with a willing mind and not through force or constraint. Again, because men are so stiff-necked that they cannot stoop down without raising a ruckus, and because on the other hand their lusts carry them away in such a headlong manner that they quickly forget what it is to serve God and act like wild horses which have broken loose, threats are here added: "Take heed how you offend Me, for vengeance is ready for those who despise My law." Thus you see what the curses are which we shall take up more fully in the 28th chapter, but Moses touches on them here by way of example.

Now it would have been enough for God to say, "Whoever shall serve Me in keeping My law, he shall be blessed, and I will make his whole life prosperous for him." If God has once promised to recompense those who serve him, it ought well to suffice us. What would men need to say in their own behalf? Similarly, seeing that God pronounces a sentence of condemnation upon those who transgress His law: considering that the Judge has spoken, no man ought to reply. What need is there, then, for men to ratify what God has said, as if His Word were not of sufficient strength and authority in itself? True it is that God well deserves to be hearkened to, and whatever He says is as an unchangeable decree. All the same, He wants men to witness outwardly that they allow that which He wills us to follow. He

wants us to acknowledge the favor which is offered to us, and to declare that we are assured by faith that He will not deceive us in promising us prosperity when we endeavor to live according to His Word. God, therefore, will have us to agree with Him, that we also confess in humility and fear that there is great reason why He should punish all those who despise and overthrow His righteousness and commandments.

And when He threatens them, we may not think that it is in vain, but that in the end they shall feel the execution of the sentence. God therefore in this respect will have us to say "Amen" both to the promises which He makes to those who keep His law, and to the threats which He denounces against all those who are rebels and despisers of Him. So then, we have now made a good entrance into the understanding of this place. Concerning the blessings and cursings, we shall more fully treat of them when we come to chapter 28, and it is better to handle them there because that place is more fit for it. It suffices to know in a word that when God offers His favor to those who obey Him, it is to the end that they should serve Him, not through constraint, but of a free good will, knowing that it is for their own ease and welfare; and again that on the other hand such as are of their own nature given over to their lustful desires, and take to themselves a lawless liberty of living wrongly, must be restrained by such fear that they see they shall not escape the hand of God, but that in the end they must come to account. So, you can see what we have to bear in mind, in a word, until we come to handle the matter more at large.

Blessings: Conditional and Unconditional

Let us, then, note well that God thinks it not enough to have spoken Himself, but He will have us also to agree as it were in one melody with Him, as we noted earlier. This is to show the faith we have in His Word, which consists in these two points: namely, that we embrace His promises and hang wholly upon them, and second, that we tremble as often as He gives us any sign of His wrath, so that we are not dense or drowsy, nor so hardened that He must strike us with heavy blows before we feel His anger, but that we prevent this by endeavoring to obey Him, and avoid His vengeance as much as we can.

Now, then, the blessings in this place are conditional. For example, blessed is he who observes the law of God, who maintains His service purely, who is not given to superstitions and idolatries, who does not abuse His holy Name, who observes the day of rest and all the other ceremonies, who honors his father and mother. The blessing, I say, is matched with condition, so that if we serve God, He will show Himself liberal to us, and we shall not lose our time. But all these blessings depend on the fact that God of His free goodness had chosen this people, so that they were not to rest on this point as if to say "Blessed is he who serves God." For after all, no man discharges himself of his duty, as we have already declared, and as we shall see further in the end of this chapter.

Seeing then that we are all sinners, even including the faithful, so that when we endeavor to walk uprightly we still make many false steps, what will become of us? It is cer-

tain that we should all be deprived of the hope of salvation, if we had nothing else to lean upon than our own righteousness. But as I have told you, the conditional promises here depend on the fact that God has received us for His people, and wants us to take Him as our Father. This is grounded on nothing other than His mercy. So then, we must be thoroughly persuaded that God will take pity on us, even though we are wretched sinners, and do not deserve to be pitied. He will receive us as righteous and accept us, even though we deserve to be rejected by Him. And although we can hope for nothing but utter confusion, yet notwithstanding we are assured of the inheritance of salvation because we are His children. We must be thoroughly persuaded concerning this point.

So then, seeing that God has chosen us out, and set us apart for His service, we may not take license and indulge in all manner of wickedness but rather we must endeavor to obey Him. For this reason we must be quickened and pricked up by His promises to serve Him. In this way we can see how the conditional promises are not in vain with respect to us, when they are grounded on the freely bestowed goodness of God, by which He receives us even though we are not worthy to be received, not imputing our vices to us. Although there are many stains and corruptions in us, yet He hides them and does not call them to account.

And so we see now how God encouraged the people of Israel to be of good comfort. For if He had begun in this manner with them, saying, "Serve Me and you shall be well recompensed for your labor," if God should speak this simple word to us, alas! what could we do? For even when we should try to serve Him, we should be very far from the perfection which He commands. Those who should run best would be but in the middle when they should have come to the end. All of us would be discouraged rather than have a good heart. But, we must join both these things together: one, that He will not deceive us in any thing; and two, that He binds us to serve Him and declares that He will bear with us in our infirmities and not deal severely with us to pay us as we deserve, but use a fatherly goodness.

Now on this basis we may be of good comfort to serve Him, when we may say, "Surely it is true, Lord, that I do not discharge myself of the hundredth part of my duty towards You, but no matter what, You will not fail to accept me because You do not respect what I do, but take a pleasure in me as in Your own child." You see, then, how God pardons us, and does not regard our faults and imperfections which are in the service we yield to Him. When we serve Him of a sincere good will, and not hypocritically, He likes all we do and rewards us for it. Since we hear this, let us take pains, and receive the bridle into our mouths (as they say) and press on; and even though we are hindered by the vices of our flesh, yet let us force ourselves to go further. And why? because we shall not lose our labor.

Thus you see what God means. We perceive His inestimable goodness, in that of His own good will He offers His promises to us, although He is in no wise bound unto us as we have seen heretofore; His will is to win us to Himself by all the means that He may. Now He repeats this point again, and that is done because of our sloth and negligency.

ce. For that reason He adds this aid; and all for our profit, for what is He advantaged thereby? Will He gain anything by our service? Let us defy Him to the utmost, what shall that hurt Him? But, He will possess us for our own welfare.

The Rewards of Faithful Works

And with this He shows us also what mind is requisite for observing His law properly, which is that we come willingly and yield ourselves to Him, and place our whole felicity and joy in serving Him, and put this sentence into our hearts, that where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also (Matt. 621). You see what we have to notice touching the first point on the blessings. In effect, then, what is it that we have to do? Although nowadays we do not have the ceremony spoken of in this place, yet the substance of it must be in force among us, which is that in seeking to serve God, we must have an eye always unto His promises. Behold ! our God calls and allures us unto Himself. And how does He do so? He might have commanded us in one word, saying "You owe all to Me; see therefore that you discharge yourselves as I command." But no, He bears with us, and utters a fatherly goodness toward us in saying, "My children, I will not have your service unrecompensed. Indeed, I owe you nothing, yet nevertheless I will be so bountiful above all that you need, if you serve Me, that your life will be happy, and you will prosper in all things."

And besides that, there is a sovereign blessing for us concerning the life everlasting. For all that we can desire or look for in this world is nothing in comparison with that salvation which we hope for through faith, and all the blessings which God promises us and offers us concerning the life to come. Therefore, all this ought to make us the readier and better disposed to submit ourselves to God. Why? because seeing our Lord seeks nothing but our welfare in our obeying Him, and offers us a reward for so doing, are we not too incredibly wretched if we do not enforce ourselves to serve our God? You can see then how we ought with our good consent to ratify all the promises which are contained in the Holy Scripture, that while others think it is only lost time to do well, we may always have this imprinted in our hearts, that there is nothing better than to cleave unto God.

The heathenish sort think themselves very happy in following their own lusts. When lecherous and covetous persons have scraped together money from all sides, they think that all is well, and they rejoice in their deeds. If fornicators, who are brutish in their fleshly lusts, are allowed to enjoy their pleasures, they wallow in them; they are drunk with them; they are wholly bewitched by them. If a vain-glorious man comes to any dignity, and is advanced to any authority among men, he thinks there is no other joy or happiness but to be in high estate. At the same place are all despisers of God. And in the meanwhile, the poor faithful ones are mocked; they are poor persons; they are set at naught; they hang their wings down; they do nothing but drop and pine away in this world. These wretched souls, say some, are not well advised to take so many pains over things they do not understand, for what profit do they have for all their travail? It seems, therefore, that they who seek to serve God are greatly beguiled, and that the

wicked bear sway everywhere.

But we must be thoroughly resolved on the other side, as it is said in the prophet Isaiah, "Say to the righteous that it will be well with them, for they will eat the fruit of their actions" (Is. 3:10). The prophet Isaiah would have us to fight against this temptation. Even though the whole world should laugh the Godly to scorn, and the wicked triumph over them, yet for all that the faithful should not be astonished, but say to themselves, "No, no, the righteous man shall not lose his labor; he shall not be deceived of his expectation when he depends wholly upon the promises of God."

What we have to gather from this place, then, is that as often as we read the promises in the Scripture where it is said, "Blessed is the man who fears the Lord; those who walk in the obedience of His word shall be blessed; blessed is he who walks uprightly and soundly with his neighbors, but especially those who renounce the world because they have a better inheritance in heaven" (Ps. 1121; Ps. 1191; Matt. 1921); as often, I say, as we read these things, we must be confirmed in our faith, and answer with a good courage: "Amen, Lord; it is so. We do not dispute what You have said. We embrace Your promises in this place, and trust assuredly in them." Thus you see how every man ought to enforce himself to serve God, because He bears with us so gently, and commands us not so precisely as He might, having all authority over us, but applies Himself to our imperfection in order to win us and to enjoy us.

And above all let us be mindful of this general promise: that God calls us to Himself as His children; that He spares us and bears with us, and does not enter into an extremity of rigor with us; and that even though there are many faults in our works, He accepts them; that if we offend we always find pardon at His hand; that when we swerve aside he brings us back onto the way; and that none of our faults is imputed to us. You see what we have to keep in mind.

The Necessity of Threats

The threatening of God are also very necessary for us. We can see that great pride and rebelliousness are in all of us, so that even though we are not rebellious on purpose, to set God at nought and to cast off His yoke, yet we are so dimwitted that we do not think of Him much, so that the incitements of the world seduce us to the extent that we are heedless of the warnings God gives us. If He calls us by gentleness, He can get nothing out of us, and therefore He uses threats.

From this we see that He uses every device that is proper, to hold us in awe under His obedience. On the one hand He uses mild and loving speech toward us (as I have already discussed), saying, "Come to Me, My children. Indeed, I owe you nothing, but still I will bind Myself to you. I promise you that if you serve Me, it will be for your profit." Thus our Lord speaks to us, as a Father that encourages His child in order to win him to be ruled by Him and to employ himself in His service with a freehearted affection. On the other hand God, perceiving that this is not enough to move us, uses threats and says, "Take heed. If you think to cast away My word and yet remain unpunished, you deceive yourselves. I must call you to account for it. I will not

allow My children to mock Me. I must be their Judge. Do not look for any pardon when you have abused My patience. I must double your punishments, and My vengeance must fall more horribly upon you."

Therefore, when God declares that our sins are unpardonable, and yet we continue in them, and make no account of submitting ourselves to Him, especially since He has applied Himself in every way to us so that we should remain in His obedience and not perish; since we see that He has such a care for our salvation, must it not be the case that we are entirely too stubborn, indeed very beasts, if we are not moved to better behavior by the fatherly care which He shows towards us? Yes indeed.

And therefore, being stirred up by the goodness and gentleness of God, of which even now I speak, let us also wake ourselves up with His threatening. When we see that our flesh is wanton, and that it draws us into evil, let us say, "Alas, should we shake off His yoke like wild beasts? What has God said?" Let us therefore tremble when we hear the threats of our God. For if the anger of an earthly king is the messenger of death, as Solomon says (Prov. 16:14), what ought we to think of the anger of God when it is denounced against us?

So then, let us learn to tame ourselves with fear. When the temptations of Satan start to prevail over us, and our sins act as baits to deceive us, let it come into our minds to say, "What? Shall I under the delusion of some pleasure which will soon vanish, go and provoke the anger of my God and so perish forever?" After that manner, I say, we ought to call God's threatening to our remembrance, and then answer "Amen" to them, saying, "Indeed, Lord, if is even so; it is no children's game. When You pronounce condemnation upon the wicked, You are ready to execute it, and when You have once pronounced the word with Your mouth, it is all the same as if we saw the fire already kindled to consume us."

In this way, I say, we ought to receive all the threats which God utters against us. For that is the best means to teach us to observe the law; I mean, so far as our weakness will allow it. For as I have told you, it is not possible for us to come to total perfection, as long as we are enclosed in, this flesh of ours. All the same, we may well dedicate ourselves to God, and be held in His fear, if on the one hand His promises are in force with us, and on the other we give ear to His threatenings.

(to be concluded.)

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