

Calvin Speaks



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A PLETHORA OF PLAGUES* (Part 2)

.Title not in the origins/

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

Summary of the First Half

In the first part, Calvin expounds verses 59-61. As always, Calvin argues that these threats as uttered, as well as the plagues when manifest, are tokens of the grace of God, for they are the means whereby God deals with us. Better for God to deal with us than to cast us off. The plagues threatened are "marvelous" (v. 59), in that men will be astonished at their severity and peculiarity, so as to shock them to attention. The plagues will be "lasting" (v. 59), in that it took men a long time of rebellion to get to this point, and it will take prolonged chastisements to get them out of it. The plagues will be those of Egypt (v. 60), which once they escaped by the grace of God; but since they act like Egyptians, they must be treated like them. The plagues will be strange and new (v. 61), never before heard of, for God can always come up with new and ingenious ways of chastising His wayward children, so that they do not fall asleep.

The Rending of the Abrahamic Covenant

Now he adds that even though they were as many in number as the stars of heaven, God would waste them so thoroughly that there would but a handful remain. Here must we remember what we touched on earlier. For when God uses this similitude of the stars of heaven, He has respect to the promise which He had made to His servant Abraham; namely, that his seed should be in number like the stars of heaven. So God spoke. But now, so that the Jews should not presume to think that God was always bound to multiply them, He says "No, I will consume you whatsoever come of it, and you shall be but a handful of people."

It seems at the first sight that here is a contradiction. For when God promised so great a seed unto His servant Abraham it was not grounded upon the merits

of men. So then, seeing that the promise depends upon the free goodness of God, must it not be kept, even though men are wicked? Yes indeed, but we have to consider, that God does not always accomplish His promises after our fashion, nor according to our carnal capacity. He has means which we cannot begin to comprehend, and which we do not understand, until they appear by effect. Whereas He promises to multiply His Church, that is to say to make it to prosper, if He sees that under color thereof the hypocrites take liberty to do evil, he withdraws His hand.¹

Let us therefore consider well, that since the Jews were puffed up with a foolish presumption, and thought it impossible for God to diminish them, seeing He had spoken the word that He would increase them; since, I say, they abused the goodness of God and falsified His promise through their hypocrisy, He consumed them and brought them to a small number. Nevertheless, of that small number, there came a great offspring again; yea, and so great a one, that men might so much the better perceive His truth and mercy, although after another manner. Therefore He says by His prophet Isaiah in the tenth chapter: "Even though you are as the sand of the sea, (for He always sent them back to the promise made to Abraham), and even though your seed (as I said) is as the sand of the sea; yet shall but a final remnant be saved" (Is. 10:22). But when you are altogether consumed, yet shall that little remnant be dispersed over all the earth, as if out of a little fountain should issue forth a great river or a great lake, wherewith very many lands should be watered. So shall it be.

1. Calvin touches here on the "problem" of unconditional promises. Promises by their very nature have to be received by faith. God's promises are always, from that standpoint, conditional. Since God predestines all things, His promises will surely come to pass, in His own good time. Whether they come to pass in our own day, however, has to do with whether or not we are faithful. The same is true of threats, as the book of Jonah illustrates. Jonah 3:4 simply did not come to pass, though it would have if the people had not repented.

Now then we perceive, that even though God punishes the hypocrites which abuse His promises, yet He never fails to perform His promises to the full, even if by an extraordinary means as we have seen it in the Popedom, and as it is still to be seen. For the Papists have overflowed the whole world with superstition and idolatry and **all** manner of evil. Yea, and moreover they harden their hearts in pride, and scoff at God with open mouth. "How now," say they, "Are not we the church? Is it not said that Jesus Christ shall be with us unto the end of the world? Can He forsake His Church?" Yet do they continually crucify Him as much as in them **lies**;² they spit in His face, and do Him all the reproach in the world; they make Him as if He were a prisoner or a bondsman among **them**;³ and they consider not that such a horrible destruction happens throughout the whole world, through God's just vengeance for the shameless hypocrisy which has been in them that have rebelled against the Gospel. Yet notwithstanding, God has continued to save His people, as it were under the earth. And in our days He has raised His Church, as if its bones of rotten bodies should recover flesh and strength again. For what were we through our unbelief? You see how it is a miraculous resurrection that God has wrought in this way.

Mark well therefore that when our Lord promises to maintain His Church and to preserve it, this promise does not apply to them that abuse His name falsely, nor to them that come to despise Him because He is gentle and merciful. For they shall evermore be disappointed of that favor which God has so reserved unto His people, because they remove themselves from it through their own malice and unthankfulness. Yet notwithstanding, however the case stand, God is ever faithful, and will find incomprehensible means to give place to His truth, by fighting against the malice of men. That is the thing which we have to remember concerning this text, where He says that He will waste the Jews though they were as the stars in the sky.

And in fact the same appeared even in Jesus Christ the Head of the church. And therefore we ought not to think it strange that the members of the body should be fashioned like unto Him. Whence came Jesus Christ when God His father sent him to be the Redeemer? The prophet Isaiah says that He would spring from a stock, as if a tree were hewn down and there remained but the stump within the ground, the sort that men might tread upon (Is. 11:1). It is not said that He would come out of the house of David, but out of the house of Jesse, who was a cowherd and a man despised. Such was the father of David: a man of no estimation. Although David was so excellent a king that he was chosen of God to be magnified to the skies, yet the Prophet shows that

when Jesus Christ would come into the world, it would not be with any show of that royal majesty that was in David, but He would come out of the house of Jesse, as if He came out of a herd. And that in addition he would not come from a tree, but from a stock that had been cut off. And in what manner? And after what fashion? As a little branch, says He.

Now seeing that God did thus to the head of the church, we must understand that all the body must be secure, but this does not mean that hypocrites will be partakers of that which God reserves to His elect, whom He has chosen, who show themselves to be His children and are obedient to Him, as to their Father, and who also come not only with all confidence, but also are drawn with a right affection to honor Him. And when we perceive that at this day God is sending horrible destructions into the world, let us understand that He practices that which is here declared. Yet, let us not doubt, but realize that He does evermore preserve His Church. Let us not doubt, but realize that He upholds us as often as we have our recourse to Him, according to this saying, that whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved, yea even amidst the greatest trouble that may ever be (Joel 2:32). Though heaven and earth should run together, yet we are sure that by calling upon the name of God, we shall be preserved. But let us take heed that we do not abuse His name, to make thereof a false cloak, for He can waste us well enough. And if we boast that we are of His Church when He has cut us off, He can quickly raise Him a new people: and increase them in such wise as His truth shall not be defaced, and yet we shall perish.

Gods Delight in Their Destruction

After that, Moses adds that just as God had taken pleasure in doing good to the Jews, even so He would take pleasure in persecuting them, until He had consumed them and utterly rooted them out. Here Moses first of all shows what affection God bears towards these whom He has chosen out for Himself, and means to take for His flock. It is certain that God is not subject to any human **passions**,⁴ yet He is not able sufficiently to manifest either the goodness or the love that He has towards us, except by transfiguring Himself, as if He were a mortal man, saying that He would take pleasure in doing us good.

Let us understand therefore that God holds us dear, as if a father should delight and rejoice to do good to his children. When he sees them behaving according to his mind, and doing him honor, and obeying him; then when he feeds them and clothes

2. A reference to the perpetual sacrifice of the Mass, in which the transubstantiated bread and wine are seen as re-sacrificed. Calvin has Hebrews 6:6 in mind here and in the next phrase.

3. A reference to the claim that the priest has some sort of dominion over God when he performs the consecration of the Eucharistic elements. The Roman church has **modified** this type of claim in recent years.

4. There is an uncomfortable Stoic influence in Calvin's way of expression which comes through from time to time, as here. God is not "subject" to 'human' passions, of course, but God's emotional feelings are the foundation, the original, of which human feelings are the image or copy. It is not as if God has to pretend to be a creature in order to express His feelings, either. Rather, humanity was made to understand God; indeed, being His creature and His image, man cannot help but understand and know God.

them, it is a comfort to him, and it does him good to see them in their bravery; for that is the very felicity of a father. God likens Himself to mortal men, and says that he will delight to do us good.⁵ And therefore we cannot magnify the inestimable goodness of our God too much, seeing He stoops so low as to tell us, that His whole delight is in making us to enjoy His benefits and in demeaning Himself in such wise towards us, as we may have cause to praise Him, and finally, in yielding to all our desires. But what? We cannot away with it; we are not able to apprehend it, for we are not able to consider it.

We see that God is (as one might say) wayward towards us; we see that He not only bereaves us of His blessings, but is also angry with us; and to be short, we perceive in Him nothing but all manner of rigor. And what is the cause of it? Certainly we shut the gate against His goodness, and will not permit Him to use (as one might say) His natural disposition. Here is something that should make us the better acknowledge our faults, and not accuse God of any excessive cruelty when He does not deal with us after our liking. For it is certain that He will take pleasure in doing us good. But on the other side let us consider also, that He must likewise delight to do us evil. And why? Certainly because He is just.

Indeed, if we did permit God to use His own inclination towards us, He would bestow infinite benefits upon us, and we living in this world should be as in Paradise. But because of our sins we must live here like wretched wanderers. We must languish in many miseries; we must dwell in continual fear and in doubt; and we must groan in great unrest. It must be so. And why? Because God is just.

This is the very pleasure that is spoken of in this text. According whereunto it is said that God will rejoice and be glad when He has punished the wicked, and maintained His majesty against them, because they have despised Him and set Him at nought. Nevertheless, it is also true that He says by His prophet Isaiah, that He does it unwillingly. Alas (says He), do I have to avenge Myself of Mine enemies? God cries there alas, as if He were in sorrow and anguish for it. I must (says He) take comfort in avenging Myself of Mine enemies. Those whom He terms His enemies, are the children whom He had adopted, and which boasted themselves to be His people. And how does He comfort himself in them? Even by giving them over, and by driving them away. But in the meanwhile, He shows that it is against His will, when He must so beat men down with main strokes, although He cannot do otherwise.

Yet notwithstanding, God is surely able to tame the hearts of men without any great violence, for (as we have said) He is not subject to our passions. But hereby we are to consider how He intends to declare that our unreformable sinfulness is the reason why He is compelled to pursue us after such manner as is

spoken of here, and that he" is compelled to take pleasure in doing us harm, wherein the order of nature is after a sort quite altered and changed. But all this is our own fault, and we ourselves are to blame for it, and it is not for us to seek any other reason thereof than our sin, which has kindled His vengeance to the uttermost. Thus much concerning that sentence.

The Coming Diaspora

Now for a conclusion it is said that God will rout out this people from the land wherein He had planted them, and then He will disperse them among all the nations of the world. And that there this wretched people (which were formerly in a country of freedom, wherein God had set them to the end that His service and pure religion should dwell there) shall serve strange gods, even idols of wood and stone.

First we see that even though the land of Canaan was given as an inheritance to the people of Israel, yet they were surely put out and banished, when they abused the favor that had been shown unto them. God had planted them there, even as though He had set them with His own hand. Lo (says He), here is My resting place and yours (Ps. 132:14). He intended to dwell among them Himself, and thereupon He promised to give them rest here, insomuch that although all other people should be displaced and removed to and fro, yet should the children of Abraham continue to enjoy the heritage of that land. Notwithstanding, this did not prevent God from driving them out again, and scattering them abroad with the wind, because they had defiled that land, which should have been kept holy to His name.

Now since it is so, let us not think it strange when God at this day sends many changes into the world; for He has given no such privilege to any nation as to say unto them, "You shall inhabit this land, as the land of Canaan was given to the lineage of Abraham." But we see how God is offended. We see men's misdoings as heinous as can be. Now then, if God removes men, let us understand that it is for their sins.

Moreover, let us return to the eternal rest, whereunto the Apostle leads us in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Having spoken of the rest of the land of Canaan, He says that we must look unto a rest that is higher (Heb. 4:9; 11:16). For the children of God are commonly like wayfarers in this world as Saint Paul terms them, putting himself in their number (2 Cor. 5:6); but let us evermore direct our course and endeavour to this heritage which is promised us in heaven, for we shall not be disappointed of that heritage, if we continue in our calling whereunto God has called us. Nevertheless, it is said that they which give themselves over unto wickedness shall be wiped out of the Book of Life (Ex. 32:33). Not that God's chosen shall ever perish; but it is spoken with respect to such folk as think it enough for them to bear the name of God's children, and to have been baptized,

5. It would be better, and clearer, to say that mortal men were created "likened" to God.

and to receive the Lord's Supper, and such like things, and make no further regard. But our Lord tells us that although it seem for a time that they be written and enrolled in His register, because they are taken to be of the company of the faithful, yet shall they not fail to be wiped out.

The Greatest Privilege

So then let us advise ourselves, and so long as it shall please God to keep us in this world, let us walk under His obedience, in such a way that His hand may ever be stretched out to preserve and maintain us. Let us so stick to Him that we may have freedom to honor and serve Him. For it is a dreadful desolation which Moses here speaks of, namely to be no longer of the body of the Church, nor to have any longer the appearance or shape of religion; and yet this is seen throughout the world at this day.

Therefore, let us mark that one of the greatest benefits which God can bestow upon us in this transitory life is to let us have some little corner in which to assemble ourselves in His name, to call upon Him, and to profess ourselves to be His people. This ought to be esteemed among us more than either meat or drink or anything else. Yet very few do think upon it. Yet, notwithstanding, we must confess that even though we have sufficient food, yet if we forget God meanwhile, then our state is most miserable. And if we do not think on this, we betray our own **beastishness**. For God tells us that this benefit, which is spoken of here, is far greater than all the rest. That is, that we may worship Him in purity, and be gathered together under that Head which He has appointed to us, namely our Lord Jesus Christ.

And therefore, while we have such a privilege as to hear the **Word** of God, to call upon His Name, and to walk according to His Gospel, let us hearken unto it, for fear lest God disperse and scatter us abroad in the same way as he has dispersed the Jews. And especially let us stand in fear of this threat, which is namely, to be made such beasts as to honor idols again, as we see it has happened to others who are a good example to us of the vengeance of God, of which we ourselves have also felt our part.

For we have been **bondslaves** under idolatry, and underlings to the abominations of the Papal system, and that was for our sins and for the sins of our fathers. Seeing we have already felt such blows, and indeed have been as mirrors unto others, should we now be so brutish as to provoke our God in such a way that He should be forced as it were to deprive us of the grace that He has given us?

Let us then use this benefit and treasure of the Gospel, while our Lord gives us a place wherein to hide ourselves as it were under His hand while He governs and guides us and while we be knit together in one body, that He may be magnified among us with one accord not only with the mouth, but also especially with our lives, to the end that as a result of our endeavor to honor Him, He on His side may continue doing good towards us, and that this threat not be executed upon our heads, that is; to be dispersed here and there, and to be constrained again to worship idols and other dead and senseless things.

Prayer

Now let us fall down before the majesty of our good God, with acknowledgement of our sins, beseeching Him to touch us with such repentance that, being ashamed of our sins, we may seek altogether to put ourselves wholly into His hands, and that by obtaining forgiveness of Him, we may also feel that He has reformed us, and that we are in His favor, to give over ourselves altogether to His holy will. And that even though there is always much to be amended in us, and our lusts and affections do draw us quite away from that which He commands us, yet nevertheless we may not cease to strive against them, and to yield ourselves wholly to Him, and to enforce ourselves hereunto more and more, knowing that the same is our sovereign welfare. And that although he shows us now and then some tokens of rigor in correcting us, yet we may learn to profit thereby, to the amending of our sins, so that we may be brought to the perfection whereunto He daily calls us. 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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