

# Calvin Speaks



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## GOD% THREATS\*

(Part 1)

\*Title not in the original

Sermon 156.13 March 1556. Deuteronomy 28:15-24.

15. *But it shall come to pass, if you will not hearken to the voice of the LORD your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes which I command you this day; then all these curses shall come upon you, and overtake you:*

16. *Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field.*

17. *Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading-trough.*

18. *Cursed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your land, the increase of your cattle, and the flocks of your sheep.*

19. *Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.*

20. *The LORD shall send upon you cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that you set your hand unto, until you be destroyed, and until you perish quickly; because of the wickedness of your doings, by which you have forsaken me.*

21. *The LORD shall make the pestilence cleave to you, until He has consumed you from off the land to which you are going to possess it.*

22. *The LORD shall smite you with a consumption, and with a fever, and with an inflammation, and with an extreme burning, and with the sword, and with blasting, and with mildew; and they shall pursue you until you perish.*

23. *And your heaven that is over your head shall be brass, and the earth that is under you shall be iron.*

24. *The LORD shall make the rain of your land powder and dust; from heaven shall it come down upon you until you are destroyed.*

We have seen these past several days how God entreats His people with promises. Now on the opposite side, He adds threats. And that is not without good reason, for we see how slow we are when it comes to submitting ourselves to obeying God. Our feet are swift enough to run to evil, as the prophet Isaiah says (59:7), and as it is spoken of in the Proverbs (1:16; Rem. 3:15), but God cannot make us set forth one step to behave ourselves properly, and

therefore we must be compelled to it by force.' Nevertheless, God certainly begins with gentleness and goodness. And that is why He first sets forth His blessings to those that serve Him. He might very well have begun with threats, but He did not. In so doing He makes a test to see whether we are apt to be taught, by showing Himself fatherly towards us, and by making it to be seen that he seeks nothing other than our benefit, welfare, prosperity, and quietness.

### Promises as Motives

Thus we see how God first tests us, and if that does not avail, then He uses threats. These two belong together. Let us consider the matter: What good does it do if we do not serve God freely and willingly? Even if men are notable to find any fault with us, yet if we obey unwillingly, our whole life is detestable. After all, the main point is that we are to have a free and good will, to give ourselves over to God. For, if we are not to obey simply with a view to the reward, how much more does it follow that if we obey simply out of constraint, all our life is cursed.<sup>2</sup> We can see that a desire to serve God because it is not lost labor [because it is rewarded – cd.], is not all we have to do. For when we have come to that point, we are only half way. Even if a man receives the promises contained here, and offers himself to God to serve Him, yet his obedience is always imperfect and deserves to be cast off. And why so?

1. Did Calvin really say "God cannot make us set forth one step to behave ourselves"? Maybe; at least his translator did. We ought to take note of this, for it shows a couple of things, both of which are important. First, it shows that Calvin was not such a stickler for precise language that he refused to use common jargon to get across his ideas. Everybody knew that Calvin believed in irresistible grace. Secondly, Calvin is speaking of God's "inability" in a *covenantal* sense, not in a *decretal* sense. God is unable to get through man's sinfulness by means of *covenantal* promises and threats; obviously, God is fully able to change men by means of regenerating grace. Calvin is not so hung up on *decretal* theology that he is unable to speak freely about the covenant.

2. As we have noted in previous sermons, Calvin will give back, a few paragraphs further on, what he here takes away. Calvin pits the ultimate motive (love of God) against proximate motives (promises and threats) at this point, in order to bring out the fact that only the regenerate heart can properly relate to any of God's covenant words. Later on, Calvin will declare that proximate motives are proper extensions of the ultimate motive, since the God we love is a merciful Father who deals with us in terms of rewards and chastisements Calvin is mainly concerned that we do not get the cart before the horse.

Because, as I have said, we are not to be hirelings, but our yielding of ourselves to God must be because we are His, and because He is worthy to have our lives employed in His obedience, and especially because He is our Father. He begins with promises because of our infirmity, to get us going, and when He has brought us on so far, then He manifests to us a greater perfection.

To summarize the matter, we have to note that there are three kinds of people who keep the Law of God in outward show. One sort does it out of compulsion, with gnashing of teeth, though they do discharge its commands after a fashion. And why? Because they know well that they cannot escape the hand of God; they fear His anger and His vengeance; and therefore they do serve Him, but only by compulsion. But as I have said, all this is rejected.

A second sort takes the middle way; for they know that God is faithful, and that such as serve Him shall not lose their labor. These hearken to the promises which are expressed in Holy Scripture. And so, a great many do yield themselves to serve God, because He lures them thereto by promising them reward, as we have seen before.

[And now, moving to the third sort, Calvin says:] But, as I said, we may not stay there, but we must rather consider that since God has made and fashioned us, redeemed us, and is our Father, these things ought to suffice us apart from that which He has promised us. And since He has gone before us with His mercy, and shows Himself so bountiful towards us, we should be inflamed with ardent affection to serve Him. This is one of the principal points of our life.

But as I said before, our Lord in His Law has respect for our imperfection, and therefore He promises to reward us so that we should have a better courage. And indeed, though we serve God with affection never so purely and freely employed, yet we must always wait for that which is promised us, and stay our minds on it. We must, I say, hope for His blessing, when we have served Him with a good courage, but we must not do it to that end; we must not be drawn by this respect [rewards] only. For, as I have said, we must be His children, and honor Him as our Father. And since it is He that upholds us, so must we assure ourselves that it is not for us to imagine any merit in ourselves, but that He accepts us out of His own unique goodness, and therefore that we for our part must seek nothing but to vow and dedicate ourselves wholly unto Him.

But setting that aside, what we must learn here is that when God has set out His promises before us, He must also proceed to spur us forward [by means of threats — cd.]. Why? Because our nature is full of rebellion against Him. We are not only slow, but also there is in us an inclination to draw away from what God commands us. If there were nothing more than slothfulness, yet that certainly is a vice that needs correcting, and therefore we would have need of the threats mentioned here. But seeing we are so rebellious, and are always kicking, so that God cannot reclaim us nor place us under His yoke, it appears that the manacles are doubly necessary.

We see in this the justice of our condemnation, since God cannot win us to love Him, but finds it needful to show Himself dreadful to make us afraid, without which we would fall asleep. Seeing then that God prevails so little with us

when He trains us gently, seeking nothing but to make us follow Him with a willing heart, let us acknowledge our rebellion and condemn ourselves. And along with that let us also confess the fatherly care that God has concerning our salvation, seeing He uses all the means that He knows are fitting for us. For it is all the same as if He would, you might say, transfigure Himself. His only aim is to reclaim us. At onetime He smiles on us; at another He frowns at us; but all this tends to the end that we may be drawn to Him to give ourselves over to His service.

#### Threats as Motives

Now someone will say, "Look, since our lives displease God and He reproves them when we serve Him out of compulsion, if the threats only leave us there, what good are they? It would be better for God to leave them off altogether." But let us note that He trains us by degrees, according to His knowledge of how necessary it is for us. It is certain that if nothing but fear will bring us to serve God, it is worth nothing. It is, however, a good preparation, and it leads us further on after we have begun with it. For example, before God has made us meek, we are full of pride and our flesh is wholly rebellious, and to be quick about it, we are as colts that have never been saddled or ever tasted the bit. God must take pains to prepare us and to bring us into order, and He uses threats to do so. But this, as I have said, would accomplish nothing at all unless He bonded us to a voluntary obedience and subjection afterwards. And when we have that tendency, then we have greatly profited in that this pride of ours is beaten down, and we are no longer wild-headed, but we know that there is a Judge before whom we must make an account; and we profit in that the same consideration restrains us from using such looseness any longer, and from being so heady in doing evil as we have previously been.

This is a beginning, and indeed it is only a beginning, inasmuch that if we should remain there, we would not yet be plucked out of the mire. But when we have thus begun, then does the Lord match His threats with a taste of His goodness in such a way that we are drawn to Him. And in so doing, He shows Himself to be our Father. Now when we understand that God indeed is ready to reward us when we have served Him, even though we are not able to merit anything but rather only provoke His wrath, then we must have our refuge in His mere mercy to obtain remission of our sins as it is offered to us in our Lord Jesus Christ and as He has purchased it for us by His death and passion. When we are thus reformed, and are rid of all trust in our own works, then we ought to offer up ourselves willingly in sacrifice to God, as St. Paul also exhorts us in Romans 12:1. He sets forth no reward, but says, "I beseech you, brethren, by the mercy and compassion that God has shown towards you, that every one of you renounce this world and also himself, that you become living sacrifices to God, for that is your reasonable service."<sup>3</sup>

3. There is no preparationism in Calvin's theology here He is not saying that men must go through "law-work" before coming to salvation. Rather, Calvin is saying that the God who appointed the end (salvation) has also appointed to use, very often, certain means God's threats arouse men to fear Him, and His goodness leads men to faith in Him, and salvation.

## Promises Come Before Threats

But yet, somebody is sure to raise a second objection, and say, "If threats make us ready for the promises of God, it seems that they should be placed in the first rank, and that the promises should follow them." But the answer to this doubt is this: that God will hold us more convicted before Him when He begins with us by means of His promises. For we shall have to admit that there is a shameful thanklessness in us, seeing that while our Lord seeks only to win us by love, we still deal rebelliously with Him and draw backward when He comes so lovingly toward us.<sup>4</sup> You see then why the promises are set before us first of all: that we might be the more reproved for our rebelliousness.

Then God moves onto show us that His goodness will not avail us unless He threatens us. In so doing, He uses rigor, and the same rigor is profitable to us, since when we are touched with it our hearts are daunted. Not everyone, of course, for there are many that take the bridle in their teeth to strive against God; but I mean the faithful. They are the ones who are prepared for the promises of God through His threatenings. Afterwards, God turns yet again, and allures them newly with His goodness, as I have said before, insomuch that when He has stung them with His threats to tame the stubbornness of their flesh (and surely it is requisite that God should show some sign of His wrath), thereupon He sets before us His mercy, which is the accomplishment of all, to the end (as I have said) that we should learn to yield ourselves wholly to Him with a free-disposed affection.

### To Whom Much is Given. . .

Now let us come to the words that are set down here:<sup>5</sup> "If you will not hearken to the voice of the LORD your God, to observe to do all His commandments and statutes which I set before you this day, then all these curses shall come upon you, and overtake you." Here Moses speaks expressly to those who have been trained in the Word of God. It is true that those who offend without the Law shall

4. It may seem amazing that Calvin speaks this way. Modern Calvinistic evangelistic methodologies have reacted so much against Arminian decisional evangelism, that many fear to speak of God's love as leading men to repentance. Calvin, however, has no problem with saying that "our Lord seeks only to win us by love." Indeed, as Calvin points out, God's first word to sinners is a word of love and promise, followed up by threats. This was the order in creation, where God declared His love for humanity by giving them all good things, but threatened a curse if they disobeyed. It is also the order in the gospel, which is good news (not neutral news), that God intends to save the world, and wants all men to repent. There is, then, a germ of truth in the order of the "Four Spiritual Laws," which begin with the love of God, and then move to God's judgment upon sin. Too often, modern Calvinists have lost the positive evangelistic methodology of Scripture, and of Calvin himself! The fact that God's love is rejected by the reprobate, and adds to their condemnation (two points he makes right in this section of the sermon), does not mean for Calvin that the offer is insincere or should not be made.

5. From here to the end of the first half of the sermon Calvin expounds verse 15. It is noteworthy that Calvin does not analyze and then resynthesize the text (one method taught in seminaries), nor does he isolate one big point or three secondary ones. Rather, he simply says what the text says, calling attention to several matters in succession:

1. If you will not hearken,
2. to do *all* His commandments and statutes,
3. hearkening to the *voice* of God,
4. you will be *surrounded* with curses.

perish all the same, as St. Paul says in Romans 2:12. And we ourselves see that the ignorant and blind do not escape punishment at God's hand. Even though they might plead that they were not taught, yet they are plenty at fault. But let us note that here our Lord doubles His curse upon those to whom He has showed such favor as to manifest His will to them, for He has shown them the way to saving health, had they obeyed Him and yielded themselves unto His teaching. This, then, is not general to all men.

Now first of all God shows that when He has given His Law, and published it abroad, the fault lies in the people when they do not understand it. This is the reason why Moses expressly says: "the commandments and statutes which I set before you this day." When he says, "commandments and statutes," it serves to show that they contain a sufficient instruction, just as we have told you here before that God has not spoken by halves, but that He has taught His people. Thus, they cannot reply and say, "We don't know what these things mean." Moses says, "Behold, the statutes and commandments which I set before. If you apply your endeavor to them, you cannot go amiss."

And therefore let us bear well in mind that according as God has delivered to us His Word, our ungodliness is doubled before Him and our punishment must be so much the more severe if we are not willing to do good, yea and also profit therein, and from day to day be established in His obedience. That is the thing which we have to consider upon this text.

Moreover, when he says, "if you will obey the voice of the LORD your God," it serves to touch us thoroughly to the quick. For seeing that God vouchsafes to speak to us, is it not fitting that we should at least pay attention to Him? And if we act deaf, is this not contrary to nature? For if we refused to hear someone who is our equal, surely he would take offense at it; how much more would one who is our superior? And since God has all sovereign dominion over us, and has done us the favor of delivering to us His Word, and has familiarly acquainted Himself with us, if He finds us stubborn against Him, disdaining to hear Him, is it not fitting that He should avenge Himself of such contempt? Especially when He sees such a villainous stateliness in us, who are but worms of the earth. The thing, then, which we have to bear in mind from this text is that here Moses intends to condemn the ungodliness of men that continue in hardness of heart after God has given them the means to return by setting His Word before them.

### Encompassed with Curses

Now, when he says that these curses shall take hold of us [encompass us], it behooves us to remember what was spoken earlier. For in speaking of the blessings of God, he said (v.2): "You shall be compassed round about," and now in like manner joins the curses in the same way, so that we may not think we can escape the hand of God. No matter how sly we are, we shall always be entrapped. It will do us no good to seek places to hide, according to what He has said by His prophet, "if you go into your house, and shut your door and double-bar it, yet shall the serpent come in

and sting you there; if you go into the field and seek a way to escape, you shall meet a lion on the way; if you slip aside from the lion, a bear will meet you" (Amos 5:19; cf. 9:1-4); and to be short, whatsoever men do, when God is against them and has become, as it were, their enemy, they must come to find that they are discovered, caught, and entrapped, for they are environed round about with these curses, with no hope to get out. Therefore, let us not deceive ourselves in seeking worldly means to save us, for if the hand of God is lifted up against us (as we shall see in the song here at hand — Deut. 32:23), He has his storehouses full of arrows, and not of three or four sorts-only, but of infinite. And if we suppose that we have escaped when we have overcome some one evil, then we deceive ourselves, for God has laid by one hundred more. Let us then look for all manner of woe if we disobey God's Law.

But it would be a miserable appeal if we should come unto God by compulsion, solely for fear of His punishments. What must we do, then? We must submit ourselves willingly unto Him, praying Him to keep us from His wrath, and from warring against Him, and from forcing Him to come to destroy us. That would be as if some petty lord

should attempt war against a great prince, having neither strong town, nor munition, nor anything else, and yet should presume to defy one that is able to swallow him up if he did but lift his finger against him. Wouldn't that be insane? Likewise, when we provoke our God by setting ourselves against Him knowingly, He must war against us, and set us in prison.

So then, let us pray Him not to allow us to be so far gone as to fall into the practice of defying Him, but rather that we simply obey Him so that we may be crowned and encompassed with His blessings, as it is said in Psalm 32:10, "He that puts his trust in God shall be crowned with His benefits," which is to say that God will make him to possess His blessings round about him, and he shall be so thoroughly fenced on all sides with His safe-guarding, that he will have no need to fear. Although we are laid open to many dangers, yet shall we be preserved through His goodness. Now, as touching that which he adds, we have expounded here before.

(to be cone/uded)

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