

# Calvin Speaks



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## THE PERIL OF APOSTASY\* (Part 2)

\*Title not in the original

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

### Summary of the First Half

Calvin spends most of the first half with verse 36. He points out that God's judgments are seen as severe in that the king himself, a type of Christ, is not exempt. But the worst plague of all, says Calvin, is to be left to worship strange gods. Man's highest privilege is to worship and serve the true God, and the most grievous penalty that can be afflicted upon him is to be left in apostasy. Calvin then turns to verse 37, and notes that the people will become a proverb to the nations. Just as all nations were to desire the blessing of Abraham, so that Israel was a proverb among them for good, so negatively all nations would fervently hope that God would not curse them as He had the wayward sons of Abraham. They would be a proverb among all the nations "where the LORD will lead you." It is to that last phrase that Calvin now turns his attention.

Moreover, when Moses says that God will disperse His people, it serves to confirm the matter, so that the Jews should not think that they were carried away by a storm, as it were by mere happenstance, but that they should understand that it is the hand of God that is upon them. And in that His warnings did not prevail with them, therefore what happened to them should cause us to stop short. For behold what vengeance we hear God threaten in this place! We see the same thing executed before our eyes. Is it not a horrible thing that the Jews are abhorred at this day throughout the whole world? Yet they were the people whom God had sanctified for Himself. They were His heritage. They were the royal priesthood, as they were termed in Exodus 19:6. They were the blessed generation. And yet for all this, they are rejected by all men, insomuch that men do as it were shudder to behold them as though they ought to be cut off from mankind. If it be said, "Well, this might very well happen to the faithful, and similar things

happened even to the holy patriarchs," this is quite true, but in another fashion.<sup>1</sup> For the faithful may well be put in fear, just as it is said in Isaiah 8:18, and people may point at them with the finger and shun them afar off, and that is because God is not known and His grace is despised.<sup>2</sup> But when we speak of the Jews at this day, it is very well seen that God is against them, for they are like rotten members, and their body is torn to pieces, and there does not remain any token of this blessing which God had bestowed on them. Therefore, when we look at such a mirror, let us learn to make a good use of it, and let their example serve to seal this doctrine and to confirm it, so that we do not test God, and so that we not continue hardhearted so long that He decides to wrap us up in reproach with all the rest of the nations of the world.

### The Destruction of Food and Oil

After this, Moses returns to something he had touched upon before, which is that the people, having tilled their fields and possessions, would not drink of the wine of their grapes, nor eat of the corn of their harvest, nor enjoy the fruits of their trees (compare v. 30). This has been spoken before, but there is here a certain difference to be noted.<sup>3</sup> For before, God had stated that when the Jews had labored for corn and wine, the enemies would come and take it all away, and that all of it would be made a prey. But now He says that without any force of man, and without any

1. In other words, the righteous also suffer as strangers in a strange land, ridiculed by men.

2. Isaiah and his children were signs to Israel. Calvin assumes that because Israel rejected Isaiah's message, they also shunned his family.

3. Calvin does not note it, but grain, wine, and oil are singled out for curse here. Each is pregnant with religious significance in Scripture, and especially in the New Covenant: bread and wine in the Holy Eucharist, and oil used in ecclesiastical healing (James 5). Thus, Calvin might have followed up his earlier point about apostasy itself being the worst of curses, by pointing out that it is precisely separation from the sacramental tokens of God's fellowship which is pointed to here. Calvin's discussion is not invalidated by this point, but he focuses only on the general cultural ramifications of the verses, without seeing their special cultic applications.

trouble of war, they should nevertheless not fail to be famished and to be destitute of all things that might do them good.

And how? Because worms, beasts, caterpillars, locusts, and all other things would eat up the fruit of the earth. Behold what armies God stirs up against the wicked! Again, on the other hand, they would be blasted and singed, so that all would perish. So that even if men do not touch the Jews, and leave them alone in rest, yet they are to understand that God has other means to punish them, and that He is always armed in infinite ways. That is what God intends to declare.

And therefore let us take warning from this text, that when we have escaped one plague, God will find another for us, and if we step aside to the left hand, yet He is nevertheless armed against us, and before we have gone three paces He stops us in our way. Behold how well men succeed when they seek holes to hide in! We see it in the prophecy of Isaiah (29:15), how he mocks those who think by their craftiness to escape the hand of God. "Dream on. Dream to your fill," he says. "Yet shall the curse always overtake you." And similarly, even though we have no enemies to trouble us and to rise up against us to spoil our substance, yet let us understand that God has other means, which we are not aware of, by which He can bereave us of that which He has put into our hands. We shall be abashed when, thinking we have something wherewith to satisfy ourselves, the bread will be plucked out of our mouths; and that when we think to drink, we shall be dry.

And what brings this to pass? Well, it is our Lord who gives increase to the corn when it is sown in the ground, and it is He who sends the grapes. It is He also who causes all things to prosper for our nourishment. We are taught by this text, first of all, that when we till the fields, sow them and reap them, we must make prayers always to God to bless the earth, that we may be fed through His grace.

And we must hold it for a certainty that it is His peculiar office to feed us as a father feeds his little children. So much on this point. I have treated it at large before, so that it suffices here merely to touch upon it.

#### God's Special Warriors

Now furthermore let us note then when God speaks here of locusts, worms, caterpillars, and other beasts, and when He speaks of blastings and of burnings which come from it, He shows that He has available men-of-war of a strange sort, when He determines to punish men. This serves to pull down the pride of men. For if we are spoiled by our enemies, "Very well," men will say, "this was done by violence and plain force." For example, when war comes, the whole country is spoiled; the richest become beggars; and all this is ascribed to the war. Man is not blamed for it.<sup>4</sup> But when it comes to pass

by other means—so that men do not know by what means their substance is wasted, though they see it melt away before their eyes, one year by hail, another by frost, and one time one way and another time another way, so that all things are consumed in their hands—God by this means makes it more manifest to men that He intends to confound them utterly.

Indeed, if we look at the way God dealt with the Egyptians, we shall see it much better (for we discern God's judgments better in other men than in ourselves). If God had stirred up a great army against the Egyptians, instead of lice and vermin, they would have continued on in their pride and presumption. And even if they had been a hundred times discomfited, yet they would not have ceased being stiff-necked to this very day. When they were persecuted with lice, which were God's soldiers in Egypt, they should have been confounded. Therefore, let us well note that God, by sending men such chastisements as are set down here, is warning them to think on their frailty.

If Herod had been slain with a thunderbolt from heaven, it would not have been as fit a punishment for the blasphemy which he committed in allowing himself to be called a God and not a man, as when God caused him to be eaten and consumed with vermin until he was as rotten as could be. Thus he was compelled to say (as one of his friends and contemporaries records), "Oh, behold here a goodly god, which is so rotten that he is forced to feel that the hand of God is persecuting him for his pride."<sup>5</sup>

Let us therefore mark well that God, after threatening the Jews to send against them enemies who by violence and force of arms would spoil the country of all manner of food, now adds moreover that although they were not vexed or troubled at all by the hand of man, nor was anything attempted by man against their possessions and land, yet notwithstanding they should not pride themselves in their labors nor in their tilling well their grounds. And why? Because the vermin will waste it all.

And He says expressly, "You will sow much, and gather nothing." He shows by this that no matter how good provisions men make beforehand, thinking undoubtedly that all will go according to their wishes, yet they shall be never the better for it. And it serves to this end, that we should not fall asleep when we see fair prospects, according to our propensity to despise God, as if to say that if there is a good seedtime then we are out of danger. As if God had no more dealings with earthly things! Or if we have reaped and laid up the corn in our barns, it should make us more proud because we see no likelihood of any more danger. But instead of this, we should evermore have an eye to God, saying, "Lord, behold, the earth waits for rain as though it were athirst, and when You give it, it is to make it to bring forth sustenance for our nourishment. Again, such storms might fall from heaven as would wash away all from us, and one war would be enough

4. I take it that Calvin means that the cause of the destruction is not ascribed to the immorality of man, but to the designs of the enemy.

5. The marginal note in the 1583 English edition of these sermons ascribes this statement to Josephus.

to bereave us of all that we have. Thus is all in your hand, O Lord, and we must depend upon your mercy, and be all our life long in your custody, or else we must perish, and all the provisions that we have shall profit us nothing." Thus, then, must we call upon God with diligence, and walk in His fear, seeing He is so gracious as to be our foster-father, and vouchsafes to stoop so low to us.

Therefore Moses has very well declared in this text, that we must not be beguiled by the goodly prospects and fair provisions which we may have. As for example, when we see the corn is fair upon the ground, we must not be too joyful, as if all were won; no, not even when the corn is gathered in. For God wishes to be called upon at that time, just as we are bound to make our daily suit unto Him, saying, "Give us this day our daily bread, O Lord," that day by day He may feed us. For even if we have never so much today, yet tomorrow we may starve. For when it pleases God, He is able not only to destroy the corn and wine in the fields, but also He can make them to be worth nothing, even when we have them in our garners and cellars. Nay, we hear the threats that He makes, saying, "You will carry corn to the mill by measure, and the bread to the oven by weight (Ezk. 4:16), and yet for all that, you will still be empty and hungry. When you have eaten your fill, there will be no strength at all in the meat, neither will you be sufficed therewith." Seeing our Lord tells us that He has so many ways to famish us, let us not be hardhearted, but let it rather waken us, that we may altogether depend upon Him, and walk in His fear, and be His children, if we intend that He shall still continue to do the office of a father toward us. That is the effect of these things, which we have to remember.

Here again Moses repeats these threats, which he had spoken before, saying that the Jews and their lineage shall be carried away into captivity. Now certainly there can happen nothing more bitter to men than to see their children taken away by force, eaten and devoured by the enemies, and cruelly dealt with. They would a hundred times rather bury them. Now then let us mark in few words what God intended to declare in this text, which is that although He has been never so bountiful to us, and filled us with His blessings, so that we are fenced in on all sides, yet He can very well bereave us of them all again, and that plague shall be much more grievous to us than if we had never known what His goodness means. Wherefore the larger God bestows His blessings upon us, yea even those blessings that concern this transitory life, let us look that we are always so much the more provoked to honor him and to serve Him. For He for His part will not cease to do us good, if we do not turn tail and give Him over. But seeing that He allures us to Himself gently, if we are willing to come to Him, let us assure ourselves that His hand will evermore be stretched forth to augment the gifts and blessings that we have received of Him.

## Comprehensive Judgment

In the end he returns to the matter which we have dealt with already: All these curses will come upon you; they will seize upon you, and you will be caught and beseiged by them on all sides until God has completely consumed you, all because you did not hearken to His voice, to obey His statutes and the commandment which He gave you.

I have told you before how Moses has repeatedly showed to the Jews that no evil or adversity came upon them except by the hand of God. It is necessary for us to know the cause as well, however. It is true that sometimes God visits us and we cannot perceive the reason for it, for He does not do it on account of our sins (not that He might not do so, but because He spares us). Yet must we always look to this, that when we sustain any affliction, we ought to think upon our sins, and enter into examination of them to condemn ourselves before God. Indeed, and we must not tarry until such adversity come, but we must benefit ourselves from every calamity which we see throughout the world, knowing that God punishes men's sins by such means, and bridling ourselves in the light of it.

So then, the matter to which Moses now returns is this: that having showed us how it is the Lord who withdraws all manner of blessings from us, how it is He who curses our possessions and the fruits of the earth, how it is He who sends vermin and storms and tempests to destroy all, how it is He who gives power to our enemies, He then shows why all this is done: It is because we have rebelled against Him, because we have despised His law. That is the very reason why these plagues of wrath do so pursue us.

Now then, let us bear in mind the teaching which has been sufficiently set forth about this already, which is that when God afflicts us, we must shut our mouths from replying or entering into argument, for we shall win nothing by being contentious with Him. No, rather we must condemn ourselves, confessing that He deals justly. Even if it is His purpose to prove our patience and to try us to the uttermost, yet all the same we must declare ourselves guilty before Him, and understand that our sins deserve to be thus roughly handled at His hands. Such an approach would cause to cease all blasphemies, murmurings, and complaints which are daily heard in the world. When any adversity or any other affliction happens to us, it is so that we should think on the sins we have committed. Mark that for one point.

And since mention is made of the commandments and statutes which God has ordained, the same expressly and purposely concerns us. For although the Papists have the law, yet it is buried in their midst. The Jews, as St. Paul says (2 Cor. 3:15), have a veil before their eyes. The Turks walk in their own ignorance, as do all the rest of the heathen. Now our Lord enlightens us, and shows us the way. There is, therefore, a more villainous rebellion in us when we do not do according to what we have been taught. We deserve that God should use greater severity with

us, and pour upon us the plagues of vengeance which are contained here. Therefore, let us benefit ourselves by the things that are said here, concerning the commandments and statutes that God has ordained. And seeing it is the case that He speaks to us daily, declaring to us His will so familiarly, let every one of us submit himself obediently to it.

And when Moses says further that these curses will catch hold of us, and that we will be hemmed in round about by them until they have consumed us, it is a warning to us that we should not be self-willed against God. For we may well seek hiding places, but it will avail us nothing, as we have said before, for the end will always be unhappy for us. And therefore, let us remember the complaint that God makes through His prophet Isaiah. He says in Isaiah 1:6 that from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot, God must of necessity smite hard upon them that have rebelled. And having spoken thus by His prophet Isaiah, He says, "What more can I do? I have not ceased to chastise My children, insomuch that from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot I have so beaten them, that there is no whole nor sound place, and yet they continue hardhearted still. Alas, what shall I do? I must crush them and break them all to pieces."

So then, let us be afraid to take such a rebellious stance against our God, and let us prevent the condemnation here pronounced. And as soon as God begins to correct us, let us bestir ourselves to return to Him. And let us not tarry long, but being admonished

by His word, let us fall to bewailing our sins, being sorry for them, and let us ask forgiveness of them in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

#### Prayer

Now let us fall down before the majesty of our good God, with acknowledgment of our sins, beseeching Him not to allow us to be so blinded in this mortal life as not to realize that all the miseries and wretchedness which we suffer are warnings given to us, to make us think on ourselves and on our lives, and also to move us to repentance. And therefore that, if we are afflicted by His hand, it may not make us to blaspheme His holy name, nor move us to impatience, but rather tame us, so that we may fare the better by all His corrections and turn again to Him. And that when we see the wretched world at this day to be so full of wretchedness and horrible miseries, and thus behold the wrath of God for the sins that reign therein, it may be a means to hold us in awe, praying God not to use any such rigor toward us, but rather that we, fleeing for refuge to His mercy in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, may be touched with true repentance and increase and prosper more and more therein, until that, being delivered from all our imperfections and sins, our God do clothe us with His righteousness unto which we are daily called. 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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