

Calvin Speaks



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EXODUS UNDONE*

(Part 1)

**Title not in the originals/*

Sermon 163. 28 March 1556. Deuteronomy 28:65-68.

65. And among these nations you shall find no ease, nor shall the **sole** of your foot have rest; but the LORD shall give you there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind.

66. And your life shall hang in doubt before you; and you shall fear day and night, and shall have no assurance of your life.

67. In the morning you shall **say**, 'Would God it were **evening!**' And at evening you shall **say**, 'Would God it were **morning!**'—because of the fear of your heart with which you shall **fear**, and because of the sight of your eyes which you shall see.

68. And the LORD shall bring you into Egypt again with ships, by the way of which I told you, "You shall see it never again." And there you shall be sold unto your enemies for male and female slaves, but no man shall buy you.

Among the benefits that we desire in this present life, one is to have some resting place and some harbor to lodge in. Though a man be poor and troubled on all sides, yet if he has some little hole to hide his head to which he may resort, he cares not for all the rest. But if we know not where to go, nor have any friend to receive us, nor any nook or corner where we may rest, our state is then extremely miserable. That is why Moses now (after declaring that God would drive away and banish the Jews out of the land which He had given them to inherit and to rest in forever) adds, that they shall be as vagabonds and have no certain dwelling place, but be tossed from pillar to post.

How the Righteous Suffer

Now it is certain, as we have already said, that this often happens to the faithful, but it is for another purpose, God comforts them in it, and it is fitting that their patience should be tried in this manner. For we show our obedience toward God when He mingles us among the wicked, so that we seem not to differ from them at all. All goes to havoc, as they say, and yet notwithstanding we continue sound in heart and commit ourselves into the hands of our God, knowing that He has not forgotten us, though He allows us to be so tossed.

On the other hand all despisers of the Law bear their mark as if they were burned with a searing iron in their hearts. They know that God is against them, and that their sins reprove them. Even though men do not accuse them, yet they feel a sufficient testimony in themselves to be confounded. And that is what Moses goes on to say, that concerning those who are hard hearted against God's word, God will give them a trembling heart, a sorrowful mind, and failing eyes, so that in the morning they shall say, "Would that it were night." And when night is come, "Alas how shall I get through it? Can I continue until the morning?" Their lives will as it were hang before them, and they shall be in miserable distress. That is the thing wherein the faithful do chiefly differ from the despisers of God, and where their state varies.

For although the faithful do suffer much trouble in this world, yet they have much with which to comfort themselves—just as our Lord Jesus says in John 16:33, "You shall be vexed in this world, but yet you shall not fail to have comfort in Me." We must consider what is the ground of our comfort; namely that they which stand assured in the protection of God, do

evermore commit their life into His hands, as we see David did when he was beset on all sides. When he was threatened with a hundred deaths, he said, "Lord, I commend my soul unto Thee, Thou art faithful and Thou hast redeemed me" (Psalm 32:6). He knew that God had maintained him even to that hour; and that indeed without His marvelous power, he could not have lived so long. And thereupon he concludes that because God is faithful He will surely have pity on me, and therefore I commit my soul to His keeping.

Look at what point the faithful are. They very well perceive that their life is but a smoke that might vanish away out of hand. They see there are many ambushes laid for them, and that they cannot safely go forward one step without encountering some misery. The faithful understand, over and besides all this, that they are subject to all the changes of this human life, and that they are as frail as all the children of Adam. They see that there is no resting place for them here. But yet in spite of this they know that God has care over them, and that He is their protector. That is what they rest upon.

Having such a stay, they keep on their way forward but yet they are not careless, for we must not be so stupid as to ignore perils. For we could not call upon God if we did not see the perils in which we find ourselves. And it provokes us to seek our God when we see that without Him we should perish during every minute of an hour. The faithful then must not be without fear, but resting upon the instruction of God, they must stick to Him, and assure themselves that He will never forsake them. That is what they rejoice in.

Yea and they go yet further, for although they have to go among thorns, although they are driven to make many leaps, although they catch now and then some knocks, and although they are altogether shut up and have no way out, yet notwithstanding through the power of faith they evermore rejoice even in the midst of all their sorrows and perplexities.

On the other hand, the despisers of God are as blind as is possible and close their eyes lest they see their infirmities, and so they harden themselves. Yet for all this, God compels them to look at themselves, and then they are undone. They are overwrought with fear and amazement. It is not their manner to make their recourse to God, for they understand nothing of His protection. No, rather they shun Him, and flee as far from Him as they can, because they conceive nothing in Him but dreadful majesty; which puts them quite out of heart. As for the wicked therefore, and all who have rebelled against God; they, after long hardening of themselves, when God wakes them, know not where to go. For they will not come to Him, but do rather utter their rage by spitting at Him and by gnashing their teeth at Him. And because they find no end to their miseries and have no rest, this terror which God casts upon them becomes an incurable

disease. For to call upon Him, or to put their lives into His hands, is beyond their power; but rather since they know that they have warred against Him, they are likewise driven to understand that instead of helping them, He will sorely vex them. That is what we see here in this text, where Moses says, "God will give them a trembling heart, a sorrowful mind, and failing eyes."

Why the Righteous Sometimes Suffer Intensely

Now here we may ask a question. For we perceive that God's children—even those most dear to Him, who have served Him in the rightest and soundest manner—even they are oftentimes in such distress that it bewilders them and makes them besides themselves. What complaints does David make? That his eyes are worn out, that he is consumed with mourning, that the marrow of his bones is dried up, that all his strength is faded, that he is in such great fear that he seems to be swallowed up into a bottomless gulf (Psalm 6). This happens sometimes to God's children.

How can this be? This is a threat made against those who despise Him, those who cannot by any good means be reclaimed, and who have always withstood God. I have already told you that God in order to try His people to the quick, allows them to be in exactly the same situation as the wicked, so much so that even they themselves do think so too. But yet God always reaches to them with His hand, and although He does not overcome their griefs at the first, yet He holds them so that they do not fall. There lies still some seed of God's spirit hidden in them, which at length manifests itself more fully, so they see clearly that God sustained them in the midst of those extremities, and in the end it appears to them as it were in a whole manner.

Let us mark it well then, that sometimes the children of God are tossed and troubled with afflictions and have such grievous and hard temptations that they think God has become their enemy, so that they dare not open their mouth to call upon Him, but are utterly confounded. And even though He reminds them of the promises of His grace, yet they cannot taste of them, but sometimes even refuse them like unbelievers, as though they were fully determined to shut themselves out of all hope of salvation. When they are at this point, then does our Lord work in them in such a way as to cause them not to be overthrown completely with temptation.

And that is what Saint Paul means when he says, "We are afflicted, but we perish not, we are oppressed, but yet no matter how the world goes, we are not overcome, for we bear the mortifying of Jesus Christ in our flesh" (2 Cor. 4:8-10). Whereas he says that the faithful may indeed be pent up in afflictions, he says also that yet notwithstanding they do not fall. For even

though they stoop under the burden, and groan as though they were crushed and broken, yet all those heartbreaks do not cause any deadly fall. He adds the reason, namely, that it is the mortifying of our Lord Jesus Christ that they bear. That is, that God always separates us from the unbelieving and from reprobates, and from the despisers of His majesty, and that He prints in us the marks of His only Son. It is true that in this case they seem as dead, but the same death is holy, for God sanctifies it because they are members of our Lord Jesus Christ, and thereby they attain to the resurrection. True it is, that Saint Paul speaks not only of the last resurrection, but he begins at the comfort which God gives presently to His children to train them to arrive at the port of salvation. Now then, they enter into the midst of death even while they are alive.

And therefore let us remember that although God does now and then so afflict such as have walked in His fear and have put their trust in Him, so that they are stricken with terror and tossed with unquietness, yet notwithstanding He holds them up by the secret operation of His Spirit. And moreover He comforts them and makes them glad in the end, accomplishing that which is said in another text, that the more they were distressed, the more did He set their hearts at liberty, that they may freely come unto Him and so consequently makes them understand that He never forsook them (Rem. 5:3ff.). Behold how our Lord tempers the troubles and afflictions of the faithful, so that although they endure ever such great pains, and do even pant in coming to Him, as people scarcely able to open their mouths to call upon Him, yet when they have ended their conflict against their temptations, even though at the first they cannot get the upper hand, yet shall they get the victory in the end.

But as for those who have acted like restless horses, they remain pent up in their miseries, without any remedy, because God continues to set Himself against them more and more until they become frantic, and gnash their teeth at Him, and finally fall into utter despair. In short, we see that which is spoken by the prophet Isaiah daily accomplished; namely, that there is no peace for the wicked, but that their minds are tossed like the waves of the sea (Isaiah 48:22). When there is any storm, the waves are troubled and the water is full of mud. It is the same with those who despise God. Because they make war against Him, therefore must He also trouble them. Insomuch that even without an enemy, yea and without anybody to fray them, they of themselves are frightened and beat and bounce themselves, as if they were at war within themselves, so that there is no calmness at all in them, but they are full of trouble and disorder. For the faithful are enlightened in the midst of their darkness, and God still comes to them to give them some little spark of light, so that they may see Him. And although they attain not to it at first, yet they still strain

themselves and hold on their way. But the unbelievers are troubled at the very root of their heart, and cannot otherwise conceive, but that they must perish in despair. And when they are at the last cast, then fall they to spitting at God and blaspheme Him with open mouth.

To be short, here we see that the worst curse that God can send upon men in this transitory life is that they cannot rest upon Him, to acknowledge Him to be the keeper of their lives, but contrariwise are cast up at adventure, so that they are ever in doubt of their lives, and are so carried away with mistrust that they do not know whereto go. When men are in this situation, it is the greatest curse that can light upon them. Not without cause therefore does Moses declare here for a conclusion, as it were by way of summing up the rest of all the curses which we have heard heretofore, that there is nothing so dreadful as when men have become so stupid that there is no understanding in them. It is as if God no longer reckons them as His creatures, and they may well perceive that He neither guides nor governs them any more.

When men are come to this point, so that their life, even though allowed by men, is nevertheless heinous and detestable before God, and moreover they have no taste of His fatherly love, nor of the care that He has for other men, but are in the dungeon of despair; when men I say are come to such an extremity, it is better for them that they had been born before their time, and that they had never enjoyed this present life. And that is the reason why we hear it threatened that they shall say, "O ye mountains fall upon us," and that they shall wish that the bottomless pits had swallowed them up. And why? For they find that all creatures are against them when they have no more access to God. When men perceive that He will not maintain them, but shows Himself to be armed against them, then they understand that all creatures are their enemies, and it grieves them to see the sun. Then are they so possessed with fear that they wish there were no world at all, or rather that they were rooted out of it.

Godly Fear

Now since we hear such horrible threatenings, let us learn to walk in the fear of our God. For there is no other way to live in rest, and to be comforted in the middle of our sorrows and adversities, except to come with a free will to yield ourselves obedient to our God, and to do Him such reverence as is due to Him. For when we acknowledge Him to be our Judge, we will not play the rebels, but be willing to be reclaimed, so that we do not wind up included in the number of them that have refused Him. You see then that we must willingly hearken to God when He menaces us, be moved by it, and be touched to the quick, and that

thereupon we endeavor to sewe Him, and to obey His word. For it may well be that we shall sometimes be vexed with fear and unquietness, but yet God will deliver us from them. It is certain that we shall be weakened by that means, and it is good for us so to be. But yet however we fare, God will so keep us that we shall not fall into utter despair.

Moreover, when we sometimes feel any unquietness in ourselves, and we lack the power to call upon God but are tormented with distrust, let us understand that it is the fruit of our sins. And let us desire God to make us to perceive that we have not kept touch with Him as we ought, and so for that reason He casts us into vexation and distress. But let us not so tempt our God, lest He should proceed to this rigor that is here mentioned, namely, that we should have no power to commit our life into His hands.

So then, whereas here is mention made of a trembling heart, let us consider wherein our true rest

remains: that God is our father, and that we are His children. Likewise mention is made of failing or sunken eyes. Let us understand that we must look upwards as often as we are in any fear, and that there is no other remedy to assuage our griefs but to lift up our eyes to heaven. For as long as men look downward, what shall they find there but an infinite mass of miseries able to scare them out of their wits, so that they shall not know where to turn? Let us therefore seek this means, that is to lift up our eyes to heaven, knowing that God has His hand stretched forth, to uphold them that return unto Him. Where mention is made of a sorrowful mind; let us understand that it is the proper office of God to let out hearts at liberty, to the end that no temptation may utterly vanquish and overwhelm us. And this shall be treated of yet more fully.

(to be concluded)

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