

Calvin Speaks



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GOD'S PLAGUES* (Part 2)

● *77tle not in the original*

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

Summary of the First Part

Calvin discusses w.25 & 26, showing that God brings war upon His people to drive them back to Him, and discussing the privilege of burial as a token of the resurrection of the body. He begins the sermon by pointing out that if a mere man were to threaten us in the way God does here, we should be petrified with fear; yet we do not esteem God enough to fear His omnipotent threats.

Disease

Now let us come to what Moses says next, that God will strike the despisers of His law with many diseases (v.27). He has spoken earlier of fevers and of the whorle disease⁵ and of the yellow jaundice, as well as of others. Now he speaks of the itch and canker and of other worms and scabs. Mention also is made of hemorrhoids, as some understand it. All these things are the weapons of God, to punish the offenders of His law. To be short, they are His men of war, to fight against us, when He sees that we take courage against Him. And indeed, when we favor our own lusts to violate His righteousness, and to break the order which He has established among us, and when He sees our lusts to be so inordinate as to be thieves and robbers, then He arms His people and substitutes, which are the diseases that are here spoken of, and other sorts as well.

Let us therefore learn that whatever diseases we suffer in our bodies, they are all messages from God to make us feel His wrath, because we have offended Him. The extraordinary diseases are especially so, however, as when God sends upon us such sicknesses as are not common among men, and of which the cures are unknown or very difficult to discover. By these God

means to make us feel His anger toward us double, and to show us that we have provoked Him too much.

But we think little of this. Concerning the ordinary diseases, their very commonness makes us think that they do not proceed from God. We say, "There is a man who has a fever; there is another who has a bad problem with catarrh or a head cold, or some other such disease." We tend to be hardened in these things. How? By custom. And must God, therefore, let go the possession of His right? If He continues to show Himself a Judge towards us, in chastising us, is that any reason why we should forget Him and have no regard of His hand? All the same, such is our bull-headedness. I would to God that the examples of such were not so notorious as they are! But let every man look to himself and see if the ordinariness of sicknesses does not cause us to turn our backs upon God, and to have less regard of His judgments and of our own sins, so that none of us finds any fault with himself. So much concerning the common and usual sicknesses.

And as for the extraordinary diseases, we see how men are hardened by them as well. I pray you, have we not seen that God within these fifty years has brought up new diseases against harlotry?⁶ Whence comes syphilis and all these other filthy diseases, which cannot be counted at this time? Where do these come from except from God, Who utters such vengeance as formerly was never seen? The world wondered at it, and for a time men were greatly afraid of it; but yet in all this they have had no consideration for the hand of God. And at this day it has become so ordinary a matter that the despisers of God (I mean the lecherous sort and the whoremongers, who give themselves over to all sorts of lewdness) do but wring their groins at it. Though God

5. I have not been able to find a modern English equivalent for this — ed.

6. Syphilis appeared in Europe around 1495, and spread all over. The sudden appearance and spread of genital herpes and AIDS in our own time is a parallel.

smites them with such a leprosy (for it is a kind of leprosy indeed), so that they are eaten up with fretting and with other filthiness, yet they do not cease following their practices and only mock at the illness.

Truly it is a strange thing that such a punishment of God should be scoffed at! How they jest about their bawdiness, at the same time they are being punished by God! It is amazing: They jest and scoff at it, as it were in spite of God, and while He calls them to humble themselves in sackcloth and ashes, they razz at Him with their tongues and are so far from being ashamed of their deeds that even as it were in spite, they make a sport of their own filthiness and miseries. We see, then, how perverse men can be, seeing that they can make no better profit in God's school. I don't mean in the school of His teaching, where He speaks to them, but in the school of His smiting them with heavy strokes, and raising up wars and troubles, which ought to make men beside themselves with fear. All the same, Moses did not write this in vain.

Let us, therefore, be the better advised, and when God sends us any strange diseases, let us understand that our sins are multiplied, and that God must on that account be more moved than He was before. For this reason, let it bring us to repentance, and let us not double our iniquities for in the end we shall find out from experience what we have seen even now, namely that such evil will stick with us, even in our marrow and bones, until we are utterly consumed. Besides this, God has other means to punish us, and when He perceives that the usual methods do not prevail, He has other rods laid up in His storehouses, as it is said in Canticles.'

Indeed, we shall see what it means to walk at all adventures against Him; namely that in the end He will overtake those perverse and crooked persons, who pretend to be innocent fools, and do nothing but scoff and shake their heads when He has punished them one way or another. Let us not, therefore, tarry until God must use such extreme measures toward us, but being warned beforehand by what is here mentioned, let us look to it and consider that however many diseases He sends us, they are so many witnesses He sends to prove that we have sinned against Him, that we might think on it and turn to Him again with all lowliness.

Forsaken of God

I said earlier that the very worst of all is what Moses adds here at the end, that God will smite us with all astonishment, so that we shall be groping blindly at full mid-day as do the blind in their darkness, and that our hearts will be bewildered. Hitherto we have seen that God shows a singular favor towards men, in afflicting them in their bodies while their minds remain at quiet, that they may be patient. Thus they feel their sins and

bewail them, and cease not to call upon Him Who chastises them. And in truth it is sometimes seen that the grace of God is much more manifested towards such people than if they had no such great afflictions. For example, if God spares a man, and he comes to serve God, we see that God blesses him. When we see a sound and holy life in one, we say, "Here is a man who serves God, and God also shows Himself gracious towards him." Again we see another that is visited with great diseases, so that every man has pity and compassion on him; he pines continually and has vehement pains; he is vexed with various maladies, and the very remedies that are given him prove so grievous that nothing can be done; yet notwithstanding this man does not cease to hold himself in quiet, confessing his sins and craving pardon from God. In such a man we see such patience as moves us to glorify God, and the man himself continues in prayers and supplications. When a man is thus mortified, and God holds his heart in awe so that he continues in patience under His hand, then we perceive a great grace of God in the midst of these chastisements. But when we are without reason in our sickness, and act madly and in bedlam, and stand chewing on the bridle without knowing which way to turn, all the while never making any attempt to flee to God for relief, then we are in the full measure of all misery.

Therefore it is not without reason that Moses, having spoken of the sicknesses and griefs that God sends upon men's bodies, and likewise of extraordinary chastisements which constrain men in spite of their pride to feel their sins, adds here that God will strike with blindness, and He will so strike that our minds will be amazed we shall grope at noonday as in the dark, we shall have no more sense of feeling in our hearts, and we shall be altogether blockish. Here we are warned again that the chastisements which happen to us in our minds should be more dreadful to us than anything we can endure in our bodies. It is true that our nature draws us clean contrary, for we are so tender and nice to our bodies that as soon as we feel any grief, by and by we cry out and lose our patience, and therein we see a part of our brutishness. For if we had even a drop of firm understanding, we would a hundred times be more afraid of the chastisements that God threatens to our souls than of all the evil we can endure in our bodies. In what case is a man, when he is forsaken by God so that he seeks Him no longer, but endeavors by any means to hide himself from His presence? Surely when we come to that point, if we could pluck God out of His seat, we would gladly do it. He that seeks such hiding holes to evade coming to God, is doing whatever he can to rob Him of His majesty, for he is loathe to come before such a Judge.

And truly, although a man suffers no further harm than this blockishness, so that he feels not his own misery,

is it not a token that God has already given him over to a reprobate mind? Yes, for there is not a more evident sign of reprobation than to be without remorse or scruple of conscience. Moreover, when a man is frightened and out of his right wits, in such a manner that he does not know which way to turn, and has no more taste or feeling of God, nor any skill to lament for his sins or to ask forgiveness of them and to repent of them, but gnashes his teeth and bites the bridle like a mule; is such not a dreadful thing? When we behold such mirrors, our hairs stand upright on our heads, and even nature forces us to it. And yet for all that, if we do not think upon it, that we may stand in awe and walk in fear and humility, is it not a tempting of God?

Let us therefore learn not to harden ourselves in such away that God is forced to fall to this rigor, where-with He here threatens us, namely that He will make us grope as the blind in the dark, and that we shall have neither understanding nor discretion, that will make us fall in such a fearful state that we shall not know whether we are living creatures or not, nor perceive whether or not there is a God that will receive us to mercy and whether or not we will prevail in calling upon His name. Let us not tarry till such evil comes upon us. For it is a deep pit from which very few can get out. Indeed, God will sometimes bring His people to that point, so that they shall not know where they are, and they shall be so greatly afraid and so troubled with it all that they shall become dull and blockish; this is well seen. But He lifts them up again after He has brought them low. Since, however, this example is very rare, let us not tempt our God, but when He afflicts us in our bodies let us understand that He spares us greatly and that He mitigates the rigor of His wrath, and let us be no longer as impatient as we have been prone to be. Although the grief be hard and bitter to us, yet let us confess, "And yet God has not touched me in my soul." Let this come always to our remembrance, to the end that we, acknowledging the goodness of our God in that He forbears us, may return to Him, and not doubt but that He is ready to take pity upon us when we seek him unfeignedly. Let that serve for one point which we have to remember in this lesson, where mention is made of the said blockishness.

Now Moses says expressly that the transgressors of God's law shall grope at noonday. It is as if he should say: Notwithstanding that God gives them many occasions to rejoice, yet they shall be frightened in such a way that they shall not take hold of any grace but be as blind wretches. Seeing it is so, let us mark further that although God mitigates our griefs and comforts us, yet that serves no profit if He does not give us the wisdom to understand that we are not able to enjoy the good that God offers to us when we are destitute of His Holy Spirit. And this is one execution of the threat here uttered. It is true that we should always return to this point, that

our Lord does not desire the utter confusion of sinners, but that since such miseries do happen oftentimes, we should not tarry till they light upon our heads, but rather seek the remedy, to the end that God not have occasion to withdraw Himself from us.

But whatever the case may be, let us first of all mark that God directs this teaching to such as have been trained in His word, as we have already said. It is certain that He is Judge of the world, yet we deserve to be well chastised after a more severe fashion when we have been taught by His mouth and have rejected His will and are so far corrupted that we make but a jest of His word; and that whereas He sought to retain us as His people, we have despised Him. It is very proper therefore that we should be grievously punished; and therefore let us think that since God does us the favor of letting us have the pure doctrine of the Holy Scripture, the same serves to remove from us all excuses and also to quicken us up to walk so much the more in fear.

But with all this let us mark further that God not only uses threats towards us, but also daily exhorts and allures us to Himself, to reconcile us to Him, showing that on His part, He is ready to come to reconciliation, if we condemn our sins and return to His mercy. What else is the Gospel that we hear every day, except a message of reconciliation, as St. Paul calls it in 2 Corinthians 5:18? Seeing then that God sends us a herald to declare peace unto us, and to show that He is ready to do away all our offences, let us take heed that we use this time of our salvation to receive the grace that is offered to us in due season, as the prophet Isaiah tells us and as St Paul says, using the same testimony (Is. 49:8; 2 Cor. 6:2). Again, when we have been overly hard, and God has patiently waited for us, and we still continue in our sins, let us not think that He in the end has either given over or forgotten His office. We must yield an account of such unthankfulness. When we forsake the salvation to which He has called us, and despise Him out of measure, such wilful stubbornness must of necessity come to reckoning.

Then let us stand in fear, and as often as we hear words of the grace of God which is offered to us in our Lord Jesus Christ, let our hearts be inclined to receive it; and let us give way to God to come in. And when we go to Him, let it be done with bewailing of our sins, and with admission of our guilt, not only in word of mouth but also with such grief of heart as may prove that the evil displeases us. And when we thus come to dislike ourselves, let us not abide until our Lord puts into execution the threats that He sets forth here, but let us turn them to our use. And when we hear the promises of the Gospel, let us remember the threats also, that we may be so much the more provoked, and every man make haste to receive the good which is offered to us to enjoy and to possess, unless the fault be in ourselves.

Prayer

Now let us cast ourselves down before the majesty of our good God, with acknowledgment of our sins, beseeching Him to make us to feel them yet better until we are utterly beaten down in ourselves and seek for the remedy to which He calls us, namely that being

guided by His Holy Spirit we may increase and profit more and more in all holiness and righteousness, and that we may endeavor so to glorify Him in all our whole life, that in the end we may attain to that same everlasting glory unto which He calls us. And so let us all say, Almighty God, heavenly Father, etc.

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