

Calvin Speaks



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SEPARATION UNTO BLESSING*

(Part 2)

**Title not in the original*

Sermon 155. 12 March 1556. Deuteronomy 28:9-14.

Summary of the First Part

After discussing the blessings promised in verses 9-11, Calvin settles down into a discussion of the *blessing of rain*, verse 12. He says that God *could* have caused moisture to inhere in the earth, so that rain *would* not be necessary. God has chosen to water the earth with rain so that men must *look upwards* for it, and be led to consider that it is a blessing proceeding from the heavens. This is an aspect of "common blessing" which should lead all men to repentance, but for their depraved and willful blindness.

Rain from Heaven (continued)

St. Paul, speaking of the ignorance which prevailed in the old world before the Gospel was preached (Acts 14: 16), says that all people went astray like brute beasts. And why? because that doctrine was not yet taught which is the true light to show us the way of saving health, as we shall see in the thirtieth chapter (Deut. 30:15). Notwithstanding, he adds that God nevertheless did not leave Himself without witness (Acts 14:17). And his statement, "He did not leave Himself without witness," is as if he had further said, "And how so? In that He has sent rain upon the earth in due time and season. He has also sent fair weather. These are God's witnesses, which declare that just as He has created the world, even so He upholds and preserves it. These are the witnesses that speak with a loud and clear voice, saying that we must look to God for all the nourishment that He gives us."

This is why 1 said that we should mark well this saying, that God will open His treasure (Deut. 28:12). For although we see what great riches God has set in this world, what various sorts of beasts, what herbs, what trees, and what a number of all other kinds of things, yet all these things should decay and die if God did not send us daily from

heaven the things that are requisite for the preservation of this life. Could we abide three days without the light of the Savior? If God did not give natural power to every seed, what would happen? We should rapidly perish. And if nothing else were involved except what I have been speaking about concerning the earth, it would soon dry up.⁷ These therefore are the good treasures that God bestows upon us.

And when it is His will to show Himself a Father to us, He lays the heavens before us that we might see it there. It is just as if God should lift us up by the chin and say, "Poor creatures, when you seek food, you look to make sure you have planted enough seeds in the ground. Indeed, that is something you must look to, but you must first of all go higher, and lift up your eyes to Me; even nature itself compels you to do so. For you know that without rain the earth cannot prosper. Therefore, do not forget the things that I show to you day by day, which you have learned by experience."

This is the good treasure Moses is speaking of; and he expressly adds, "the heaven." Why? because if he had said, "God will show His bounty from above and from beneath," surely that ought to have been enough for us. But because of our infirmity, we see how God is careful to express the matter more plainly, so that He also shows that we must come to Him and look up to the heavens, because He calls us there, and has ordered matters such that He will have us to think ourselves to be barren and starving people except He pour His goodness upon us from above.

Now, having spoken of this good treasure he says, "He will give you rain in due time, and will bless the work or labor of your hands." By speaking of the due season, he shows to us that God's giving rain to us in due time pro-

7. In other words, God gives life to the seeds. But even if we were to assume that the seed has life in itself, it still could not grow unless God gives rain, for the earth would dry up and the seed would die.

ceeds from an especial care. After all, sometimes rain is very harmful, as we see before our eyes. From this we must conclude that if God did not have the power and skill to restrain the rain, the fruits of the earth and also the bodies of men should rot. What does the rain do, if left to itself? It engenders only rottenness. On the other side, we see that the rain refreshes in season, and gives strength to the ground, from which we see that it is the treasure of God, giving us sustenance. And why is that? Because God knows it is good for us, that He cause it to rain.

Therefore when we see it rain out of season, let us mark how God shows us that it is very necessary for us that He watch over us, and that no drop of rain fall without His commandment, according to what we have previously seen, which is that He holds the waters above as it were in bottles. The clouds are huge bottles. The prophet⁸ would have us consider that it requires a most wonderful power to shut the rain up there, for otherwise we should be drowned out of hand, or at least we should be rotted by it, as I mentioned. And here, by the way, we are admonished, as we shall note hereafter, to consider our sins and trespasses, and to think that when God gives us extraordinary rains, they are as punishments for our offenses. Moreover, when the rain comes in season, let us acknowledge that there does not fall one drop but by God's appointment, assuring ourselves that it is necessary for us. That is the reason why Moses expressly adds this particular saying.

The Gift of Labor

Next he says that God will bless the labor of our hands. This is to make us understand, as he has already pointed out before, that it is not our own labor and travail that feeds us; as we have seen in the eighth chapter (Deut. 8:17), where he says, "When you are come into the land which God gives you, remember that during forty years you were fed with manna that fell from heaven, so that you should not say, 'It is my own labor that sustains me.'" Let us therefore learn by these texts that when we have travailed, and bestowed our labor to till the earth, and have considered everything that is requisite, yet nevertheless we must lift up ourselves and not stand in our own conceit so as to say, "I have done this; it is done by my own labor and wisdom." Let us rather acknowledge that it is God's doing to give increase, and that without Him, all our labor is in vain; so that even if we were breaking our arms and legs [backbreaking labor], yet instead of going forward we should be falling backward.

The sum of the matter is that we should labor in allowli-ness, and when we have travailed for our living, we should understand that it is not in us to give the success, but that God must wholly guide it, and give it good issue, not only regarding the vegetation of the earth, but also regarding all things else in general. So then, when a man applies him-

self to any kind of labor, let "him not go about it presumptuously, but let him call upon God to help him, saying, "Lord, it is your pleasure that I should take pains. Well, I am doing so. But I know that I shall not prevail unless You guide me, and unless You give me good success. Through Your mere grace and goodness, let my labor prosper." This is the thing we are admonished concerning in this text.

Let us not then think that man's care and skill, or his travail and endeavor can make the ground fertile, but remember that the blessing of God rules all. All the same, this puts us in mind of our duty, for God will help us when we are not idle. We are not made of logs of wood, after all. Men must, I say, employ themselves when God promises them His blessing. These two points go together, namely that the Lord will bless us, and yet nevertheless that He will have us also to labor. It is certain that God could feed us, if our arms were broken, and He could make us to live without any care and without having to regard the maintenance of our own households. God, I say, could give us food free of cost, but it is His pleasure to exercise us with care and travail, and that every man according to his vocation should apply himself to that which he sees fitting for him.

I say that God's matching of His blessings with our labor is to show that He will not have us to be sluggards, every man sitting on his own tail and not tilling the ground nor occupying himself with any other trade and taking the bridle in our teeth. Rather we should do this honor to God, saying, "Lord, although we have done what we can, yet it is nothing unless Your gracious goodness rule it." But men do not use this teaching properly, for we see how men are given to darkening the grace of God under pretence that they can do something for themselves; that is how they think of themselves.

And this demonic arrogance pertains not only to matters concerning the nourishment of our bodies, but also to the area of personal salvation. Is not this the foundation of the notion of "free will"? God requires men to study and labor to do good, to withstand temptation, to have such a fervent zeal as to give themselves wholly unto Him and to forsake themselves. And since God requires all these things, it seems that we can do them [in our own power]. Indeed, but we do not consider that God, for all His commanding, also said that He works by His Holy Spirit, so that He writes His laws in our hearts, and engraves them in our minds, and causes us to walk according as He commands. Oh, this is very true, and yet we also must do our endeavor. And where does that endeavor come from? These wretches do not understand that it is God Who drives us forward and stirs us up, and that all the endeavoring wherewith men endeavor comes from their being instruments of the Holy Spirit.

Now then, seeing that under this pretence of working we seek nothing other than to darken the grace of God, so much the more diligently ought we to note this doctrine, by which God stirs us up, and would have us to work, and yet shows us withal that we cannot profit unless He gives us good success. Truly there is great difference between His handiwork and that which the faithful do in endeavoring to live well. For as I have said men are created to labor by nature, but we are so wicked and rebellious that instead of obeying God, we are born to nothing but to offend God until He has reformed us and made us new creatures. So then, God not only blesses our labor when we endeavor to

8. Assuming that the sermon was accurately transcribed, and Calvin did not really say "psalmist; then he is referring to the psalmist as a prophet in that all of Scripture is prophecy. The reference to the clouds as bottles seems to come from Psalm 18:12, but I have not been able to find out why Calvin thinks that this verse refers to clouds as bottles. In his *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin makes no reference to cloudy bottles in his remarks on this verse.

serve Him through the grace of His Holy Spirit, but also we labor only through His power, according as He guides and governs us. This is the sum of that which we have to bear in mind concerning this text.⁹

The Promise of Dominion

Now it is also said that God will make them the head and not the tail. This means that those who endeavor to serve Him will be set above, and not beneath. This is, as it were, the height of all prosperity. Now surely it was necessary (as was treated of yesterday)¹⁰ that the old fathers under the law should have more promises concerning this transitory life than we have. For they did not have such an opening of the heavenly life as is given us in the Gospel. Therefore, it was God's will to draw them after that fashion, like little children. For, since an infant is not of capacity to understand the goodness of his father, therefore to encourage him the father will say to him, "I will give you a nice new cap, or a gay newcoat." This is agreeable to the capacity of the child, and because his heart is tender, such talk is used in dealing with him. All the same, the father's intention is to lead him on farther. Even so did God deal with the old fathers. He set forth His benefits which they should enjoy in this world, intending to draw them from hence to a higher hope, namely to the hope of the heavenly heritage.¹¹

And so, the Jews were made like a head when the kingdom flourished among them, when they overcame their enemies, and when God showed Himself to fight for them. Nowadays we must not look to have either kingdoms or principalities as they had, nor do we have in like manner the temporal kingdom of David;¹² it is sufficient for us that Jesus Christ is given us, and that we reign with Him, and that He is our King, who causes us to flourish under His government. I say, it ought to suffice us that we are a royal priesthood under our Head, who is the Son of God.

Nevertheless, our Lord has made a promise to all the faithful, that if they walk in His obedience, they will not be oppressed by the tyranny of men, but will be sustained in

liberty, which is also a blessing as much as any that can be desired in this world. Knowing therefore that this is a special gift of God, as it is here showed, let us learn to serve Him and to give Him the whole authority over us, that by His governing of us we may be set free from bondage to men. We shall see hereafter in this present chapter (Deut. 28:17) how He threatens them that will not fear Him nor shrink at His terribleness, according as it is said in the Psalm (105:38): God must lay the fear of men upon them that will not fear Him and be His willing subjects.

Let us mark, therefore, that when we yield to the reigning of God over us, we shall be maintained by Him in such a fashion that men will not be able to oppress us. And if at any time the wicked have their sway, and seem to set their feet as it were upon our throats, let us understand that God is bringing us low because we have offended Him and because we have not rendered to Him the praise that belongs to Him, and that He chastises us according to our deserts. But we must always come back to this point, that if we do not cast off God, we shall be received by Him in such a way that He will be to us as an army, and will make us able to walk with our heads upright, as it is said in the third psalm (v.4). So then, this blessing served not only for the fathers that lived under the law, but it continues also unto the end of the world.

The Primacy of Obedience

And we can see that the promise is not empty when we continue reading, "Keep the commandment 1 set before you this say," says Moses, "that You swerve neither to the left nor to the right to go after strange gods and to worship them." We see how God continually reminds us of obedience to His Word, and that is in order that we should serve Him, and not in hypocrisy, to which we are so much inclined. Let us remember therefore this lesson: that to worship our God sincerely, we must evermore begin by hearkening to His voice, and beginning at that which He commands us. For if every man goes after his own way, we shall wander. We may well run, but we shall never be a whit nearer to the right way, but rather further away from it.

And God will not only be heard but also obeyed by all men without exception, and without adding anything to His Word or subtracting anything from it. And this is expressly said, because men dare to be so bold as to bring in their new manners of serving God, and as to do that which they suppose to be good. Contrariwise, let us understand that when God has once showed what He will have us to do, we must simply hold ourselves there, without presuming to add thereto or to diminish therefrom by any means. But above all things He would have us to acknowledge Him to be our God. For the true reason that men stray, and altogether vanish into so many superstitions and idolatries, is that they know not what God they ought to worship.

We have, therefore, greatly profited from the Gospel, from the Law, and from the Prophets, when we have the skill to say, "This is the God Who showed Himself to Abraham, the God Who showed Himself by Moses, the God Who lastly showed Himself fully in the person of His only Son, and the same is He Who is our God." As it is also said in the prophet Isaiah (25:9), where he speaks of the manifestation of

9. It is important to notice how closely Calvin links faith and works. Men are supposed to do works with an accompanying attitude of faith. The issue, then, is not works versus no works, for all men do works. Rather, the issue is whether our works are done with an attitude of faithful dependence on God, or with an attitude of earning merit with God. The Bible *distinguishes* faith and works; it never *separates* them.

10. See *Calvin Speaks* 3:11,12

11. There is a teeny weeny bit of neoplatonism in Calvin here. The Bible does not pit earth against heaven as if earthly blessings were inferior; rather, we confess the resurrection of the body and the wedding of heaven and earth in the New Heavens and Earth. Heaven must rule earth, but men's home is earth, not heaven. The New Jerusalem proceeds from heaven to earth, to make earth heavenly. The eschatological movement in Biblical religion is not from earth to heaven, but from a natural Edenic earth to a cultivated heavenly Jerusalem earth. Sin detoured this eschatology, but redemption puts us back on the right track.

Later in this very sermon, Calvin refutes any implication that material blessings are lessened in the New Covenant, but the ambiguity is still present in his thinking here and there. See my essay on Optimism and Pessimism in Calvin, in *Calvin Speaks* 3:11 — J. B. Jordan.

12. Notice that Calvin carefully qualified his statements here: "as they had; in like manner." Obviously, Calvin believed in Christian reform of government; that was what he was doing in Geneva.

our Lord Jesus Christ: "Lo, this is He; 10, this is our God." Then let us have a settled faith, that we not be rovers. Let us not be like little children, nor like wavering reeds that are carried every which way; but let our faith be well grounded, by taking root in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Now let us fall down before the majesty of our good God with acknowledgement of our sins, beseeching Him so to teach us with true repentance, that we may bewail them and be heartily sorry for our corruption, to the end to withdraw us more and more, and therein to reform us. And

forasmuch as we are not only frail but also altogether rebellious, that it may please Him to bring us home again to Him, and to prop up our weakness with His strength, so that we may overcome all the hindrances that serve to turn us from Him, and that we may with perfect constancy go on to the mark to which He has called us, until we attain to the perfection of all righteousness. And that in the meanwhile, it may please Him to uphold us in such a manner as that even if we fail, yet He will cease not to take us for His children, and make us to understand more and more that He confirms us in the trust of our salvation. That it may please Him to grant this grace not only to us but also to all people and nations of the earth, etc.

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