

Calvin Speaks



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PROMISE, OBEDIENCE, BLESSING*

(Part 1]

**Title not in the original*

Sermon 153. 10 March 1556. Deuteronomy 28:1-2.

1. Now it shall come to pass, if you will diligently hearken to the voice of the **LORD** your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the **LORD** your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.

2. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you will hearken to the voice of the **LORD** your God.

We have seen heretofore how God covenanted with His people, purposing to bind them so that everyone should know his duty and be the better disposed to perform it. Now He speaks as a Judge, having all authority. It does not matter whether people plead guilty or not, when they have done wrong, for God here gives His determined sentence, whether they consent to it or not. Nor does He start off with a condemnation of those who offend the law, but rather He begins with friendly promises, thereby to lure and win the hearts of men to Himself.

Promise and Duty

And so He says, "If you hearken to My voice, to obey My commandments, and be careful to keep them, you shall be blessed in all manner of ways, and you shall be surrounded through My favor with all kinds of welfare and prosperity." I have mentioned before that God shows great goodness towards men when He endeavors by such means to win them. It would have been enough, after all, for Him to have said, "This is your duty;" and all creatures would have to tremble at His speaking. Therefore, when He adds any promises, He sets aside part of His right, and therein humbles Himself, that we should be the better disposed and more inclined to serve Him. When we have done all that we can, yea and more than we are able, is God bound to recompense us? Surely not.

We must always bear in mind what our Lord Jesus says in St. Luke 17:7, that if a man has a bond servant, and he sends him to labor in the field all day long, when

the servant comes home at night, will he say, "Well, now I must take my turn. You sit down at the table, and I will prepare your supper, and give you your meat and drink, because you have labored for me all day, and now it is my turn to serve you." Will the master say this? No, of course not. Rather, when the servant comes home, the master will say to him, "Cover the table, fix my supper, and give me drink." Even so says Jesus Christ, "When you have done all that it is possible for you to do, don't think in yourselves that God My Father owes you anything at all, or that He is obligated to you, but proceed further on and acknowledge that all you can ever do is but your duty towards Him." And indeed, seeing that God has created us, where is the man that can do too much in His service?

We see then that God might say plainly, "This is what pleases Me, and this is My will. You follow this way." And therefore, when He tells us that we shall be blessed, and not lose our labor, but have a reward for our service, it cannot be doubted but that in so doing He sets aside some part of His right.

So then we may see that He acts as the good and kindhearted Father to win His children. For even though a father knows well that his children are bound to obey him to the uttermost, and that he on his part is not in any way bound to obey them, yet he will surely say,"¹ I love you, and I only desire your own welfare. Do according to my wishes, and I shall never forsake you." A father will be liberal in his promises, saying, "Look, you know that all I have is for you. For whom else do I travail? And to what other end? And if I see you take to good ways, I will reward you accordingly." Thus acts the father who humbles himself in his authority. And why? Because he wishes that his children should serve him of a free good will, rather than be compelled to it by rigorous extremities.

Let us mark, therefore, that all the promises contained in Holy Scripture are, as it were, so many testimonies of the fatherly love of our God, showing Himself to have a care for our health and welfare, in that He vouchsafes thus to apply and fashion Himself to us. By this means the law of God becomes more friendly to us, in that we

see that in keeping it we will not be disappointed of a good reward, one far greater than we could wish. For under this word of blessing is comprehended all manner of prosperity.

Moreover, when God makes us to prosper in this world, it is for no other purpose than to give us a taste of His love toward us. This, however, is not the main point He wants to get across to us, but He leads us ever onward, so that when we feel His goodness in this present life, and that He cares for us and that He reaches forth His hand to provide all things that are necessary, we ought to conclude from this much more strongly that when He has taken us out of this present world, He will then pour on us the riches of His goodness in another manner than we are now able to comprehend. Indeed, we have in this life some small indications thereof, but the abundant accomplishment of it shall be in the kingdom of heaven. Thus you see what we have to consider, in that our God delivers forth His promises to train us the better to serve Him of a free good will.

The Efficacy of Promise

Nevertheless, no matter how the world goes, let us mark that all the promises which God makes to us on condition of obedience, are of no help to us if we stand on them alone, as I told you yesterday. And why? Surely God is faithful, and does not speak to deceive us. True, but let us look at ourselves. Where is the man that discharges himself of his duties so well that he may hope to be blessed by God? It does not say, "You shall be blessed by keeping part of My law." Rather, "If you hear My voice and be diligent in keeping all my commandments, and fulfill them all, then I will bless you."

Now when we see men endeavoring as much as possible to keep the law of God, this is not due to their own power or natural inclination. For so far removed are they who have not been regenerated by the Holy Spirit from attaining to the service of God, that they cannot so much as conceive a good thought. What is the inclination of man, but a striving against God and all His righteousness? As long as men follow the leading of their own spirits, they do nothing but fight against God as utter rebels against His will. To be short, we are not able so much as to think to do well (2 Cor. 3:5). To think is a very small thing, and yet St. Paul here cuts us off even from that power, and shows that we are so corrupted and perversely bent that in all things we move contrary to that which God commands us.

Insomuch that even when God has reformed us by His Holy Spirit, and changed our malice and rebellion, to which we were previously wholly inclined, yet still it cannot be said that we proceed to obey Him in all perfection, for there is always some infirmity to prevent us. So that instead of running we halt, and trail our legs after us. Instead of going straightforward, we reel from

one side to another, and frequently we stumble, as every man can tell for himself. How then can we hope to be blessed by God, being so far from keeping His law?

This is why I said that all the promises which are made upon condition are utterly powerless, and shall never come to their effect, if God should rest upon that point. Indeed, this matter was expounded yesterday, and this place was expressly alleged by St. Paul where it is said that if salvation comes by works, and the inheritance proceeds of the law, then shall there be no performance of the promises (Rom. 4:14). For we fail on our part, and therefore the covenant is void that God has made with us. Yet we may not conclude that God is mocking us when He sets down these promises, as the Papists do at the first opportunity, breaking out of bounds, acting as madmen. For when we say that all the promises contained in Holy Scripture are not effectual except by means of the forgiveness of our sins through the free goodness of God, and that we are justified by faith alone, "What?" they say, "Seeing it is said, 'I will bless you, if you serve Me and honor Me,' it seems that God is being hypocritical, and dallying with men. Why should God make such a promise?" Thus do the Papists accuse God of falsehood, and blaspheme Him, if they are not able to deserve the promises which He has made them [on their own merits]. For otherwise, they think, it is but a mockery, to make men believe that He would bless them.

But let us beware of such madness, and let us rather understand for what purpose God has given His promise to men, and we shall see that it is not in vain. I said before that God has showed His great goodness in humbling Himself so lovingly unto us. We pertain wholly to Him. We are altogether His. And yet He does not simply command, but commands with promises and gentleness, to win us. If a man replies to this and says, "What does it profit us?" I answer, truly it profits us nothing at all if we stay here; but we must go further. When we hear the promises that God has offered to us, and see that His whole intention is to win us through love, and that He does not mean to force us through necessity, then we are condemned if we are not thankful, and if we do not bend ourselves wholly to Him. But we cannot do it. Well then, are we excused? No, for it is our own wickedness that prevents us. Every man shall condemn himself, says St. James, because there is nothing that provokes us to evil except the concupiscence of our own flesh. Seeing then that the fault is in us, we must make no more allegations, and here you see we are confounded before God.

Thus you see that we have reason to be twice-over lowly. First of all, because we are so sinful that God's goodness does not move us to come near to Him, nor to put ourselves under His leading. And second, because we do not search out the bottom of the sin that is in us, in such away as this: "Alas, seeing I have every day so many innumerable thoughts, so many desires and motions, such a store of affections, which serve altogether to turn me away from that good to

which God calls me, by reason of which I never cease to offend God in all things, so that nothing can be drawn from me except utter evil, all offence, and all iniquity; alas, what shall become of me?" Men, when they see this, must feel themselves doubly confounded.

And when they have well examined themselves, they must be driven to think thus: "Well, God has laid before me all the means that I can wish, to attain my salvation, if I were not altogether corrupt and perverse. And now I cannot plead ignorance, seeing that the law is given to me, and the way showed me, how I ought to govern myself and how to lead my life. And so that I should be the more willing to do it, God has trained me to it by gentleness, promising that I shall be rewarded for serving Him. Is this so? What, then, is to be done? I must not, in this case, make any further protestation, nor stand pleading any more against God, for I am too much to blame already."

Now, when men find themselves thus condemned, then they are forced to seek their salvation outside of themselves, and to resort to this second remedy: "Alas, Lord, if the case were such that I should obtain salvation by serving You, You have given me Your law, and have joined to it Your promises. These things, however, avail me nothing. I must therefore forsake myself, acknowledging that I have no hope of life unless I find some better help." See here, I say, how we are led to our Lord Jesus Christ, and made to embrace the grace which is offered to us in Him, that by obtaining forgiveness of our sins, we may be sure to be blessed by God. When we have obtained that one favor, that God is at one with us by means of our Lord Jesus Christ, then He does accept our imperfect works, as though we had accomplished all the law.

Although the good which the faithful do is not worthy to be received by God, yet He accepts it as good. Why? Because He, of His own goodness, wipes away all the faults that are in them. So then, when we labor to do well, notwithstanding that it does not lie in our power to attain to perfection, because of the exceeding frailty of our natures, yet God will receive our service as acceptable, as though He had nothing to say against it. And so are we made partakers of the blessings that are here mentioned. It is true that we have not fulfilled all the law, but yet God records it in His accounts as if all had been performed, because we are made clean by the blood of Jesus Christ. And just as we are cleansed, so are our works also, and when they come before God, He accepts them as though they were thoroughly good, righteous, and perfect. Here, therefore, we perceive that the promises are not given in vain, but that they have their effect in the faithful, not at the first glance, but when we come to them by degrees and circumstances, for then we shall feel the effect and force of them.

Now, concerning unbelievers, the promises avail them nothing, except to make them the more unexcusable before God in the last day. For what shall they be able to plead, seeing that God has so familiarly offered Himself to them, requiring nothing but to have the

fruition of their whole life, that they might obey Him. And yet they continue hardhearted. Do you not see how they stand doubly confounded? And therefore the promises and threats of the law are always good and righteous. Nor are they unprofitable, if a man will take them as they should be taken. But this shall be better understood by the discourse which I shall make thereof in particular.

The Grace of Law

Now let us proceed to expound the words that Moses uses. "if you will hear the voice of the Lord your God, and be careful to fulfill all the commandments which I command you this day, all these blessings shall come upon you and compass you round about." Concerning the first point, Moses shows that which we saw before, namely that the first thing in living well is to hearken to God. For men must not have the rule over themselves, saying, "I will govern myself after my own liking." We must not take such liberty, for he that takes too much upon himself shall at the last be rejected by God for not yielding Him His due obedience, which is the foundation whereon we ought to build. Let us mark, therefore, that all they which follow their own foolish devotions (as they call them) are disliked by God. For Isaiah 1:12 must be heard: "Who has required these things from you?"

Let us acknowledge, therefore, that it is an inestimable benefit when God shows us His will, and that the state of the Papists is accursed. For when they intend to do well, they do not know which way to turn themselves, but every one follows his own fancy, saying "I hope it will turn out well, for my intention is good. And after all, common custom permits it. And again, our holy mother church commands it." But in the meanwhile, the law of God is forgotten. We may learn from this that there is nothing but confusion in the life of man, in which is nothing else than a mingling without order, until they are taught of God, as we shall see hereafter. This is the way, walk in it.

Careful Obedience

It is said that we "must be careful." This phrase was set down once before by Moses, and not without cause is it here again repeated. For we are warned by it that unless men are very heedful in obeying God, and force themselves thereto, and set their whole study thereon in good earnest, they shall never attain to keep the law. And we ourselves see what weakness there is in us, even though God does govern us, and even though we are reformed by His Holy Spirit. As for the unfaithful, they are so carried away and so furious in their willful stubbornness, that a man would think they should run madly against God. Indeed, and although we are governed by the Holy Spirit, yet we are so frail as it is a pity to see. God requires a great perfection, when he wishes us to love Him with all our heart, to eschew all

the vanities of this world, and all our fleshly lusts, and, to be short about it, to forsake ourselves and to be altogether changed. This is a matter overly high and difficult.

Now let us consider what Satan devises and practises to turn us away from the service of God. How many sorts of temptations are there? They are infinite. Again, how severe are the assaults that Satan prepares against us? When we have given consideration to all this, we may well conclude that it is not without reason that God says we must be careful, that every one of us must strengthen himself, and gather all our forces together, and not think to set forth negligently to the service of our God. For when we think to march one step forward, we shall go a hundred backward if we are not very strong and courageous, holding ourselves in awe and restraining ourselves, and gathering our wits about us so that we bend our minds wholly thereto, and even, as one might say, labor for breath in traveling about it.

And moreover, seeing we are laid about with ambushes on every side, and should be soon taken, so that we might fall into the snares of Satan before we were aware, let us take heed and be watchful. That is what we are warned about here. And would to God that we would carry away this lesson with care. For then, while we are now applying our powers and all our endeavors to things not only frivolous but altogether harmful, tending to no other end than destruction, then every one of us would be vigilant to walk in the obedience of God, and to give himself wholly thereto. And seeing that we are warned about it, there is no excuse. Will we then obey our God, and show that our affection is so inclined, without deception? Let every one of us incline to that which is given him in commandment, namely to be careful, vigilant, and attentive.

(to be concluded)

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