

Calvin Speaks



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GOD'S THREATS* (Part 2)

**Title not in the original*

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

Summary of the First Half

Calvin begins *by* observing that God seeks to motivate us to obedience *by* both promises and *threats*. God *places* the promises *before* the threats in order *to* show that it is because we *reject* His goodness that His threats are necessary. In psychological order, Calvin points out, threats usually shake men up first, and lead them to appreciate the promises which then lead them to seek *salvation* in the love of the Father manifested in the redemption wrought by Christ. The first part *closes* with an exposition of verse 15. These curses are particularly enunciated *to* the people of God, which makes them *doubly guilty* if they disobey Him. There is no *lack* in the comprehensiveness of His law, and there will be no escaping the comprehensiveness of His punishments for breaking that law. Calvin now turns *to* a discussion *of* the specifics of verses 16ff.

God the Bringer of Evil

Now concerning the curses, he says, "You shall be cursed in the town; you shall be cursed in the field; your coming in shall be cursed; your going forth shall be cursed; the fruit of your womb shall be cursed; and the fruit of your cattle and of all your flocks." From this we again understand that all the evil which we see in this world proceeds from the hand of God. By the word 'evils' I understand all the punishments, and all the wretchedness to which we are subject. This is what is said in the prophet Isaiah, where God says (45:7), "I am the LORD Who made light and darkness; I have in My power both life and death; and I do both good and evil." He uses this kind of language purposefully not that such evil which is our fault proceeds from God, nor that it ought to be imputed to Him; not so. Rather, he means that all the miseries and calamities which we suffer in this world are as it were so many chastisements.⁶ We may not

attribute them to chance, as we shall explain more fully later on, where God says, "If you walk contrary to Me, I will walk contrary to you" (Lev.26:23-24).⁷ Those are His words.

And why? Because men put mist before their own eyes, and say, "Lo, what misfortune has befallen me!" When they come to be afflicted in some way or other, they cast up spiteful words against God and go beyond their places, not considering that God is a Judge, and governs the world by His providence. They are not able to perceive that, so dull and senseless are they. And that is why Moses uses this kind of declaration, enlarging it so much in this text.

And it serves to bring us to what I just cited from the prophet Isaiah, where God shows that He made both light and darkness, and does both the good and the evil. We are not allowed to conceive vain thoughts, saying, "Whence does this come upon me? It is a misfortune. Would to God it were not so." Rather, we must acknowledge the hand that smites us, for in that is great wisdom. And for the same reason God complains thus by His prophet, "This people have not regarded the hand that smote them" (Is.9:13).

You see then how we must understand that all the afflictions and miseries which we endure in this world are indeed strokes from God's own hand. And along these lines it is said by the prophet Amos, "Is there any evil in the city which God has not done?" (Amos 3:6). That is to say, "Can there happen either war or pestilence or famine or disease or poverty or any other calamity whatsoever, that does not come to you from God? Wretched people, are you so foolish and beastish as to imagine that God, Who created the world, has left it at random and has no care to watch over His creatures, or to bestow on them that which He thinks fitting for them? Does He not sometimes show His goodness and sometimes make them feel Him as Judge, punishing the sins of men, and making men know what His office is? Do you think that He lives idle in heaven, and that He does not set forth His power, or that the world is not guided and governed by His providence?"

So then, just as God earlier has showed that we cannot prosper except by His grace and love, which He extends to us, in that He has chosen us as His children and will also

6. Calvin is most insistent on this understanding of the text, contrary to some later Calvinists, as see his *Commentary* on Isaiah 45:7. E. J. Young, in his commentary, takes "peace" and "evil" in a more comprehensive sense, so as to include God's predestination of the sinful acts of men (which Scripture clearly teaches, Acts 2:23). The more basic question concerns whether evil is a substance or a relation. Since moral evil is a relation in Biblical religion, being a breaking of the covenantal relationship between God and man, moral evil is not a creation at all. Since Isaiah speaks of "creating" evil, it seems to me that Calvin has the better position in referring the verse simply to physical calamity.

7. Calvin says we will come to this verse as we go on in Deuteronomy 28, but the verse is actually in Leviticus 26. Anyone familiar with these two passages can see how Calvin could easily make this mistake in his extemporaneous expositions. We shall have to see if Calvin actually takes this verse up later on.

accept our service (Deut. 8: 18; and earlier sermons on Deut. 28), so now He shows in the same way that if there is any affliction, poverty, or other misery, they come not by chance, but are the very punishments of God, sent by Him. And therefore, when things do not fall out after our liking, we must fall to considering and examining our sins. If we are grieved in any manner of thing, so that one is troubled with his household, another with the loss of his goods, another with some disease, another with some vexation of mind, and another with the loss of something he loved, let us acknowledge, saying "Lo, it is our God Who has lifted up His hand, and holds it up still. And why? Because we have offended Him." The first point, then is that men may not deceive themselves when God visits them, but they must know that by this means they are made to understand their offenses, to the end that they might humble themselves and bewail their sins. So much for one point.

No Escape from God

The second point is that we must not think we can escape the scourges of God, no matter how sly we are. We shall always be caught by the back of the neck if God is against us. And if we make shields and ramparts, and do whatever we can, yet our Lord will not fail to find us. He only needs to blow upon our defenses by which we imagine we can protect ourselves from Him. It is not like dealing with mere creatures; against such we might fortify ourselves both behind and before, But God will slap us down from heaven. We can erect neither shield nor rampart against Him, hoping thereby to stop His hand from touching us, when it pleases Him to punish us.

Again, what is the end of all the fortifications that we are able to build against Him, except the overthrow of ourselves? Let us therefore understand that anything men try to do against God will simply turn to their own confusion and overthrow. That is what Moses meant when he said that we shall be cursed in the town and in the field, in our going forth and in our coming in, if we do not obey the voice of our God. And just as he earlier said that God will open His good treasure from heaven to give us rain in due season, so now he says that God will make our heaven as brass, and our earth as iron, and that instead of rain He will send drought; He will send us dust and ashes, and there shall be nothing but barrenness among us.

Here we must call again to mind the lesson that has been laid out briefly before, which is that just as every one of us is visited by the hand of God, we should benefit ourselves thereby and every man should apply to his own use what is here mentioned. For God uses many ways to chastise us. One is punished in his own person with diseases, reproach, and I know not what else; another has some secret headache, so that though he is whole in body, he is continually in torment in mind; another is plagued with his wife or with his children; and another is troubled with his substance. According, therefore, as every man finds himself afflicted, so let him resort to this which is here told us, saying, "Alas, I see how my God calls me to Himself. I must not provoke Him, for what shall I win by using many crafty devices as worldlings do, who desire to fall asleep in their miseries. The only comfort they feel is to have no regard for God." Now if we do so, then must that which is spoken of in Psalm 32:9 be done to us, which is that God will deal with stiff necked and hardhearted people as with restive horses

and mad mules. We shall see more of this at length.

So then, we must come to the point of feeling God's hand, everyone according to his affliction, first on his own behalf, and also in common. When we see a drought, let us not accuse the heaven, nor yet the air, saying it was the disposition of them. Let us not do as fanatics do, who look no higher than the stars, but let us think about the hand of God, so that as many afflictions as fall upon us may be to us" as visible signs and marks that God executes the office of a Judge toward us, and that although he condemns us as often as He punishes us, yet this is not a condemnation to death, but a summoning of us to appear before Him, there to frame a new process against us. We should mark this point well.

Therefore, when we feel any evil or grief, let us understand that we have offended God, but let us think at the same time that God nevertheless does not mean to execute a final sentence upon us when He thus calls us again unto Himself. What, then, is the purpose? Is it to condemn us without mercy? No; rather He does us this favor, that we might be our own judges (I Cor. 11:31). When He summons us, it is @ the end that every one should plead guilty of his own free will, and thereupon ask His forgiveness, and flee for refuge to His mercy. Behold, here is an inestimable privilege!⁸

And so let us benefit ourselves both privately and publicly by the things that are told us here; that when we see the heavens burning hot, and we ask rain and yet go without it so that the fruits of the earth fail and the heat dries up all things, let us understand that it is the hand of God which visits us, and let us confess our sins with one common accord. And if any man feels any household vexation, let him confess, "Well, God is wakening me by this visitation, because I have offended Him."

Thus, the main thing God would have the faithful exercise themselves about is the examining of their sins after this manner. As a result it will come to pass that, as Solomon says, blessed is the man who troubles himself and awakens himself; not that we must so trouble ourselves as to fall into unmeasurable despair, but we must quicken up ourselves with fear, because the Devil seeks nothing else except to make us dull and dense, so that we should offend God and razz at Him with our tongues, as we see certain despisers do who set themselves against Him, dashing at Him with their horns and vomiting out their blasphemies. Therefore, so that we do not come to that pass, we must arouse ourselves with fear and trembling, which cannot be done unless we profit under the correction of our God and consider that when He visits us, it is to call us unto Himself. It is so that we should make our own indictments, and not tarry until that final laying of His hand upon us, but go before Him, just as St. Paul says that those who judge themselves will not be judged by Him (I Cor. 11:31).

8. This section, and that which follows, are particularly noteworthy examples of Calvin's theology. Note first of all that Calvin does not neglect corporate, social blessings and curses in the interest of a false individualism, nor does he neglect the personal aspect, but rather deals with both the one and the many. Second, we see here the rigorously judicial (and Biblical) character of Calvin's theology. God's mercy is manifest precisely in judgment, not in foregoing it. Not only is this the case in the judgment meted out to Christ as our Substitute, but also in that God visits us in history with various judgments. Each judgment short of the final one is an opportunity to repent; thus each judgment which does not kill us is an act of grace on God's part. Grace and law (judgment) are not only joined in Calvin's thinking, they are inseparable as far as the elect are concerned.

Now finally it is here declared to us that the course of nature, as we call it, is nothing but the disposition of the will of God, and that he bears such rule over both heaven and earth, and over rain and fair weather, that He changes them at His own pleasure, and yet does not send either without cause. If there were a permanent order in nature, it would seem unto us that God never meddled with it; we would grant that He made the world, but we would then say that He does not govern it. We would think thus: "What? When the springtime comes, we see that the rest of the year goes on in the same course as did the year before. It is always the same." But in fact we see one winter is longer, and another winter later, and another earlier yet longer; we see one winter rainy, and another dry; we see abundance of snow in one year, and another year none at all; one year is hot, another cold. Now, does not such inequality make it manifest that God is at work? For the sun performs his office in one year as well as in the next, and always keep his just course better than the best clocks in the world.⁹ How, then, do we get such variety of weather? It is God's doing, to tail us to Himself.

Truly the philosophers (and scientists) do seek out causes, as they term them. There is such a meeting of stars (say they), and this proceeds of such and such a conjunction. But where does all this come from, if not from the hand of God? We must always resort to the first cause. And indeed, such men are nothing more than beasts if they will not admit that!

Yet it is not sufficient to know that God guides all His creatures, and that He holds them bridled in order to make them bow, just as a horseman makes his horse to turn on this hand and on that, to stop, and to run. It is not enough to know that God looses and binds and sends such changes as He likes; rather, we must also understand that God does nothing without reasons. For if we say that God governs the world, and do not know why He plagues us, we shall quickly be inclined to murmur against Him. And meanwhile we shall not profit under His chastisements and corrections, but continue dulled in our sins. So then, let us mark that in shutting up the heaven so that it yields no rain, and in drying up the earth as if it were iron, He is showing us our sins and that He is our Judge. This is what we have to bear in mind concerning the course of nature, as it is here declared to us.

Nor is God content simply to say that the heaven shall be as brass, but He goes on to say that he will send us ashes and gravel or sand instead of rain. Just as we see caterpillars that eat, mar, and destroy all that is on the earth, so it only takes one blasting or mildew to eat the corn and consume it wholly. It is worse than if God should sow salt. And these blastings or mildews are of the same substance as the rain. God only needs to make little changes. He can send a little sharp cold and that same cold will make a clean riddance of everything. When we see such things, then, let us always take warning from this teaching,

9. That the sun has its inconstant spots and these effect weather patterns was, of course, not known to Calvin, but his point stands. The God of orthodox Christianity is eternally at rest and eternally active; He works all things. He has not appointed some "natural law" to run things in His absence, but He makes all things work. The apparent regularities in His working are due to His covenant, as revealed to Noah, and not to in-built laws. Thus, when scientists study the workings of the course of nature, they are actually studying God's covenant.

and let us be no longer entangled in our follies. Let us never say, "Ah, evil fortune, evil fortune." But let us understand that our Lord is tailing us back to Him, and has His hand stretched out; and let us know that it is He that smites, as if He should say, "I have gone about to draw you to Myself by fair means, but you have not humbled yourselves before Me. Seeing then that you will not be brought to it willingly, I will not compel you, as if I drew you by the hair on your heads." Let us, I say, be admonished by this teaching, here mentioned, to prevent the wrath and vengeance of God, as often as He gives us advertisement of the same.

Again, when God makes the earth fruitful, let us acknowledge it to be His work, and that there does not spring up a blade of grass except He has put thereupon His hand. Let us then take our daily food from Him, not cramming ourselves like brute beasts, which fill their bellies, not knowing whether there be a Creator that causes the earth to bring them forth food; but let us understand that God blesses the earth, and causes it to yield fruit for our nourishment and sustenance. Let us bear it in mind, that in affliction as well as in prosperity we may turn our eyes ever more unto God.

The Curses **Cling** to the Sinner

And it is expressly said further that God will make pestilence cleave unto us and that He will send other diseases and that they shall continue upon us until we are consumed by them. This should waken us even better, seeing that God does not strike, as it were, a single blow and then quit, but that His curses shall follow us and cling to us, unless we forsake our sins and wickedness.

Finally let us learn that those who stay away from God, and hide from Him day after day, only deceive themselves. For example, we see many who, when God sends them some affliction, take some notice of it, but soon they forget it. They shake their ears and think it is over, and like a dog that has been stuck with a whip they turn their backs and run away, thinking that they may appease God by some means. Thus deals the world. But let us beware of such stupidity. For we see what is said expressly in his place.

After God has spoken of His curses, and added that they shall hem us in on every side, He concludes that they will cling to us. And why? Because if we cling to our iniquities, so that they reign in our bones and in our marrow, and are fixed in our hearts and minds, then must God's curses follow us similarly. When a man will not do away with his evil affections, but is delighted in them and continues to soak in them, God for His part must then shut him up in them. And when we so do, then He must send up His curses to stick fast to us like a leprosy that they may consume us utterly, so that they do not respond to medical plasters, being so deeply rooted within us and in a way, incurable. Therefore, let us be afraid at the hearing of these things.

And so we see now to what purpose Moses adds that the curses of God shall cling to us, namely to warn us that if the mischief has taken root, we must strain ourselves the more in praying to God to show us the favor of the cleansing of His Holy Spirit, Whose property it is to search the bottom of our secret affections; that it may please Him to reprove us in such a way that this fear may cause in us a marvelous purgation, expelling our sins from us, that we

may no longer be so wedded to them as we have been.

And therewithal let us realize that when diseases begin to reign, or any other afflictions, we may not hope for any end thereof unless we cease to offend our God. It is said in a common proverb that diseases come on horseback (that is to say, very rapidly), and that they return on foot (that is to say, quite slowly). But even though the reason for this is readily apparent, we consider it not. And as I have said before, it is because we do not look to the hand that smites us. Nor can God win us to Himself by the first stroke, when He punishes us. Sure, we are full of fine words When a man is sick, he will protest that his whole desire is to serve God, and that if he may only recover his health, the world shall see him a new man. But all is quickly forgotten.

Therefore, it is no wonder that instead of lessening our punishments God at various times increases them and allows us to languish in our adversities. It is because He sees that our diseases are deeply rooted that He must come again more often than only once or twice to purge us of them. And therefore let us learn to pray to Him to vouchsafe to cure our faults in such a way that they may not proceed to the extremity here expressed, but that as soon as we feel a little stroke of the rod of His hand, the same may be sufficient to bring us again to Him; indeed, to Him with the kind of repentance that will show that we are honest, acting in simply truth, and that we continue therein to the end.

Prayer

Now let us fall down in the sight of our good God, accusing our whole life of the malice and rebellion that is therein, beseeching Him to vouchsafe to chastise us with gentleness, and to spare us in such a fashion that we are not cast down into despair that rather are brought home again to Him. And therewithal, since we cease not to offend Him and it is also necessary that He should daily call upon us and awaken us that we may fare the better by His corrections, let us continue to lament and mourn until that time when He has rid us from all the corruptions of our flesh and has brought us to the perfection of righteousness, wherein lies our true rest, which is the heavenly blessedness which we hope and long for. And since we cannot obtain any such matter except by means of our Lord Jesus Christ, may it please Him to reconcile us to God His Father by His death and passion and in the meantime so to mortify our old Adam that His own Image may be restored in us, and His glory shine forth in us. That it may please Him to grant this grace not only to us but also to all people and nations upon earth, etc.

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