

Calvin Speaks



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GOD'S PLAGUES (Part 1)

**Title not in the original*

Sermon 157. 18 March 1556. Deuteronomy 28:25-29.

25. The **LORD will** cause you to **be** smitten down before your enemies; you shall go out one way against them, and you **shall flee** before them seven ways, and you **shall** be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth;

26. And your carcass **shall be** food for all birds of the heavens and for the beasts of the earth, and no **man shall** frighten them away.

27. The **LORD will** smite you with the hoi/s of Egypt and with hemorrhoids and with the scab and with the itch, from which you cannot be **healed**.

28. The **LORD will** smite you with madness and with blindness and with bewilderment of heart;

29. And you **will** be groping about at noon, as the blind man gropes in darkness, and you shall not prosper in your ways; but you shall only be oppressed and robbed **continually**, with none to save you.

If we were threatened by a mortal man in the way that God threatens us in His law, surely we would be moved to fear, even if such a man had no great power over us. From this we see our ungodliness, so much so that even though we try to hide it, yet it betrays itself in that we attribute more power to mortal creatures than we do to the living God. Hereby God intends to test the honor and obedience that we bear Him, in this way that He assures us of His love, and we should rest everything wholly thereon and keep ourselves contented therewith. And likewise on the other side, when He gives us any certain token of His anger, we should quake at it. Let us take good heed therefore of what is here mentioned, namely that we not be so blockish as to scorn God's wrath.

But let us return to what has been said already, which is that His hand must be against us if we do not live according to His law. It is certain that men will naturally give liberty to their lusts, to do whatsoever God has forbidden them, and that they will not forbear to make war against Him. Indeed, they will not admit to it, but their actions show it to be so. And when we on our part have defied Him and assaulted Him, is this not reason that He should arm Himself against

us? True it is, that so long as we live in this present world, the infirmity of our flesh is such that we are not able in all respects to satisfy the law of God. Nevertheless, when men pass their bounds so far that good and evil is all the same to them, and when they do not strive at all against their lusts, they show themselves open enemies of God. And to that end also is Moses speaking.

Even though we do our utmost to resist evil, and do it in the fear of God which restrains us, yet we do not cease to deserve to be chastised by Him. We see, thus, that the faithful are not exempt from many afflictions, and that God acts to reclaim them much more than He does the despisers of His majesty. For since they are His children, so He has the greater care for them, and therefore He chastises them the more earnestly. Howbeit, Moses in this place does not speak of them, but of such as harden themselves in stubbornness, flinging out of course in such a way that they make no conscience about evil-doing. They never think that there is a Judge in heaven until He makes them feel his hand.

And therefore Moses does not say, "God will chastise you as a father does his children," but "God will strike you fiercely; and you shall feel His hand so roughly and strongly that you shall not be able to abide it, and that not for one day, but continually until you are consumed and perish." Seeing then that we hear such threats, let us understand that they are prepared for such as are hardened in evil and are not restrained by any fear which might make them resist when they feel any temptation within themselves; rather they go on, taking the bridle in their teeth and making mockery of God.

And what shall follow from that? Over and besides the things which we have seen before, Moses adds that God will smite such despisers with various plagues. First, He will send them enemies, and give them power to destroy and to consume them, insomuch that they shall persecute them even in their dead carcasses, so that when they are overthrown He will not do them the honor to permit them to be buried, but will leave them as food for the crows and for the beasts of the earth. And moreover, He has various other means of plaguing them in their bodies: by sending

them various diseases, such as cankers and other boils and scabs, whereby they shall be brought to such a pass that they shall no longer have any understanding, but will be utterly out of their minds so that they grope at noonday, as the blind do in the dark. And surely the sorest point of Gods vengeance is when men are so overthrown that they have no more heart to return to Him, nor are able to recover themselves to acknowledge their faults and to perceive that when the hand of God destroys them there is no help unless they flee to Him for mercy; rather, they remain bewildered as men beside themselves. By this, God shows Himself to be their mortal Enemy.

Wars

Now concerning what Moses says here about enemies: We see again how God holds the hearts of men in His hands, so that if we are in peace and suddenly war is made against us, and we did not know it was coming, it is because God is angry at us (as I have shown before). Because we have despised Him, He must also war against us. He has soldiers enough — as soon as He makes any sign (as Is. 5:26 shows) all the earth is moved, even though only a little while before no man thought to have stirred himself up. Let us therefore understand that when wars occur in the world, God shows tokens of His wrath.¹

It is certain, as we have already noted, that even though we serve God faithfully, and stand in His protection, yet we shall not cease to have enemies. For it is His will to exercise us by that means, and such is the present state of the Church, as it has also always been. But this good comes from it, that God will maintain us against our enemies. When they have devised evil against us, yet shall they not bring their purpose to pass. They shall be disappointed. And though they are as fierce as lions, and full of desperate rage, yet will God tame them at the last; and though they continue in their purpose to devour us, yet they shall not have the power to do it. As has been said before (Deut. 28:7), if they come against us one way, they shall flee seven ways.

But now it is said contrariwise that although we are powerful above our enemies, and attack them in good order so that the victory may seem to be already gained on our side (as we see how the wicked are enflamed with pride and presumption), yet when we think ourselves to have attained the goal, God will touch us with such a fear that we *shall* not know *which* way to run fast enough, but every one of us will beat his wits end. Let us understand from this that when God stirs up wars to chastise us, though we are fully equipped and have all the means possible for fighting, yet we must perish if God is against us. For victory is not obtained by the force and valor of men, but by the power of God (Is. 1:24), Who for that reason is called the Lord of hosts. And there is no other help for us but to be at peace with God, that He may choose to guard us under His

wings — according to His use of the same similitude, that He will play the part of a hen towards her chickens (Matt. 23:27). For then we shall be safe, though all the world conspire for our destruction.

And although our enemies be exceedingly mighty and strong, and fully determined in their malice to destroy us utterly, yet is it sufficient that God protects us, and that although we have no succor from men, yet we are sufficiently fortified by His power alone. But if we proceed to offend Him, and He sees that after He has spared us and recovered us to Himself, we depart and become His adversaries and continue in our rebellion, then after He has put up with us long enough, He must perforce bring us to this point of being consumed by the hands of our enemies.

And although others seem as wicked as we are, and it seems that God is prospering them no more than He is us, let that not deceive us. For God will sometimes give victory to the wicked, which are no better than we are, but even worse; yet He will not refuse to destroy us at their hands, though their turn will come as well.² Meanwhile, we must not think that this threat is uttered in vain. Therefore, let us not compare ourselves with others, saying, "Well, aren't they just as bad offenders as we are? And doesn't God have just as good reason to punish them?" Yes, He does; but He knows the proper time and season, and He can use them as seems good to Himself. But let us prepare ourselves to abide His blows if we stop up our ears against His threats and sleep when He would awaken us. For if we give no heed to His threats, we must feel by experience that He Who pronounces them has power to put them into execution, and that He does not speak, as they say, just to frighten little children!

It is certain that God will threaten often, before He finally comes to execute judgment. Let us therefore consider His long patience in tarrying for us (Ps. 86:15; Rem. 2:4). For if we abuse the same, it will result in nothing other than a heaping up and doubling of God's wrath toward us, so much so that it would have been better for us if He had rooted us out the first day than to have borne with us so long. Let scoffers say that respite is worth gold. There is no respite which we would not redeem with a hundred deaths, were it but possible, when we have been so stubborn against our God and so disobedient to His word that we have made into a laughing matter His giving us some token of His anger!

Let us therefore consider that as long as God is sparing us He is giving us leisure to return to Him, and that if our enemies have left us alone, it is of His favor shown to us, that we might act to prevent His wrath. But if we will not hear Him when He *speaks*, nor receive His warnings, then we will need to give ear to these His threats here set forth, and it becomes necessary for Him to send us off to another school. It is of the wonderful goodness of our God that when we have thus provoked Him (as we see we do), yet He forbears us and does all to recover us to Himself, not by forcing us with many strokes, but by attracting us after a loving fashion, being ready to receive us to His mercy, not standing as a Judge to vex us and to condemn us.

But what? When we have shown contempt for all this, it must come to pass in the end (as I have said before) that

1. Calvin's discussion here is invaluable to Christians in peril or under persecution, as so many in America are today. Calvin is a consistent supernaturalist here. If men rise up against us, it is God who provokes them to it. Practically *speaking*, no matter how well prepared we may be, in the day of battle it is God *who gives courage* or fear to the *heart*, and thus the battle is *always* ultimately in His hands. This is not to say, and Calvin would agree, that we should not prepare for legal battles to defend our Christian schools; but it is to say that if we *stand*, it will be because God's Spirit gives courage to our *hearts*, and causes the *hearts* of our enemies to quail. Our greatest weapon is humility before Him, and prayer.

2. This is the point of the prophecy of *Habakkuk*.

our Lord will stir up against us other masters, so that the wicked will rise up against us and seek to make a slaughter of us by butchering and murdering us, being in very deed the executors of God's vengeance, of which we were warned long beforehand, though we chose to laugh at it, continuing in our sins and wickedness. That is why I said that as long as God speaks to us, and we condemn ourselves and acknowledge our sins and seek atonement with our God that we may live in peace in this world, then even if it is God's will that we should have enemies and be kept occupied with wars, yet notwithstanding He holds us still in His keeping, and we are maintained and defended by His power and goodness.

The Privilege of Burial

Now let us turn to the next verse (v. 26), where Moses says that their dead carcasses shall be food for all birds of the heavens and for the beasts of the earth, and no man shall frighten them away. This seems an empty threat, for what difference does it make whether or not a man is buried when he is dead? What is he the better or worse for it? It seems then, at first glance, that this threat should not be highly regarded. But God intended to show that He will make His wrath felt even in the bodies of those that are dead. And indeed, burial is a privilege that God has given to mankind as a warrant of the resurrection.³

Let us not think that burying the dead proceeds from a foolish superstition, or that men devised it themselves. It is true that the heathen have used it, and it will be a witness against them at the last day when they shall be convicted by their use of that ceremony, which should have taught them to look for the last resurrection; their failure to consider it so is inexcusable. For our burial ought to be for us an impressive mirror or portrait, to show us that we are not created to decline into corruption, as though there were not another life and we should not be restored into a new state. And it serves always for a larger declaration, which is that mankind perishes but for a time, and that their bodies shall be renewed.

Now, since burial is a memorial of the resurrection, as I said before, therefore it is given to men as a privilege to be buried. In this respect there is an honest virtue in it, so that we who remain are taught as it were by eyesight to look continually for a second life. For the dead man also bears a certain mark in his body, that he is as it were laid up in safekeeping until the day comes that God will raise the dead again.

Now on the other hand, when it is said that men shall not be buried, but that they shall be eaten by beasts and fowls, it is as much as if God meant to deprive them of the common benefit that He had granted to all mankind, and as if He had showed openly that both in life and in death they were

accursed of Him. And that is why it is said, "You shall be buried with the burial of an ass" (Jer. 22:19). This was spoken by the prophet to a king, even the king of Judah. And because he would not be corrected in his sin, and because God had given him the honor to bear in his lifetime the figure of Jesus Christ, and notwithstanding he had abused the same privilege and given himself over to all kinds of ungodliness, then "you shall be buried with the burial of an ass" says the prophet.⁴

Hereby we are warned to have very great regard of all the corrections that God sends us, even of the very least, that we may always be stirred up to fear. For what is the reason why we pass over so many chastisements of God without profiting from them? It is because we shut our eyes willfully, and unless we are compelled by sheer force and necessity, we are content to think that it is not God Who chastises us, and as we shall see hereafter, we fall to such stupidity that we attribute everything to chance. Let us therefore be admonished to mark all the corrections which God sends us, both upon ourselves and upon our neighbors, that we may receive a warning by them.

It seems to be only a small matter not to be buried, indeed, but God wants to have it noted and to be understood that it is His hand that is in it, and that He shows Himself a judge against such as have offended Him. Seeing that God will have His judgments known in such small matters, let us be advised to have more wit and discretion. And as often as God gives us, as we say, a mere flick of the finger, let us be moved to think on Him and not tarry until He draws His sword or bends His bow to hit us with a mortal wound, but let us by all manner of means humble ourselves under His hand.

Moreover, we have here a testimony of the life everlasting. It is true that this point was not so plainly declared in the law as it is in the gospel: neither the doctrine that we should rise again to the heavenly glory, nor that we should live with God after our death. But yet for all that, the ancient fathers did not live the life of beasts, nor did God leave them in such ignorance that their faith was closed up to this present world and to this transitory life. Here we have record that when we have finished the course of this life there is yet a greater judgment prepared for all men. And if God forbears with us here, so that we escape all the curses mentioned in the law even to the end, yet we must come to a greater reckoning. For it would be needless for God to speak of depriving men of their burial if, as I said even now, He had no further meaning in it.

Therefore, let us so use this doctrine that we may be provoked to have an eye to the life that is yet hidden from us, and which we look for by faith. And let us not think it shall greatly avail us, when God does not punish us in this world. For it is far better for us to linger here below and be continually in misery, than to enjoy our ease and delights if in the meanwhile God is but tarrying with us, in order eventually to thunder upon us when He has taken us out of this world. Thus you see what this text of Moses serves for us, where he says that the birds and the beasts shall eat our carcasses, and that no man shall drive them away.

Now, if God gives such tokens of His wrath to our bodies, which have no motive in themselves, what shall become of

3. The reference in this verse is to Genesis 15:11, "And the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away." God is saying that the curse of the covenant will be visited upon them, and that father Abraham will not be there in that day to protect them (John 8:33). The curse of the covenant in Scripture is to be ripped in half and devoured by the birds and beasts. Notice that Judas was torn in half (Acts 1:18) and that Ahab and Jezebel were devoured by beasts (1 K. 21:23f). The ceremony of ripping one's garment in half and saying, "May the Lord do so to me and more also" was a ceremony of taking the covenant curse upon oneself (2 K. 6:30f). Jesus' taking of the curse was signified by the ripping of the Temple veil in half from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51) which veil was His flesh (Heb. 10:20). Calvin's remarks go in another direction, but bring out a second and no less profound implication of the text.

4. The ass was an unclean animal, and thus buried outside the gates of the city. This is why the ass was never to be yoked with the clean ox.

our souls, in which is the very seat of evil, and the kingdom of Satan? For our hands, our feet, our eyes, and our ears do not offend of their own proper motion, but by the direction and provocation of our wicked thoughts and affections. And where do all those things like, or whence do they proceed, but from our souls? Seeing then that the bodies, which were but instruments, do feel the wrath of God and do answer to the same, as we see, let us not suppose that the souls shall escape. Let us therefore always look higher than to this transitory life in order to waken ourselves up, and let us walk in such obedience that after we have fought against sin and against Satan, and have been exercised in patience and in various afflictions in this world, having done our endeavor to serve God with all diligence, our souls may be taken up to rest, and that our Lord in like manner may show the same favor to our dead bodies.

Notwithstanding, this favor and blessing of having their bodies buried does not always happen to the faithful, and it falls out that many of the wicked are very honorably buried, even though it is nothing to them, and their state is not bettered in the least thereby. We see what is said in Psalm 79:3 concerning those that have faithfully served God, namely that their bodies were laid out as a prey to the fowls and the beasts; and yet they were the children of God. And although this is a testimony of God's wrath upon the wicked, yet it may oftentimes come to pass that our Lord will use the same manner of chastisements upon His own people, and yet it shall not harm them.

It is true that we must always humble ourselves when such a thing happens, and we must understand that such things are as it were marks of Adam's sin and of the corruption that is in us, and also of the offenses which we have committed. And yet for all that our Lord all the while turns this evil to good, when He permits the faithful to be deprived of burial. We see what is said of the rich man and of Lazarus (Luke 16:22). It is said that the rich man died and was buried. Behold how the world's pomp is bestowed on the reprobate. It seems that his soul should have been received into paradise when his body was sumptuously carried and treated with great ceremonies. And what of Lazarus? He died, too. But what mention is there of his burial? None at all. Whereby our Lord Jesus intends us to understand (for it is He who speaks) that we must not rely

altogether upon visible things. But yet this threat, however the case stands, is not in vain. What are we to understand, then? Let us gather generally (as we have said) that burial serves to lead us to the hope of the heavenly life, and of the resurrection which we must hope for. So much concerning that point.

When we bury the dead, let it serve always to provoke and to stir us to understand that we are not created to live in this world only, but that there is another better life prepared for us. And again, when we see that our Lord deprives any of his burial, let us understand that He therein shows His wrath. Nevertheless, it is better sometimes for a man to be devoured of beasts and birds, and to be chastised by God after that sort in his body for the sparing of his soul, and to have a temporal condemnation than to perish forevermore. It is better sometimes for a wicked man to be hanged than to die in his bed. For how many do we see who gnash their teeth against God, when He has patiently tarried for them and given them so many plain and apparent tokens of His wrath for their conversation, and yet nevertheless they make a mock at Him and still continue obstinate in their rebellion!

When a wretched evildoer is condemned by men, he is ashamed of it and cast down in himself, and acknowledges and bewails his sins. This condemnation, then, which he bears in his body, even though it is an execution of that which is here spoken of by Moses, does serve to his salvation; and therefore let us keep these things in mind. Moreover, when the faithful, even the very martyrs, are burned and their bodies are consumed to ashes, so that they do have what should be common to all mankind, let us understand that God converts the same to their welfare, and their glory is thereby doubled. How do we know this. for it is certain that this is a threat of God, as are also all diseases? But when our Lord says so, He means that these are the ordinary means which He uses to correct our sins. Nevertheless, He does chastise those who have not offended Him, and whom He does not intend to pursue with rigor, and that in such manner and with His own hand. This is in sum that which we have to bear in mind concerning this text.

(to be concluded)

A NOTICE TO THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Mr. Vi Lockman, comic book author and tax protestor, has been sentenced to Federal Prison on charges arising from his counterfeiting of U.S. Federal Reserve Notes. Mr. Lockman has also been declared excommunicate from the Christian faith on the grounds of contumacy against the court of Christ's church. Mr. Lockman has been known in some parts of the Christian community as an author of religious and political tracts in comic book format.

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