

SONGS OF THE
NATIVITY

John Calvin

Selected Sermons on Luke 1 & 2

Translated into English by
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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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THE JUDGE OF ALL THE WORLD

*'He has plucked princes from their seats, and has raised up the lowly.
53 He has filled with good things those who were hungry, and has left
the rich empty. 54 He has received Israel his servant in remembrance of
his mercy, 55 According as he spoke to our fathers, promising mercy to
Abraham and his seed for ever' (Luke 1: 52-55).*

We have seen already that, because God resists the proud, we cannot do better than walk before him in sincerity. For if we try to promote ourselves by high-flown ambition and careful scheming, God is bound to intervene and bring everything undone, so that it all ends in ruin and confusion. Let us not be too clever, but be sober-minded. If we did not live modestly, but rather aimed above our calling, we would become like wayward beasts—the faster we went, the more likely we would be to break our necks! That is why Mary continues her song with the words, 'God plucks princes and the mighty from their seats, and raises up the lowly.'

Unbelievers, when they see the way the world is always changing, think that God plays with humankind as with a ball. That is the kind of thing men say when they blaspheme God, or else they think that change is merely random.¹ So what we have to notice is that, when God raises up the lowly and casts the mighty down,

it is because men cannot endure their condition. They forget who they are, and in their pride and arrogance they not only despise their fellow-men but also make war on heaven itself. God must naturally curb such folly or, should I say, such utter madness. It is clear then that when those who were once of superior rank are thrown down, and when those who were formerly despised are now honoured, it is no mere accident. God is using such examples to teach us that the lowly should not desire more than he has ordained, and that men who have power over others and who even reign supreme, should remember they are mortal creatures. If they are above others, it is because God has chosen to place them closer to himself.²

For that reason they must always remain obedient to him and recognize that, overnight, God can turn their honour into shame and their dignity into disgrace. So here two opposites are brought together. God raises the lowly, but scatters the proud in the thoughts of their heart, that is, in the many devices they employ to maintain and shore up their power. Intrigue and scheme as they will, whatever miracles they think they have performed and whatever victories won, God will scatter the lot and send it up in smoke.

It follows therefore that 'he plucks the mighty from their seats'. Why, you ask? The mighty, as we saw, ought always to remain humble, knowing that the higher the position in which God asks them to serve, the greater is their obligation to him. Instead, some go overboard and engage in tyranny and cruelty; some again are so blinded by ambition that they think they are no longer bound by human limitations; others are utterly depraved and wallow in their lusts and pleasures; still others have no respect for law of any kind. That is why God must intervene to strip them of the powers they have so culpably misused.

Do not think, however, when all around us is changing, that God enjoys turning things upside down. He is simply exercising

his righteous judgment. We do not always understand the reason why, but we must take it as given that when leaders seek to rise above their station, God will bring them down. If they had looked to him for support they would have had a sure and lasting foundation; but because they have risen against him, they are bound to stumble, and the greater their presumption, the greater the disgrace which he brings upon them. The reason is stated in Psalm 75, where it is said: 'Do not speak with a stiff, proud or stubborn neck, and do not raise your horn on high, for exaltation comes neither from east nor west, from north nor south. God is judge and ruler, and he humbles arrogance whenever it climbs too high.'³

Here we have a sound explanation of our text. In the first place the prophet shows how disaster often overtakes the kings of this world and those who are worshipped as petty gods, because in prosperity they stiffen their necks, thinking they need never bow before another, nor be subject to God, nor account to anyone for what they do in office. So they go to extremes, indulging in all kinds of evil, and fancying they are superior to law, reason and everything else. Since, therefore, the proud are defiled by pride and arrogance, God must take a hand. Then too the Psalm declares that exaltation comes neither from east nor west. That means it is pointless for us mortals to enquire why someone has risen high in rank and why another has been suddenly brought low. The answer is that God humbles and exalts whomever he wills. Why is it so? We must carefully weigh what the Psalm says: 'He is judge.' In other words, God is a just ruler.

Observe, then, that God neither promotes men nor pushes them arbitrarily about as if he loved confusion. It is because he rules the world, as is his right. So it is that those who abuse their office and the favour God has done in honouring them, must inevitably come to grief in their pride. Let the lowly, too, be an example to us that, when God wills, he has only to stretch out his hand to the down-

trodden and the rejected, and in an instant they are honoured, valued and esteemed: God's hand is there to uphold them. The more frequent the changes we endure, the more thankless we are where God is concerned. His very goodness to us is something we cannot bear. For when the powerful are brought down, we should all feel apprehension and concern. Yet no-one gives it a thought, and those who take their place behave even worse. God must therefore put things right. So when we experience change after change, we can be sure it is all because men are wicked and perverse.

Here, at all events, we learn a double lesson. When we see the mighty brought so low, remember that it is because God loathes and detests pride. He is implacably opposed to it. All who would rise higher than they should will feel the power of his hand to break and shatter them. For Scripture says that we must humble ourselves under God's mighty hand if we are to be raised up.⁴ Clearly, no-one can rise a finger's breadth above his calling without God's hand immediately being against him. Who among us could bear so powerful a force? It is too much for us. So when God humbles the pride and what Scripture calls the haughty brow of the arrogant,⁵ we should learn to be modest, and when such things happen they should serve us as models or pictures in which we may view ourselves. So much for that point.

Now supposing we were among the lowly, there is a useful analogy we might draw. We might ask: 'How is it that God still spares me? I know that he begins with the mountains, for that is where the lightning most often falls.' God indeed begins with the mightiest, because they misuse the blessings he has given them: the higher they happen to rise, the freer they think they are to do evil. In fact they provoke God's wrath much more than the smaller fry. So if we are lowly or of average reputation, we should learn to walk in all modesty, since with great severity God overthrows those who seemed exempt from the ordinary rules which govern us. When,

on the other hand, we read that God exalts the lowly, we should not resent it if we are of humble rank. Such is God's good pleasure. We know that he assigns to each of us our station in life: the poor whom the world despises and rejects are not on that account alienated from him. As the Psalm says, God dwells on high, but his eye is on the little things.⁶ There the prophet is describing God's providence and fatherly care for those who accept their lowliness, and who have not been swept away by the lust for power and prestige. We should all, then, learn to remain under our Lord's yoke if, in the eyes of the world, he should deny us a place of high honour.

Meantime, we may gladly boast in that free adoption by which he acknowledges us to be his children. That should mean more to us than if he were to give us all the kingdoms of the world, with all its pleasures and delights and all the good fortune we could possibly want. For what is that beside the eternal inheritance in which we share by faith and which is kept as a precious treasure for us? It would be different if we were meant to live always in this world. But we are no more than poor aliens here, and can never claim it as our home.

Next in Mary's song we read: 'God feeds the hungry poor and satisfies them.' By way of contrast it is also said: 'He sends the rich away empty.' It is no accident that we are often in want, since despite the good things we have received from God, we fail to honour him with due praise. Although the Lord may cause this man or that to prosper, they all straightway fall into sin and end up more dissolute than before. When the Lord is generous to us, his purpose is to lure us, so to speak, to himself, and to win us over by gentle means. He wants to encourage us to love him better and to serve him. Yet what actually happens? Our very prosperity makes us fractious, leading some to indulge their insatiable greed by adding to their store of goods; there is no end to their appetite for more, and their passion destroys whatever remains of trust, honesty and

conscience. They become so cruel as to be like wild beasts and they are indifferent to rebuke of any sort. They are beyond all reason, and are without humanity or pity for their fellow men. They eat up the poor, they suck their marrow, they gnaw their very bones. Prosperity leads others to indulge themselves in showy spectacle and reckless extravagance. Their vices spread corruption all around, as happens when those who are powerful refuse to be reined in. They introduce so much evil that in the end whole cities are infected with debauchery, villainy and other abominations. Others again look for attention and crave adulation.

In a word, there is no-one who, receiving good things from God, does not end up depraved and estranged from him. Nevertheless, there is evidence to show that what this verse teaches is true. For however much the rich may manage to amass, they remain, generally speaking, poor. They burn with the desire for more; they grieve that the earth will never supply their wants; they do not think of what they have, but fear it will slip through their fingers. They are driven so wild with worry that no-one could torture them more than they torture themselves. That is why they are hungry and empty, even though they have enough to gorge themselves to death, which is precisely what they do! We hear of spendthrifts who destroy themselves and others too. Or of others who, after thirty or forty years of relentless toil, are reduced to nothing in the twinkling of an eye. They will have taken the bread out of their own mouths, as the saying goes; they will never have had a full night's rest for fear that old age should steal a march on them! They will have been unhappy wretches all their lives. And yet we are amazed when the wind blows and they vanish away! The reason this happens is that God is at work, as he tells us through his prophets.

We should not then judge on first impressions the saying: 'God sends the rich away empty.' Rather, we should weigh whether those who have many goods are really satisfied, whether they are thank-

ful to God, whether they are prepared to give it all up, whether, finally, they recognize that all comes from God and depends on his liberality. If that is how the rich are, they are assuredly not empty. What, however, mostly happens is that the rich grab everything for themselves, or else agonize lest a mere nothing tip them into poverty. Some will squander their wealth without a thought for where it goes, while others, out of ambition, will spend madly in order to show off or to maintain their reputation. When we see such things, we can be sure that these people are empty, however much they may possess. Enough, I think, has been said on that point.

The opposite idea is now introduced: 'God satisfies the hungry poor.' Here we must observe that it is often better for us to be poor and needy than to have an abundance of goods. God, for his part, knows why he bestows wealth on those who wickedly misuse, pervert and profane it, and why he gives none to others. As for us, though we may not own much, and have no lordly or princely estates, nor possess silver or gold or suchlike, we may be sure of this: God knows that being poor may work to our advantage. The poor are often thought of as little angels.⁷ But supposing they were suddenly to come into wealth, might they not change in an instant? So God, knowing our weakness, administers a kind of preventive medicine, to stop us making gluttons of ourselves in one way or another. That is what we have to remember when Scripture says, 'God satisfies the hungry.' The word 'hungry' has nothing to do with the feeling of want which sometimes makes us bitter or angry with God, or which unsettles us when we fail to get our own way. The fact is that when we are in need we are driven to ask God for our daily bread, and to regard what he gives, however little, as a blessing to be received with thanks.

There are two things here which the Virgin Mary intends to convey. First, although we may have nothing, God is rich enough to sustain us, and his blessing in itself is more to us than if we had

overflowing barns, well-stocked cellars and gold and silver in our purse. Supposing the whole world were ours, a piece of bread with God's blessing would undoubtedly be more precious, as Psalm 37 declares, than the greatest abundance, which simply destroys those who cannot enjoy it with thanksgiving.⁸ Secondly, Mary wants us to see that we should turn to God in every circumstance, and not champ at the bit as unbelievers do who rant and rage when things are scarce and when earthly wealth is lost. They do not have the wit to open their mouths like the young ravens who, in the words of the Psalm, 'lift their beaks on high when they are hungry, and ask God to feed them.'⁹ That is how it is with people who are hungry. Their hearts are puffed up with pride, they seethe with resentment and are full of complaints against God. Yet they will never open their mouths and say, 'Lord, have pity on me.' Let us learn, then, when we are poor and needy, to look for the good things where they are to be found—in God, who makes it his business to satisfy the hungry.

In essence, Mary teaches that God wishes to be known as the one who rules the world, not only in its natural and continuous order, but also in the changes we see all around us. This is worth noting, for as we have already said, worldly people who do not know the Scriptures are always crying 'Chance! Chance!' when they see one man reduced to poverty while honours are heaped on another. Either way God is completely ignored. Now this is a clear warning to us: we should see in such events the extraordinary judgments of God.

If we were the people we were meant to be, we would all be living in a paradise on earth, and everyone would have reason to be happy. As it is, the Lord sends us such varying afflictions as he sees are good for us. That is why we, as his children, must each receive our share from the Father's hand. Let every one of us take what is given and thank God for it.

There is a further warning for us. The Lord is capable of changing events which otherwise might follow a smooth and even pattern. What is his purpose? Psalm 107 tells us.¹⁰ It is because men get above themselves in times of prosperity, so that some appear to scorn God and openly defy him, and others become perverse and corrupt. Therefore God brings barrenness upon certain places, and prison and captivity upon others; he sends famine upon some, and the pain of ignominy upon others. When such things happen, iniquity is sure to shut her mouth, as we read at the end of the Psalm, and we will rejoice to discover how marvellous God's judgments are.

That is the lesson to be learned from Mary's comments here. She now goes on to draw a final inference from the grace which has been shown her, saying 'God has received Israel his servant and has remembered (or because he has remembered) his mercy, according as he spoke to the fathers of old, to Abraham and to all his posterity.' Earlier we said that, in giving God overall praise, Mary shows how we too might be moved to praise him. Each particular blessing received from God should be used to deepen our appreciation and to enlarge our understanding. What I mean is this. If I have been delivered from illness or received help in some necessity, if I have escaped from some great danger, I must magnify God for having been gracious to me in time of need. That, however, is still not enough. I must go further, and reflect that it was not just today that God began to bless me. When I came out of my mother's womb, did he not draw me forth as by a miracle? From that point on I have always felt his hand aiding and supporting me. How often has he worked to save me from hazards and perils! How merciful he has been to me in so many ways! When, therefore, we fully weigh the blessings we have received from God, how can we not be confounded, especially when we recall the wonderful pity he showed us even before we were born?

And is not God's act of eternal election the best proof we have of his goodness, wisdom and righteousness? By it he chose us for himself, calling us to a knowledge of the gospel and making us members of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. That is how a single favour should give us cause to exalt God always and everywhere, and to stretch our reach, as it were, upward, downward and outward, so that we forget none of his benefits.

That is how Mary proceeds in her song. She began with herself. 'I have every reason', she says, 'to praise God for so blessing me that all nations which hear my news will call me happy. He has looked upon my lowliness.' See how completely she humbles and abases herself! Then she continues, 'God has done a wonderful work for me.' Then, as we have seen, she is led to this overarching conclusion: 'it is God's function to judge the world and rule it, in such a way that change is never haphazard but proceeds from his just and wonderful counsel. His name is forever holy: we who once opposed him must now praise him for his righteousness and wisdom, and accept as good whatever comes from his hand.' That is how Mary describes to us the providence of God.

She now returns to the theme of redemption, whose instrument she was chosen to be. She declares that 'God has received Israel his servant.' Here she refers to the people who bear the name of their father Jacob, also known as Israel, a name which denotes the strength and steadfastness he showed in his victorious struggle with the angel. Mary affirms that God has received his people. Had they been, then, at enmity with him? It would appear so. God's covenant, to be sure, was always immutable, and although the Jews did not believe, God's nature remained the same. He remained faithful, as Paul teaches in the third chapter of Romans. There it is said that the Jews did their best to annul God's covenant which gave reality and substance to all his promises; nevertheless, he never wavered from his purpose.¹¹ Even though men, as Scripture says, are liars,

God is and always will be true; he will not yield for all men's wickedness.¹² He always reserved some seed for himself among this people, because of his promise to Abraham, 'I will be your God, and the God of those who come after you.'¹³

Nevertheless, the outward condition of this unhappy people was such as to suggest that they had been totally rejected. Scripture often speaks this way: 'Why have you made your heritage an object of shame? Why have you torn down the hedges and broken the fences so that wild beasts have come in to scatter and despoil?'¹⁴ Such was the external evidence, visible to all, of Israel's rejection. Yet God remained faithful. It was just when the very end times had come that the Lord Jesus Christ was revealed to the world. For although the Jews had regained their freedom and rebuilt the temple and the city of Jerusalem, and although God was worshipped, they suffered as we know much affliction.¹⁵ Jerusalem was filled with the blood of all who maintained true and pure religion. It was no longer a question of burning two or three dozen at a time: mothers were slaughtered with their children, the throats of all were slit—this was an atrocity if ever there was one! In the end the Jews' misery was such that they were reduced to slavery, yet dared not complain. They were forced to submit to Herod, their mortal enemy, who was more than happy to oppress this wretched people. Despite his claim to be a Jew himself, he was bent on wiping out the Jewish religion.¹⁶

The Romans, too, were intent on snatching their prey. They looted whatever they could, and imposed tribute so as to burden these poor souls still more. In time religious teaching ceased to be pure and became perverted. It is true there were no idols nor many open signs of other superstitions. Even so, purity of worship disappeared. Men no longer knew what it was to serve God or to trust in him. They talked well enough about religion, but with no real understanding. In short, such was this people's confused and troubled

state that it seemed God had deserted them, and wished to make them a spectacle of horror to all who saw them. Confusion was never worse than when Jesus Christ was sent among men.

That is why Mary says that God has received his servant. Up till then the nation had been laid low; it was like a rotten corpse, of no significance to anyone. Yet now God seeks it out, to rescue it not merely from the mire but from the bottomless abyss. Here, then, we see how God's mercy is magnified, in that he sends the Redeemer whom he promised so many years before. Recall what Paul says in this connection: God, he writes, in establishing his church, calls into being things that are not.¹⁷ Only if we know we come from nothing can we rightly give God the glory for our salvation. If we thought we had anything of our own to bring, some trifling contribution of our own devising, we might be the most wretched people on earth, but that would not stop us claiming to be partners with God, or denying we owed our salvation to his goodness alone. We are but mean, mangy dogs, whom the Lord must totally transform. To realize that is to understand that only he can save us from hell and call us into his heavenly kingdom.

I have no doubt that the confusion which came upon the Jews was due to the express counsel of God. His object was to throw into sharper relief the redemption which he had promised. For although Abraham was, so to speak, rescued from hell—he and his forebears having been idolaters, as we see from the last chapter of Joshua¹⁸—the Jews would never have known that salvation was free, had not God subdued them, making them in the eyes of all an object of shame and aversion, so that life for them seemed worse than the most painful of deaths. If they had not been brought to that extremity, they would not have been able to glorify God. Here, then, Scripture invites us to see God's mercy as in a mirror, when it tells us that God received Israel. That is to say, the church has now been made manifest when, in earlier times, it had been laid waste,

a pile of ruins so awful as to terrify all mankind. That is the lesson contained in this text.

Notice now what Mary says next: 'God has remembered his mercy, according as he spoke to the fathers of old, to Abraham and his seed forever.' Here the Virgin expresses more forcefully than before the idea that Israel is a mirror of God's goodness, a mirror which could not have functioned half so well if God had heaped wealth and prestige upon this people. Had that happened, God's mercy would have been greatly dimmed, for as we already said, men use his gifts as a blindfold so as not to see the one who is the source of all good things. Such blindness beggars belief, but there are precedents aplenty which prove that, whenever God is good to us, instead of being drawn to him we shut our eyes and become like brute beasts. So Mary here insists that God has gathered in his people who before were desolate and utterly cast down, in remembrance of his mercy.

Now when Scripture says that God remembers, it does not mean that he forgets anything, or that one thought puts another to flight, as happens with us. We are incapable of keeping everything in our heads at once: when we apply our minds to one thing, others come along to distract us and to stop us recalling our earlier thoughts. That is not how it is with God. All things lie open before him, and nothing is left out. However, as we have seen, Israel appeared to be a forgotten people. That is how Scripture describes them, accommodating itself to our weakness. For we imagine that God has put us out of his mind when he deals severely with us. We think he has withdrawn his mercy from us and put it beyond our reach. So God is said to have remembered his mercy when he gave effect to his promise to adopt Abraham and his posterity, and to be a Father to him, although he was no better than other men.

That is how God remembers—by allowing us to experience his mercy and thus prove that he has not forgotten us. When we have

gone through sadness and distress, we inevitably think that God is far from us. We are at the end of our tether, as the saying goes. Where, we ask, is God? We are like men in a daze. But if the Lord afterwards reveals his hand and gives us a taste of his power, he shows that he remembers us. He acts this way because he is full of pity. That should always be the well-spring to which we return if we are to glorify God alone. The point Mary makes is that when God calls us to be part of his household and church, it is on his sheer kindness that our salvation rests, and in continuing his work in us, he gives us a greater measure of his gifts. His mercy runs in an unbroken thread, so that we can never claim to make progress on our own or attribute anything to our own powers.

Along with this, Mary's words give us something else to ponder: 'according as he spoke to the fathers of old, to Abraham and his descendants'. By this we understand that, while God is good to all creatures without distinction, and while his mercy extends, as the Psalms tell us, to the brute beasts,¹⁹ he is particularly good to those who hope in him. Now this kind of hope is not something our own brains or imagination can devise. It would be foolish and rash of us to think: 'God will be good to me, because that is what my head tells me!' No, what we need is God's word which alone gives assurance. It is the word that must have authority over us. Mary therefore brings us back to the promise made to Abraham, to encourage us to hope in God, to call upon him with confidence, to give him due praise for blessings already given and for those we still await. Let us rest, then, on the truth of his promises, and on his goodwill to which the Law and the Prophets bear witness, and which is more fully revealed in the gospel.

How may we apply this teaching? Convinced that God has been a kind and gracious Father to us, we must turn to his word, otherwise all the benefits we have received from him will lose their taste and flavour. Unbelievers, we know, receive much by way of blessing

from him, but it does them no good. The salt which preserves for us all of God's graces is his word, provided we receive it by faith. We cannot doubt that God is our Father, since he welcomes us as his children and supplies our earthly wants while leading us to our inheritance in heaven. So God's physical blessings must take us further on, to what is lasting—to the eternal blessedness which he has promised us, and which Christ our Lord has won for us.

Let us no longer, then, speak vaguely and abstractly about God's goodness. Everyone talks that way! We should rather say, God is indeed good, and he will be good to us because our trust is fixed in him. Now how can that be? It is not because we have hit on an idea we happen to like. It is because we have his promise; we know that he is faithful and will never disappoint our hope. We should never seek to live by our own lights, but should turn to God's word which, if it truly rules our life, gives us the assurance that once God has drawn near to us, he will not turn away, as long as we follow the path he shows us. And knowing how weak we are, we should pray that he will strengthen us and always give us grace to persevere, enabling us to overcome every worldly trial and obstacle, and every hindrance the devil puts in our way. When we place our trust in him and in the testimony he has given us of his goodwill, faith will triumph over every attack the devil and the world may make upon us.

Now let us cast ourselves down before the majesty of our good God, conscious of our faults, praying that we may feel them more deeply than we have so far done, and may always be brought to a proper repentance. And may we so lament the uncleanness, corruption, misery and lusts which lie within us, that we may be purged of them and may long for that perfection which God reveals in holy Scripture. And may this kind God so support us in our weak-

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nesses, that we may more and more profit in his school, casting off whatever is of the old Adam and being made new in our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may come at length to share in his glorious resurrection. Therefore together let us say, Almighty God and heavenly Father . . .

5

THE DAY OF VISITATION

And fear came upon all their neighbours. And all these words were made known throughout the mountain country of Judaea. ⁶⁶ And all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, 'What will this child be?' And the hand of God was with him. ⁶⁷ And Zechariah his father was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, ⁶⁸ 'Praised be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and brought deliverance to his people' (Luke 1:65-68).

When God is pleased to exhibit his wonderful works to us, we should be moved by a feeling of reverence, as if he himself appeared before us in all his majesty. This sometimes happens even among the unbelieving and rebellious, not because they have the same root of God's fear in them, but because they are bound to feel a fitful kind of awe when God makes them conscious of his presence. They are aroused for a short time, but then the emotion vanishes. Believers, on the other hand, have such a holy fear graven on their hearts that in every circumstance of life God is always present to them, so that they walk as if his eye were on them. For this reason we ought to heed what Luke tells us here, namely that all who heard of the miracles which occurred when John the Baptist was born were overcome with fear. Sadly not all were to benefit: there were many who in a short space of time forgot all about it. For