

Calvin Speaks



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GOD OUR FORTRESS* (Part 2)

.Title not in the original

Sermon 161. 26 March 1556. Deuteronomy **28:49-58**.

Summary of the First Half

*Calvin begins by reminding us that the only sure **protection** against evil is for our ways to please the Lord, for it is He who holds all things in His hand, either to bless or to curse us. Commenting on verse 49, Calvin notes that God will bring His armies of wrath upon sinners suddenly and **swiftly**, so that it almost seems a miraculous punishment. Moving to verse 52, Calvin points out that human fortresses might as well be made of paper when we trust **in them rather than in God**. Calvin now continues by moving to comments on the horrors of siege warfare.*

Human Shelters, Human Traps

Now with all this he also shows that whatever we may devise for our own strength and security, it **will** be impotent in the **face** of His power, and we shall **continue** to be besieged until we are totally wasted. indeed, we may gather from this text that it would be much better for us to be delivered into the hands of our enemies from the first, than to have the means to resist. [Shut up in the siege] we are made so to languish that we are not permitted a simple and clean death. The poor folk who are abroad in the fields are struck at the very first, and are dispatched. **Surely** they are in a piteous **state**, with their throats cut and all their possessions set on fire, but all the same, by such means they are delivered from their miseries so that they do not pine away in suffering. But those who are in **strong** towns have to abide a long siege. They must languish and pine away piecemeal, not for a mere month or two, but until they can no longer hold out. The result is as if they should die a hundred deaths.

Thus does our Lord avenge Himself on those who think that they **have** escaped when God does not root them out at the first. "No" He says, "think about this. Which fruits are preferable? Those that are brought to the market in their prime and are eaten immediately, or those that are kept for a time and eventually rot? It were better then for you to be overcome and vanquished by your enemies at the first." Let us therefore consider well that when we have the means to defend ourselves against the world, where it ought to profit us, it shall turn to our double confusion if we place our trust in it. We shall groan a great while under the burden, and be

wasted little by little. For when we are disobedient and **refuse** to be reformed, our Lord will not let us go until He has utterly destroyed us, as He shows here so many times in this passage.

Cannibalism

This is brought home by what Moses adds in verse 54, that the man who is so tender and very delicate among you, shall be grieved at his brother and at the wife who lies in his arms, because they will demand a share of his children when he eats them. The woman who is so particular that she will not touch the ground with her bare feet (such are **the** words of Moses), shall seek to destroy and spoil her own children. Indeed, they shall no sooner be born out of her womb than she will desire to devour them, and if she has raised them to a larger size, she will still not spare them. These are dreadful things. For it is not simply said, "You shall be besieged, and remain a long time in famine, so that you shall be driven to eat horses rats, mice, shoeleather, and the very manure of birds (as it is said in 2 Kings **6:25**), and all these things shall be your meat." Nor is it said that men and women should be eaten, but that every man shall eat his own children.

When God speaks this way it should make our hair stand upright. And in fact, everything here declared by Moses eventually came **to** pass. Let no man say, "This is not credible; it is repugnant to nature. A man would pluck the bread out of his own mouth when he is in extremity, in order to give it to his children. He would die to help them, just as we see that **Hagar** could not abide to see the death of her child, but left him alone and wished for her own death." But we don't need to get into an argument over such things, for the common affection of humanity sufficiently shows that any man would rather die than eat his own children. Yet, such cruelty was shown among the **Jews**. They who had been instructed in the law of God, and should have had much more humanity and compassion than the pagans and infidels, even they forgot all manner of true living, and were overcome by this madness. It was fitting that this blindness, of which the prophets also spoke, and which we see here already mentioned by Moses, should come to **pass in them, and that they should lose their minds**. For when God takes away **all** reason and uprightness from men, then **He** leaves them to a

kind of madness. Such fury must have been in them, for them to eat their own **children**.¹

By this we are particularly warned that those who are set aside for the last judgment are in no better **situation** than those whom God chastises long before. And this is a profitable warning. For as soon as God strikes some, and leaves others alone, we want to know why. **Weren't** they equally deserving? We do not have the patience to allow God to execute His judgments in the order that seems good to Himself, but we surmise that those whom He leaves alone, and whom He forbears for a little while, are privileged more than we are. But it is the other way around. It would have been better for them to have been punished earlier than to be thus reserved for the end. And therefore, let us not envy those whom God forbears for a time, as though they were exempt from all plagues, but let us wait until God fetches them about at their time; for it would have been far better **for them** if they had been dispatched out of hand.

And with all of this let us every one look to himself. Let us not trust in the patience that God uses towards us, deceiving ourselves therewith. Indeed, when God has been patient, and forbore us, it should give us a better disposition to resort to Him, and to hope to find Him merciful to forgive us our faults and trespasses. But we must not fail asleep therein, to dally with Him, and to say, "O well, He has waited this long to deal with us. He will continue to wait some more." We see the wicked thinking this way. They don't worry, for when they see that God has spared them, they think that they are discharged. Let us beware that. For we see how he says that when we are well appointed, and have fortresses as it were invincible, all must fall down on our heads, and we shall be so much the more grievously punished. This much we have to bear in mind from this text.

Now let us mark further that when we forget our God, we must also forget all the course of nature, and He finds it proper to strip us of our wits. For it is He on whom all human fatherhood depends; He is the wellspring of it. **We** would not know what the duties of parents toward their children are, nor what reverence children owe to their parents and superiors, except for the fact that God is sovereign leader in this. If we do not refer all to Him, He will make us to become idiotic, so that we will not understand what this fatherly affection toward our children should mean. This much for one point,

But we also have to note that those men who did so devour their own children were not so **blockish** as to be bereft of terrible heartbitings. They were vexed with furious fearfulness, that made them abhor that which they did. It is true that they were carried away by force, and had no reason in them; but yet for all they they had certain secret stings and prickings inwardly, and God held them as it were upon the rack of torture, as if He were saying to them, "What will you do, wretched creature? It would have been better for you to have been born before your time, and for the earth to have swallowed you up a hundred times, than that you should have committed so terrible a deed. All the same, necessity gets the upper hand with you." Let us mark therefore, that when we are not made meek under the hand of God, we must then fall into such a **blockishness**, that will overmaster us, and make us torment ourselves without the help of any other executioner, so that every one of us shall execute God's vengeance upon himself, which vengeance he had earlier scorned and scoffed at.

1. While Calvin probably ascribes more virtue reason than is warranted, he should not be taken as saying that the only issue is reason versus insanity in the modern sense. Moral madness is what he primarily has in mind. Also, it might be mentioned here that devouring one's own children is what the mysterious law about not boiling a kid in its mother's milk deals with. See James B. Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant* (forthcoming, 1984).

I have said that there is **nothing** here spoken of which has not been seen come to pass, to wit that fathers have eaten their children, and also have mothers (2 Kings 6:29; Lam. 4:10). But in that the Jews had most exceedingly provoked God, even so they came to the **fulness** of iniquity, and consequently it behooved God so to utter His wrath toward them with extremity, that it was seen when they were **besieged** by their enemies. For then did they eat pigeons' dung, **buying** it by gold weight. You will see that they committed acts against nature by eating one another. But when they had once rejected the Son of God, and had utterly cut themselves off from the hope of salvation by forsaking the Redeemer upon whom were grounded all the promises which had been made unto them concerning the goodness of God; then it was necessary that those things should be the more accomplished. For if you read the histories, even of those who were of that same nation, and which were present witnesses of the matter, you would think that you heard dreams or fables; and yet for all that, those things were then notoriously known, and noted to be true, and God intended as it were to set up scaffolds, that it might be seen how His threats directed against His people were not in vain, as we see, and that all men should take example **thereat**.²

For they are horrible things, and such as should make our hairs stand upright, when it is said that the husband shall deceive the wife and steal away the children which issued from their two bodies, and that the wife also shall seek some secret place to cut the throat of her child, as if to say, "I will set this aside for himself." And both the husbands and the wives should be so mad as to say, "I will eat my own child." Seeing that all these things were accomplished, and that our Lord has executed such vengeance, let us understand that we ought not to read these things at this day without trembling, for it is even as if God should lay forth His previously uttered vengeance before us on a silver platter. Moreover, let us understand that when God had pronounced such sentence against the Jews, it was not executed at the first day. For He waited for them with long patience, so that it seemed that no mischief should light upon them. But when the sore was burst, then was the rottenness perceived which lay hidden before and the disease was the more deadly. Also let us mark that if God does bear with us, and afterwards He corrects us in various ways, and yet does not strike so roughly as to come to extremity, we must not think that we have thereby escaped His hand, but we must return to Him, and not tarry till He sees our disobedience to be unreformable, and so find it needful to proceed to the extremity of His threatenings. Thus much have we to remember touching this text.

The Fearfulness of God

Now finally Moses says, "if you do not keep all the words of this law to do them, and if you do not fear this dreadful and glorious name, the Lord your God. . . ." It certainly seems at first glance that what Moses requires of men is beyond measure, that it is not in their power, for who is he that can fulfill all the law of God? And again, though a man miss in some certain points, should God use such rigor? I have told you before that he directs this speech towards those that are wholly given over to evil, and to such as are despisers of God, who break His law by every means they can. To what end, then, does he require such perfection?

Let us first of all mark that God will **not** have his law chop-

2. The reference is to Josephus's accounts of the devastation of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

ped into **pieces** and sections, for He is setting forth His righteousness unto us in it. Men therefore must not chop things up at their own pleasure, as if to say, "I will, for God's honor, abstain from whoredom, but I will steal if I please; I will abstain from murder, but I will be a blasphemer." No, but seeing that He who forbids us to rob has also forbidden us to kill, and He who has forbidden fornication has in like manner forbidden blasphemy, let us learn to obey Him in all points and in all respects. Let us restrain our senses and bridle our affections, and to be short, let us come to the point to give ourselves wholly to the service of our God. That is what we ought to do, and that is what Moses is speaking of here. For if we miss in any one point, we are accursed of God, and deserve the rigor which is here mentioned.

Nevertheless, He of His mercy does not cease to bear with us. Yea, and He will never use the great severity that is spoken of here, but towards such as set themselves altogether stubbornly against Him. Yet notwithstanding, it is not without cause that Moses here exhorts the Jews to the perfect observation of the law. A physician prescribing an order does not permit his patient to eat whatever he wants, or to do anything amiss at all, no matter how little it seems, but he says, 'i will have you to do such and such.' Now if the sick man were to step aside to the slightest degree, very well, he is not yet incurable, the physician will still have care of him. But if he overturns everything, and casts off all order, and plays the madman, well, he shall have payment as he deserves. In like manner will our Lord have us at His commandment in all cases, and for good reason.

Even so, there is such great infirmity (1 mean even in those who are governed by the Holy Spirit, and who strain themselves to be obedient unto Him) that they fail in many respects, but yet however the world may go, sin never overpowers them, for they do not strive to transgress the law, but proceed forward, and even though they do it limpingly, yet they keep on moving toward God. And concerning these infirmities, they are born along withal. It is true that God will chastise them, and in what manner? Even in forgiving them, according to this saying of His,"¹ I will visit their iniquities, but it shall be with the rod of men, and not with extremity. I will not deal with them as with enemies. I will not take away My mercy from them, although I correct them." Thus does God deal in that way. But if our hearts are utterly hardened, then will He war upon us, and destroy us without sparing, and even though He bears with us, yet **shall** ail turn to our confusion. That is one thing that we have to remember concerning this text.

It is also a notable point to be observed, where Moses speaks of the yoke of iron. For he says (verse 48) that the Lord will lay a yoke of iron upon the neck of all unbelievers until they are wholly consumed. And that is to the end that we should learn to receive the corrections He sends, and not kick against them. For we see what happened to Hananiah when he mocked at the threats of Jeremiah (Jer. 28), and tried to break the yoke which he had upon his neck, which was a yoke of wood and cords. The prophet wore that yoke to move the people to consider that they should all become captives, and so to behold their own state in the person of Jeremiah. Now this wicked one that was possessed by the devil (to make the Word of God to be ignored) came to break the yoke from Jeremiah, and said, "Even thus will God break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar; and even if he besiege you, and do what he can to carry you away captives into a strange land, yet shall you be **preserved** by the grace of your God." God threatened, and this fellow mocked all His threats, and for that purpose took the shadow of the name of God, and abused the people. **Well** then, what did he win by such rebellion? It was said to the prophet Jeremiah, 'Take a yoke of iron' (Jer. 28:14), for whereas the bondage should

have been gentle and **tolerable**,² it must now be so cruel, that they shall not be able to endure it. See here how He deals with all such as harden their hearts against God, and refuse to abide and be meekened by His hand.

So then, let us be afraid of this yoke of iron. First of all, we know that God's yoke is amiable to all such as willingly yield themselves to it, and allow themselves to be governed by the hand of our Lord Jesus Christ. **We** have the testimony of the Son of God, "My yoke is easy, and My burden is light. Come to Me, and learn that I am lowly and meek." Seeing that our Lord Jesus declares that those who are teachable and obedient shall perceive that there is neither burden nor weight nor grief in His yoke, to overpower them, it ought to move us to yield our necks unto it and to pray God to put us under it, and also to permit Him to chastise us when we have offended Him. Indeed, the strokes will be grievous to us, as the apostles says, and we shall never find the corrections pleasant during the time that God strikes us (**Heb.** 12). We are like little children when they are corrected; we feel it grievous, because our nature cries out against it. But whether we like it or not, God will use that fatherly means, and by little and little teach us to return unto Him. But if we find it necessary to try His patience to the uttermost, He must then use the iron rod to break our heads with it, as it is said in Psalm 2. **We** shall be driven to feel the iron which shall serve, not to reclaim us, but to break us in pieces and to confound us utterly. And justly, for we have heard what is said here, "If you will not fear the glorious and dreadful name of the Lord your God."

Where does this despoising and contempt of all good doctrine come from, and our boldness in sinning, if not from this, that we are deaf to all admonitions? Indeed, if we could yield ourselves obedient to our God, with a good heart, and with a good affection, and abide at that point continually, we should no sooner hear these threats but we should consider thus, "Alas, do we not deserve a grievous curse at God's hand, seeing we have thus striven against Him?" **We** see then that all the evil deeds and disobedience which are committed do spring from ignorance and contempt of God, in that we have failed to regard His majesty. Certainly this kind of stubbornness is not always directly of set purpose and determined malice, but yet there is such rudeness in us that we do not yield such a reverence to God as is requisite, nor the obedience whereby we should endeavor to submit ourselves to His word.

And because we are so bullheaded that nothing can quicken us up, when we are called upon to submit ourselves to God, Moses says expressly, "**this** dreadful name, this glorious name," which is "the Lord, your God." Where he says, "The Lord," which is 'the eternal, the **everlasting**,'³ that term imports all glory and majesty, and therefore ought to ravish us with wonder. Indeed, for we should not have this name of God so that we can use it coldly, so as to say "God, God," as they do who have it continually in their lips, and afterwards do let it vanish, as though it were a thing of nothing. But we must join both together thus: God, even the same that created us, the same that holds all things in His hand, the same that is honored by the angels, the same that is of glory infinite, the very same whom all the principalities of heaven cannot abide, at the sight of whom all manner of creatures must be fain to cast down their eyes, even the same which with one word alone can make all the earth to tremble, the same that can remove mountains with His mere blast, the same that gives being to all manner of creatures, finally the same that maintains and governs all things and orders all things well, righteously, and with wisdom; the

3. In French, the word "Lord" is rendered "the Eternal." The translation is based on the meaning of "I am that I am."

same it is who speaks to us.

And so you see after what manner we use the words of Moses, where he says, "The Lord your God, He it is who speaks to you." Let us therefore hear Him speak, in such a way that His majesty may possess all our wits, and that thereby we may be so humbled under the same that when we have worshiped Him, we may so remain under His hand, that we allow ourselves to be governed by Him, to follow the rule that He has delivered to us.

if **He** inclined to execute the office of a judge against us; and with all **this** let us pray Him not to fail to be a Father to us for our Lord Jesus Christ's sake. And that since we are guilty of many **offences**, we may allow ourselves to be daily cut off from our sins, so that nothing may hinder our coming to Him to yield ourselves in such a way **to** Him that we may renounced all our wicked affections more and more, until we are thoroughly rid of them, and are clothed with His heavenly **righteousness**. And so let us all say, Almighty God and heavenly Father, etc.

Prayer

Now let us fall down before the judgment seat of our God, acknowledging the infinite faults of which we are guilty,

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