

# Calvin Speaks



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## EXODUS UNDONE\* (Part 2)

● Title not in the original

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

### Summary of the First Half

*In the first part of the Sermon, Calvin discusses the fact that Christians sometimes go through periods of suffering that seem as intense and horrible as those described here, so that the Christian may **feel** that God has become his enemy and has cast him off. Nevertheless, the Christian is in fact not cutoff, and God will **revive** his heart in time. Even when the **Christian** thinks that God is against **him**, he still knows that God is his only-hope, and seeks His **favor**. The worst curse, and the only true curse, is to be left without any such faith at all. Such is the state of the impenitent and unbelieving.*

### Hanging by a Thread

Now we come to what Moses adds, that in the morning they shall say, "Would God it were evening," and in the evening they shall say, "Would God it were morning." For your life, he says, shall be hanging in doubt before you, as by a thread. Here we see even better what has been noted before, for what is the reason why men are thus in continual fear, except that they refuse to commend their lives into the hand of God?

Now in truth, and to speak properly, all of our lives are constantly hanging by a thread, as it were. But those who despise God are the ones who most particularly find it so—and well they should, because they have gone to war against Him Who alone could have set them in peace and safety. Their lives areas it were hanging by threads, because instead of life there is constantly this fear of death in their hearts, and with good reason. After all, what is the life of man, but a smoke that passes and vanishes away? And moreover, let us behold how many kinds of death beset us on all sides.

So then, as long as we remain in our natural state, without respecting God, our lives will always be hang-

ing by a thread, as it were. And indeed, even if we are never outwardly touched, how many diseases do we bear within ourselves? A man does not need to go out of himself, nor seek very far, to learn how many miseries and wretchednesses he is subject to. Even in his own person he can immediately find an infinite number of deaths. Seeing then that it is so, let us realize that until we have learned to rest ourselves in the providence of God, our lives must of necessity be, as it were, flittering before our eyes and altogether uncertain. And to be short, we bear it continually as it were in our own hands, just as it is said in Job (13:14) and in Psalm 119 (verse 109).

Now, when it is said that we carry our lives in our own hands, it is to show that whereas life should bear the man, the man bears the life; that is to say, the life is left up to the hazard of all misfortunes.<sup>1</sup> This is how it is with all men by nature [that is, by sinful nature — ed.]. At the same time, as we have said, the faithful are not free from it, as we see in the examples of Job and David. Notwithstanding, it is those who despise God who most feel that their lives hang by a thread. And why is this? Because God, in spite of their rebellion, forces them to perceive the perils that beset them. They see very well that all manner of creatures are their enemies, and because of this they start when they hear but the falling of a leaf, and they are afraid when no one pursues them, as it is said in Proverbs (28:1).

Thus does God open the eyes of those who are puffed up with pride, and are drunk with the delights of this world, especially those who have hardened themselves in stubbornness against Him. He opens their eyes that they may know how their lives are less than nothing, and that all these shadows, lies, and vain hopes upon which men are wont to rest are but

1. This is a bit obscure. Calvin seems to mean that men should not have to worry about life, since it should be a gift from God. The sinner, having taken matters into his own hands, now must worry about his own life.

baits to beguile them. See here 1 pray you where they come to who have scorned God and His Word, and are wholly given over to this world, reposing their trust on earthly means and on creatures. At the last they will be caught with such fear as will teach them double and triple to understand their own condition.

### Driven by Fear

Having spoken thus (v. 67), Moses then adds (v. 68) what they will say: "Who shall assure us that we shall see the morning? How can we be sure we shall come to the end of the day?" When men understand once how frail they are, and with how many perils and miseries they are enthroned, they then have no more happiness. Indeed we may well say that there is nothing more certain than death, nor anything more uncertain than its hour; but while we say this, in the meantime we do not regard it until God puts us in the wringer, and forces us to think about it. For when that happens, those who act as if their lives should last forever, find out the contrary. (And we see how men deceive themselves by fancying an immortality in this world, imagining that they will live a hundred years after they are dead.) And therefore, because men are so blockish, God acts to constrain them to behold a present death continually pinching them and holding them at bay. As a result, they are in continual fear, and although they may utter nothing with their mouths, yet in their hearts they wonder, "Who can assure me that I shall see the morning?" To be short, it looks to them as if the very earth sinks under them. And although this does not always appear, yet notwithstanding those who despise God do feel that this threat is not in vain nor without effect.

So then, let us not fritter away time until God decides to execute such a judgment upon us, but let us rather prevent it by having the kind of willing fear which is spoken of in Proverbs 28:14, where Solomon says, "Blessed is the man who fears in his heart," that is to say, who calls upon himself and does not wait until God forces him to fear whether he wants to or not. When each one of us stirs himself up, it is the greatest blessing we can have. The worldling makes himself a dull head, and wanders away after his own imagination, and flings beyond the moon (as they say), trying to live in peace and rest without feeling any grief or trouble—this, 1 say, causes them to fall asleep. But let us look to ourselves, and gather out wits into some fear, and let every one of us stir himself up. And if we do not stir ourselves up in this manner, then must God torment and vex us, and make us a lively picture of what is mentioned here.

After those who despise God have acted like mad beasts, and spat upon all manner of sound doctrine, and ridiculed all threats, and like mad bulls have rushed against God and all His judgments, then at the last they will come to feel themselves vexed and troubled with uneasiness. We see how the great tyrants, who make all the world shake under them, ex-

perience this without measure so that whereas they make others to drink a little glass of fear and terror, they themselves must drink up a whole jar full. They drink it down to the dregs, as the prophets say when they speak of the greatest punishment God sends. When those whom God chastens [because He loves them – cd.] have drunk more than their fill in swallowing up great stores of sorrows, then they who have lived at their ease and pleasure must drink the lees, which is the bitterest of all and will make them burst.

And indeed, we have an example of a heathen tyrant, who bore witness and declared that all his whole life was continual torment. For being flattered by one who said to him, "O sir, how happy is your state," he replied, "Yes, and 1 will make you to understand it for yourself." And thereupon he made him a feast, and when he had set him at his table, he put a sword over his head, hanging by one hair, to show to him what kind of state it was that he had accounted so happy. The man, seeing himself in this situation, said, "Let this kingly state be taken away from me, for 1 had rather die a hundred times than be in such uneasiness and perplexity." This 1 say was the confession of a heathen tyrant—as if God had held him under torture—that it might be a general lesson against all such as make war with God and trouble the world with terror. They must, in spite of their rebellion, be made afraid themselves, and find no rest. After many tossings and much turmoil, hell must always await them, they must see their graves open into which they are to all, and they must behold the great gulf ready to swallow them up—and in the meantime they make no recourse nor refuge to God, but flee from Him still, whereas in fact He is the only person to Whom they should have fled for succor.

### Peace with God

Now beyond what we have said already, there is another consideration. As we have noted, we ought to prevent this judgment by fearing God of our own accord. We must bear in mind that we are all wretched sinners, and there is not one, be he never so well and right minded, who ought not to understand that he is greatly threatened by God. But, it is also true that when we have our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is our peace, and when we can by His means rest upon the fatherly goodness of God, then we can be sure that He counts us as His children, and that He watches over us and procures our welfare. And that is why St. Paul says expressly that when we are once justified by faith, then we are at peace with God (Rom. 5:1).

He says that we must be justified by faith, which is to say that we must have embraced the grace which is offered to us by the Gospel, knowing that God forgives us our sins and is merciful to us in that He bears with us for our Lord Jesus Christ's sake. Until we come to this, we must always be in doubt and perplexity. But once knowing that God has buried all our sins, so that we put our trust in the death and pas-

sion of our Lord Jesus Christ, then we are at peace—yea in peace and not in dullness like the wicked. The unfaithful and despisers of God may have some peace for a certain time, as we have said before, but since they forget themselves and follow continuously on their wicked track, they utterly besot and bewitch themselves. But St. Paul says that we, acknowledging ourselves undone without Him, may boldly press unto Him and say: "Seeing God is my Father and He has shown Himself so gracious to me in this present life as to grant me some rest here, surely there is a more blissful rest prepared for me when our Lord Jesus Christ shall come to meet me, to guide me, and to bring me up, that I may seek my God." And that indeed is the place we must come to, if we intend to have a place to rest ourselves in.

The prophets speak with the same effect when, prophesying the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, they always say that every man shall then sleep under his own fig tree and under his own vine, and nothing shall make him afraid. The prophets were true expounders of Moses, and as the renewers of the law, bringing it to remembrance again, they showed the people the unbelief and rebellion which they saw in them. And having shown the vengeance of God which was ready to fall on them, according to the threats set down by Moses, the prophets then brought the people back again to Jesus Christ. And although it was necessary for them to suffer smartingly for a while because of their sins, yet they gave them hope that God would make a covenant with them, and that then they should sleep every man in his vineyard and under his fig tree. By this, the prophets caused the people to understand that even if they slept not in a locked chamber but lay in the midst of the fields, yet they would be safe enough because they were under the protection of their God, and for this reason they might sleep in ease and safety.

Since we have such assurance then, we ought to be well settled in our minds. And since we have understanding of the reconciliation that is made in our Lord Jesus Christ, we now have a good reason to rest in our God, and to be still and quiet—provided we do not forget such a great benefit. And we see that our Lord Jesus Christ desires to reign among us. Let us therefore allow ourselves to be governed by His hand, and as ewes and lambs let us follow our Shepherd, and then shall we do that which our Lord has appointed for us, so that nothing may hinder us, but we may attain unto Him. Although we see things confused about in this world, so that all goes to havoc, yet we shall be able to take breath again and say: "Yet has my God still showed me the way, so that although other men have run to and fro, I have always stood fast. And although I have been in various ways troubled and vexed, yet do I know, Lord, that Thou dost evermore govern Thy people." Thus you see that being stayed on our Lord Jesus Christ, we may be assured that God will never fail us.

Seeing that this is so, let us return to Him, and pray Him to defend and deliver us from all evil. The

way, then, for us to be sure of our lives is that although we see nothing but continual war, yet we must force ourselves to fight and persevere until we have obtained the victory. And if He takes us away to Himself, He will then be the keeper of our souls. He will guide us in this present life, so that both day and night we shall feel His grace. When the enemy comes, even if the night brings exceedingly great fear with it, yet shall we be in safety. Why is this so? Because God is our fortress during that time, and we will not be forsaken by Him. Therefore, let us tarry until the morning. Thus we are always more and more to refer our lives to Him.

And although we may not be strong, yet we shall always have something to hold us up when we see our own infirmity. For example, when a man perceives that he is not able to stand, but his legs quake and totter under him, he either leans on some thing or sits down in a chair, or else stays himself upon some staff. Even so is it with us. For we have not the strength of giants. We have not the power to defy our enemies, for we see quite well that we are far too weak. But, in all this we continue to lean on God, and that is our refuge. Nor is this faith good only for this presently, but we have it for the life to come also. Thus, even if our Lord does put us into the hands of our enemies, yet will He not fail to be our Savior even in the midst of death. Let us not doubt, but that not only will He safely convey us from the morning to the evening and from the evening to the morning, but also that even in the midst of the darkness of death we will always be lightened with His goodness and He will show us that the life which He has promised to His people shall never fail.

Therefore does David use this manner of speech, in Psalm 23 (verse 4): "Lord, Thy staff, or Thy shepherd's crook." He uses the similitude of a shepherd with his staff or hook. "Lord," he says, "as long as I see Thy staff before me, I am safe, so that if I were to go into the darkness of death, yet being in that dark and irksome dale, yea even if it might seem I had been cast into hell, I would not cease to rejoice." Such must be our attitude as well, as we consider this teaching.

### Back to Egypt

Finally, it is said (v. 68) that God would bring His people by the way whereof it was said 'thou shalt never see it again,' and that they would be carried in ships, and that coming into Egypt they would be for sale as slaves, but no one would buy them. They would not be esteemed, but be regarded as a people utterly cast away, and everyone would disdain them.

Now this means that God would cut them off, saying, "Remember how marvelously I delivered you out of the land of Egypt, when I made you to pass through the wilderness and to go through the Red Sea (or the Sea of Bulrushes, which they call the Red Sea; but properly it is the Sea of Bullrushes because of the

bulrushes that grow in it),<sup>2</sup> for I caused that arm of the sea to shrink back that you might pass on dry foot. But now you shall return thither in ships. You must pass that way again, even though I prohibited you from doing so, and enjoined you expressly that you should not go that way any more. Yet, whether you like it or not you shall return thither. Indeed, the first time you were in Egypt you wept because of the oppression you suffered, and I took pity on you and removed you from it. But this time, when you shall need for someone to buy you as a slave, in order to yield you life up to miseries as great as any that may be, you shall find no buyer at all." Thus God says, "Seeing you have despised the deliverance that was wrought for you, and have forgotten such a benefit, it will be well known that you are an unhappy and a cursed people, and that I have forsaken and rejected you utterly."

This threat could not help but be exceedingly terrible to the Jews. And when the prophets expounded Moses, we see likewise how the people gnashed their teeth against them. All the same, they were not rendered any more meek by it, but rather they doubled their rebellion, so that it was always cast in their teeth that their iniquities proceeded to such an extremity as was intolerable. Even though all the threats of the Law were pronounced against them, they still disregarded them, but kept going on and became much more hard-hearted, as if they had a set purpose to make war on God.

Consider: These people were of the household of God, the holy generation, the children of Abraham, who from the beginning had been trained up in the doctrine of the law and had had the sayings always laid before them which were written by Moses, so that their ears were continually beaten with them. Truly it is a horrible thing, and against nature, that these should yet notwithstanding fare never the better for it, but still go on from evil to worse. Was that not a horrible thing? Yes indeed, and yet we see the same thing today.

Let us then benefit from it, and beware that we not wax so hardhearted, lest we be possessed by Satan and forsaken by God. Let it not be that no matter what is told to us and shown to us, we are touched with no manner of fear but become like wild boars which of their own willfulness do cast themselves to death. Let us take heed that we not provoke our God in such a manner.

And moreover, where it is said that God would bring this people whom He had redeemed into a dou-

ble captivity, more reproachful than had been the first, let us trust in that redemption which was once and for all wrought by our Lord Jesus Christ. And that we may be partakers thereof, let us freely serve Him who purchased us so dearly. And seeing that our God has redeemed us in the person of His Son, to such a state that now we are fully free from the bonds of sin and Satan, let us henceforth fear Him and serve Him all the days of our lives, according as Zachariah speaks in his song recited by St. Luke (1:75). Seeing then that this is the case, let us learn to walk in such obedience to our God as He may always make available to us the redemption wrought by our Lord Jesus Christ. And let us serve Him in all holiness and righteousness, that we be not bereft of the favor which He has purchased for us, as we see this people were, who after they had been settled in the land of Canaan were put out again for their unthankfulness.

Therefore, let us be careful lest God dispossess us of the grace which He has bestowed on us. But let us learn to take such profit thereby, that all may yield fruit to His glory, so that He may make us to understand that in life as well as in death He is always our Savior and Redeemer; and that we may make our boast that He has not redeemed us in vain but with the condition that we should henceforth live in liberty, despite death and the devil, just as we have an example of this in St. Paul.

#### Prayer

Now let us fall down before the majesty of our good God, with acknowledgement of our sins, beseeching Him to touch us more and more, to the quick, that being stricken with such a fear as may make us see that of ourselves we are dead and forlorn, we may yet for all this not fail to flee for refuge to His mercy. Let us therefore seek the way thither, which is that we acknowledge ourselves to be reconciled by Jesus Christ, and that He is our peace unto the end, according as He continually declares and testifies to us by the teaching of His gospel. And that in the meantime it may please our good God to give us the spirit of mildness and meekness, to the end that we no longer rebel against Him, nor have our affections straining and rebelling against His law, but rather that we may commit ourselves to His guiding and be confirmed in the assurance which He has given us, that He holds us for His people, so that He may show by effect that He watches over us, and that He will continue with us to the end to preserve us both in life and in death. That it may please Him to grant this grace not only to us, but also to all people and nations of the earth. Etc.

2. The Hebrew name for the Red Sea is yam *suph*, or "sea of weeds." In this Harmony of the **Pentateuch** (English translation, vol. 1, p. 205), Calvin discusses this more fully (comments on Exodus 10:19).

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