

Calvin Speaks



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GODS ANGER* (Part 1)

*Title not in the original

Sermon 158. 23 March 1556. Deuteronomy 28:29b-35.

29b. You shall be only oppressed and robbed **continually**, with none to save you.

30. You **shall** betroth a wife, but another man **shall** violate her; you shall **build** a house, but you shall not dwell in it; you **shall plant** a vineyard, but you shall not begin to use its fruit;

31: **Your** ox shall be slaughtered before your eyes, but you shall not eat of it; your donkey shall be **torn** away from you, and shall not be restored **to you**; your sheep shall be given to your enemies, and you shall have no one to rescue them.

32. Your sons and your daughters shall be **given** to another people, while your eyes **shall** look on and yearn for them continually and there shall be nothing you can do [lit.: nothing in the power of your hand].

33. A people whom you do not know **shall** eat up the produce of your ground and **all your** labors, and you shall never be anything but oppressed and crushed continually

34. And you **shall** be driven mad by the **sight** of the things your eyes shall behold.

35. The LORD **shall** smite you on the knees and legs with sore boils, from which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your **foot** to the crown **of** your head.

We ought to remember Moses' intention, of which we have spoken before; **that is, the reason why he** "continues to utter so many **curses**. **It is because we**" are so slow to be moved. When our Lord threatens us, we make a **game** of it; and **although** we confess that we should meditate upon it, yet it escapes our minds. Moreover, we **suppose** that we shall **always** find places to hide, so that if God follows after us one way, we shall be able to avoid His blows by freeing another. Thus do men deceive themselves, and for this reason they become hardhearted.

Now Moses (or rather, the Spirit of God, speaking by his mouth), perceiving that men are thus careless, and that they do not cringe as they did when God's judgments were first set before them, continues further and adds threats upon threats. Again, perceiving also that men seek hiding places, and thereby deceive themselves, thinking that they can save themselves by fringing over the fenne (as they say),¹ he shows that God has infinite means to punish us with: both above and beneath, both before and behind, both on the right hand and on the left, so that we are so hemmed in on all sides that it is not possible for us to escape.

Delivered unto Oppression

Now after the threats which we have seen already, he adds that those who so resist God shall be afflicted and tormented, so that men shall spoil them and they shall be laid open to all sorts of violence forever, and no man shall deliver them (v.29). We see here that God uses the wicked for His own purposes, and that although their own intent is not His, yet He applies them to a good use when He inclines to punish us. In that there exist thieves and robbers, although they are given over to Satan, yet they do not fail to serve God's purpose. Indeed, for we see in this text that our Lord does not leave them at random, to rob and to spoil whether He wishes it or not, but He threatens His people, saying "They who disobey Me shall be vexed and robbed." And where does it come from, except from Him.

Now although God permits oppressions, robberies, and violence to be done, He is very properly also able to condemn them according to His righteousness, for He must hate injustice. Yet notwithstanding, by His wonderful wisdom, which to us is incomprehensible,

¹ If the word "fenne" here is "fen" or marsh, this might mean "escaping to the other side of the marsh."

He turns such things to His own service. Thus, when we have offended Him, He must needs punish us by the hand of the most wicked. This is the more to our reproach; for if He Himself should have punished us, and we saw before our eyes that He revenges His honor because of our iniquities, we would well say, seeking that we have offended Him, that it is with good reason that we should come to account for it. But when He stirs up evil people, who despise His majesty, such as are given to all wickedness, and makes them our judges, it is to make us so much the more ashamed.

Let us therefore consider that wherever the evil comes from, we always ultimately have to deal with God, and we must keep in mind that there is nothing done in this world except by His direction. And on that basis let us enter into the examination of our faults. For it is not enough to know that God rules all things; every one of us must indict himself, and consider that all afflictions and adversities are tokens of God's wrath. Now, when we speak of His wrath, 'we must in like manner remember His justice, and conclude from it that we very well deserve to be punished. All the same, He threatens us before He strikes, so that we should not stand idly by until His threats come to pass, but rather prevent them beforehand, as St. Paul also admonishes us (1 Cor. 11 :32). As long as God spares us, let us be advised so to walk in His fear that we do not provoke Him to stir up thieves to torment and vex us, but that rather (if men attempt such injuries against us) we may stand in His protection, even as He promises to uphold all those who walk in His obedience.

So then, let us see that we do so, and let us remember what is spoken by the prophet Isaiah, which is that they who have robbed must be served with the same sauce (Is. 33.1). And that is the reason why violence and extortions do so continue in the world. Men marvel that evils grow worse and worse, but they should note the cause thereof. For those who bear chief sway and preeminence do not restrain themselves, and seek nothing except to enrich themselves by swallowing up other men's substance. And if they have robbed, then God must send an overturning, so that other robbers will come and bereave these of their booty, and afterward a third group must step in to spoil them again. So, there is never any end. And why? the world never ceases to provoke the wrath of God. And since we are headstrong it is reasonable that our Lord should continue to show Himself our Judge. " , "

But, as I said even now, let us be well content to walk in such a manner that innocent blood not cry out for vengeance against us. Let us not do injury or outrage to any person, that our Lord may bless us for

so doing, and not pay us with like measure, just as we see how our Lord Jesus Christ says that it shall come so to pass (Matt. 7:2). Let every one of us therefore rein himself in, in such a way that this curse not come upon us—that is, being robbed as punishment for using robbery and extortion against innocents. But since men imagine that their adversity will be short, and that they will soon be rid of it, Moses adds that it shall be continual, and that when the hand of God is against us, no man shall be able to save us.

It is sure that just as God is slow to anger, so He is soon pacified, as far as the faithful are concerned. As for the wicked, he holds on with them, and they must feel their burden every day heavier than before. And why? Because just as they harden their hearts against God, so they must likewise feel Him the harder against them. And although this is not always the way it is, yet do we see it often come to pass. God will sometimes withdraw His hand after He has menaced the wicked, or else when He has given them some stripes with His rod He will let them go again. And that is, as it were, a respite, that they may have leisure to turn to repentance. Notwithstanding, when He sees them to be unreformable, His dealings must of necessity be turned to their sorer condemnation.

If God, then, spares the despisers of His law, and those that are obstinate in malice, it does not therefore follow that they shall be saved. Rather, it is to the end that the plague shall come double upon their heads, for their abusing of His patience after such a fashion. For when He has waited for them, and they proceed still from evil to evil, He must put forth His hand at last.

No End and No Deliverer ,

However the case stands, it is not in vain that Moses tells us here that when God is our enemy, our life shall not be miserable only for a day, or yet for a little while. We must not think to limit ourselves to any term in this matter, but we must look for one evil to draw another, until He has laid us quite under His feet, unless we turn to Him to obtain mercy. So then, let us weigh well this word which Moses adds, where he says that if God begins to smite us for our despising of His justice, it shall not continue for a little while but we must be miserable forever. And why? Because inasmuch as the majesty of God is everlasting, He must take endless vengeance of those who despise His justice. Therefore, as soon as we see the blows come near us, let us be afraid, and let every one of us make haste to return to Him, whom we have offended — that is, our God — to obtain forgiveness of our trespasses. That is the only remedy, without which there will be neither end nor limit to our afflictions, except we take care to reconcile ourselves to our God.

Now in that he alleges that none shall save them, it is to cut off all the vain hopes which men do forge for themselves in their own brains, when He punishes them. They look here and there, and if they find any comfort in this world, it seems to them that they can hold God off. Of course, they will not say so, for it would be a blasphemy which all of us would hold accursed. But yet we are so sinful that we hope to turn away the hand of God when we find any help here, inasmuch that if men show us any favor, and we are supported in anything, we arm ourselves therewith against God.

But Moses tells us here that it is in vain for men to seek various succors after that fashion, when God wars upon them. And why? Because all creatures are in His hands, and without Him they can do nothing. Moreover, that which is (apparently) for our benefit shall become our curse, and all things shall redound to our confusion. Let us not, therefore, look to be saved by any means that come to hand, when our Lord opposes us, but let us return to Him, seeing that there is no other remedy but that, and let us rid ourselves of all such things as may hinder us to come to repentance.

Let us then be quickened up by these two sayings of Moses, that we sleep no more in our vain fantasies, as we have been accustomed too often to do. But what shall we say? There are very few who think about that. For every man torments himself, if his griefs continue and he finds no help in men.² In all our afflictions, we can complain well enough, but we do not consider that God withholds the help of men from us when He intends to punish us in such a way that we shall, after a fashion, be utterly overwhelmed. And again, if our sorrow continues, it is because we have persisted too much in our stubbornness. We don't think a whit about all this. But all the same, these things are not written in vain. And therefore let us learn to profit better from them than we have done in times past.

Seven-Fold Chastisements³

Finally, Moses sets forth by these threats, *how* we shall be vexed and robbed, if we offend against the law of God. He says, "You will marry a wife, and not lie with her. You will build a house, and not dwell in it. You will plant a vineyard, and not gather its fruits. Indeed, they will take your cattle and your sheep and kill them, while you stand by starving. And not only will your cattle be made a prey and a booty, but your children also will be delivered into the hands of your enemies, and" you wilt yearn for them and your eyes

will be dazzled due to grief and sorrow, and meanwhile your hand will be without strength or power to recover them."

It would have been enough to have said, in a few words, "You will suffer robberies, extortions, and wrongs." But because men are slow, it is good for them to be so much the better touched, and to behold the thing as it were before their eyes. That is the reason why Moses speaks here of houses and vineyards, of wives and children, and of cattle. It is as if he should say, "Some will bewail the robbery of their houses which they had built; some their being separated from their vineyards, and other possessions; some the spoiling of their goods and the driving away of their cattle. And others will bewail the wrong that is done to them in their children, and in their wives." But we are to consider that all these things are the scourges of God, with which He punishes us for our sins.

It is certain (as I have said already) that God sometimes, in order to exercise the faithful in patience, sends them the very chastisements here mentioned, and yet He is not punishing them for their offenses. For Job was not punished for his sins; not that God did not have just cause to do so, but in that He had no respect to it.⁴ However the case stands, it is something we see every day. Indeed, we may find many examples of men that are tormented and vexed by the wicked, so that they are driven from pillar to post and robbed of their goods. Such examples do happen every day, but this does not prove this doctrine invalid, or that it is not true as an ordinary rule that God punishes men's sins by such means.

Now when we have walked in the fear of God, and endeavored to serve Him, and yet notwithstanding our substance is taken away and robbers possess it, let us consider that if this is not done for our sins, our Lord is giving us a great preeminence. For first of all, if we have not offended Him, to whom does the credit belong? We were preserved 'by His Holy Spirit. And moreover [secondly], notwithstanding any good affection and zeal that we have had to live uprightly and uncorruptly, yet we do not cease to be guilty before God. But what of that? He spares us, and yet He intends to try our patience, to humble us. When it is His will that we shall bear these miseries, which are punishments for them that despise His law, and that we must feel them, well then we must bow to them. And thereby He tests us, how pliable we are under His hand to yield to His governing, according to His good pleasure.

Moreover, this always takes place, as we have said before, that our Lord punishes the offences and trans-

2. That is, looking for the empty help of men is a form of self-torture.

3. Calvin does not call attention to the seven-fold character of the judgments: wife, house, vineyard, ox, donkey, sheep, children.

" 4. That is, Job's punishment did not have reference to his sins, though he was, as are all men, a sinner.

gressions of His law by the things that are specified here. So then, when a man builds, let him take heed that he does not build with extortion, pillaging, cheating, and robbery, unless he intends to have his house taken from him, as it is said by the prophet Habakkuk (2:12). For the prophet shows us the walls singing and answering one another.⁵ For since men's houses and palaces are often built with blood, robbery, extortion, and wicked practices, so that the very walls themselves cry out that they were built with pillaging and cheating, it must wake up God's wrath and vengeance against such builders. Do we desire, then, to live in peace? Let us look that we build without doing wrong to anybody, whoever he is.

And moreover, let every one of us in his dwellings, dedicate himself in such a way to God, that He may dwell with us. For they that are driven out of their dwellings have commonly driven God out before. That is to say, they have followed some evil practice, so that God has not reigned there. Is it then any wonder, if they are driven out in the end? No. And why? Shall God be thrust from His right, and we in the meantime possess every man his dwelling in peace? Is that reasonable? Therefore, when we see such changes happening as are seen in this world, let us understand that God drives them out who earlier would give Him no lodging. And let such examples

5. "Surely the stone will cry out from the wall, and the rafter will answer it from the framework" (Habakkuk 2:11).

admonish us to stand in fear of the threats here specified. And let us not tarry till our Lord banishes us from the place where we are harbored, but let us rather endeavor to serve Him so that He may continue always with us to maintain us.

And if it comes to pass that we are driven out, let us understand that it is for our sins; for it is better late than never. Moreover, if we are driven out for any other reason, as at this day we see many poor faithful people, who are like birds on a bough, as though the earth could not bear them, as St. Paul says of his time (1Cor.4:13); and as it is seen at this present time that the children of God are as vagabonds, having not a hole to hide themselves in – when we behold these things, let us understand that since our Lord leads us this way, He does us a great favor; that this is not because of our sins, but for His name's sake and for our better establishment in the hope of the heavenly inheritance, seeing that there is nothing sure nor stable in this present world, but that we must always aspire to the eternal life, and to the rest that is prepared for us on high. Let us then acknowledge the good that He does to us in this matter. But in any case, let us take good heed that we do not provoke His wrath against us in such a way as I have spoken of before.

(to be concluded)

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