

Calvin Speaks



No. 45

01984, Geneva Divinity School

May, 1984

A PLETHORA OF PLAGUES*

(Part 1)

**Title not in the original*

Sermon 162. 27 March 1556. Deuteronomy 28:59-64.

59. Then the Lord will make your plagues marvelous, and the plagues of your seed, even great and certain [lasting] plagues, and sicknesses wretched and chronic [lasting].

60. Moreover he will bring upon you all the diseases of Egypt, which you were afraid of; and they shall cleave to you.

61. Also every disease and every plague which is not written in the book of this law, them will the Lord bring upon you, until you are destroyed.

62. And you shall be left few in **number**, whereas you were as the stars of heaven for multitude, because you **would** not obey the voice of the Lord your God.

63. And it shall come to pass, that just as the Lord your God rejoiced over you to do you good, and to multiply you; so will the Lord rejoice over you to destroy you, and to bring you to nought; and you shall be plucked from off the/and whither you go to possess it.

64. And the Lord shall scatter you among all **people**, from the one end of the earth even to the other; and there you shall serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known, even wood and stone.

I have discussed already how slow men are when it comes to learning from the chastisements which God sends them. For they continue to become more and more hardhearted, until they perceive the hand of God and are driven to understand that it is He with whom they have to do. And to make it worse, they labor to conceal from themselves that which they ought to feel and see right before their eyes, which is that it is for their sins that they have been smitten.

Marvelous and Lasting Plagues

Since men will never willingly come to a knowledge of themselves, God finds it needful to force them to it. This is why Moses, in addition to what he has already said, adds that God will make the plagues that He visits upon the despisers of His law to be marvelous (v. 59a). That is to say that they shall be so noteworthy that even in spite of their rebellion they shall be afraid of them, as of things never before seen and never in use before. For we see that accustomed things are despised, just as the same is true concerning God's blessings.

For instance, the sun daily rises to lighten us, but who thinks of the change and alternation that God makes between night and day? Psalm 19 tells us that it is as if God should waken us every morning, and tell us with a loud voice how reasonable it is that His infinite goodness, wisdom, and power are known (Ps. 19:2). But we have no ears to hear. And why? Because the sun appears every day in the same way, and we become hardened to it because it is ordinary, and we make no account of it. It is the same with punishments; for the more our Lord provokes us to come to Him, the more do we stir ourselves up to become un-reformable. Thus is it needful for us that His plagues should be a wonder to us, and we may be afraid of them in spite of our rebellion.

Again he adds that they shall be great and certain, or lasting (v. 59 b). The last word Moses uses signifies true or faithful.¹ By this God causes us to understand that His plagues shall grasp hold on us completely, just as He said also that they would cleave to them that were rebellious and could not be won by gentle-

1. That is, "certain" means 'lasting, continuing, or true in the sense of faithful, enduring.'

ness. These plagues must be rooted in them, and for that reason He terms them "certain." Here we must consider our own hardness, that every one of us may be more vigilant in looking to the hand of God, and benefit ourselves from it. And let us be afraid lest God should do what is threatened here in this text, which is that when His normal punishments do not profit us, then He must proceed against us after such a strange and horrible manner; indeed, such a way that will make us fearful and cause the hairs to stand on the back of the heads of all those who but hear of it, and as the prophet Jeremiah says, to make men's ears tingle when the reports of it come into foreign countries (Jer. 19:3).

Let us be afraid, then, lest God work on us after that manner, when He perceives such stubbornness in us that He cannot win us by measurable and tolerable correction. And with this let us also take warning by this phrase, "sicknesses wretched and chronic," or lasting (v. 59c).² When God has followed us to bring us to the way of salvation, and we have fled from Him, then the plagues must also continue to the uttermost, both upon us and upon all our descendants, so that when we think we have seen an end of them, we shall find that we have not yet begun. Let us not, therefore, think that we shall escape when the plague has lasted for a while. For as we proceed on in our wickedness, so must God proceed with His rigor and augment it more and more, according as He sees us wax worse and worse.

When this happens, let us not do as we see most men do, who cry out and storm at it, saying, "When will this end? Why is it that God takes no pity on me, to ease my pains?" But when they say this, do they have any intention of reconciling themselves to God? Do they confess their sins and bewail them? No, rather they defy Him at this very point. All the while they talk about their feelings, and make their complaints, but not one of them looks to the foundation of the trouble, in order to set it right.

Therefore, when we have been rebellious against God, let us not think it strange that He should pursue us with such rigor, but let us acknowledge that it is expedient for us. And meanwhile, let us not forget what is here written, namely that God threatens sinners for the purpose of bringing them back again, even though they have been like folk forlorn and past hope of recovery. For God is not speaking hereto men who have committed only one fault, or some two or three faults. Nor is He speaking to those who, having done amiss, yet did not wholly give themselves over to wickedness. Rather, He speaks unto such offenders as have made war against Him for a long time, and despised His Word, and been deaf to all His warnings, making a mockery of them. Yet notwithstanding, He does not cease to threaten them still. And to what end or purpose? Even to win them by His amiable goodness. So then, although we have gone astray for a

2. The same Hebrew word for "lasting" as in the earlier phrase of the verse.

time, yet it is better for us to turn late than never, and thus we shall fare well by that which is here shown us by Moses.

The Plagues of Egypt

Now, next he says that God will cause the plagues of Egypt to come upon the Jews (v. 60). We understand that God afflicted the Egyptians so much that they became a terror to His own people, insomuch that the Jews themselves were astonished at it, even though they were exempted from the evil. When the Egyptians were oppressed to the uttermost, the Jews understood from this that God was sparing them, and that He held them in His protection because He smote their enemies while He kept them in peace and rest. And this we see chiefly in His killing all the firstborn of Egypt. For God had commanded, that the door posts of the houses should be marked with the blood of the Paschal Lamb (Ex. 12:7). In this, God gave a singular testimony to the Jews that He would spare them, and during that time He turned His wrath and vengeance against their enemies.³

But now He says hereto the contrary, that God will cause these very plagues to return back. For the word that Moses uses means the same as if he should say, "Your fathers saw how God turned His wrath against the Egyptians, but now it must come back again upon you, because you do not care to honor and serve Him, who has loved you so much, and to whom you are so greatly bound." By this we are admonished that when God has borne with us for a time—indeed, moreover, for the love that He bears towards us, has punished our enemies, and showed Himself their enemy in order to maintain us—we must not therefore flatter ourselves, but rather be more diligent to walk in His fear. For when we will not acknowledge such grace, but rather abuse it; God has good reason to cause to fall on us those very things which He had sent upon our enemies, thereby to show us that He held us in His defense and safeguard.

It is said that the people of God shall be as a fire kindled to consume all the wicked and unbelievers. And God will surely bring this to pass. But if we kindle His wrath through our sins and transgressions, then the fire that should have fallen upon the unfaithful, must fall on us, and we must perish therewith.

Let us therefore consider well this word, and let this which is said concerning the land of Egypt be to us a mirror and an opportunity, that we at this day may apply it to our own use, since all these things are written for us. Let us mark (1 say) what our Lord did in old time for the Jews, and let us understand that thereby He recorded what love He bears to His Church.

And yet, let us take warning to yield ourselves

3. In other words, the Jews deserved to be punished the same as the Egyptians. God's sparing of them was solely of gracious election. If they do not live in accordance with His covenant, then He will bring on them the judgment He originally spared them.

obedient to Him in such a way that He may continue to do us good, and that this covenant may be confirmed between Him and us, namely "I will be a friend to your friends, and an enemy to your enemies" (Ex. 23:22). It is certain that this promise was given to Abraham, but with the intention that we also should enjoy the same. Now if we refuse to let God be our Friend, but rather make war against Him, and break the faith and alliance that is established between us; then whereas before He set Himself against our enemies, now He must be compelled to fall upon us and to make us feel His infinite power, until we are quite confounded and brought to nothing. Therefore while our Lord spares us, let us acknowledge His goodness, and not provoke His wrath to make us feel His power in smiting us.

And moreover, when it comes to pass that, although the unfaithful are the ones who should be stricken by His hand, it is we who feel the first blows, let us acknowledge that it is proper that it should be so, because we have broken the peace which He made with us. Let us not thereupon be discouraged, whatever happens, but let us stick by Him closely. Furthermore let us not tarry till He proceeds to extremity. And if we are not so wise as to have that discretion at the first, yet at least let us benefit ourselves by the notices set down in this place. After that manner should we put this text in use.

Now Moses says expressly, that the Jews feared the plagues of the Egyptians, and that they had good reason to be afraid of them *of them, for when they beheld them upon their enemies, they were then astonished at them.* Therefore it was proper that they should magnify the goodness of God. But regardless of that, the plagues which God sent upon the Egyptians, were so great and so horrible that the Jews must have been amazed at them (although that they themselves were free from them) because they beheld such an alteration of nature.

Now if they feared the wrath of God while it was upon their enemies, and had therein a testimony of His love and goodness, how should they then feel when God rushes upon their heads, and they are compelled to feel the very same plagues which came upon the Egyptians? Must they not needs be doubly decimated? Yes, and therefore we see that this threat is not superfluous, but serves to wake them up, according as we have said here before. And as experience shows, we are too much deaf, yea and as it were senseless, when God warns us that He must smite upon us as it were with a hammer, or else will we never understand what He says. And so you see the reason why this word is expressly set down.

Now when we see that God punishes the wicked, let us learn to have such fear of His vengeance, that we do not tarry until He wraps us up in the same package with those whom we have seen punished before us. This is what St. Paul meant in saying, "Deceive not yourselves, neither let any man abuse you with vain words: for the wrath of God has been

want to fall upon the unbelievers and disobedient for such offenses" (Eph. 5:6). Hereby St. Paul shows to the faithful that they should not fear the hand of God only when they see it armed against them, and when it touches their persons; but they ought to use the opportunity to reform themselves, when God is so good to them as to punish the reprobates and rebels before their eyes. Let us therefore be afraid when God punishes the wicked, and let us be advised to acknowledge Him for our Judge beforehand; and that we have well deserved to be handled as severely as they, were it not that He of His goodness forbears us. Let this touch us to the quick, that we may be brought to repentance. Thus should we yet further put this saying of Moses in practice.

New and Unheard of Plagues

Now he adds, that God (over and beside all this which He has declared) will send yet other adversities and afflictions upon the Jews. Indeed Moses had reckoned up many sorts of plagues already, and he thought it not enough to have said only once, "God will chastise you after such and such a manner," but he redoubled it, because he saw men so gross and heavy that they could not be moved at the first, as much as was desirable. But our Lord's intent here is to declare that He has means of vengeance incomprehensible, and more than can be uttered by words; *insomuch that if a man should make a list of them, and rehearse a million different kinds of them, yet should he not comprise them all, for God has other hidden means unknown to men, wherewith to punish those who rankle full of malice against Him.* And that is what we shall see in the 32nd chapter, in the solemn song that Moses makes there. "These things are laid up in My treasury," says the Lord, "so that I have whole chests full of horrible plagues, such as have never been imagined nor understood by men." Thus much is said in this text.

And so let us remember two things when we have had experience of the power of God by His doing, or read the threats that He has made against the transgressors of His law, and do behold the practice and execution thereof. First, let us be amazed thereat and say, "How now? What a thing it is to provoke the Lord? For if He spares us on the one side, He can well assail us on the other; and when we are delivered from one hundred afflictions, He has three hundred others ready for us; and when we have escaped all those, yet have we gotten nothing." Let us therefore think upon these things.

Now let us look what sorts of threats there are in Holy Scripture, how many sorts of deaths there are that God has denounced against the despisers of His majesty, and against all them that despise and set light by His word. It would weary us to recite them. And in reading the histories, we see the examples that God has given us of His wrath; and that not of

one sort only. We should be at our wits end if we should think but upon the tenth part of them. And if we should set our minds to mark and to note them all, what a thing were it? The first thing therefore which we have to do, is to be diligent to call to remembrance all the threats whereby God would tame our wicked affections, and hold us embridled, and along with that to compare the things that are set down unto us, how that God has not threatened in vain, but has accomplished whatsoever He has said. Let us think on that.

And moreover [second] let us understand, that besides the means which are contained in the Holy Scripture, God has yet a great many other means to punish men, and we see how He daily sends new kinds of wrath. And that is for the purpose which I have touched on before, namely to make His plagues wonderful, that men may be forced to think upon them because they see that God works not after the ordinary course of nature, but after a sort that has not formerly known. When each of us has well studied all the lessons that are declared to us in the Holy Scripture, and made use of the examples and punishments that are there mentioned, let us conclude that God has yet a great many more means than are expressed, which men never thought upon.

And He has made this manifest ever since the Law was written: and He has never stopped making it

manifest, in order that all manner of excuse may be taken from us. If a man looks upon the diseases that are currently in the world, he will see that there are many which were not mentioned in the law of Moses, or in the days of our fathers. How has whoredom been punished by diseases that have come up of late! Who knew the pox (syphilis) a hundred years ago? Surely that is one horrible plague which God has sent upon the world!⁴ It is the same as if He had stretched His arm out of heaven, and said, "So, they refuse to know Me any longer as their Judge; they harden their hearts against all the plagues that men knew and experienced in earlier times; they make but a fig at it; ⁵ but now I will make them to understand that in My coffers and in My storehouses there are yet other rods that are incomprehensible to them." God shows this; and we perceive that we cannot take a better course to profit by this doctrine than to fear those rods and punishments which are not written in the book of the Law. And in everything it is proper that we understand that God is wholly our Judge, no matter what happens.

(to be concluded)

4. Compare AIDS today.

5. That is, treat it as nothing.