

# Calvin Speaks



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## SIGNS AND WONDERS OF WRATH\*

(Part 1)

\*Title *not in the original*

Sermon 160. 25 March 1556. Deuteronomy 28:46-50.

46. *And these things shall become a sign and a wonder on you and your seed forever.*

47. *Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and a glad heart, for the abundance of all things,*

48. *Therefore, you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD shall send against you, in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in the lack of all things; and He will put an iron yoke on your neck until He has destroyed you.*

49. *The LORD will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you shall not understand,*

50. *A nation of fierce countenance who shall have no respect for the old, nor show favor to the young.*

Because things are so greatly confused in this world, so that it is hard to tell **which** people God intends to punish for their sins, and which He intends to show His love, therefore Moses expressly says that God will send such plain signs upon them that are stubborn against Him, that they shall marvel at it. As a result, they will be compelled to understand that these come to pass neither by fortune nor by any ordinary means, but that they are extraordinary things, and that God is showing forth His power in them.

### The Sufferings of the Righteous

It is true, as we have noted before, that at first sight it cannot be easily discerned who they are whom God loves, and who they are whom He hates, because as Solomon says (Eccl. 9:2), both good and

evil are common to all. He that serves God sometimes prospers, and oftentimes is afflicted. And the same is true of the despiser of God. This is why he says that men become hardhearted, for it seems to them that they win nothing by serving God, or rather that it is but lost labor. Moreover, we often see that the children of God are sometimes handled more roughly than the most wicked in the world. From this the carnal-minded gather that it is much better to despise God. David confessed (Ps. 73:2) that he staggered as if drunk when he beheld the course of things to be such that the good and those who endeavor to walk in all manner of integrity, are constrained to drink the water of trouble, to eat the bread of heaviness, and in moisten themselves with **tears**; but that meanwhile the wicked, who do not cease to do evil, live at their ease and in pleasure, whereby it should seem that God loves them. And what kind of cleaving would that be? But our Lord declares in this place that in the end **He** will make it apparent to them that are corrected by His hand that their sins are the reason why they suffer pain, even if it is not quickly perceived.

We have seen already among the other curses which Moses pronounced that they who cast off the word of God are constrained to borrow, and to be **always** in need, but that the others [the righteous] who lend to them, have the wherewithal to help themselves. But we see how all the children of God fall into need, and do not find any that will comfort them. They make many turns before they meet with a man that will use gentleness toward them, and this seems clean contrary to the word spoken by Moses. But yet God is exercising His people after this fashion, and in that respect it is said that when we are afflicted, whether it be with poverty, or with sickness, or in any other way, we must not fail to enter into account with God; that is, to examine our lives, and to see whether we have not committed many faults. And then shall

every one of us find himself at fault.

But on the other hand, if we do not perceive the reason why God is moved to treat us rigorously, let us be content, recognizing that He knows it is profitable for us. If we have not already offended Him, perhaps we were on the way to doing so and He has prevented it. All these corrections are designed to bring us low, to the end that we should walk under Him in fear, and that our **flesh** should not overcome us, as is its tendency. For God sometimes foresees the pride of a man, and then He takes away the occasions and the objects. Besides this, He knows that a man will be too cavalier in his pomps and **delights**, and therefore he cuts off the occasion beforehand, preventing a man from doing what he would. Seeing that our Lord provides beforehand for our welfare after such a fashion, let us think on the faults which we have earlier committed.

Moreover, if there were no further meaning in it than to move us to repentance, even that would be plenty. But we must always consider how God cannot provoke us too much to come to Him, for every least straw is enough to hold us in this world, so that meanwhile we do not think **on** the heavenly life at all, or if we do think about it, we do it so coldly that we do not travel towards it with the kind of earnest affection we should have. Therefore, God finds it necessary to deal out to us many afflictions. This is how every one of us should deal with them.

### Our Attitude Toward Others

Now, concerning others, we may not at first blush condemn those whom God is punishing. We must keep in mind what is said in the Psalm (41:1), that God will bless the man who deals kindly with a man in tribulation. But we have an incredible way of jumping hastily to conclusions in this matter. As soon as **we** see any poor man in misery and wretchedness, we say, "Oh, God is plaguing him, and he must deserve it." When we do this, we are very rash judges. If God smites us, after He has bestowed many stripes upon us, it is still hard for us to admit that we have sinned; but concerning others, our tongues are ever so quick to condemn them.

But gentleness is what we should incline towards. For example, when we see the faithful suffer, we should think, "Behold, how God deals with His children, instructing us thereby that there is no rest in this world, and that our happiness is in heaven, and it is thither that we ought to lift up our hearts." And again, if this happens to a green tree, what will become of the dry wood (Luke 23:31)? If God does not spare those who have endeavored to follow His word, as we see, what shall become of those who scorn it, as the prophet says (Is. 51:23). If judgment begins at the house of God, most miserable shall they be who have hardened themselves against Him, as St. Peter ad-

monishes us (1 Pet. 4:17). And so you see how we ought to deal in this situation.

### Profiting from Suffering

Moreover, if we have patience and meekness and are teachable, it is certain that we will always feel a taste of the goodness of God in the midst of the afflictions which He sends us. It is true that often we shall be frightened by them. There will be a kind of disquiet in us which will so vex us that we will think ourselves utterly forlorn unless God withdraw His hand very quickly. If He prolongs our afflictions, then we become wholly **stupified**. Our courage fails us, so that if we are not held in by the fear of God, and by patience, so that we are wholly quiet under His hand, we would be always wandering. But if we hold ourselves there, and keep still, then we shall understand that He chastises us in His mercy and goodness. As it is said in the prophet **Habakkuk**, the faithful, after they have been in heaviness, do come to understand that God is always upholding them, and does not forget them but always tempers and mitigates their afflictions, so that they feel His fatherly goodness toward them, and comfort themselves with it. They can say with David (Ps. 30:5) that the anger of the Lord is but for a moment, but His favor is for a lifetime.

So behold, here we may always have matter with which to cheer ourselves, and to rejoice in the midst of our afflictions, so that we may perceive indeed that our Lord will always be merciful to us, notwithstanding that He uses some sternness in dealing with us, to try our patience, and to quicken us up to come to Him, and to labor with a view to the heavenly life. But we must always take the long view, as David says in the 37th Psalm, verse 1, where he exhorts us not to be grieved at the prosperity of the wicked, for he knows that our eyes can be dazed by it. When we see a wicked person at ease and having all his desires, we conclude straight away that God has no regard to deal with men according to their worth. When we think thus, we stagger and are in such confusion that we do not **know what** shall become of us. Now David says, that in so thinking, he was acting like a beast, out of his mind, and he confesses that he was at that point devoid of reason and judgment, affirming that he did wrong to all the generation of God's children (Ps. 73:22), until he came to look into the sanctuary.

It is true that in the 37th Psalm, which I mentioned earlier, he says, 'I passed by and saw the wicked flourish and grow high like a cedar tree of Lebanon, and when I looked again, he had been cut down like a tree that had no more left but dry stock lying on the ground, so that there remained no sign of him at all.' Such changes do we see in the world, but even if we saw none, yet must we enter into the sanctuary of God, as it is said in the 73rd Psalm. And there we must wait patiently until God makes it plain to us that

all afflictions are profitable for His children, and also that He sends them as medicines for their health. And contrariwise, that the prosperity which He permits to those who have contempt for His law and His justice, shall be converted to their great confusion. **We** must therefore learn to hold our wits and senses in awe, that we do not wander in the afflictions which God sends us.

### Strange and Unusual Punishments

But to return to Moses and his purposes, let us note it well when he says that the punishments God sends upon those that have utterly rebelled against Him, who have refused correction, shall be as signs and wonders to them and to their posterity. That is to say, He will punish them after a strange fashion, in a way not commonly seen among men, so that they will be compelled in spite of themselves to say, "Surely this is the hand of God."

Indeed, can there be a more beastly contempt of God found than that which was shown by Pharaoh? He was a man not only drunk with pride, but wholly senseless. He was a man who despised the majesty of God, and a man so rebellious that he could not in any manner be dealt with. When he heard Moses and Aaron speak, he laughed them to scorn. When he felt the first strokes, he refused to yield. But in the end he needed no prophet to admonish him, for he himself could say, "Surely this is the finger of God." We see therefore how God often expresses His power in such a way that even the most fierce are constrained to perceive and to think that there is some majesty in heaven, which before that time they had not acknowledged, and as a result they enter into consideration of their sins and confess them, and are the more lively touched therewith. This is what Moses here means concerning signs and wonders.

This matter is worthy to be marked. For as I have said, if God begins to punish men, it is usually ascribed to fortune. This is agreeable to our state, for we know that man's life is subject to much wretchedness—so they think; yet all the while the hand of God is not regarded. And if He doubles the punishment, yet men continue to be dull and seem as though they could continue to hide themselves and escape away. They do not enter into their consciences to search out the sins therein. They don't want to know them; as if a man **should** go and hide himself in a dark corner in order to shun the brightness of the sun at noonday. Even so do we behave in all the chastisements which God sends us to warn us of our sins and to draw us to repentance.

But in the end, God augments His punishments in such a way that they become miracles. That is to say, they exceed the common measure, the ordinary order and course of nature, so that we might be ravished with astonishment, and thereby perceive that God is

showing Himself as though His hand appeared from heaven. And this is more fully declared in the 26th chapter of Leviticus. For after He has pronounced the sentence upon them that reject the doctrine of salvation, He says, "**I** will send upon you seven times as much, if I perceive that nothing prevails with you. If **my** punishing you fails to amend you, I will add thereto seven times as much" (vv. 18, 21, 24, 28) And He repeats this sentence again in the end, and says, "If you will walk contrary to Me, I will also walk contrary to you."

### The Hostility of God

**Now** this word, "contrary," refers to the stubbornness that it is us, which we have touched upon **before**. For we see very well those adversities which befall us in this world, and wading in yet further we confess that it is God who punishes us. But to think on the matter in good earnest, and for each man to judge himself by calling his sins to remembrance as often as God gives any inkling of them—this is farthest from our thoughts. Let each man examine himself: How many afflictions do we have during the year which should be testimonies to us of the wrath of God, and as it were summons to appear before Him, warning us to sue to Him for pardon, and to have pity upon us? Scarcely does any one day pass, but that a man is warned five or six times. It is as if God should say to him, "Wretched creature, have you no concern for your soul? Why have you no care to beseech Me to receive you to mercy?" But scarcely once in a month will a man enter into examination of his life to condemn himself. And if we do it, it is but coldly. But we ought to be as ashamed and as vexed at seeing God's wrath as though we saw hell lie open before our eyes. But we see that very few actually think on these things, because each one of us forgets himself. That is the matter which God intends by His threat to walk adversely to us.

Yet we tend to continue on our course as if nothing had happened to us. **We** swallow up our afflictions. They do **trouble** us, indeed, when they pinch us, yet we do nothing but shake our ears (as they say), and continue **in our** own way. Thus, we proceed in hostility, yea exceedingly so, when we fail to acknowledge the hand of God, nor perceive that He is a judge, so that we might condemn our sins and each of us labor and endeavor to withdraw himself from them.

Therefore, our Lord says that he will come against us in all hostility. It is as if He should say, "I will cross you and thwart you. Don't think to gain anything by your hardness of heart, and by your kicking against Me, and by your dullness in that you refuse to perceive that it is My hand you are dealing with. No, no," He says, "I will be as stout and as headstrong as you; yea, and more stout and headstrong, too. For I will manifest all sorts of hostilities. **I** will let My

plagues run out at random, so that I will break your necks, and beat you on both back and belly, and that without pity."

Now we can see how much this word ought to weigh with us, where Moses says that the plagues shall be for signs and wonders to all scorers. When they have given the raspberry at the threats of God, and have wagged their heads against the first corrections which He sends them, and have bitten on the bridle; yet He proceeds onward still, and does not cease to wring them, but drives them in the end to come to a reckoning. Having done their worst, they will say openly, "it is the hand of God that presses us; these are miracles, no ordinary thing, not according to the course of nature."

Now therefore let us learn not to provoke God's wrath so far against us. Let us allow ourselves to be tamed by Him, and let us yield ourselves tractable and gentle as soon as He has summoned us. Let us yield ourselves guilty without using any excuses, for we shall win nothing thereby. There is nothing better than to enter into pure and free confession, saying, "Lord, what will You do to these frail and wretched creatures? It is true that we have deserved a hundred-fold to be sunk, but yet for all that we flee to Your mercy. Wherefore, have pity upon us." When we have thus condemned ourselves, it serves to pacify the anger of God, which will never happen if we harden our hearts. For then He will always proceed farther, until He has brought us to these signs and wonders that are here mentioned.

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1. In the Old English, "bleared out their tongues at the threatening of God."

Again, God will do the same thing when men prove slothful and negligent (or rather, utterly senseless). If we could be subdued at the first blow, God would take no pleasure in laying on us plague after plague. But when He sees that there is so much stoutness and presumption in us, that we will not stoop nor bow our necks, He finds it necessary to hold on until He makes us to feel in very deed and after a strange manner that is it He before whom we must yield our account. Let us therefore mark well how the obstinate malice of the world is the reason why God sends such strange corrections, to **put** us in fear.

And if we considered well the state of the world at this present day, it would make the hairs of our heads stand upright. Certainly all men sign at the feeling of the stripes, and they complain, but not to any amendment of life. Rather, they bite upon the bridle, in-somuch that when those who are not wholly stupid enter into a comparison of the present with that which existed before the wrath of God was provoked, they see a great gulf, and that ought to make us afraid. And so, let us come back again to that which Moses declares, which is that the world must be very rebellious and hardhearted for God to augment His punishments in such a way. For such would never come to pass were it not that men were otherwise unreformable. Let us not accuse God of cruelty when we see Him using exceeding great rigor in punishing us, but let us acknowledge that our stubbornness is so great that our Lord must handle us after that fashion, for otherwise He should never overmaster us.

*(to be concluded)*

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