

Calvin's Last Lecture – “The Glory of God” Ezekiel 20:39-44

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. II, 335-346, emphasis added; English updated.

LECTURE SIXTY-FIVE—*The last lecture on Ezekiel from John Calvin, given just prior to his death. Calvin shows us the glory of God, as seen in many profound teachings of Holy Scripture.*

True versus false worship

We yesterday saw the reason why God prefers that men should be entirely devoted to their superstitions rather than mingle them with the resemblance of true piety, since this is but a profanation of his holy name. He wishes to be kept separate from all idols. Hence it is not surprising that He loosens the reins from the Israelites, that they should cast themselves entirely on their idolatries; and He repeats again what He had said, that His name was profaned by gifts and idols, since the unbelievers pretended to worship Him, but at the same time transferred His glory to idols. Hence He does not suffer Himself to be trifled with in this way; so wherever offerings and idols occur, we should notice that **all mixtures by which the pure simplicity of lawful worship is corrupted are condemned.** It now follows —

Ezekiel 20:40 “For in My holy mountain, in the mountain of the height of Israel, says the Lord God, there shall all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, serve Me. There will I accept them, and there will I require your offerings, and the first-fruits of your sacrifices, with all your holy things.”

God now directs His address **to the elect**, or **the remnant** in whom He wished His Church to survive. Thus far He has spoken of the whole body of the people. He says, although He should free them from the hand of the Gentiles, yet that redemption would be but partial, because they should perish in the desert, and never enjoy the promised land. On the whole, He shows that those to whom a free return to their own country was given were no less strangers than if they had been exiles at the time, and always remained outlaws, since their impiety prevented their restoration.

The Israel of God—The elect, a remnant of grace

God now addresses **the true Israelites**, who were not only naturally descended from their fathers, but were genuine and spiritual children, as Paul distinguishes between those sons of Abraham born according to the flesh and to promise (Romans 9:7-9). For this reason also it is said in Psalm 73—And surely God is good to Israel—to those who are upright in heart for the Prophet here asserts that God is gracious towards the Israelites; but since many hypocrites boast themselves to be members of the Church, for the sake of correcting them, he restricts the sentence, and does not reckon any, as true Israelites except the upright in heart.

So the same thing is repeated in Psalm 15 and Psalm 24—Who shall ascend into the mount of the Lord? But the perfidious and the wicked did mingle themselves with the sincere worshipers; yet the Prophet excludes them from the list of the faithful, since he says that none should have a fixed station in God's sanctuary except the sound in heart

and the clean in hand. In the same sense also the Prophet formerly taught that although hypocrites proudly boasted themselves to be God's people, yet their names were not written in the secret catalogue of the righteous (Ezekiel 13:9). We now see how well those things which seem inconsistent agree together, namely, that the Lord's redeeming Israel from the tyranny of the Gentiles would not profit them, and yet, that they should come into the mountain of Israel and worship Him sincerely. Israel is here placed before us in a twofold light: for many were Israelites in name; but **here the Prophet is treating of the elect, whom Paul calls a remnant of grace** (Romans 11:5).

Mount Zion, New Jerusalem, the Church

In the mountain, says He, of My holiness, in the lofty mountain of Israel. He does not call the mountain high, because it was loftier than others, for we know that there were many lofty mountains in the land of Judea; and Zion was but a small hill; but we have elsewhere seen that it was preferred to lofty mountains, because it excelled in dignity. Here our Prophet does not regard the height of Mount Zion, but the singular glory with which it was adorned; as if he had said that **God resided there, and His glory shone forth over all the loftiness of the world.**

Meanwhile I do not doubt that this epithet is obliquely opposed to the high places, which were consecrated everywhere, as we saw before. Since, therefore, the people had erected altars in all elevated places of all kinds, here God opposes one lofty mountain to all these, whose height had deceived those wretched men who thought themselves when there, nearer to heaven. This, therefore, is the reason why he calls it a high mountain. He says, *there shall the whole house of Israel worship Me, the whole, I say, in the land.* It is not surprising that **the whole house of Israel** is placed here without exception, because, as I have said, the Prophet does not comprehend all those who boasted in that title, but **he only means the pure worshipers of God, who were the spiritual children of Abraham.** But here God describes the agreement in faith among all the faithful, as if he had said that the people would be fresh, and would not follow various speculations, as they formerly wandered, each after his own superstitions, but there should be one common rule for all.

True worship and Christian unity: The faithful, true believers, are to exhibit agreement and unity in the faith, as they are all to worship God in the same way—only as God has prescribed in His all-sufficient Word.

So we are taught by this passage that our worship does not please God except we are bent upon a simple agreement of faith, and the celebration of His name with our mouth. The impious often subscribe to different modes of belief, but they have no regard to God. But, here we must hold the principle, that **God cannot be worshipped unless the doctrine of His law flourishes.**

The whole house of Israel, I say, in the land. He signifies by these words that the whole land of Israel, so long contaminated by much filth, should be so sacred that the pure and perfect worship of God should alone be beheld there. *In the land,* then, purged from all defilements by which it was before polluted, He adds a promise, *there will I be propitious to you.* **We formerly saw that all the people's sacrifices were rejected, and that for one reason, because they mixed them with their own inventions.** Now, God pronounces that He would be propitious [favorable] to them, because He will be purely worshipped, and His service shall no longer be vitiated [corrupted] by the perverse comments [additions] of men. We here see, therefore, that God's complacency or favor

is accompanied with a detestation of all superstitions, as we have often mentioned previously.

As, therefore, **God abominates whatever is added to the simple teaching of the law, so He asserts that he will be propitious where He is purely worshipped according to the law.**

He adds, *and there will I require your oblations [sacrifices]*: the person is changed, but the sense flows on readily: He says, *I will require your oblations*. He puts one kind of oblation, but He includes them all, as will be seen at the end of the verse. Although I confess that two different kinds of offering are signified by the words . . . , yet they are often taken for any kind of offering when used separately, a part being put for the whole, as I have said. He says, then, that the offerings were grateful to Him, and He implies that by the word requiring, because we have seen that the people's gifts were refused when corrupted by foreign superstitions, and God is said to exact the gifts which He approves.

And the first-fruits of your gifts, He says, that is, the flower or excellence of your gifts, *in all your sanctifications*, that is, in all My worship. It signifies, on the whole, when the Israelites betake themselves to the simple doctrine of the law, their obedience is so grateful to God, that their gifts please Him, their offerings are taken into account, and their whole worship is accepted.

As the apostle Paul wrote, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." (Romans 12:1-2)

It now follows —

Ezekiel 20:41 "I will accept you with your sweet savor, when I bring you out from the people, and gather you out of the countries in which you have been scattered; and I will be sanctified in you before the heathen."

Scripture alone for worship—We are to worship God only as He has prescribed in His law, in His word.

He continues the same sentiment, namely, that **the people's worship would be acceptable**, when those who had formerly been deceived by their superstitions had bidden them farewell, and **follow the law only**.

He uses the word "savor," according to the customary legal form, not because incense was pleasing to God, but because external ceremonies were no vain discipline for the people when they retained the truth. For surely incense of itself is of no consequence, but God wished in a palpable manner to testify that He did not reject the sacrifices which He had commanded. Hence, by these forms of speech, the Holy Spirit signifies that God was truly appeased when men approach Him with sincere faith and repentance, and desire to be reconciled, and suppliantly pray for pardon by ingenuous [genuine] confession of sin, and look up to Christ. This is the savor which Moses everywhere teaches was sweet, to God. But as the incense of the law was always sweet, so all others were offensive, as we have already seen.

The Prophet, therefore, adds nothing new here, but confirms his former teaching, that **God delights in the pure and sincere worship of the faithful, when they try nothing but by His law.**

Afterwards, says He, I will lead you out from the people, and will collect you from the lands through which you have been dispersed. He repeats the same words which were formerly used, but with another sense and purpose; since, while He redeems alike the hypocrites and His elect, the offered liberty does not profit the hypocrites: because, wherever they might dwell, their station was in the wilderness; and even in the very bosom of the land of Canaan they were exiles, and their life was erratic, and they were without any enjoyment of the promised inheritance, but wandered in the desert, and through distant regions. For although they dwelt in the midst of a crowd, yet such was their condition that God had deservedly threatened them with remaining in the wilderness of the Gentiles even till death.

But now, when he speaks of the elect and the faithful, he makes a difference between them and the hypocrites. For a question might otherwise arise, since all were apparently alike, What was the tendency of the promise, that some should be exiles and others return to their inheritance? For Daniel never returned to his country, and there is no doubt that other pious worshipers of God were at, the same time held back.

But we know how sinful a multitude returned to Judea when the edict of Cyrus permitted them. For all were afterwards attentive to their own private business. The temple was neglected; God was defrauded of his first-fruits and offerings; they married strange wives; and mingled polygamy with their sacrifices (Haggai 1:4). We have already seen how sharply and severely the three last prophets inveigh against them. Since many returned into the land of Canaan in their unchanged state, and who had better remained in Chaldaea. For this reason the Prophet directs his discourse to the elect, and says that they should not only be brought back, but when restored, as if by stealth, their worship would be pleasing to God in the land. *When, therefore, I shall have brought you forth, I shall be sanctified in you before the eyes of the Gentiles.* God was in some sense sanctified in the wicked, because they became an illustrious specimen of His power when the Chaldaeans were slain, and His temple erected a second time.

But here the Prophet, as I have said, separates the elect from the reprobate, since God was sanctified in them in a special manner, when a new Church emerged again, in which piety, true religion, and holiness of life flourished. When, therefore, such a spectacle was offered to the eyes of the Gentiles, then God asserted His glory among His faithful ones.

Lastly, these passages are to be read conjointly, *that He will be propitious to them, and will be pleased with their first-fruits and offerings, and He will be sanctified in the eyes of the Gentiles:* as it is said in Psalm 114:22, When Israel went out of Egypt, Israel was God's power, and Judea His sanctification, or sanctity. It follows —

Ezekiel 20:42 “And you shall know that I *am* the Lord, when I shall bring you into the land of Israel, into the country *for* the which I lifted up My hand to give it to your fathers.”

For the sake of frightening them, He threatened that He would be conspicuous to the reprobate, saying, *you shall know that I am Jehovah*—meaning, that He would be their judge: hence He was known to the reprobate by proofs of His anger or wrath. But now another kind of knowledge is denoted, namely, that which brings a sweet taste of paternal love: *you shall know, says He, that I am, Jehovah your God, when I shall*

have brought you in again. He here shows His full and complete benefit towards the faithful, which we saw before was withheld from the reprobate. For they were brought back, because, without exception, all were permitted to return to their country; for then the yoke of an imperious tyranny was broken when they were freed from the dominion of the Chaldees [Babylonians], and the king of the Medes had permitted them to build the temple, and to dwell in the land of Canaan. All were set at liberty, as I have said; but that was the only favor conferred upon the wicked, since they all perished in the desert of the Gentiles. But God's elect were led by the hand to the land of Israel, and there they really possessed the promised inheritance, since they dwelt there as sons and lawful heirs. The hypocrites returned, as I have said, but they never possessed the land by right of inheritance, for they wandered here and there in the desert, and although they resided at home, were always wandering exiles.

We see, then, that a singular privilege is intended when it is said, *I will be known by you, when I shall have brought you back from the nations and the lands through which you were dispersed, into the land concerning which I swore that I would give it to your fathers.* Here a mark is inscribed, that the faithful may know that this promise was not common to all. For the dwelling in the land of Canaan of itself was not a matter of much consequence, but here a value is expressed, that they should arrive at that land as God's heirs, and succeed their sacred fathers, to whom the inheritance was promised.

The Abrahamic covenant and God's promises to His elect

As God swore that He would give the land to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this ought not to be restricted to them personally, as we very well know; and yet they were its true heirs and lords, as their sepulchers bear witness. They suffered vexation by constantly changing their settlements, and were never at rest in one residence. During life they were strangers, but their sepulcher was a proof of true and lawful dominion. And in this way they transmitted the hope of the promised inheritance to their posterity. Now, therefore, we see with what intention the Prophet here says that the land was promised to their fathers, that its value might raise the minds of the faithful to consider the magnitude of the benefit. It follows —

Ezekiel 20:43 “And there shall you remember your ways, and all your doings, in which you have been defiled; and you shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for all your evils that you have committed.”

True repentance and forgiveness of sins

Here God shows that He would at length be propitious to His elect when they repented. Thus He signifies that there was no other means of reconciliation than by the intervention of **repentance**. And we must carefully remark this, as I have previously mentioned. For we know with what security all men usually indulge themselves, nor are the pious themselves affected with grief sufficiently serious, when God invites them to the hope of safety and at the same time offers pardon. They embrace indeed greedily what they hear, but meanwhile they bury their sins.

But God wishes us to taste His goodness, that the remembrance of our crimes should be bitter, and also that every one should judge himself that he may obtain pardon from Him. Now, therefore, we understand the Prophet's intention. We saw a similar passage in Jeremiah: this teaching occurs throughout the Prophets, *there*, says He, *you shall remember me*. The circumstance of place is to be noticed, because the Prophet means that after the elect shall have returned to God's favor, and He shall account them as true

members of his Church, then **they ought to be mindful of their former life and to repent of their sins**. As if he had said, as long as God afflicts you and you remain under the tyranny of the Gentiles in exile, the sense of your evils will compel you to groan, so the remembrance of your sins should return, since, whether you will or not, their punishment will ever be before your eyes, since they would be easily persuaded that their sentence was usual and common.

But He shows them that **the sons of God** were not only mindful of their sins, when they feel themselves chastised by Him and experience shows His hostility, but **when received into favor and in the enjoyment of their inheritance, they live under God's wings, and He cherishes them as a tender offspring**. When, therefore, the faithful are treated so humanely by God, yet the Prophet shows that **in their condition they ought to be mindful of their sins, and all your works in which you have been polluted**, says He.

He now shows to what purpose they were to be mindful. For the wicked are compelled to call their sins to remembrance when God, by forcibly turning their attention to them, draws them to consider what they desire to bury in oblivion. But it is here said, *you shall be confounded in your own sight*. Since the Hebrew word . . . signifies to cut off, many interpreters take it for "ye shall be cut off;" that is, you shall judge yourselves worthy of destruction among those whom God will cut off and blot out of the earth. But this seems forced. Since the same word sometimes signifies to litigate, and to become abominable, I willingly take this meaning, *that they shall be abominable, or contemptible, in their own sight*: that is, they shall be so ashamed, as willingly and fully to acknowledge themselves utterly disgraced. **Hence Ezekiel means that the faithful should suffer voluntary disgrace, that they may glorify God by the pure and genuine confession of their shame.**

If any one prefers to expound it, you shall be condemned or convinced, that sense will suit well enough; but I have already brought forward what seemed more simple. For I said that **this is the fruit of penitence, when we lie confounded before God and are vile and despicable in our own eyes, and when we not only suffer ourselves to be condemned by others, but inwardly reflect upon our own disgrace, and so of our own accord prostrate ourselves before God**. This then is the fruit of penitence, this is true humility, flowing from genuine shame.

At length it follows —

Ezekiel 20:44 "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I have dealt with you for My name's sake, not according to your wicked ways, nor according to your corrupt doings, O house of Israel, says the Lord God."

God's glory is seen in the salvation of His elect and the destruction of the reprobate.

Here at length God pronounces that His glory would be chiefly conspicuous in the pity which He bestowed upon those who were desperate and abandoned, gratuitously [freely] and solely with respect to His own name. Hence Paul so specially celebrates the grace of God in the first chapter of the epistle to the Ephesians, as that mercy by which God condescends to call His own elect in a peculiar sense—His glory; for His glory extends farther than His pity (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14).

As Your name, so Your praise is extended through all lands (Psalm 48:10); for God deserves no less glory when He destroys the wicked than when He pities His own people. But Paul calls that gratuitous favor glory *par excellence*, by which God embraced His own elect when He adopted them. So also it is said in this passage, *then you shall know that I am Jehovah, since I shall deal with you on behalf of My name, and not according to your sins.*

But when God wishes His glory to shine conspicuously in gratuitous pity, hence we gather that the enemies of His glory were too gross and open, who obscure His mercy, or extenuate it, or as far as they can, endeavor to reduce it to nothing.

The Papacy obscures God's glory

But we know the teaching of the papacy to be that God's gratuitous goodness either is buried or enfolded in dark obscurity, or utterly vanishes away: for they have invented a system of general merits which they oppose to God's gratuitous favor. For they distinguish merits into preparations, good works acquiring God's favor, and satisfactions, by which they buy off the penalties to which they were subjected. Afterwards they add what they call the suffrages of the saints; for they fabricate for themselves numberless patrons, and various reasonings are concocted for the purpose of obscuring God's glory, or at least of allowing only a few sparks to be visible. **Since therefore the whole papacy tends that way, we see that they professedly oppose God's glory, and those who defend such abominations are sworn enemies of God's glory.**

For ourselves, then, let us learn that we cannot otherwise worship God with acceptance unless we adopt whatever pleases Him as pertaining to our salvation. For if we wish to come to a debtor and creditor account, or to consider that He is in the slightest degree indebted to us, we in this way diminish His glory, and as far as is in our power we despoil ourselves of that inestimable privilege which the Prophet now commends. Hence let us desire to acknowledge God in this way, since He treats us with amazing clemency and pity out of regard for His own name, and not according to our sins.

The Church is God's kingdom, and Christ is now seated on His throne as the King of kings and Lord of lords. Let us live to the glory of God alone and give Him all the praise and glory!

And since that was said to His ancient people because they returned to the land of Canaan, **how much more ought God's gratuitous goodness to be extolled by us, when His heavenly kingdom is at this day open to us, and when He openly calls us to Himself in heaven, and to the hope of that happy immortality which has been obtained for us through Christ?**

PRAYER.

Grant, Almighty God, since we have already entered in hope upon the threshold of our eternal inheritance, and know that there is a certain mansion for us in heaven after Christ has been received there, who is our head, and the first-fruits of our salvation: Grant, I say, that we may proceed more and more in the course of Your holy calling until at length we reach the goal, and so enjoy that eternal glory of which you afford us a taste in this world, by the same Christ our Lord. — Amen.

PRAISE TO GOD.

After finishing this last Lecture, that most illustrious man, JOHN CALVIN, the Divine, who had previously been sick, then began to be so much weaker that he was compelled to recline on a couch, and could no longer proceed with the explanation of EZEKIEL. This accounts for his stopping at the close of the Twentieth Chapter, and not finishing the work so auspiciously begun. Nothing remains, kind Reader, but that you receive most favorably and graciously what is now sent forth to the world.