

Calvin Speaks



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GODS ANGER* (Part 2)

*Title not in the original

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

Summary of the First Half

Calvin begins by reminding us of Moses' intention, which is to move us with fear, because we are so slow to pay attention to God. He goes further to remind us that no matter where evil seems to come **from**, ultimately it comes from God, and it is with Him that we have to do. **Moreover**, when God is angry with us there **'no'** be no end to His wrath, and no **deliverer** from it, **unless** we make peace with Him.

Concerning Marriage

Now, when it is said, "You shall betroth a wife, but another man shall violate her" (v. 30a), let every man take heed to walk in such chastity that he draw not upon himself this curse of God, so that he is deprived of the wife he desires, and the wife in like case of her husband. **We** see how men are given over to all unchastity, and God has to give them their reward accordingly. David himself was not spared in this case. **We** hear how it was said to him, "You have done this in secret, but I shall do it to you publicly" (1 Sam. 12:12). He was forced to suffer reproach before all the world, in having his wives ravished openly. Since it is so, then, let us be careful to walk in such chastity that when men take wives, they may so live together that they may feel the blessing of God, and that their marriages not be broken, through the committing of any offense.

For, as I have said, it is no wonder that there is so much trouble in the world at this time, because men are more and more kindling the wrath and vengeance of God. Similarly, concerning adultery: For what is the reason that men are so riotous, and have come, as we ^{ic}ould say, to their full pride? It is because wedlock is so little regarded, and there is no fear of God. There is neither faith nor truth, and therefore must men plunge themselves into all misfortune, so that in the end there will be nothing but disorder. So much the more,

therefore, ought we to take warning to walk in all cleanness of life, that every one may keep him to his own wife, and the Lord bless his marriage and maintain him in quiteness.

Moreover, seeing that God is matched with us in the Person of His only Son, and would have us to keep fast the faith of wedlock towards Him, according to the simplicity of His gospel, let us cleave thoroughly to that which He has commanded us; and to be short, let us be hallowed unto Him, and follow His holy calling. For if we do so, our Lord will grant unto husbands the grace to live quietly with their wives and households, and unto the wives to learn to live in good agreement with their husbands. For we must mark that if a man and wife do not join in one mind, there must be discord in the whole house, and one shall bite and snatch at another like dogs and cats, and the one shall wish the other a hundred feet under ground, so that they shall live in continual misery and disquietness. And why? Because neither the one nor the other has any regard to God, to yield himself to His direction. Therefore, let us learn to stop provoking the vengeance of God in this case.

Concerning Lands and Possessions

Concerning lands and possessions, he says that the transgressors of the law of God shall plant vines, but they shall never gather the fruit of them (v. 30b). We have seen that those who have thus offended God are of the strongest and boldest sort, believing that no harm can come near them. And that is why we see that those who acquire the most, and engage in the greatest enterprises, are those who willfully give themselves to pillaging and robbing by hook and by crook, having no concern what robbing and extortion they commit, and offending both God and man without end or measure. Such persons as these must afterwards give account. They think that when they have planted vineyards, they shall enjoy them without further effort. Thus do men harden themselves against God.

But Moses declares to the contrary, that when they have planted vines, other men shall gather the fruit thereof. And indeed, when we see at this time so much thievery in the world, let us understand that it is because there are so few that have clean hands, and because so few are able to protest that they have not encroached upon the goods of other men by unjust means. Indeed, there is such unmeasurable disorder these days that the children of God are fleeced, though they abstain from wrongdoing. We must, however, always bear in mind the ordinary course of things, of which I have spoken, which is that our Lord will not fail to punish the sins that break out in this area like a waterspout. And as for those who have lands and possessions: They will not go around and steal other folk's goods, nor pick a few grapes. They will not go filchingly to cut down a patch of meadow. It is for beggars to do so, and we see in these days that for the most part it is poor folks who are the pilferers, filching and stealing anything they can finger. But yet they that have lands and possessions are the greatest thieves, for the things which they possess they get by unlawful means.¹ It is no wonder then, if God requites them with the same, and that they come to be vexed in their goods and possessions.

God, therefore, shows us by experience that His uttering of such speeches is not in vain; but we ignore it. Men are well able to complain, as I have said before, but they have no regard to the principal point, which is that God is putting into execution those things which He spoke by the mouth of Moses.² Let us therefore consider these things, and when we see so much stealing of vines, of corn, and of such other things, let us understand that our Lord punishes the ravenousness and extortion that is committed both in merchandising and in all other trades of occupation. And let us not tarry until God punishes us, but let us walk uprightly, if we wish for Him to be our Defender. For although all places are full of thieves, yet our Lord will keep our goods in safety if we walk in His fear and abstain from all manner of evil-doing. That is what we must have our recourse to, and we must not think to escape evil by evil-doing, but we must use the remedy that our Lord sets forth in this text.

The same thing is said of our cattle and our children (vv. 31-32). Indeed, Moses continues to enlarge on the matter, to the end that men should so much the better perceive what is the effect of this speech which he employs, namely 'this shall be forever.' It is as if he should say that the hand of God shall always wax heavier and heavier. So much so that if a man is driven from his dwelling and thinks to remove to his

possessions and to his lands, God shall persecute him even there. And if he thinks to cheer himself with his wife, she shall be taken from him by force. And if he thinks to find some comfort in his children, they shall be delivered into the hands of his enemies. And if he thinks to have any recourse to his cattle, they shall be all stolen or taken away by force. Moses therefore besets us here on all sides, to the end we should learn to resort unto God, since it is in vain for us to labor to escape any other way. This is the matter in effect which we have to bear in mind from this text.

Concerning Invasions

Now he adds, moreover, to increase the evil, that the fruits of the earth and the labor of our hands shall be eaten by a people which we have not known, and that we ourselves shall be distracted by reason of the miseries which shall thus light upon us (w. 33-34). That is to say, we shall be out of our minds, beholding the horrors before our eyes, and being bewildered at it, we shall be forced to admit that the hand of God is against us. That is in effect the matter which is intended in this text.

Now I have mentioned before that the misery is all the more grievous to bear when an unknown people come to pillage and ransack. It is hard to bear when we are robbed by our neighbors, by those who should bear amity with us. But if there come a strange people, there is less mercy. For when men are separated one from another, and have no intermingling at there is less likelihood of any means of safety. And we see how this is often repeated in the prophets, so that it is said sometimes that the people who shall persecute us shall be a barbarous people without language comprehensible to us (Is. 33:19); so that when we ask them for mercy, and cry alas, it shall seem to them that we curse them, and they shall increase their cruelty. So then, let us mark that his speaking thus of a strange people is to make us understand that God will send us such chastisers as will have no pity nor compassion towards us, who will thoroughly root us out.

And now be warned, that although the plague has not yet come near us, we must not therefore fall asleep. For we always measure God's threats by our own conception of them, and by the things that offer themselves to our eyes. When men speak of war, and threaten us with the Turk, we reply, "But how can he come at us? He is too afar off." Again, "Can such a prince invade us? Tush, he shall be prevented by such and such a means." And, "The plague cannot come that way, because of such and such a reason. It may be dealt with by all such means. It cannot be." When we have such varieties of shifting thoughts to comfort ourselves with, therewith we despise God. not in word but in deed, for we continue unreformed and proud, and do not fear that the plague can come at us. Therefore God says that He will stir up strange people against us, even people of far countries. When men think least about it, then they shall wonder to see

1. One almost gets the impression that Calvin is against all wealthy men, and believes that wealth can only be acquired through sin. Not so. For a full treatment, see Gary North, "The Economic Thought of Luther and Calvin," in *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* II: 1 (Symposium on Economics). Available for \$5.00 from Chalcedon, Box 158, Vallecito, CA 95251.

2. Calvin is quite clear that modern men and modern nations are directly under the same covenant blessings and curses as were pronounced in the Mosaic law. There has been no change in ethics from the Old to the New Testaments, as far as Calvin is concerned.

how God will come in upon them on that side which they never thought of, and bring them enemies to spoil them.

Let us then mark by this text, that God's scourges are sometimes hidden, and break out suddenly, so that men are taken asleep by them, according to the saying that they are like to a woman that is childbearing. For a woman that is with child is utterly undone when her hour is come. Even so it fares with them that are puffed up with their iniquities, and delight therein. They do not see that the hand of God is near them. It comes upon them like a tempest. While they are saying "Peace and safety," then their ruin and utter destruction comes (1 Thess. 5:3). Therefore, since we are told of strange people, let us learn to look far before us when God threatens us, for just as faith must look above the world in order to take hold of God's promises, that is may rest wholly upon them, so likewise when God threatens us, our faith must look further off than we can see with our eyes. We must not trust that which we see.

We can take Noah as an example: He did not tarry until the Flood broke out, nor until God unlocked the rain of heaven and opened the watersprings of earth, but as soon as he heard the word, he did nothing but think about the vengeance of God (Gen. 6:22). And by virtue of that word, he beheld the flood as if it had been present, and he lived in such fear and carefulness as if he had seen the rain both evening and morning destroying all things before his eyes. Even so should we. And we should be warned thereof by this saying, where God speaks of distant lands.

Moreover, we are warned to live in peace and concord. For seeing that God has formed a society of us, and we are intermingled together, we must learn to live in such unity that our Lord will not need to bring strange enemies to chastise our churlishness, when we resemble dogs and cats. For when men who ought to agree together start vexing one another, it causes God to stir up foreigners to be their enemies, because the closer God comes to us, the more He will have us given to doing good one to another. And if we do contrary, then must God stir up a people to come to spoil us, because we have not lived in peace like brethren, nor knitted ourselves together like fingers of one hand. This is what we have to bear in mind touching this text.

Concerning Distraction

Now, where he says, "and you shall be amazed at the sights which you shall see" (v. 34), it is just as what we saw in verse 29 above, namely that men should be distracted and grope at noon like the blind in the dark. For if we are held up, so that we gather our spirits to call upon God, and are enabled to be patient in our afflictions, that is a great grace, and such a one as cannot be sufficiently esteemed. But if our Lord does not encourage us to repentance, nor gives us wherewith to assuage and diminish our sorrows, but all hope is taken away, and we are totally forlorn, so that we see

the naked sword continually before us, having no means to remedy or succor at all, that is a dreadful threat. Nevertheless, it is not sent without cause, considering the hardness of heart that is to be seen in all men.

For until God has brought us to this condition, we are wholly blockish. We are contrary. We certainly complain when anything troubles us. Indeed, sometimes we lie as beaten down, but that does not make us to come again to God. For we see how every man takes the bridle in his teeth, so that they shake off all fear and never think upon that which is set down here. And so we see how men become blockish. Now our Lord would fain draw them to remembrance, if they are teachable; that is to say, if they are not willfully stubborn. For He tries all manner of ways to draw us to Him. This is the reason why He corrects us gently, and as it were with His little finger. But when He sees that such will not prevail, then must He bring us to this kind of shock. For until He has left us as men distracted, we shall never have our minds peaceable and obedient; we shall never be won.

Therefore, let us mark well that this threat is directed to such as do not bow under the first blow God gives them, but go from evil to worse; for then must they of necessity come to this place. Now, He speaks expressly of the sight of the eyes. For men blind themselves, as I have said before, persuading themselves that they can escape by some means. Even though we see the evil at hand, yet we may wonder to behold how we hold on to our course, and take no care for it, just as the prophet Isaiah says, speaking of the wicked, that when the scourge passes over the whole earth, and the storm overtakes them all, they are not one bit moved by it all (Is. 28:15). In such a way do the despisers of God speak, and there are an infinite number of them.

So then, men do indeed thus blind their eyes, and have no respect at all for the plagues to which they are subject; but notwithstanding they may fall into an infinity of trouble, out of which they cannot get again. Yet, they hold on still, since they are so rebellious. Moses says, therefore, expressly in this text that they shall have a sight set before their eyes.³ That is to say, after you have been hardened for a long while in your vain fantasies, and have flattered yourselves in your sins, imagining that God should spare you and that you are (as it were) His buddies, and have made a pact with death and with the grave, as the prophet speaks it (Is. 28:15); when you have been thus a long while untouched with any fear, and have deceived yourselves, assuring yourselves that your plague shall not last, *then shall come a sight that shall make your eyes dazzle* in beholding the infinite horrors which you must endure. And whichever way

3. Calvin has a way of taking his time in getting to his point. The analogy of blindness and sight is strikingly used here, however. God deals men a severe blow in order to dazzle open their sin-blinded eyes. Thus, His severest chastisements are still merciful, if men will only open their eyes and benefit from them.

you turn your eyes, whether upward or downward, forward or backward, you shall see the hand of God continually pursuing you, by reason of which you shall be driven to madness.

Let us learn, therefore, to convert this text to our benefit; and while God forbears with us, or at least so moderates His plagues that we are not thereby altogether overthrown, let us fear Him. And let us consider how many ways we have offended God, inasmuch that if He inclined to deal rigorously with us, we should then perish every minute of the hour. And with all of this, let us not tarry till He thunder down upon us, and pour out His curses upon us in such a manner that they sink into our very bones, but let us return to Him and to His goodness.

And above all things, when He gives us the grace to foresee His plagues afar off, so that we may say that others are punished for our instruction, let us take warning from their example. By faith let us receive God's corrections wherewith He threatens us, so that we may be preserved from that sight of which Moses here speaks, so that our Lord does not strike us with such fear that we cannot in any way think to receive any manifestation of His goodness because of our sins. No, rather let us put this lesson of obeying Him and of submitting ourselves to Him to good use, so that we may escape the aforesaid dazzling of the eyes, and be not so oppressed that we should become like people who are out of their minds. Let us

not come to such an extremity; neither let us compel God to execute such threats against us.

Prayer

Now let us fall down before the majesty of our good God, with acknowledgement of our sins, beseeching Him to vouchsafe to make us so to understand them, that every one of us may be his own judge and turn to Him, before we are constrained thereto; and that having willingly condemned ourselves and bewailed our sins, we may seek to return to His obedience in such a way that the same may serve to dedicate us wholly to Him. And that in the mean time it may please Him that, just as He has sent us the message of reconciliation in His gospel, He will also give us that grace to obtain mercy from Him, and forgiveness of all our sins in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; and that resting thereon, we not fail to walk always in His fear; and that His bearing with us through His fatherly goodness may not cause us to sleep in our sins, and to flatter ourselves in them, but that every one of us may quicken himself up, until we are quite clean rid of them. And that since we are to pass through so much filth in this world, we may be taught to amend our misdoings continually until we are thoroughly rid of them, for the full uniting of ourselves with Him, making us partakers of His heavenly glory. That it may please Him to grant this grace not only to us, but also to all people and nations of the earth, etc.

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