

Calvin Speaks



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Separation UNTO BLESSING* (Part 1)

**Title not in the original*

Sermon 155.12 March 1556. Deuteronomy 28:9-14.

9. The LORD will establish you as a holy place to **Himself**, as **He** swore to you, if you **will** keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and walk in His ways.

10. So all the peep/es of the earth **will see** that the Name of the LORD is **called** upon you; and they shall fear you.

11. And the LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your beast and in the fruit of your ground, in the /and which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you.

12. The LORD will open for you His good treasure, the heavens, to give rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hand; and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow.

13. And the LORD **shall** make you the head and not the tail, and you alone shall be above, and you shall not be underneath, if you **will listen** to the commandments of the LORD your God, which I charge you today, to keep and do them.

14. And do not turn aside from any of the words which I command you today, to the right or to the **left**, to go after other gods to serve them.

Continuing the matter we spoke about yesterday [see *Calvin Speaks* Vol. 3, Nos. 11, 12], Moses shows us the condition that results from God's choosing of us, when He takes us to be of His church; which condition is that we should be separated and set far off from the common curse of mankind. It is true that God's goodness extends over all the men of the world, so that we see how all are fed and maintained by His liberality; but meanwhile we also see how many miseries men are subject to. For this reason, it is good for us to be separated, and for God to watch over us and bear toward us a special love, as for His own children; for apart from that, all our life would be confused, as we can see from the wretched infidels: Even though God bestows all kinds of blessings on them, yet they cannot profit by them, but always remain in doubt, and not without cause. For what can they rest their hopes upon, seeing they are not certified of the love of God? How can they hold to Him as their father? Therefore, it is a word

well worth marking, where Moses says that God has separated us from all other nations of the world.¹

It is certain that this word 'holiness' (see v.9) indicates that the image of God should shine forth in us, and that we should serve Him purely in a virtuous lifestyle; but yet from there he proceeds farther, as he does in this text, showing that God will give unto His people a certain mark to show that they are privileged above all others. Therefore, in beholding what the state of men is in this present life, let us learn to resort always to this promise, that God has not only created us after the common curse of the brood of all Adam's children, but that He has also chosen us to Himself for His heritage. And let us not doubt at all, but that He watches over us and will make us to perceive that we are of His household, and that He is near to aid us. Let us be well resolved in this.

Election, Promise, Preeminence

Moreover, Moses adds that all peoples of the earth will see that the Name of the LORD is called upon over you, and they shall be afraid (v.1 O). It is certain that the idolators² can vaunt themselves, and claim the name of the God, even while they fight against Him and cast off all doctrine; insomuch that being as fierce as wild beasts, they still look to be counted in the church. But Moses here takes the term 'call upon' to mean "naming." And indeed, he means that the people were truly and properly called by God after His own name, or named as His people. if we

1. Christians are not to try to read tokens of salvation from providential blessings, for these are not signs of the Gospel, but normal results of it. Thus, providential blessings by themselves cannot give assurance of favor with God, and the pagans cannot get assurance from them. Christians have been "certified of the love of God in baptism, which is the sign of God's promise to them. If a man does not persevere in the response of faith to that sign, then baptism is of no avail; but in and of itself it is a certification of God's favor. "As Baptism is a solemn recognition by which God introduces His children into the possession of life, a true and effectual sealing of the promise, a pledge of sacred union with Christ, it is justly said to be the entrance and reception into the Church." This is from *Corpus Reformatorum* 9:116, as translated by Ronald Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Tyler, TX: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1982), p. 176.

2. A reference to Roman Catholicism, and the idolatry of worshipping images and the sacraments.

walk in the fear of our God, and frame our life after His calling, then it shall be seen how it is not in vain that He calls Himself our God, and avows us to be His people.

Now it is certain that this teaching presupposes that we have our recourse to God, as being under His protection. For it is said that a man is called upon or named after the name of his prince when he is his subject and under his leadership. Even so it is said that the faithful have God's name called upon over them, signifying that they are His, and that there they are all safe under His wings. And this cannot be unless we call upon God, and have our refuge to Him in all our necessities.

But where does such boldness come from, that we glory in this: that we belong to God more than others? For we know that the state of men is all alike by nature. Why then are we preferred before others who are descended from the selfsame race? It comes through God's election; for it cannot begin with us. For where is a man who can advance himself to come nearer to God than others? What can any man bring with himself to deserve such preference? Nothing, obviously, Therefore, it is God Who must make choice of us through His own mere goodness, and when He has declared Himself to be our God, then we may also for our part be bold in all assurance, and without doubt call upon His name. Now we see what is the effect of this sent ence.

Moses intends to declare the preeminence that God gives to those whom He has adopted as His children, which is that although they are mingled among men, and encompassed with many miseries, yet they are preserved, being under His hand and protection. This is because He holds them and avows that they are of His household, and not for any other reason, except His own good pleasure. Let us therefore courageously defy Satan, when we see that he practises all that he possibly can against us, and let us count ourselves assured against all the dangers of this world, seeing that God has done us such favor as not to leave us to fortune, as the unbelievers imagine. And why? Because we are unto Him a holy people.

And what do we get this preeminence from? We have it because he has testified to us that He is our God. If we had not gotten this word from Him, we should always be in perplexity, we should still doubt. We should be questioning this or that, and our life should hang as it were by a thread, as we shall see in this chapter. But seeing that God has uttered His fatherly love to us, and it has pleased Him to open His mouth to make us to understand that He has given us familiar access to Him; seeing, I say, that we have such assurance, let us call upon Him. Let us not doubt, but glory in this, that He is our Savior, and that since we are His, we cannot perish.

All the same, let us beware that we do not call upon the name of God falsely, as all those do which abuse it, making a mockery of Him, and despising His majesty. If we claim the name of God, let it be because we are grounded upon His promises and have received them through faith, and then let us call upon Him, let Him be our refuge, and let us not give ourselves to fond bragging as they do who think it enough for them to bear the bare name of Christian. No, let us follow the call of our God, as Moses shows here, saying,

"If you will keep the commandments of your God, as I do set them before you this day" (v.9). For there is good reason for us to yield ourselves to God's direction, seeing He has so bound Himself to us. And we should not only profess with our mouths that we are His people, but also show it by framing our whole lives agreeable to the same; and by keeping His commandments make it apparent that we have received the grace which He offers to us. For that is the true evidence thereof.

The Heathen Shall Fear

Now he says moreover, that other people will see that we are called by God's name, and they shall fear us (v.10). It is not enough that God promises to make us feel that we are safe in His keeping; but He also says that even the pagans, our mortal enemies and the despisers of His majesty, shall be made to know the same. Now it is certain that the infidels do not know the arm of God in such a way as it ought to be known to us. They come far short of it. For though they see, they do not see. How then can it be possible for them to perceive that God has blessed us, that we live by His favor, and that we are nourished through His provision? After all, they are blockish, and do not recognize that anything comes to them from the hand of God. We see well how the infidels are fed and clothed; they enjoy the light of the sun; indeed, they have an abundance of goods. But as for the worshipping and seeking of God, we hear of nothing of the sort among them. And if besides their despising of the benefits of their God, they have no understanding whence they come unto them, how should they then know that God has named us with His own name?

They will not know it through any persuasion of mind, nor through any such true understanding of it as we ought to have. But Moses says that they shall have it proved to their faces; as for example, we see the wicked grind their teeth when they behold the faithful prospering, and when they see that God upholds and keeps them. And how does this come about? Truly they shall be astonished at it, and they shall not be able to think otherwise but that God does indeed favor their adversaries — not that they take it to heart or have a proper attitude about it, but in that they are at least confounded in their own selves.

He says that they shall perceive that God's name is placed upon us, and that it shall put them in fear (v. 10). For although they do not fear God, yet He bridles them secretly, insomuch that when they would practise anything against His people, they cannot do it, for they feel their courage broken. This is to be marvelled at, that God sometimes permits the wicked to cast out the foam of their rage against us, and they devise whatever they can, and work their spite; but once they have done that, then it shall appear that they are His underlings, and cannot withstand Him. And why is this so? If God should permit the faithless to have their own way, it is certain that the world should not last three days, but that they would crush down all things before them. Therefore it is necessary that He should restrain them with some secret bridle, and not permit their

desires to have full scope. And we see it before our eyes.³

Why is it that we have not been swallowed up a hundred thousand times during these last twenty or thirty years? It is due only to God's defense, which consists not in signs that may be seen, but in His secret restraint of the wicked as it were in prison, notwithstanding all the evil that is in them. By reason of this, when they have devised anything, they wash away like water, and all their thoughts vanish, and they lie as with their arms broken. And though they undertake great things, yet they cannot attain to their purposes. And so you see what Moses meant in saying that the wicked, in that they are our enemies, shall perceive that the name of God is placed upon us, and thereby be stricken in fear.

We see from this that there is no fortress or defense like having recourse to our God. As long as He takes the burden upon Himself to save us, let us boldly trust that we stand in safety; yea, although the wicked conspire against us, and lie in wait and watch for us, yet shall we be as an invincible fortress, since we can call upon the name of our God, and be thoroughly assured in ourselves that He avows us to be His people; and we have good warrant of this if we do not break our faith which we on our parts have plighted to Him. But we must feel the protection of God in a way other than the wicked feel it; that is to say, in hearing His word we must embrace the grace which is presented to us, and rest wholly upon it. After that manner must we ascertain that the name of God is put upon Us.⁴

Repeated Assurances of Blessing

Now Moses repeats again what he had said concerning the fruit of the womb, of cattle, and of the earth. Surely it would have been sufficient to have promised it once, that all bodily blessings come from God. But *on the one hand* we see the mistrust that is in men, how that when God speaks to them, they cease not to argue and to reply, saying, "Yes, but can I be sure of it?" And therefore to give us better resolve, God confirms the matter which He had previously spoken of. Again we see our unthankfulness to be such that we attribute things to "Fortune" or to our own skill and craft, which are actually done for us by God. Therefore, He calls us to Himself, and shows that it is He who does it.

3. Here is a brief statement of Calvin's doctrine of "common grace." The doctrine of "common grace" has been a sore point of controversy in Reformed circles. The best discussion of the history of the idea is in Henry Van Til's *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, published by Baker but currently sadly out of print. The simplest way to think properly concerning "common grace" is to recognize it as the crumbs which fall to the dogs from the master's table, or to put it in theological language, benefits of the sacrifice of Christ (signified by the Lord's Table) which extend to all men. The doctrine of particular atonement, that Christ died to provide eternal salvation only for the elect, does not do away with a concept of general atonement, that the death of Christ for the world-as-a-whole results in benefits for all those living in the world, which benefits cease when the reprobate leave the world and enter hell.

4. Calvin does seem to get off the subject here. Common restraint, after all, is not the point of the statement that the heathen will fear the name of God as it is placed upon His own people. Calvin *might* have called attention to the testimony of Rahab in Joshua 2:9ff., or of the Philistine in 1 Samuel 4:8. If Calvin wanders a bit from the text from time to time, that is not unusual in preachers, and it might be borne in mind that he was lecturing daily, rather extemporaneously, and frequently in bad health.

And *on the other hand*, He would have us to understand that if we intend to prosper in all points, we must hearken to Him and obey Him. For all men, yea even the most wicked in the world, are desirous to have issues of their own bodies, increase of cattle, and great revenues. But what? In the meanwhile we despise God, the author of all goodness, and seem as though we labored purposefully to thrust His hand far from us, which is as much as if I should ask a man for an alm and then reach up and box his ear, or as if he should come to my aid and I should spit in his face; *even so* deal we with our God.

God therefore, perceiving such malice in us, and that we cannot be taught simply but stop our ears *against* what He says, repeats the same things again which He had spoken to us before. Whereby He warns us that if we lack anything, we must lay the blame for it on our sins, and not on Him. And why? because He is ready, on His part, to bless us as much in the issue of our bodies as in revenue of land, and in cattle; and He is liberal and rich enough for us; neither will He be stingy towards us regarding the blessings that are in His possession. Let us therefore acknowledge that the fault lies with us, when He withdraws His benefits and gives them not to us as largely as we wish.

Rain from Heaven

Moreover, it is noteworthy that he says that God will open His good treasure, namely the heavens, and give us rain, that the earth may bring forth food. Here Moses sets out the order of nature which we see with our eyes, that we might the better understand how God is our Father and Nourisher, and that although the sustenance whereon we feed is gathered from the earth, yet it is God alone who sends all things. How so? The earth indeed has nature given to it to bring forth fruit, but if it should continue dry, what would come of it? We see that unless there fall both rain and dew, the earth will crack open as though it would cry out that it is thirsty, and it dries up for want of moisture. And therefore David, intending to utter his earnest desire of God's grace, uses this similitude, saying, "Lord, I am unto You as a dry ground" (Ps. 143:6).

We see before our eyes how the earth becomes barren and parched for want of moisture, and finally has neither strength nor substance. Had it so pleased God, could He not have given property to the earth, to have of itself substance enough? For as we read in Genesis 2:6, there was not such rain in the beginning as we have in these days, but God caused a certain vapor to rise up to moisten the earth. Cannot He do the same now, or else arrange matters so that the earth should have some kind of moisture proceeding from underneath? And indeed, where does rain come from? If you ask the philosophers [scientists today, cd.], they will say that the rain comes from the vapors that ascend out of the earth, which being drawn up into the air, are sent down again upon the earth. Thus then, after the opinion of the philosophers, the vapors do ascend.

But now, how did it come to pass that God does not make the heavens yield rain except it come first out of the earth? Or why not let the earth retain that moisture which it

has so that it may always have strength and substance of itself? What is the cause of this rising up of the vapors, that when the earth has yielded them forth, they are held up in the air as in bottles, as is mentioned in the psalm?⁵ What is the reason for all this? It is because He sees us to be so stupid and idiotic that although He shows us with His finger that it is at His hand that we receive all goodness, yet He intends to make us to perceive it in a more visible manner.

And that is the reason also why He says that He will respond to the heavens, and the heavens will respond to the earth, and the earth will respond to the grain and to all the seeds that are committed to it (Hosea 2:21f.). When the husbandman sows his grain well, he lays it up as it were in prison, and it seems to be at the mercy of the earth. The earth then must conceive the grain, nourish it, and make it to spring up, and in the same way give it substance. But does the earth "hear" (respond to) the grain? No, it is deaf; that is to say, it has no power to make it prosper unless it is "heard" (responded to) by others. And how is that? The earth, as I have said, looks ^{Up} to heaven, and after a fashion opens her mouth, for her mouth cleaves open when it feels extreme heat, and is not watered as it wishes. The heaven then must answer to the earth. The heaven? What can it do? Can the heaven give water? It has none to give except God draw it up into it by His secret

5. The marginal note refers to Psalm 18:12, which does not quite fit.

power. Indeed, we shall see hereafter how God threatens to give a heaven of brass. It is needful then that God hear the heaven, and that we repair thither.

So then, as often as it rains we must understand that God opens His treasures, which are otherwise shut up. God, as I have said, could even without rain or dew cause the earth to bring forth fruit, but He uses such means as He knows to be convenient for our dullness, and He does so for the purpose of giving us less excuse.⁶ If we are unthankful to Him, and close our eyes against so apparent a matter, we should be so much the more blameworthy at the last day, and be certain to yield an account for our willfulness in refusing to know the things which ought to be thoroughly known by us. Thus you see what we have to bear in mind.

(to be concluded)

6. Calvin points to one of the fundamental structures of Biblical theology. In the first creation, the water came ^{up} out of the earth to water the world. The fall of man cursed the earth, and that water was dried up. Thenceforth, water would come out of the heavens. Indeed, the holy land is contrasted to Egypt at just this point (Gen. 13: 10; Deut. 11:10-12). The contrast is not absolute, but does point to the procession of the Holy Spirit from heaven as the source of Life in the New Creation (redemptive). Calvin's point is that the fact that rain falls out of the heavens should cause men to look upwards for it, and consider the Divine Giver. Men should acknowledge God as the Giver of all water, but he has a special reminder in being made to look upwards to find rain.