

Calvin Speaks



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THE PERIL OF APOSTASY* (Part 1)

**Title not in the original*

Sermon 159. 24 March 1556. Deuteronomy 28:36-45.

36. *The LORD will bring you and the king whom you set over you to a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods – wood and stone.*

37. *And you shall become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword among all nations where the LORD will lead you.*

38. *You shall carry much seed out to the field and gather but little in, for the locust shall consume it.*

39. *You shall plant vineyards and tend them, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes; for the worms shall eat them.*

40. *You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil; for your olives shall drop off.*

41. *You shall beget sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours; for they shall go into captivity.*

42. *Locusts shall consume all your trees and the produce of your land.*

43. *-The alien who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower.*

44. *He shall lend to you, but you shall not lend to him; he shall be the head, and you shall be the tail.*

45. *Moreover all these curses shall come upon you and pursue and overtake you, until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes which He commanded you.*

Put No Confidence in Princes

We know what kind of emotion led the people of Israel to chose themselves a king: pride, for they did not wish to be inferior to their neighbors (1 Samuel 8:20). Moreover, they thought it would make them very secure to have a head over them who would have all authority. And so we see that the children of Abraham were not content with their liberty, but

desired to have a king. Because they saw that the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Moabites, and as well as the Tyreans and other like people had kings, they were certain that if they also had a head, all would go well with them.¹

Now, just as pride and ambition was the reason they chose a king in Israel, even so they became hardhearted in it, supposing that they were out of all danger. Having such a defense, we see that they despised the prophets, believing that they were well guarded. The Spirit of God, foreseeing this though it had not yet come to pass, said that the king which they should appoint would be led captive into a strange country (v.36). It is just as if God had said that they might well seek hiding holes to save themselves, but such would be of no avail at all against His hand. This is what we touched upon yesterday,² namely that when God is our adversary, we may not imagine we can defend ourselves against Him by means of His creatures, knowing that He will surely apply them to our destruction. Therefore, let none of us deceive himself; neither let us make our defense out of that which is nothing but smoke and lies.³

It is true that the king who was first chosen by the people of Israel, namely king Saul, was not brought into captivity, although he died in battle. The successors of David, however, were dealt with cruelly and with great reproach, even though God had ordained them, and even though they were a figure and image of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it is a horrible thing that the kingdom which God had dedicated to Himself (as we see from the anointing) should be laid open to such reproach. You see how the successors of David, who had received the promise that their fear

1. Calvin's sermons on monarchy are in the Deuteronomy series, sermons 105 & 106; reprinted in *Calvin Speaks* Vol. 2, Nos. 1-3. These are available upon request, for a contribution.

2. Sermon 158; *Calvin Speaks* Nos. 37 & 38.

3. The Old English has "leaving," which can mean either "lies" or " gleanings" (possibly chaff). I don't have access to the French original, so I cannot tell which it should be. -Editor.

should be everlasting, and were also figures of our Lord Jesus Christ, were handled in such a way that they were led prisoners in chains, were arraigned as offenders, had their eyes put out, had their children's throats cut in their own presence, were cast into a deep dungeon, there to rot or to be eaten to death with vermin.

And that, as you can see, is a very strange matter. But the vengeance of God was to extend so far, and that of necessity, because of the rebelliousness of the people, for which there was no other remedy. The more God put up with them and patiently waited for them, the more they were to be brought to the extremity of all confusion for despising such great goodness and for being so rebellious and hard-hearted against it.

Now we may gather a good warning from this, that (as was declared yesterday) although in the eyes of the world we seem to stand in no peril, yet it is needful for us to seek to have God's favor. For if God is not on our side, and we under His protection, all the helps we think to obtain from creatures are cursed, for they will serve rather to overthrow us. And therefore let us take heed that we put not our confidence in the greatness of Princes, or in any other defenses, for we see how they are but means to blind such as might otherwise turn to God and obtain forgiveness from Him, and we see how in the end it will overthrow them utterly. Let us, then, be better advised, and though we seem to be well guarded by the world, yet let not that prevent us from always walking in the fear of God, knowing that all the favor which we are able to purchase in the world amounts to nothing at all; and that if God but blows upon it, it all vanishes away in the minute of an hour. That is what we have to note from this text.

Apostasy Itself the Greatest of all Curses

Now it is expressly stated that both the king and the subjects shall serve foreign gods, of stone and of wood; that is to say, puppets and idols. Doubtless God intended by these words to utter the dreadful extent of the punishment which was to come upon the Jews. For although the nourishment God gives us, and all the testimonies of His fatherly love and goodness appertaining to this transitory life, are to be highly esteemed; yet the most singular benefit that we receive as long as we live in the world is that we have religion well ordered, that His service be pure among us, that we call upon Him, and that it be lawful for us to claim Him as our God, and that we be not corrupted and defiled with superstition and idolatry. That, I say, is the principal good thing to which the faithful should aspire; and we are truly but blocks and beasts if we do not prefer the same above all manner of riches and pleasures and before all our ease and comfort.

Now then, on the contrary part, the plague which ought to be the most dreadful to us, and the most horrible calamity that can fall upon us, is to be deprived of God's service, and to have our mouth shut so that

we cannot call upon Him; and not only that, but also through tyranny to be compelled to honor idols, and to defile ourselves with their abominations, and to pervert that which God has ordained for the magnifying of His name among us. When things are thus corrupted, let us understand that God has departed from us, and has departed from us, and has declared Himself to be our mortal enemy, and has quite forsaken and refused us, and is loath that we should henceforth have any token or inkling at all either of His presence or of His favor.

And so, when Moses says in this text that the Jews shall serve foreign gods, he intends to threaten them more dreadfully than before. It is as if he should say, "It will surely be grievous to you when you are famished and want bread to eat and water to drink, when your enemies shall rob you of all your substance and make havoc of all your possessions, when you shall pine away in grief and sorrow without any means to assist yourself—surely these will be very hard things for you, especially when you can obtain no favor from your enemies, who shall be as wild beasts against you. All the same, this is all nothing in comparison to the other curse, which is that instead of honoring the living God and of confessing that He has chosen you to be His people (which is an immeasurable blessing)—instead of such things, I say, you should serve idols and become accustomed to the superstitions of the pagans, and have no more prayers, neither Psalms nor Offerings, but be dispersed and forlorn."

Now, seeing that we perceive the natural sense of Moses, let us understand that among all the blessings of God which we enjoy in this present life, this ought to be preferred above all the rest: namely, to have freedom to serve our God, to make confession of our faith, and to declare that we are His people, of His Church and of His flock. Certainly this truth is little enough acknowledged; it is not, however, in vain that we are admonished concerning it. Seeing, then, that it has been the will of God to plant His Church among us, and that We should have His **Word** and His sacraments, by which He declares that He dwells among us, *let us accept such a blessing according to its worth.*

Do not Envy the Prosperity of Apostates

It will serve a double use to us. First of all, when we fare better every day as a result of the doctrine that is preached to us, such a treasure cannot perish except through our own unthankfulness; just as we see many folk who think that it is enough to be in attendance at sermons, and it seems to them that God has been given His due if they have but made a ceremonial appearance. Meanwhile, the seed of life perishes without yielding any fruit. Therefore, so that we may apply the blessing God bestows upon us, — which blessing is that we have liberty to hear His doctrine, and be trained therein, and have the sacraments for an establishment of our faith, and may declare that it is the living God Whom we worship and

that He governs us—I say, for all this to profit us, let us acknowledge that our Lord cannot bestow any greater blessing on us than this.

And in the mean time, we must take it patiently if other things fail us, so that we lack comforts. Let us not be grieved at the children of this world, who have their delights and triumphs, **revelling** in their earthly pleasures. If the children of God have not the same, let them know that they enjoy a thing which recompenses double, yea a hundred-fold. And that is, that they are able to serve God.

After all, what good does it do these wretched people who dwell in papistry to lie slumbering in their nests, if meanwhile they are banished from the kingdom of God, and Christ Jesus Himself and His Word are banished from the country in which they dwell? What does it avail for them to be served in their houses, if they are not permitted to serve God? What does it **avail** for them to have food **and** drink to **consume** until they burst, if they are starved for lack of Spiritual food? What does it avail them to have honor and credit, if they are constrained to defile themselves with these treacherous dealings whereby God is despised, and His honor spoiled and conveyed over to idols, they being guilty thereof? Alas, is this not a cursed condition?

Let us therefore take it patiently, even if we are held in contempt by the world and counted as underlings and castaways, lacking comforts and not having what our flesh desires. Seeing that God gives us this special freedom, that we may purely worship Him and serve Him, and be delivered from this cursed slavery to idols, let us be content, and esteem this benefit according to its worth, so that we are not grieved toward them that enjoy the goods of this world, but who are meanwhile destitute of the grace of God, which does remain among us.

Do not Forsake Christ's True Liberty

Additionally,⁴ here is a warning that, since God has **put us in possession** and fruition of His **liberty**, we must take good heed that we not be deprived of it through our own leadenness, for this threat which was made to the Jews is also directed to us. Let us understand, therefore, that since we have the gospel preached to us, if it does not prevail with us, God must deliver us into the hands of other teachers when we refuse to obey Him. And in truth, we ought not to think that the horrible confusion which exists in papistry comes from any other cause than this: They were taught the pure doctrine of the gospel, but they have rebelled against God and have not bound their necks to bear His yoke, and therefore God could not do other than to deliver them over to such tyranny as we see.

And truly this was prophesied to them by St. Paul (2 Thess. 2:11-12). It is proper, says he, that the world,

4. This apparently is the second use of the "double use" mentioned by Calvin above.

since it will not believe the truth, should obey lies, and those who will not be subject to' the living God should be obedient to the creature, even to idols. With such examples before our eyes, and hearing the threat as it lies here, let us learn while God keeps us in His school, so to walk in His fear and awe that we may not be bereft of the welfare which we now enjoy, but that God may rather augment it and cause it to prevail.

Moreover, let us mark that **those** who serve idols will not be excused for it even though it is itself a punishment from God. We know that one sin is punished by another, as it is said in various places in Scripture, and as we see it especially avowed in the first chapter of the letter to the Romans (1 :24). Those who would not serve God by giving themselves wholly to cleanness of life, were shaken off and given over to all manner of shameful lusts, and retained no more understanding to discern between good and evil than **the brute** beasts, but ran into **all** kinds of evil. By this St. Paul shows very well that when God gives us leave to plunge ourselves into the depths of our iniquities, it is so that we should be more guilty before Him. Those therefore who worship idols, notwithstanding that they are compelled to it, and sigh and desire to be at liberty, still offend God, and from this they should better understand how heinous their sins are, seeing that they must receive such correction for them. How so? Whereas I should glorify my God, I must offend Him, and He is ready to cast me off because I am not worthy to serve Him, and He must deprive me of the liberty and ability to dedicate myself wholly to His obedience.

Let all those therefore that are in the captivity of papistry and mingled among the superstitious, understand that the vengeance of God lies upon them, and that they shall be more and more guilty for their serving of idols. It is a poor reply for them to say, "We do not do it willingly. We wish that it might please God that the right and pure religion were over all." But for all this, our Lord does not exempt them from condemnation. **And He is** the competent Judge. Let us therefore rest upon His Word, and seek no more escape routes, but let them that endure such a state understand that it is now or never when it comes to turning to God, since they are as good as drowned in their present condition, and possess a token of wrath against themselves in that He is gone far away from them. Therefore let them think upon this, and be moved with it to the quick, according to the meaning of God in this text, and as we have touched **on it heretofore**.⁵

An Example to the Nations

Now Moses says that this people shall be an

5. Calvin does not make it clear what he thinks these people ought to do about their situation. By 1556, however, the Reform in Europe was pretty well advanced, and Calvin probably would have answered that anyone genuinely grieved by idolatrous worship should separate from the Roman Church and join the Reform. Those who remained in idolatry, and did no more than wring their hands over it, would be condemned.

astonishment, a proverb, a byword, and a ridicule among the nations, among whom they shall be dispersed. Here our Lord shows that as His goodness should be displayed among the people of Israel, so that every man should rejoice in the seed of Abraham, so should the very same people be abhorred and detested. The promise to Abraham was thus: All nations shall be blessed in thy seed. Of course, it is true that we must look to our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the very bond of the seed of Abraham, or else this blessing has no place nor ground to stand upon. Yet notwithstanding, they who were descended from the race of Abraham should have been blessed by God so that they might have been an example, that everyone desiring grace might say, "O God, take pity on me, as upon the children of Abraham," whom He has chosen and adopted. Such was the promise.

Behold here the threat that was laid against it: When men see how fiercely God smites the people whom He had chosen, they will be astonished at it and think thus with themselves, "Is it possible that they whom God chose should now be cast off and be persecuted and thrown under foot with all manner of reproach?" And upon this, men may say, "O God, keep me that I not fall to such a case as this people is in". Or else when they intend to curse, they might say, "God do to you as He did to those vile Jews." This much is to be understood from this place.

Now let us mark that just because the Holy Spirit spoke thus by the mouth of Moses, it was not His intention that this doctrine should serve only for two thousand years or thereabouts, which was the time the Law lasted until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but that we at this day must apply the same to

our own use. Insomuch as God has come near to us, we must walk in His fear in spite of Satan, so that His goodness may shine in us and be perceived to remain upon us.⁶ And on the other side, when we are unthankful, and our God is as it were mocked by us, it is needful for us to think thus: "Well, we may shrink back from the way, but we shall gain nothing from all our plans, for in the end we shall not fail to come to shame."

In truth we see how it is said that the name of God shall be blasphemed among the unbelievers because those who were counted faithful earlier, have been so cast down that God may seem to have falsified His promise and to have deluded them, so far forth must the vengeance of God extend. Now, seeing that this is so, let us learn to submit ourselves to our Lord while He allures us to Himself with gentleness, and so hold ourselves under His obedience that we may not become a byword and a ridicule to all the wicked, which seek nothing but to blaspheme God and to make a mock of us. Let us, I say, look well to that.

(to be concluded)

6. Sometimes Calvin speaks as if Christians can only expect trouble in this world. This is because he was speaking to people who did experience much tribulation. In principle, however, we see here that Calvin held that over the long haul, visible prosperity should accompany the gospel as a sign of God's blessing, just as visible curses were presently the accompaniment of late Medieval European apostasy. This entire sermon makes the point that a troubled external situation is a consequence of sin, and should drive us to self-examination and renewed mortification. God wants to bless us; it is our sin that keeps Him from doing so. (This is not to be confused, of course, with the all too temporary blessings which sometimes come to the wicked, and which are external only, rootless, and fleeting.)