Sermons from Job

by

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THE LORD GAVE; THE LORD HAS TAKEN AWAY

The Lord Gave; The Lord has Taken Away*

Then Job arose, and tore his robe, and sheared his head, and threw himself upon the ground, and worshipped, and said, "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, naked I shall return there; the Lord has given it, and the Lord has taken it away; blessed be the name of the Lord." In all this Job sinned not at all, nor attributed anything unreasonable to God—Job 1:20-22

We may well say that patience is a great virtue, as indeed it is; since there are very few who know what the word "patience" means; from which fact it might be concluded that we slightly value being patient and having this virtue at which we grab so long. Now God, seeing such indifference on the part of men, wishes to put before their eyes that which is so needful for us. For if we are not patient, our faith must have vanished; for it cannot be maintained apart from this means. This being so, God wills that amidst the miseries of this world we may always have a peaceful heart, and that we may be so assured of His goodness that we may rejoice and content ourselves therein, and that we may be able to glorify God in the midst of all their affliction, that they are not troubled by anguish and so swallowed up as to quit everything; but that they fight against their passions until they are able to conform to the good pleasure of God, and to conclude as Job here does, and to say that He is entirely just.

This is what we have to note when it is said, "Job has torn his robe, and has shorn his head." For such fashions were customary in oriental countries, as we know that there were more ceremonies in those regions which do not exist at all in the cold countries where we live. For when something hap-

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* Sermon in Calvin's Works, Corpus Reformatorum, volume 33, pp. 91-103.

1. Fr. abysme, cast down to the depths.
2. Fr. eslourdis, weighed down (mentally).
pened which could move men to great anger, as a sign of grief they tore their clothes. So much for one item. Then, in that country, where they were accustomed to letting hair grow, they sheared themselves to display grief; on the other hand, where they sheared themselves, when they displayed grief they let the hair grow. They are, then, signs of the grief which here overtakes Job when he tears his robe and shears himself. Now it is certain that his act was not in any sense feigned, as quite often those who wish to disguise themselves assume masks in order that no one may guess that they are in great sadness and that they may not cease to laugh in their heart. Job has not used such hypocrisy. Let us know, then, when he has torn his robe and he has shorn his hair, that it was anguish and unlimited displeasure, and when he threw himself to the ground, it was yet another testimony. But it seems that Job here releases the bridle to his sadness, which would be a vice to condemn. For we know that men are only too excessive and overflowing in their passions. For although they restrain themselves and correct themselves as much as they can, yet they do not cease to go out of bounds, and there is nothing more difficult than to so restrain ourselves that we keep rule and compass on ourselves. We see that men cannot rejoice without being too gay. Grief or sadness is a much more violent passion which carries men further away than does joy. So then, we have to be on our guard always and whenever God sends us some adversity, for this is where we are accustomed to overflowing the most. Now it is here said that Job tore his robe; it seems that he wishes to spur himself to be more sad than he was (for a man who sees himself so disfigured is astonished at himself) and then when it comes to his hair it could be said that he sought aids to needle himself and add to his grief, and that he was as it were driving himself to despair. And this (as I have said) would surely be condemnable; but in the first place let us note that the Scripture here wished to express to us that the sadness of this holy person was so great and so vehement that he was not able to satisfy himself, that he went beyond ordinary custom by tearing his robe, to show that he experienced such anguish that it had grieved him to the bottom of his heart. This is what the Scripture wishes to express to us. Now although men ought to be on their guard lest they be swallowed up by sadness when they are afflicted, yet whenever God sends us some evil we must think about it. For the common manner of repulsing every trial is very bad; and yet this is the way men have been in this respect; when they wished to be patient they extinguished all thoughts of their maladies, they pushed them far away, and they withdrew from them; briefly, they wished to be so stupefied that they might know or discern nothing. Now entirely on the contrary, when God afflicts us it is not to give us blows of the mallet upon the head in order that we may be dazed and drowsy, but He wills to induce us to think of our miseries. How? Beyond the necessity for keeping in memory our sins in order to ask pardon for them and to be all the more careful to walk in the proper way, we are also instructed it is part of our life, in order not to please ourselves, in order not to be inflated by vanity, nor by presumption as we are, and then to acknowledge the obligation that we have to our God in that He treats us so tenderly, in that He carries us, as it were, in His bosom; and then when we see that He cares for our life, let us look further, that is to say, let us reach toward the eternal kingdom, wherein is our true joy and rest. This, then, is how God does not cease to be pitiful toward us when He sends us some affliction; for it is in order that, examining what is in us, we may also acknowledge our condition. Also it is good and useful that believers, when God afflicts them, are incited to think to themselves, “Who am I? What of me? Why am I thus afflicted?” Let them think (I say) of all these things. Now this is how Job was able to tear his clothes and then to shear his head without offending God; not that he wished to be precipitated in too great anger, but it tended to humility; as also it was to the ancients a sign of repentance; for if God sent pestilence or war, they wore sackcloth and threw ashes on their heads. Why that? It was not to nourish an evil sadness, of which Saint Paul speaks (2 Cor. 7:10), which he says is according to the world (we must flee from that), but that was of another
sadness which he says is according to God, when men, after having known that they are poor sinners, come before their Judge; that they are there condemned, and they show that they deserve to be confounded. For he who wears sackcloth, who has ashes on his head, protests that he no longer has any basis to glorify himself, that he must keep his mouth closed, that he is as if he were already buried, as if to say, “I am not worthy that earth should sustain me, but it ought to be on top of me; and God should cast me down so low that I should be as it were trodden under foot.”

This is what Job meant by it; seeing that God invited him to humility, he surely wished to conform; and for this cause he tore his robe and sheared his hair. Now though we see (as I have already mentioned) that patience is not without affliction, that it is very necessary that children of God should be sad, experiencing their pains; nevertheless they do not cease to have the virtue of patience when they resist their passions in such a way that they do not fret against God, that they do not go out of bounds, that they do not kick against hope, but rather that they give glory to God; as immediately follows in the text, “Job threw himself to the ground, he did it to worship.” Now it is true that this word means “to recline” or “to lie down,” but the purpose of humbling oneself before God and doing him homage is implied. We see some who throw themselves on the ground, but they continue to be so angry that, if it were possible, they would ascend above the clouds to wage war against God. We see those who are so carried away by spite, but it is because they cannot rush against God as they wish. Now Job, entirely to the contrary, throws himself on the ground, in order to worship, indeed looking to God to humble himself before His high majesty. For when we experience the hand of God, it is then that we ought to do Him more homage than ever. It is true that if God treats us kindly we ought to be moved thereby to come to Him, as in fact He does invite us. The great goodness He uses — what is it except that He wishes to draw us to Himself? But since we are so lazy about coming, He has to summon us and show what right He has over us; as when a prince sees his vassal who is slow to do his duty, he sends him his officer to summon him. So God, seeing that we do not take into account coming to Him, or perhaps that we do not come with such ardent affection as would be properly required, invites us and calls us. Job then, knowing the purpose and true use of afflictions, threw himself on the ground, in order to do homage to God, as if to say, “Lord, it is true that until now I have served and honored Thee, while I prospered, and I was in my great triumphs, I delighted in doing Thee service. But what of it? I did not fully know myself; and now I see my weakness, that we are miserable creatures. So then, Lord, I come now to do Thee a new homage, when it pleases Thee to afflict me in the world; Lord, I voluntarily yield myself to Thee, and ask not unless it be to render myself subject to Thy hand, whatever may come of it.” So much for the saying “Job threw himself to the ground, having the aim of worshiping God.”

We come now to the saying, namely, that Job recognized man’s condition. “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb,” he says, “and naked I shall return there.” When he says “there,” he implies that he is from elsewhere, namely, from the womb of earth which is the mother of all; or perhaps, like a man who has a heart ailment, he does not express all the words, but he speaks half, as we see that those who are extremely sad do not express all their words. Yet this protestation is clear enough, namely, that Job wishes to say, “Well, I must return to the earth, just as I came out of the womb of my mother.” It is true that this passage could be taken in a double sense: namely, firstly, that it was as a general statement. Behold men who came naked into the world, and when they return it is likewise; they do not take their riches, nor their honors, nor their pomp, nor their delights; they must go away in decay; the earth must receive them. But the other exposition is more suitable, that Job applies this to himself, as if he said, “Naked I came out of the womb of my mother; for a time God willed to enrich me, that I had a great quantity of livestock, I had a large family, I had a multitude of chil-
In brief, I was well-adorned with gifts and blessings with which God had enlarged me. Now He wills that I go away entirely naked; He had enriched me with all these things, and He has taken them from me, in order that I may return to my first estate, and that I may now get ready to go to the grave.” Now this sentence is good to note. For Job could not better prove his patience than by resolving to be entirely naked, “inasmuch as the good pleasure of God was such. Surely men resist in vain; they may grit their teeth, but they must return entirely naked to the grave. Even the pagans have said that death alone shows the littleness of men. Why? For we have a gulf of covetousness, that we would wish to gobble up all the earth; if a man has many riches, vines, meadows, and possessions, it is not enough; God would have to create new worlds, if He wished to satisfy us. But what if we die? Six feet under we decay and are reduced to nothing. So then, death shows what our nature is; nevertheless, we see many who fight against such a necessity; they build worthy sepulchers, they have triumphant funerals; it seems that such people wish to resist God, but they do not succeed at all. Now such is the general condition of men; but as for us, we must suffer patiently to be despoiled when we have been clothed with goods and riches; we must allow (I say) that God should deprive us of everything, and that we should live entirely undressed and naked, and that we should be prepared to return to the grave in such condition. This (I say) is how we shall prove that we are patient. And it is what Job wished to indicate in this passage. Thus however and whenever we shall lack the goods of this world, we shall be hungry and thirsty, we shall be pressed by some afflictions, and we shall not have any help, let us think of our origin, let us look at ourselves and who we are and where we are going. For men abuse the fatherly care of God toward them when He proves to them what must happen to them. Surely we ought to have this very well imprinted on our hearts: namely, that God does not will that we lack anything, that He would not have put us in the world unless He was willing to feed us; yet we must always acknowledge that this comes from out-

side ourselves, and we should not suppose that we have by our own right what we possess by the gratuitous goodness of our God. If a man should feed me out of his pure liberality and should say to me, “Come every day; you shall have so much wine, so much bread; I wish to entertain you; and it is not that I would oblige myself to you, but I would give you this;” if thereupon I wished to bring suit to collect what I ought to beg for each day, receiving substance from his hand, if I wished to gain an income by what he gives me out of his pure liberality, would it not be too villainous an ingratitude? I would deserve that someone should spit in my face. All the more are we bound to receive the goods which God gives us with all modesty, knowing that He owes us nothing and, because we are poor, we must come to Him to beg every day from His infinite liberality. So then, when we have some need, let us run to Him (as I have said) and acknowledge, “Whence came I out? From the womb of my mother, entirely naked, a poor, miserable creature; I needed help and to be cleansed from the poverty in which I was; I would have utterly perished unless I had been helped from elsewhere. It pleased God, then, to feed and preserve me until now and to do me an infinite number of favors. And howsoever now He may will to afflict me, it is very right that I should bear everything patiently, since it comes from His hand.” This is what we have to note from what is shown us by Job, “Naked I came out of my mother’s womb, and also naked I shall return to the grave.” In summary, we think, when God shall have placed in our hands some goods, that the ownership of them ought to remain ours, that we shall be so accompanied by our riches that they will come with us to the grave, that we ought never to be deprived of them. Now let us not reckon that way; for we deceive ourselves; but on the contrary let us know that if the good pleasure of God is to take away from us the goods with which He may have enlarged us, the next day we must be ready to be deprived of them, that it would do us no harm to be despoiled in a minute of everything that we may have been able to acquire in our whole lifetime.
Besides Job leads us still further, saying, "God had given it, and He has taken it away; yet blessed be the Name of the Lord." When he says that God had given it, he shows that it is reasonable that God should dispose of what He has put in our hands, since it is His own; for when God sends us riches, it is not that He gives up His title, that He may no longer have lordship (as He ought to have), since He is Creator of the world.  

For the word "Creator" implies that He has done everything in such a way that all power and sovereign dominion must remain His. And although men possess each one their portion according as God has enlarged them by the goods of this world, yet He must always remain Lord and master of them. Job, then, acknowledged this, entirely subjected himself to the good pleasure of God; and all of us confess this thing to be more than equitable; however, no one is willing to conform to it. Though this may be, as soon as God shall have let us enjoy for three days some blessing, it seems to us, if He takes it away from us, that He greatly injures us; we shall murmur against Him. And what is to be said of this? Recently I discussed ingratitude, that it seems to us when God has shown Himself one time liberal toward us through His gratuitous goodness that He ought never to fail us, no matter what we do. This then is a statement which is common enough but so poorly practiced that it is clearly seen that it is understood by a very small number. So much more must we think over the meaning of "The Lord had given it, and the Lord has taken it away," that we may acknowledge what liberty our Lord has to give us enjoyment of His goods and also, when it may please Him, to deprive us of them in a minute. And this is why Saint Paul exhorts us (1 Cor. 7:30) that, inasmuch as the face of this world passes away and all things wear out and vanish, we should possess as though we possessed not, that is to say, we should not bind our courage; as is said in another place (1 Tim. 6:17), "We must not trust in the uncertainty of riches:" we must always be ready to say with Job, "When God will have despoiled us of what He has given us," or perhaps, "Lord, Thou has exercised Thy right, Thou hadst given it, and Thou hast taken it away when it pleased Thee." Here, then, is the summary of this passage, namely, whenever we think of the goods of this world we should remember that we hold everything from God. And on what condition? It is not by property right, that He should not longer wish any claim over it, and that He should no longer have any mastery over it; but if it pleased Him to put it in our hands, it is on the condition that He may take it back when it seems good to Him. Let us acknowledge then, that we are so much more obligated to Him when He shall have caused us to enjoy some benefit, a day, a month, or some space of time, and afterwards, if He despoils us of it, that we should not find it too strange; but that we should run back to that acknowledgment which I have said, "May God always retain such superiority over us that He can dispose of His own as seems good to Him." If it is awful for mortal men to control their wealth as they wish, ought not much more control to be attributed to the living God? Seeing then how God ought to have mastery not only over what we possess but also over our persons and over our children, we ought to humble ourselves before Him by subjecting ourselves entirely to His holy will, without any contradiction. But what do we see? There are very few who do this homage to God. It is true that everyone will surely say that it is God Who has given them all that they possess; but what do they do about it? They claim Him, and raise themselves as it were in defiance of Him. And what is this? Is it not a mockery? Indeed it is unbearable hypocrisy, when, after having protested that we hold everything from God, we nevertheless are never willing that He should dispose of it, we are not willing that He should change anything, but wish that He would leave us in peace and go away from us, as if we were separated from Him and exempt from His jurisdiction. It is just as if someone said, "Oh, I am content to acknowledge that such a one is my Prince, I shall do Him enough homage and obedience; but He should not enter my house, He should not come to ask for anything, He should not cause me any trouble."

4. Fr. que nous n'y ayons point nostre courage attaché. Perhaps he means we should not set our hearts on things.
The world could not suffer such villainy. Nevertheless this is how they frolic with God. And what is the meaning of the confession “Let us hold everything to be from Him” while we are not willing that He should touch anything? We see, then, how the world openly mocks God; but we must always follow what is here shown, namely, since God has given us what is in our hands, He may claim it back and take it back when He wills.

Furthermore the final implication is added. “Blessed be the name of the Lord.” For by this Job so submits himself to God that He confesses Him to be good and just, although he is harshly afflicted from His hand. I have said that this implies more, inasmuch as one might still be able to attribute to God entirely sovereign power by saying, “Very well, since He has given it, He can surely take it away,” but nevertheless he would not confess that God did it justly and reasonably, as there are many who when they are afflicted accuse God of cruelty, or of too great a severity, so that they cannot reserve for Him the right to take back what He has given to them; and they do not consider (as I have said) that they should possess wealth in such a way that they could be stripped of it the next day. There are very few who hold this consideration in such a way that remain peaceable and confess that there is nothing better than to be entirely subject to the majesty of God and to recognize that if He let us do according to our desires there would be only confusion; but when He governs us according to His will, it is for our profit and salvation. This is the point of view to which we must come. So, we see now that the sentence implies more when it is said, “Blessed be the name of the Lord.” For we must not only split hairs over words, we must consider from what affection this proceeds, and that it is said in truth and without pretense. For how is it possible that we should bless the name of God, except by first of all confessing that He is just. Now he who murmurs against God as if He were cruel and inhuman thereby curses God and as much as is in him rises against Him; he who does not recognize that God is his father and that he is His child, who does not render testimony of His goodness, does not bless God at all. And why not? For those who do not taste the mercy and the grace which God performs toward men when He afflict them must gnash their teeth, throw and disgorge some venom against Him. To bless, then, the name of God implies that we are well persuaded that He is just and equitable in His nature; and not only this, but that he is good and merciful. This is how we shall be able to bless (according to the example of Job) the name of God: it will be by acknowledging His justice and His equity, and then by acknowledging also His grace and His fatherly goodness toward us.

And this is why the text also adds in conclusion: In all these things Job sinned not, nor attributed to God anything unreasonable. Or literally: Job put forward nor imposed upon God nothing which was without reason; and it is a manner of speaking which is very worthy to be observed. Why is it that men fret so when God sends them things entirely contrary to their desire, except that they do not acknowledge that God does everything by reason and that He has just cause? For if we had well-imprinted on our hearts “All that God does is founded in good reason” it is certain that we would be ashamed to chafe so against Him when, I say, we know that He has just occasion to dispose thus of things. as we see. Now, therefore, it is especially said that Job attributed to God nothing without reason, that is to say, that he did not imagine that God did anything which was not just and equitable. So much for one item. But we must note above all the word “in God” or “to God.” This implies much, for we do not think that the works of God should be spoken of so abominably as we speak of them. As soon as God does not send what we have desired, we dispute against Him, we bring suit, not that we appear to do this, but our manner shows that this is nevertheless our intent. We consider every blow, “And why has this happened?” But from what spirit? This is pronounced? From a poisoned heart; as if we said, “The thing should have been otherwise, I see no reason for this.”

5. Fr. esplucher les mots, pick words.
6. Fr. En Dieu.
7. Fr. de quel courage.
Meanwhile God will be condemned among us. This is how men exasperate themselves. And in this what do they do? It is as if they accused God of being a tyrant or a hair-brain who asked only to put everything in confusion. Such horrible blasphemy blows out of the mouths of men. Yet very few think about it. However, the Holy Spirit wished to tell us that, if we wish to render glory to God and to bless His name properly, we must be persuaded that God does nothing without reason. So then, let us not attribute to Him either cruelty or ignorance, as if He did things in spite and unadvisedly, but let us acknowledge that He proceeds in everything and through everything with admirable justice, with goodness and infinite wisdom, so that there is only entire uprightness or equity in all that He does. Now it is true that here is an article to deduce, namely, how Job recognized that God took away from him what had been carried away by robbers; which seems to us very strange; but what we cannot explain this hour we shall reserve until tomorrow. It is enough to have shown that if we are afflicted we must not think that it happens without reason, but God has just cause to do it. And whenever we are tried and anguish let us run back to Him, let us pray to Him that He will give us grace to acknowledge that nothing happens to us in this world except as He disposes; indeed, and to be certain that He disposes in such manner that everything always comes back to our salvation. And when we shall have this knowledge, it will cause us to bear patiently the afflictions which He will send us. It will also be to make us humble ourselves before Him, and that having tasted for ourselves His fatherly goodness, we shall ask only to glorify Him in everything and through everything, as much in affliction as in prosperity.

8. Fr. se letent hors des gonds, throw themselves off their hinges.

SERMON 3

Blessed is the Man whom God Corrects

Behold, the man whom God corrects is blessed; therefore refuse not thou the chastisement of the Almighty. It is He Who makes the wound, and Who binds it up; Who smiles, and Who brings life. —Jon 5:17, 18

Previously Eliphaz has declared what the power of God is, that we may be better prepared to receive the doctrine which he adds. For we see why we are not as teachable as we should be: namely, because we do not sufficiently know the majesty of God to be touched by fear of Him. Therefore we need to know how God governs the world, and to consider His infinite righteousness, power, and wisdom. Now if the wicked are confounded because God shows Himself against them and so have their mouths stopped, what ought to be our attitude? For God should not have to constrain us to do Him honor; it should be enough that He gives us occasion, and that He shows how there is just cause for us to do it, and we should come to it of our own accord. So, then, let us bear in mind what has been declared previously: namely, that when God's judgments are laid before us, it is no matter to laugh at or to dally with, but it behooves all creatures to tremble at them.

And now it is said that the man is blessed whom God chastises, and that therefore we must not refuse the corrections of the Almighty. If a man should tell us that God does men no wrong when He becomes their judge and uses great severity and rigor toward them, surely this ought to affect us sufficiently; but yet we would be as astonished at this doctrine as if a man had hit us on the head with a hammer. What is to be done, then? There must be some sugar mixed with

* Sermon 21 in Calvin's Opera, Corpus Reformatorum, volume 33, pp. 258-270.