

Calvin Speaks



Vol. 3, No. 11

'1982, Geneva Divinity School

November, 1982

BLESSING AND AFFLICTION* (Part 1)

**Tit/e not in the original*

Sermon 154.11 March 1556. Deuteronomy 28:2-8.

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

3. **Blessed shall you be** in the city, and **blessed shall you be** in the field.

4. **Blessed shall be the fruit** of your body, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your cattle: the offspring of your herds and the lambs of your flocks.

5. Blessed shall be your basket and your **kneading-trough**.

6. Blessed **shall you be** when you come in and **blessed shall you be** when you go out.

7. The LORD shall cause your enemies that rise up against you to be smitten before your face. They **shall** come out against you one way, and **flee** before you seven ways.

8. The LORD shall command the blessing upon you in your storehouses, and in all that you set your hand to, and He shall bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you.

Prosperity and Righteousness

It is a thing to be marvelled at, that men cannot be persuaded that they will prosper if they do righteously. This, however, proceeds from unbelief, because they do not acknowledge that their lives are in the power and direction of God, and that it is His peculiar office to govern us. For if we were well assured that all creatures are in the hand of God, and also that He has care of us, it is certain that everyone of us would rest on Him, waiting to receive all goodness from Him. This is something that should encourage us to serve Him, and to direct ourselves after His will. But although every one of us seeks and desires his own ease, yet we do not understand that God is the one from whom we must look for it. We can say it well enough, but our actions show that we cannot judge or conceive it to be so! Everyone tries to become rich by evil practices; every man seeks his own happiness by offending God! We have to conclude that we are without sense and reason, since this doctrine, in which we should be resolved, cannot be imprinted in our minds; to wit, that all welfare proceeds from the hands of God, and that there is no way

to prosper except by giving ourselves over to Him, and to His service?

Misery and Sin

Yet notwithstanding, God has always left this engraved on the hearts of men, that the wretchedness and miseries to which we are subject proceed from the corruption of mankind, so that the pagans themselves had the same opinion common among them. It is certain that they were not taught about the fall of Adam, and that they did not understand how all mankind came to be cursed, for the Devil through his wiles had put them out of that knowledge. All the same, it was understood among them, and written down, and common to all of them, that all the sickness and wretchedness that men endure, all the famines and plagues and such like things, have come from this, that men have tried to rob God of more wisdom than belongs to them. They did not know that this came from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; they knew nothing of that. Nevertheless, God did not permit that knowledge to be buried completely, so it remained among the heathen and infidels. They understood that because man tried to usurp to himself more knowledge than was lawful for him, all things are now confounded in this world, and the life of man has become miserable, and subject to so many adversities as to make it horrible.

Now, this by itself is sufficient to make us altogether inexcusable. Yet, God will have us (by 'us' I mean those whom God has chosen to be of His household) to be more familiarly taught. 'Thus God speaks as it were mouth to mouth, and what the infidels had only by means of imagination, the same does He tell and testify to us. I say, He tells it to us that we might know it familiarly, and He testifies it to us that we should be assured thereof. This is why He says that He will make all manner of felicity to rain upon us: so that we will hearken to His voice. By this He shows that though we do not deserve it, He is ready and forward to entreat us as a father does his children; and that He does not delight in vexing us with multitudes of evils, but that He intends rather to make us feel His goodness in all respects. Let us therefore be advised to walk in the obedience of our God, if we want Him to pour upon us the treasures of His grace, in such a way that our lives may be blessed.

1. That is, **our actions** show that our profession is mere lip service. We look to our own craftiness rather than to God's blessing for prosperity.

2. At first glance, this paragraph might read as if Calvin held to the primacy of the intellect: If men only understood the truth, they would live by it. On closer inspection, however, it is clear that Calvin is attacking the sufficiency of reason, by pointing out that sin has perverted the understanding of the mind.

Why the Righteous Suffer

Nevertheless, we know that God often afflicts His people for reasons other than their sins, as we see it happened to Job, this being a notable mirror for us. We see the like in the holy patriarchs, who although they did endeavor and travail to serve God, yet were in as great troubles and griefs as could be. This is even more manifest in the New Covenant. For since God has revealed more fully what the perfect happiness of men is, it is required that the faithful be exercised under many adversities in this transitory life.³

But let us note *first* of all that if God does not punish the sins of the faithful, He does chastise them in order to preserve them, just as a physician does not always wait until the sickness appears, but if he perceives any likelihood that a man is in danger, he will act to prevent it. God then, in not punishing the sins presently committed by His children, does chastise them, in the interest of preserving them. It maybe that there is a man who dayafterday obeys God, and does not offend Him in some particular sins. All the same, if he were always in prosperity, he would forget himself, so God acts to cure such diseases by withdrawing His blessings. He will not allow the fat to blind men's eyes, or to hinder our coming to Him, lest it should hold us too long in this world. He will not allow us to become so entangled in our delights that we fall completely to sleep in the same.⁴

There is a second point, which is that when God forbears to punish us for our sins, it is not because He does not always have just cause to do so if He wished. Pick out the most perfect folk you wish, yet if God were to deal with them in rigor, He should lay many hard knocks on them. But we may not think so, since we are not as clear-sighted as we should have to be to know the faults which God sees. But we must assure ourselves that God shows His patience and goodness in that He spares men, and does not punish them (and by this I mean the most righteous that can be fou rid).

We may take as examples of this: David, when cruelly persecuted by Saul and by all his various enemies; and Abraham, who was stung and vexed in many ways, and also Isaac and Jacob; and all the prophets were afflicted by the wicked and by those who despised God, even to death; and finally the apostles and all the faithful, who were cruelly dealt with. This was not for their sins. No, indeed. If God had been pleased to call them to account, He might have punished them a hundred times more severely, and they would have had no cause to accuse Him of cruelty. He spared them, and in so doing He did them the honor of suffering for His name; or rather He tried their obedience, killed their carnal affections, and drew them near to Himself. Forexample, when God was pleased to make Job a mirror of patience, yet at the same time He made him acquainted with his own frailty, but whatever the case, He intended to make him serve as an example for us all. We perceive then that God has other meanings in afflicting His people than simply punishing their [specific] sins. Nonetheless, He never ceases to uphold them, even by His own mere grace.

3. See the Note on Pessimism and Optimism in Calvin's Thought, at the end of this issue of *Calvin Speaks*.

4. Calvin here reflects the classic discussion of chastisements in Augustine's *City of God*, Book 1. E.g., "Forthough, if obvious punishment should now be visited for every sin, it would bethought that nothing is reserved for the last judgment, yet on the other hand, if no sin were now plainly punished by divine action, men would believe that there is no such thing as divine providence" (58). This is from the translation by McCracken, in the Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press.

We should, however, always come 'back to this point, that the source of all the miseries that we suffer in this present world is sin. How so? Because if this corruption were not in our nature, condemned by God, and of which we also are convicted, we should enjoy here a blessed life. This entire world would be for us an earthly paradise. For we ought not to think that Adam was cooped up in a little corner for himself alone; rather, all the whole earth was blessed by God. We might have enjoyed it all until the end of the world. But where is this earthly paradise now? It is nowhere at all, for the earth is cursed. It was the sentence that God pronounced on Adam and on all his offspring. And therefore we must understand that all the miseries to which we are subject in the present world do grow from this root, because we did not continue in the perfection in which Adam was created.

We must realize that God reforms us when we have done amiss. He beholds the vices of which He intends to purge us by fit medicines, and does not wait until we have offended Him and provoked His vengeance, but prevents us and administers the remedy at the time He deems best. And further, when He afflicts us for some consideration other than our sins, it is a great honor and a special preeminence for us, and we have reason to praise Him in that He vouchsafes to mark us, and to make His adoption apparent in us by making us to suffer for the testimony of His truth, and to receive wrongful persecution at the hands of men, under any pretext or occasion, whatever it may be.

Blessing and Adversity

Moreover let us mark that is it not in vain that God promises that those who serve Him shall lead a happy life even in this world. Not that they shall be exempt from all adversity, for that is impossible, and it is also against the interests of our salvation. But He will so dispose our lives that we shall perceive that He was not feeding us with an empty hope when He said that He will cause all who hearken to His voice to prosper. But by the way, we must remember that the blessings which are contained here are not designed to show what the ultimate felicity of men is, but to give us a taste of the heavenly life, to the end that we should seek for the celestial inheritance which is promised us, and there to set our affections.

This must be set out more particularly, or else it will be unclear. It is true that there is a difference between us and the fathers who lived under the Law. For God was at that time entreating them as little children, and it was fit that it should be so then. After all, they did not yet have our Lord Jesus, Who has *now* set open the gates of heaven to bring us into the life and glory of heaven. Indeed, they had as much a part therein as we do, but it was necessary for them to walk in shadows and figures to understand it; therefore, they had need of some aid, of which we at this time have no need at all. And we must not think ourstateto be worse than theirs; not being like those who complain these days, because God does not dandle them, and because they are not (as it seems to them) as much at ease as the old fathers were. Surely they deceive themselves in making this comparison.

For if any one of us should reckon up what he has suffered all the days of his life, and then examine the state of David or Abraham, doubtless he shall find himself to be in a better state than were those holy fathers. For they, as the apostle says (Heb. 11:13) only saw things afar off, things which are right before our eyes. God promised to be their Savior; He had chosen them to be, as it were, of His household; but meanwhile where was He who was to be

their promised Redeemer? Where was the doctrine that is made so clear to us in the Gospel concerning the resurrection? They knew the same afar off, but now it is declared to us in the Gospel in such away that we may indeed say, as our Lord Jesus Christ gives us to understand, that blessed are the ears which hear the things that are told us concerning Him, and the eyes that see the things which we see, for the holy kings and prophets longed for the same, and could not obtain it (Matt. 13:16f.).

We therefore have a much more excellent estate than they had who lived under the Law. This is the difference of which I speak, which needed to be supplied by God because of the imperfection [lack of completion] that was in the doctrine concerning the revelation of the heavenly life, which the fathers only knew by outward tokens, although they were dear to God. Now that Jesus Christ has come down to us, and has shown us how we ought to follow Him by suffering many afflictions, as it is told us (Matt. 16:24; Rem. 8:29), in bearing poverty and reproach and all such like things, and to be short, that our life must be as it were a kind of death; since we know all this, and the infinite power of God is uttered in His raising up Jesus Christ from death and in His exalting him to the glory of heaven, should we not take from this a good courage? Should not this sweeten all the afflictions we can suffer? Do we not have cause to rejoice in the midst of our sorrows?

Let us note then that if the patriarchs were more blessed by God than we are, concerning this present life, we ought not to wonder at it at all. For the reason for it is apparent. But no matter how things go, yet is this saying of St. Paul always verified, that the fear of God holds promise not only for the life to come, but also for this present life (1 Tim. 4:8). Let us therefore walk in obedience to God, and then we can be assured that He will show Himself a Father to us, yea even in the maintenance of our bodies, at least as far as concerns keeping and preserving us in peace, delivering us from all evils, and providing for us our necessities. God, I say, will make us to feel His blessing in all these things, so that we walk in His fear.

Purpose of Blessings

All the same, we must return to this point, that God in making us to taste of His favor here, does not intend that we should be so glutted with it that we forget the everlasting rest which He invites us. And so all the benefits of God which belong to this transitory life must serve us for ladders to mount upward, and not for cushions to fall asleep on in this world. When God gives a man the wherewithal to live, endowing him with health, and permitting him not to be vexed by his enemies, what else should such a man do but be drawn to the grace of God to endeavor to serve Him so much the more, and not misbehave himself in this world? He should go forward, using that which God has given him as though not using it at all (1 Cor. 7:31), so that nothing stops him from keeping on his way to God.

But we do all things clean contrary to this, don't we? And therefore we ought to be more awake. When we hear the promises that are contained here, let us not think that the meaning of God was to pamper the people of the Old Covenant in their transitory pleasures, but rather that the same should be a means to draw them up on high, just as He intends for us today. All the good that we receive from Him has this end and intent, that our minds should always be raised up to the heavenly life. Does God give us bread to eat? He shows Himself therein to be our Father. All the same, even though we are His children, we do not cease to

be as pilgrims in this world, having always one foot lifted up, and having here no rest. Therefore, let us have an eye to the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven, and let the bread which we eat to nourish us be a means to direct us thither. After the same manner let it be with all other things.

The Perfection of the Promised Blessings

Now let us come to that which is here contained in the text of Moses, and then in the end we shall understand better what has been said. Moses says here that God will bless His people in the city and in the field; He will bless them in the fruit of their bodies; He will bless them in their cattle; He will bless them in the fruit of their land; He will bless them in their baskets and in their stores and in their granaries; He will bless them in giving them victory over their enemies. We know that the happiness of this present life, that is to say such happiness as may be in this world, is for men to have the wherewithal to maintain themselves in quiet, and to be preserved from their enemies. Here God sets down both the one and the other. Touching the one He says, "Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body" and the fruit of your land and the fruit of your cattle. It is certain that the chief blessing which we can desire of God is in our own persons, that He provide us of such things as are requisite for this transitory life. And that is the reason why He begins with our persons, and then comes to our children, and then descends to our cattle, to the fruit of the ground, and to all provisions.

It seems at first glance here that God intended to pamper His people, as if He would set them up in a pig sty, and there cram their bellies, to let them sleep at their ease, and to be short, that they should be here as in a paradise. But I have told you already that it behooved God to bestow His benefits more largely upon the fathers that lived under the Law, because they could not otherwise be drawn to Him, seeing that the promises of eternal life were not clear to them. In any case we have to note herewithal that when God speaks after this manner, He does not mean only to give men hope that they shall be blessed in all respects, but also to admonish us that nothing prevents us from enjoying perfect felicity in this world, while we wait for the life of heaven, except the fact that we are wrapped in vices and corruptions.

And in this way God meant to train the faithful, that they should reason thus with themselves: "Let us serve God, and we shall lack nothing. And if we are vexed, and do not have all our desires, if the earth does not yield such fruitfulness as contents us, or if our cattle do not prosper as we wish, let us understand that this comes to pass because we are wretched creatures and cannot abide the perfection of God's blessings, so that He finds it fitting to withdraw His hand and to give us only a portion of His blessings, because if we should have more it would glut us, and in the end we should be choked with it."

This is the reason, then, why God here so greatly magnifies His blessings. It is done, not because men have ever been blessed in all manner of respects without feeling any vexation at all; this, I say, has never happened. So then, why does God promise it? As we have said before, it is to make us understand that whenever our life is not as blessed as we wish, we should consider that God knows us to be unable to receive the fulness of His benefits, and therefore finds it fitting to distribute them to us piecemeal, after the manner of feeding sick people or children, who because they lack discretion must be governed by others. But we are even less well advised than sick folk or infants,

for we would devour the blessings that God sends, if He did not hold us in check, for our lusts are miserably corrupted. God bestows His blessings upon us insufficiently, but we like sick folk do refuse good meat, and fall to foul feeding, which cannot but hurt us. Thus are we carried away by our wicked affections, and are never able to direct the use of God's benefits, nor to govern them as we should, for we would infect and defile everything if He did not take steps to prevent us. Let us mark, therefore, that God here is warning us to call our sins to remembrance, and to bewail them as often as we do not enjoy the fulness of His blessings, as is here mentioned. Nevertheless, He would have us to hope that by serving Him we shall prosper, and have enough for our contentment.

(to be concluded)

Note on Pessimism and Optimism in **Calvin's** Thought

by James B. Jordan

The reader of this sermon will no doubt be struck by the fact that, despite the encouraging and optimistic tone of the Biblical passage under consideration, Calvin manages to turn his remarks mostly to a discussion of suffering and affliction. Indeed, Calvin assures us that earthly prosperity is less in view in the New Covenant than in the Old, since the main purpose of earthly prosperity is to cause us to look beyond this world to the next.

Consulting Calvin's remarks on Mark 10:30, which says that those who follow Christ will receive 100-fold *in this life*, with persecutions, and in the world to come eternal life, we find that Calvin notes that "in the greater number of cases, those who have been deprived of their parents, or children, ... are so far from recovering their property, that in exile, solitude, and desertion, they have a hard struggle with severe poverty. 1 reply, if any man estimate aright the immediate grace of God, by which he relieves the sorrows of his people, he will acknowledge that it is justly preferred to all the riches of the world." (*Harmony of the Evangelists*, vol. 2, p. 407.)

Later Reformed thought, seeking to be consistent with other, more optimistic strains in Calvin's thought (and in Holy Scripture), noted that while individuals may not receive the precise promise of Mark 10:30, the Church as a corporate body will someday inherit the earth. Moreover, the goal of redemption is not escape from this world, but the restoration of the cultural mandate originally given to Adam; thus, earthly prosperity is not merely a type of the New Heavens and Earth, but a proper blessing in itself.

There is no need to pit such things against each other.

The reasons for Calvin's relative pessimism are not far to seek. First, at the time of the Reformation, so many pressing problems confronted the Reformers that they were unable to devote much systematic attention to the problems of prophecy and eschatology. Neither Luther nor Calvin took up an exposition of the book of Revelation, for instance. Second, there was so much persecution of the true, orthodox faith in Calvin's day, that it is easy to see why he focuses pastorally on this problem in his writings and sermons. Third, Calvin himself was much afflicted with illnesses of the body.

The second generation of Reformers was almost universally postmillennial, and this view was the standard Calvinistic view both on the continent and in Anglo-American cultures until the mid-nineteenth century and later. Did this represent a departure from Calvin, or a development and fulfillment of the basic conceptions in his theology? At the very least, we have to say that there is an incipient postmillennialism in Calvin's thought, though there is also an incipient amillennialism.

Those wishing to investigate the matter will find Calvin speaking very optimistically about the earthly future of the Church in his Commentaries on Isaiah 60:4 and Psalm 110:3, for instance. A reading of the prayers which conclude Calvin's lectures will also show this optimistic strand, such as the prayers which close the 61 st lecture on Daniel and the 34th on Hosea.

Calvin's outline of history is found in his comments on 2 Thessalonians 2, verses 3-8. First, the gospel is preached to all nations. Then there is an apostasy, resulting in the rise of the Papacy. The Papacy will be beaten back by the preached word (v. 8). The underlying principle of antichrist will finally be destroyed at the second coming of Christ.

Finally, perhaps it is enough to keep in mind that Calvin alone among the Reformers sent out missionaries to foreign lands; and (second) the fact that he could ever have been wrongly regarded as the dictator of Geneva shows his passionate concern for social reconstruction.

Calvin's kingdom concept, expansive and life-oriented as it was, laid a firm foundation for the Reformed optimism that soon developed.

For further reading on this subject, the reader is directed to the two books by Ronald Wallace, offered at a special price with this mailing of *Calvin Speaks*. Wallace's study of Calvin's view on the Christian life includes a full treatment of Calvin's doctrine of dying and rising with Christ, and his study of Calvin's view of the Word and sacraments is indispensable to the church in these days of ecclesiastical anarchy.

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