

Calvin Speaks



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SIGNS AND WONDERS OF WRATH* (Part 2)

* Title not in the original

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

Summary of the First Half

Calvin begins with a general discussion of the sufferings of the righteous. When God brings suffering upon us, we should use it as an occasion for self examination. When we see other Christians suffering, we should refrain from judging them, but use their travail as a cause again for self examination and reflection. Calvin then begins to discuss verse 46, that the tribulations will be a sign and a wonder. God uses strange and unusual punishments, that it might be clear that He is the one judging, and so that men may not pretend that their difficulties are the result of the ordinary round of nature.

These signs are tokens of God's active hostility towards sinners, as Leviticus 26:27f. makes clear, "If you walk contrary to Me, I will walk contrary to you." Calvin uses the plagues visited upon Egypt as an example of this. Calvin concludes here by noting once again that God's plagues are signs ultimately of His grace, for if He hated us, He would give us no warnings.

That is what we have to bear in mind. That is not all, however, for we must always fear what is to come. And since we saw that God has thus increased His punishments not upon one man only, but upon the whole world, let us think upon it, and call ourselves home again lest He fall to striking us with many blows, to our confusion and utter undoing, without giving us any more opportunities to come to a knowledge of our sins. Let us beware lest God's vengeance proceed so far, And inasmuch as we see that the trials of these present days are very great, let us acknowledge that we have provoked God very much, and that it is not for us to abuse His patience any longer. Thus you see in effect what we have to carry away from this text, especially when we see that sin is overflowing, so that all the world is infected with corruption.

Even if a man does good, yet all the same it is so mixed with sin that he shall be chastised.¹ Not immediately, however, because as I said before, God spares the wicked and waits for them, and meanwhile punishes the good that seek to walk aright. Yet in the end He always plagues the despisers of His law and majesty. And concerning the good, He will make them to feel His grace to their joy, so that although He exercises them with many chastisements and

adversities, yet notwithstanding, they will always know Him to be their God and Father still, and will rest upon Him. As for the wicked, they are not disposed to taste or to feel the love and goodness of God, but rather are cold to Him.

But when iniquity has increased to the size of an ocean, and all men are corrupted, then the vengeance of God must also overflow, so that none may be free from it. We have seen already the threat that was made here before, namely that the people should be led into captivity with their king (v. 36). When this came to pass, were none carried away into captivity but the wicked, and such as strove against the prophets, and such as despised the true teachings, and such as were headstrong against God like wild beasts? No indeed. There was Jeremiah himself, who had called upon the people for fifty years altogether and never ceased to cry, "What are you doing, you wretched people?" Yet notwithstanding we see that while others ridiculed them, he wept and wailed, and not contented with that, said, "Who can turn my head into tears, so that my brain may be as a fountain gushing out continually, that I may bewail the sins and calamities of my people?" (Jer. 9:1).

See how the holy prophet, after he had labored in the service of God and fought against all the wicked, and made war against all manner of iniquity and stubbornness, is still led away captive along with the rest, and is put to reproach, not of being carried away to Babylon, for that had been the best that could have been wished for at that time, but God gave him not the favor not be brought thither, but he was carried into Egypt (Jer. 43:6). Yet he had said, "Cursed be they that go into Egypt. Go into Babylon and serve the king of Babylon. Be quite and obedient there, and bear patiently this punishment of God, and in the end He will take pity on you" (cf. Jer. 42). The holy prophet was not given the same privilege.

So we see then that when calamities come as a result of the general corruption of all men, the good are wrapped up among the evil. And why is that? Because it is virtually impossible to walk among such infections, and not to be somewhat spotted therewith. Although Jeremiah resisted the evil as much as he could, yet he savored of the public corruptions of the people, and therefore it behooved him to be punished along with the rest. God, however, did not execute such vengeance upon him, as He did upon the despisers of His law; no, not by a long shot. For Jeremiah always had a good testimony, that God was guiding him. And when he was in Egypt, he was by a special privilege free from the curse that he had pronounced upon all those

1. Calvin apparently here refers to a wicked man who does some good deed, as the next sentence makes clear. Punishments come first, he avers, to the righteous, to train them. Only later are the wicked punished permanently,

that would go into Egypt. For they drew him thither by force. You see, therefore, how God wraps up His people among the rebels, but yet He saves them after a marvelous manner, which gives them continual cause of comfort in Him.

The same may be said of Daniel. Daniel is set forth to us as a mirror of integrity. Ezekiel speaking of him names him one of the three most holy men that can be found (Ezk. 14:14), yet he was carried to Babylon, and was it for the sins of others? He would have been a hypocrite and would have lied to God, if he had maintained that it was not for his own sins. For he says expressly in the ninth chapter (Dan. 9:20). "I have made confession as well of my own sins as of the sins of my people." He begins by saying, "Lord, we have offended You, and been disobedient. We have rebelled against You, both we and our fathers, our kings and rulers" (Dan. 9:5). These words of his are spoken generally, and it might be said that he is simply putting himself in with all the others. But so that there might be no such misunderstanding, he goes further and says, "I have confessed my sins and the sins of my people." Whereby we see that Daniel, despite his integrity and perfection, was nevertheless stained with the common vices, and therefore deserved to suffer his part and portion of the punishments that God sent upon all the people.

Hereby we are also the better warned, to stand in fear and to walk with greater wariness when we see the world so corrupted, assuring ourselves that in the end we must feel by experience that God has spoken in good earnest, where He says that He will walk contrary to us, if we continue in walking contrary to Him. This is in effect all that we have to remember in this text, where Moses speaks of signs and miracles. For this reason let us open our eyes in this situation, and let us not linger until God compels us to come to Him by force, stretching out His mighty arm against us. But let us receive His word, and let it serve us for spectacles to behold His judgments afar off, and let us not tarry until He comes to the point of executing His extreme rigor.

Gods Gentle Dealings Spurned

Now he adds the statement, "Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joy and a glad heart, when you had an abundance of all things" (verse 47). Here he reproves the Jews, since they were unwilling to hear when God entreated them gently. And he was speaking not only to them but also to us. We have, therefore, a general doctrine to be gathered from this saying, which is that God, of His own nature, is inclined to allure us to Himself by gentle and loving means. God is like a father going about to win his children by being merry with them, and by giving them all that they desire. If a father could always laugh with His children, and fulfill their desires, all his delight would be in them. Such does God show Himself to be toward us. Indeed He is not subject to passion as men are. We may not think that God is like us. But in so far as we are unable to comprehend His majesty, because it is so high, He is happy to humble Himself and to use a kind of speech fit for our rudeness and for the weakness of our minds.² Nevertheless, it is certain that it is

2. This is certainly an unsatisfactory statement, though it is unfortunately typical of one strain in Calvin's thought. We should rather say that God created man in His own image, and that human fathering reflects Divine fathering. There is no humbling of God to the weakness of our minds revolved when the analogy is used; rather, it is one of the analogies God ordained in the first place. Ultimately, to speak as if the finitude of our minds makes it hard for God to communicate to us is to deny the doctrine of creation, and to fall into an epistemological monophysitism. As God's creatures, and particularly as His images, we have no problem understanding what is proper for us to know. Our problems are ethical, and that is what Calvin is really getting at by means of his unfortunate choice of words. Also, we should add that there is no reason to deny emotion to God, His emotion being the original of which ours is the created image. There is perhaps a tinge of Stoicism in Calvin here.

the property of God to win us gently, as a father endeavors to win his children.

What does God require? That we should serve Him with an open and free heart, and with gladness. And how so? Because He deals gently with us, and gives us all things that we need: therefore, we ought to be quiet and well contented, and not be thankless. And so we may conclude that all the calamities, troubles, wretchednesses, and miseries which happen in this world are but the fruits of our sins, and that we drive God to handle us with such rigor. He is ready, you might say, to transform Himself, and to forsake His nature,³ in order to master us, because He sees that sin is exceedingly great in us, and that we have no skill to turn to our own benefit the good that He is ready to do to us.

All the same, as I have said before, God does not always wait until we have offended Him. We have to grant that He prevents our sins sometimes. He sees that we are in danger of falling, and He takes steps to remedy it in due time. Yet notwithstanding this, all the corrections which we endure in this world proceed from our sins, and the filth that is in us is the reason why God does not send us abundance of good things according to our desire. The fact is that men fall asleep and sap themselves in earthly pleasures, so that they are not able to consider what David calls them to, which is to satisfy themselves with the sight of God and to rejoice in His presence. Seeing that men cannot attain thereto, but are constantly wedded to these base things, do we not deserve for God to withdraw the plenty that He was ready to give us? For He perceives that it would burst us, and instead of sustaining us it would so overload us that it would bear us down to the ground.

This is the reason why our Lord does not give us gifts liberally, such as we desire. After all, He is not drained dry, nor does He fear being impoverished by sending us plenty of all manner of good things. We know that He is a fountain that can never be drawn dry. But He sees that we waste and devour His benefits, and are worse than drunken, and that in addition to our riotousness we are also unthankful, not only falling into forgetfulness but also spurning His majesty and turning our backs upon Him. Indeed, if we have the means to maintain ourselves well, we fall to gluttony, pompousness, whoredom, and other looseness. And to be brief, the abuses which we commit in the use of God's blessings are as immeasurable as the sea. Therefore, when He sees such things, He withdraws His hand and stops showing Himself liberal towards us. This is the sum total of what we have to bear in mind.

And therefore, seeing that God for His part is always ready to multiply us, and to give us plenty of all good things, were it not that we are unable to bear it, we must understand that we are like sick people who may only eat a little food at a time, being constrained to a diet. And why? Because they are not able to keep their food down. From this we ought to understand what Moses is saying, that it is to our reproach. For what a shame it is that we cannot abide that God should deal gently and in a fatherly way with us! Behold, God offers Himself not only in words but also in deeds, and He offers to give us all that we desire. But what do we find? He sees us not disposed to receive Him. We despise Him, and thrust away His grace. Must there not be a horrible perversity in men? Let every one of us excuse himself as much as he wishes, yet this saying is true; and when we have kicked and spurned as much as we can, yet we shall at the last be convicted of this evil, that we could not find it in our hearts to permit God to deal gently with us, "nor have served Him with joy and a merry heart."

Therefore, let us not wonder when He handles us as we deserve, since we are so rebellious against Him. For when

3. That is, it is God's nature to woo us by kindness. When He punishes us, that is against his nature, so to speak.

He sees that we kick against Him, He must needs break us, and deal with us in such a way that we may understand that He is our Master. It is not as if those who are punished wind up serving God, but that they understand that He has the majesty over them when the punishments come so fiercely as to be signs and wonders. When God appears to them as it were in a visible manner from heaven, then do they perceive the reality, "Alas, I cannot flee nor escape the hand of God." Then do they understand that He has the lordship over them, not that they willingly yield themselves thereto, but that they lie languishing and astonished, as men locked up in prison.

What we have to remember, then, is that since we could not be content that God should handle us gently, by bowing under His hand that He might guide us, turn us, and return us whichever way He wished: therefore, we must be forced by tribulation and sorrow to understand that He has full sovereignty over us, and that His utter breaking and overthrowing of us is because we could not abide to be governed by His hand when He was ready to guide us. This is what we have to note here.

The Loss of Spiritual Blessings

We see the same thing in all humanity, and not only concerning the afflictions of this present life—we have this reproach laid upon us, that we are still as it were famished for want of Spiritual blessings. For our father Adam was created in such a state that the world was an earthly paradise. The whole earth yielded him all good things to his wish. He endured neither heat nor cold, nor any grievous want. Thus **was** our father Adam appointed lord and master over all the world. All the elements and all the beasts of the earth served him quietly, and all fruits served his taste and savor. What was he in his person? He bore the image of God, and was of such a great nobility and worth that he was like the angels of heaven.

And he would have dwelt in this world with all his lineage, in a place in which he would have had no trouble, but he could not abide to be so gently entreated. When God had thus enriched him with His benefits, he had to turn things for himself, for he could not serve God with a good heart and with joy. What could have grieved him? After all, God had showed him a fair and gracious countenance, and poured out the treasures of His fatherly love towards him. But Adam could not abide that, and through his Ingratitude alienated himself from God.

And how is it with us today? We must serve God in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and reproach, for the earth is cursed to us. When we have tilled it, it must bring us forth thistles and thorns. We find the seasons contrary, so that when we wad for a good year, we see hail or frost, drought or rain, which serve to pluck the bread out of our mouths and to disappoint us of our food. We see the air troubled, and infections which often engender diseases. Great is the toil of men. For when they have gotten food with great distress, yet they lack something to clothe themselves with. See there. I **say**, what a state we are in. And why? Because we would not serve our God cheerfully and with a good heart, when He **gave** us abundance of all manner of blessings.

But this is not the chief matter, as I have said already, for we are destitute of the righteousness of God. Our very truest ornament was that we could have fashioned ourselves to all manner of rightness, and how we have ruined this! Then we had reason and understanding, but now we have become beastly, for the brightness that should shine in us is but darkness. Again, we are covered with reproach, and **where the image of God should shine in us, now we have the marks** of sin, so that even our very bare bodies must give us to un-

derstand the same thing, so **that** if a man is naked, he is ashamed of himself. And why? God by this means shows to us what infection there is in our souls, **in that we find it necessary** to hide ourselves, not being worthy to be numbered among His creatures. Finally we become like dry earth. True it is that we are overly fruitful in evil; but **of goodness, what is found in us?** Seeing that we are thus tacking in **all graces**, there is good reason why we should languish in this frail life, because we could not serve our God **with joy and a good heart**, at the time when He had **poured out all** His riches most perfectly upon us.

Now since we behold the evil that is **in all mankind**, let us also apply the same particularly to **ourselves**. Therefore, when our Lord visits us, and makes us feel **afflictions** that are strange to us, let us cast down our **heads**, and **enter into** such examination of ourselves as this: When God has given us the means to serve Him, how have we discharged ourselves with it? If there comes an ill year that brings dearth of corn or wine, so that famine threatens us, let us look how we honored God in the time that He gave us plenty.

If we see that there is abundance of wine, then drunkenness will have full play, so that men cannot be restrained from breaking out into all sorts of disorder, and what is worse, they do not hesitate to blaspheme the name of God and to rush out into all disorder, in order to fill and glut themselves out of all measure. When corn is abundant we see the same thing. Men are so proud of it that they **cannot** abide either warning or discipline, but they kick against God, and their pride is moreover matched with cruelty so that every man rakes in everything he can unto himself. He that has the most will, if he can, play the tyrant over his neighbors, taking no pity upon them that are in want.

Wars and Rumors of Wars

At this point, we are in a time of plenty. Therefore, **we** can expect our Lord to change His plenteous abundance and to manifest His majesty to us, in order to compel us to understand what sovereignty and dominion He has over us, since we cannot find it in our hearts to serve Him with a cheerful heart and with a good will, and since we refuse to give ourselves over to Him. Are we at rest? Yes, and so all our endeavors center on how to pluck out one another's eyes, and to torment each other like cats and dogs. And if we are not warring with men, then we **are** warring against God, something far worse. And if we keep this up, let us not be grieved when we are confounded altogether, seeing we set ourselves up against the majesty of Him under whom we ought to bow.

After all, we see that most commonly men make war against God when He gives them rest. We shall see both generally and particularly that those who have leisure to do evil, are the ones who persecute the Church and torment the poor faithful ones. As soon as God gives them any respite, they seek nothing but occasion to do hurt and to exercise their cruelty. And this is to be seen not only in the enemies of the Church, but also in all others, both great and small. When God has given us rest and we have made an end of warring one against another, we fall to despising God one way or another, Let us not wonder, therefore, if when a **war is finished**, it begins again immediately. For it is necessary **that** God should deal with us in such a way; otherwise, He cannot rule us.

Thus it is said here, in verse 49, that God will **raise** up a barbarous people against such **as will not be obedient** to Him. Such is God's rule over us, that He desires to be like a father to us, rather than to be a dreadful king or prince over us. It is true that we must do **Him homage as our sovereign Lord**, and that we must behave **ourselves as His people in all**

subjection and humility, submitting ourselves under His yoke. But all the same He continues to perform the office of a father toward us, and wishes to be acknowledged as a father. For He speaks to us in a friendly fashion, so that although His commandments are hard for us because of our malice and rebellion arising from the flesh, yet notwithstanding, after He has declared His will to us, He exhorts us, warns us, rebukes us, and does all these things with such mildness that we must lack both sense and reason if we are not benefited by the goodness He employs.

But if we will not hearken to our God when He speaks to us in so gentle and gracious a manner, what then? Then He will speak to us with the heavy strokes of halberds, pikes, and hackbuts (or, battle-axes, bayonets, and pistols).⁴ We shall find this hard to comprehend; their language will be strange to our intellects. And why does this come about? Because we had no ears to hear when God spoke graciously to us, indeed when He stooped so low as to teach us like little children that are taught their ABCs.

Let us then understand that when we are so deaf to God's word, He must speak with us in another language, and He must stir up some barbarous and brazen-faced people that have no fear, reason, or justice. When you pray for pity and compassion to such people, it will be in vain. They

4. *Halberd*—a military weapon, especially in use during the 15th and 16th centuries; a kind of combination of spear and battle-ax, consisting of a sharp-edged blade ending in a point, and a spear-head, mounted on a handle five to seven feet long.

Pike—a weapon consisting of a long wooden shaft with a pointed head of iron or steel; formerly the chief weapon of a large part of the infantry; in the 18th c. superseded by the bayonet.

Hackbut—an early kind of portable firearm.

(Definitions from *The Oxford English Dictionary*.)

will give no ear to you. You will find yourselves in such straits, whether you think so now or not.

And what is the remedy for all these evils? Let us enter, let us enter I say, into our consciences. Let us not grind our teeth at men, as we are prone to do. Let us not strive with them, for that is not where our combat lies. But let us understand that God intends to chastise us by means of men, because we have been stubborn against Him and refused to be edified by His word according to His first intention. And therefore, let us benefit ourselves by these warnings and corrections which God sends us. And let us not wait until we feel the strokes, but whenever God does us the favor of teaching us at the expense of other men, let us receive profit from it. And when He spares us, let us not abuse His patience. And since the means to reconcile us to Him is to accept the promise that He offers us in the Gospel, let us embrace our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is our peace, to the end that we may be entreated after a fatherly fashion at the hands of our God.

Prayer

Now let us fall down before the majesty of our good God, with acknowledgment of our sins, beseeching Him to make us to perceive them better and better, and to bear with us in such a way that His chastisements and corrections may be so fatherly and measured toward us that we may be reduced to the obedience of His righteousness. Let us pray that He evermore comfort us, so that we may have the ability to rejoice in Him and to glorify Him for His procuring of our salvation by all available means. And so let us all say, Almighty God, heavenly Father, etc.

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