THE JOHN CALVIN BIBLE COMMENTARIES

PSALMS 119-150

Commentaries On The Psalms 119 - 150

John Calvin

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John Calvin - A Biography

By William Barry

This man, undoubtedly the greatest of Protestant divines, and perhaps, after St. Augustine, the most perseveringly followed by his disciples of any Western writer on theology, was born at Noyon in Picardy, France, 10 July, 1509, and died at Geneva, 27 May, 1564.

A generation divided him from Luther, whom he never met. By birth, education, and temper these two protagonists of the reforming movement were strongly contrasted. Luther was a Saxon peasant, his father a miner; Calvin sprang from the French middle-class, and his father, an attorney, had purchased the freedom of the City of Noyon, where he practised civil and canon law. Luther entered the Order of Augustinian Hermits, took a monk's vows, was made a priest and incurred much odium by marrying a nun. Calvin never was ordained in the Catholic Church; his training was chiefly in law and the humanities; he took no vows. Luther's eloquence made him popular by its force, humour, rudeness, and vulgar style. Calvin spoke to the learned at all times, even when preaching before multitudes. His manner is classical; he reasons on system; he has little humour; instead of striking with a cudgel he uses the weapons of a deadly logic and persuades by a teacher's authority, not by a demagogue's calling of names. He writes French as well as Luther writes German, and like him has been reckoned a pioneer in the modern development of his

native tongue. Lastly, if we term the doctor of Wittenberg a mystic, we may sum up Calvin as a scholastic; he gives articulate expression to the principles which Luther had stormily thrown out upon the world in his vehement pamphleteering; and the "Institutes" as they were left by their author have remained ever since the standard of orthodox Protestant belief in all the Churches known as "Reformed." His French disciples called their sect "the religion"; such it has proved to be outside the Roman world.

The family name, spelt in many ways, was Cauvin latinized according to the custom of the age as Calvinus. For some unknown reason the Reformer is commonly called Maître Jean C. His mother, Jeanne Le Franc, born in the Diocese of Cambrai, is mentioned as "beautiful and devout"; she took her little son to various shrines and brought him up a good Catholic. On the father's side, his ancestors were seafaring men. His grandfather settled at Pont l'Evêque near Paris, and had two sons who became locksmiths; the third was Gerard, who turned procurator at Novon, and there his four sons and two daughters saw the light. He lived in the Place au Blé (Cornmarket). Noyon, a bishop's see, had long been a fief of the powerful old family of Hangest, who treated it as their personal property. But an everlasting quarrel, in which the city took part, went on between the bishop and the chapter. Charles de Hangest, nephew of the too wellknown Georges d'Amboise, Archbishop of Rouen, surrendered the bishopric in 1525 to his own nephew John, becoming his vicar-general. John kept up the battle with his canons until the Parliament of Paris intervened, upon which he went to Rome, and at last died in Paris in 1577. This prelate had Protestant kinsfolk; he is charged with having fostered heresy which in those years was beginning to raise its head among the French. Clerical dissensions, at all events, allowed the new doctrines a promising field; and

the Calvins were more or less infected by them before 1530.

Gerard's four sons were made clerics and held benefices at a tender age. The Reformer was given one when a boy of twelve, he became Curé of Saint-Martin de Marteville in the Vermandois in 1527, and of Pont l'Eveque in 1529. Three of the boys attended the local Collège des Capettes, and there John proved himself an apt scholar. But his people were intimate with greater folk, the de Montmor, a branch of the line of Hangest, which led to his accompanying some of their children to Paris in 1523, when his mother was probably dead and his father had married again. The latter died in 1531, under excommunication from the chapter for not sending in his accounts. The old man's illness, not his lack of honesty, was, we are told, the cause. Yet his son Charles, nettled by the censure, drew towards the Protestant doctrines. He was accused in 1534 of denying the Catholic dogma of the Eucharist, and died out of the Church in 1536; his body was publicly gibbeted as that of a recusant.

Meanwhile, young John was going through his own trials at the University of Paris, the dean or syndic of which, Noel Bédier, had stood up against Erasmus and bore hard upon Le Fèvre d'Etaples (Stapulensis), celebrated for his translation of the Bible into French. Calvin, a "martinet", or oppidan, in the Collèege de la Marche, made this man's acquaintance (he was from Picardy) and may have glanced into his Latin commentary on St. Paul, dated 1512, which Doumergue considers the first Protestant book emanating from a French pen. Another influence tending the same way was that of Corderius, Calvin's tutor, to whom he dedicated afterwards his annotation of I Thessalonians, remarking, "if there be any good thing in what I have published, I owe it to you". Corderius had an excellent Latin style, his life was austere, and his "Colloquies" earned him enduring fame. But he fell under suspicion of heresy, and by Calvin's aid took refuge in Geneva, where he died September 1564. A third herald of the "New Learning" was George Cop, physician to Francis I, in whose house Calvin found a welcome and gave ear to the religious discussions which Cop favoured. And a fourth was Pierre-Robert d'Olivet of Noyon, who also translated the Scriptures, our youthful man of letters, his nephew, writing (in 1535) a Latin preface to the Old Testament and a French one — his first appearance as a native author — to the New Testament.

By 1527, when no more than eighteen, Calvin's education was complete in its main lines. He had learned to be a humanist and a reformer. The "sudden conversion" to a spiritual life in 1529, of which he speaks, must not be taken quite literally. He had never been an ardent Catholic; but the stories told at one time of his ill-regulated conduct have no foundation; and by a very natural process he went over to the side on which his family were taking their stand. In 1528 he inscribed himself at Orléans as a law student, made friends with Francis Daniel, and then went for a year to Bourges, where he began preaching in private. Margaret d'Angoulême, sister of Francis I, and Duchess of Berry, was living there with many heterodox Germans about her.

He is found again at Paris in 1531. Wolmar had taught him Greek at Bourges; from Vatable he learned Hebrew; and he entertained some relations with the erudite Budaeus. About this date he printed a commentary on Seneca's "De Clementiâ". It was merely an exercise in scholarship, having no political significance. Francis I was, indeed, handling Protestants severely, and Calvin, now Doctor of Law at Orléans, composed, so the story runs, an oration on Christian philosophy which Nicholas Cop delivered on All

Saints' Day, 1532, both writer and speaker having to take instant flight from pursuit by the royal inquisitors. This legend has been rejected by modern critics. Calvin spent some time, however, with Canon du Tillet at Angoulême under a feigned designation. In May, 1534, he went to Noyon, gave up his benefice, and, it is said, was imprisoned. But he got away to Nerac in Bearn, the residence of the Duchess Margaret, and there again encountered Le Fèvre, whose French Bible had been condemned by the Sorbonne to the flames. His next visit to Paris fell out during a violent campaign of the Lutherans against the Mass, which brought on reprisals, Etienne de la Forge and others were burnt in the Place de Grève; and Calvin accompanied by du Tillet, escaped — though not without adventures — to Metz and Strasburg. In the latter city Bucer reigned supreme. The leading reformers dictated laws from the pulpit to their adherents, and this journey proved a decisive one for the French humanist, who, though by nature timid and shy, committed himself to a war on paper with his own sovereign. The famous letter to Francis I is dated 23 August, 1535. It served as a prologue to the "Institutes", of which the first edition came out in March, 1536, not in French but in Latin. Calvin's apology for lecturing the king was, that placards denouncing the Protestants as rebels had been posted up all over the realm. Francis I did not read these pages, but if he had done so he would have discovered in them a plea, not for toleration, which the Reformer utterly scorned, but for doing away with Catholicism in favour of the new gospel. There could be only one true Church, said the young theologian, therefore kings ought to make an utter end of popery. (For an account of the "Institutes" see) The second edition belongs to 1539, the first French translation to 1541; the final Latin, as revised by its author, is of 1559; but that in common use, dated 1560, has additions by his disciples. "It was more God's work than mine", said Calvin,

who took for his motto *"Omnia ad Dei gloriam"*, and in allusion to the change he had undergone in 1529 assumed for his device a hand stretched out from a burning heart.

A much disputed chapter in Calvin's biography is the visit which he was long thought to have paid at Ferraro to the Protestant Duchess Renée, daughter of Louis XII. Many stories clustered about his journey, now given up by the best-informed writers. All we know for certain is that the Reformer, after settling his family affairs and bringing over two of his brothers and sisters to the views he had adopted undertook, in consequence of the war between Charles V and Francis I, to reach Bale by way of Geneva, in July, 1536. At Geneva the Swiss preacher Fare, then looking for help in his propaganda, besought him with such vehemence to stay and teach theology that, as Calvin himself relates, he was terrified into submission. We are not accustomed to fancy the austere prophet so easily frightened. But as a student and recluse new to public responsibilities, he may well have hesitated before plunging into the troubled waters of Geneva, then at their stormiest period. No portrait of him belonging to this time is extant. Later he is represented as of middle height, with bent shoulders, piercing eyes, and a large forehead; his hair was of an auburn tinge. Study and fasting occasioned the severe headaches from which he suffered continually. In private life he was cheerful but sensitive, not to say overbearing, his friends treated him with delicate consideration. His habits were simple; he cared nothing for wealth, and he never allowed himself a holiday. His correspondence, of which 4271 letters remain, turns chiefly on doctrinal subjects. Yet his strong, reserved character told on all with whom he came in contact; Geneva submitted to his theocratic rule, and the Reformed Churches accepted his teaching as though it were infallible.

Such was the stranger whom Farel recommended to his fellow Protestants, "this Frenchman", chosen to lecture on the Bible in a city divided against itself. Geneva had about 15,000 inhabitants. Its bishop had long been its prince limited, however, by popular privileges. The vidomne, or mayor, was the Count of Savoy, and to his family the bishopric seemed a property which, from 1450, they bestowed on their younger children. John of Savoy, illegitimate son of the previous bishop, sold his rights to the duke, who was head of the clan, and died in 1519 at Pignerol. Jean de la Baume, last of its ecclesiastical princes, abandoned the city, which received Protestant teachers from Berne in 1519 and from Fribourg in 1526. In 1527 the arms of Savoy were torn down; in 1530 the Catholic party underwent defeat, and Geneva became independent. It had two councils, but the final verdict on public measures rested with the people. These appointed Farel, a convert of Le Fevre, as their preacher in 1534. A discussion between the two Churches from 30 May to 24 June, 1535 ended in victory for the Protestants. The altars were desecrated, the sacred images broken, the Mass done away with. Bernese troops entered and "the Gospel" was accepted, 21 May, 1536. This implied persecution of Catholics by the councils which acted both as Church and State. Priests were thrown into prison; citizens were fined for not attending sermons. At Zürich, Basle, and Berne the same laws were established. Toleration did not enter into the ideas of the time.

But though Calvin had not introduced this legislation, it was mainly by his influence that in January, 1537 the "articles" were voted which insisted on communion four times a year, set spies on delinquents, established a moral censorship, and punished the unruly with excommunication. There was to be a children's catechism, which he drew up; it ranks among his best writings. The

city now broke into "jurants" and "nonjurors" for many would not swear to the "articles"; indeed, they never were completely accepted. Questions had arisen with Berne touching points that Calvin judged to be indifferent. He made a figure in the debates at Lausanne defending the freedom of Geneva. But disorders ensued at home, where recusancy was yet rife; in 1538 the council exiled Farel, Calvin, and the blind evangelist, Couraud. The Reformer went to Strasburg, became the guest of Capito and Bucer, and in 1539 was explaining the New Testament to French refugees at fifty two florins a year. Cardinal Sadolet had addressed an open letter to the Genevans, which their exile now answered. Sadolet urged that schism was a crime; Calvin replied that the Roman Church was corrupt. He gained applause by his keen debating powers at Hagenau, Worms, and Ratisbon. But he complains of his poverty and ill-health, which did not prevent him from marrying at this time Idelette de Bure, the widow of an Anabaptist whom he had converted. Nothing more is known of this lady, except that she brought him a son who died almost at birth in 1542, and that her own death took place in 1549.

After some negotiation Ami Perrin, commissioner for Geneva, persuaded Calvin to return. He did so, not very willingly, on 13 September, 1541. His entry was modest enough. The church constitution now recognized "pastors, doctors, elders, deacons" but supreme power was given to the magistrate. Ministers had the spiritual weapon of God's word; the consistory never, as such, wielded the secular arm Preachers, led by Calvin, and the councils, instigated by his opponents, came frequently into collision. Yet the ordinances of 1541 were maintained; the clergy, assisted by lay elders, governed despotically and in detail the actions of every citizen. A presbyterian Sparta might be seen at Geneva; it set an example to later Puritans, who did all in their power to imitate its discipline. The pattern held up

was that of the Old Testament, although Christians were supposed to enjoy Gospel liberty. In November, 1552, the Council declared that Calvin's "Institutes" were a "holy doctrine which no man might speak against." Thus the State issued dogmatic decrees, the force of which had been anticipated earlier, as when Jacques Gouet was imprisoned on charges of impiety in June, 1547, and after severe torture was beheaded in July. Some of the accusations brought against the unhappy young man were frivolous, others doubtful. What share, if any, Calvin took in this judgment is not easy to ascertain. The execution of however must be laid at his door; it has given greater offence by far than the banishment of Castellio or the penalties inflicted on Bolsec - moderate men opposed to extreme views in discipline and doctrine, who fell under suspicion as reactionary. The Reformer did not shrink from his self-appointed task. Within five years fifty-eight sentences of death and seventy-six of exile, besides numerous committals of the most eminent citizens to prison, took place in Geneva. The iron voke could not be shaken off. In 1555, under Ami Perrin, a sort of revolt was attempted. No blood was shed, but Perrin lost the day, and Calvin's theocracy triumphed.

"I am more deeply scandalized", wrote Gibbon "at the single execution of Servetus than at the hecatombs which have blazed in the autos-da-fé of Spain and Portugal". He ascribes the enmity of Calvin to personal malice and perhaps envy. The facts of the case are pretty well ascertained. Born in 1511, perhaps at Tudela, Michael Served y Reves studied at Toulouse and was present in Bologna at the coronation of Charles V. He travelled in Germany and brought out in 1531 at Hagenau his treatise "De Trinitatis Erroribus", a strong Unitarian work which made much commotion among the more orthodox Reformers. He met Calvin and disputed with him at Paris in

1534, became corrector of the press at Lyons; gave attention to medicine, discovered the lesser circulation of the blood, and entered into a fatal correspondence with the dictator of Geneva touching a new volume "Christianismi Restitutio," which he intended to publish. In 1546 the exchange of letters ceased. The Reformer called Servetus arrogant (he had dared to criticize the "Institutes" in marginal glosses), and uttered the significant menace, "If he comes here and I have any authority, I will never let him leave the place alive." The "Restitutio" appeared in 1553. Calvin at once had its author delated to the Dominican inquisitor Ory at Lyons, sending on to him the man's letters of 1545-46 and these glosses. Hereupon the Spaniard was imprisoned at Vienne, but he escaped by friendly connivance, and was burnt there only in effigy. Some extraordinary fascination drew him to Geneva, from which he intended to pass the Alps. He arrived on 13 August, 1553. The next day Calvin, who had remarked him at the sermon, got his critic arrested, the preacher's own secretary coming forward to accuse him. Calvin drew up forty articles of charge under three heads, concerning the nature of God, infant baptism, and the attack which Servetus had ventured on his own teaching. The council hesitated before taking a deadly decision, but the dictator, reinforced by Farel, drove them on. In prison the culprit suffered much and loudly complained. The Bernese and other Swiss voted for some indefinite penalty. But to Calvin his power in Geneva seemed lost, while the stigma of heresy; as he insisted, would cling to all Protestants if this innovator were not put to death. "Let the world see" Bullinger counselled him, "that Geneva wills the glory of Christ."

Accordingly, sentence was pronounced 26 October, 1553, of burning at the stake. "Tomorrow he dies," wrote Calvin to Farel. When the deed was done, the Reformer alleged that he had been anxious to mitigate the punishment, but of this fact no record appears in the documents. He disputed with Servetus on the day of execution and saw the end. A defence and apology next year received the adhesion of the Genevan ministers. Melanchthon, who had taken deep umbrage at the blasphemies of the Spanish Unitarian, strongly approved in well-known words. But a group that included Castellio published at Basle in 1554 a pamphlet with the title, "Should heretics be persecuted?" It is considered the first plea for toleration in modern times. Beza replied by an argument for the affirmative, couched in violent terms; and Calvin, whose favorite disciple he was, translated it into French in 1559. The dialogue, "Vaticanus", written against the "Pope of Geneva" by Castellio, did not get into print until 1612. Freedom of opinion, as Gibbon remarks, "was the consequence rather than the design of the Reformation."

Another victim to his fiery zeal was Gentile, one of an Italian sect in Geneva, which also numbered among its adherents Alciati and Gribaldo. As more or less Unitarian in their views, they were required to sign a confession drawn up by Calvin in 1558. Gentile subscribed it reluctantly, but in the upshot he was condemned and imprisoned as a perjurer. He escaped only to be twice incarcerated at Berne, where in 1566, he was beheaded. Calvin's impassioned polemic against these Italians betrays fear of the Socinianism which was to lay waste his vineyard. Politically he leaned on the French refugees, now abounding in the city, and more than equal in energy - if not in numbers — to the older native factions. Opposition died out. His continual preaching, represented by 2300 sermons extant in the manuscripts and a vast correspondence, gave to the Reformer an influence without example in his closing years. He wrote to Edward VI, helped in revising the Book of Common Prayer, and

intervened between the rival English parties abroad during the Marian period. In the Huguenot troubles he sided with the more moderate. His censure of the conspiracy of Amboise in 1560 does him honour. One great literary institution founded by him, the College, afterwards the University, of Geneva, flourished exceedingly. The students were mostly French. When Beza was rector it had nearly 1500 students of various grades.

Geneva now sent out pastors to the French congregations and was looked upon as the Protestant Rome. Through Knox, "the Scottish champion of the Swiss Reformation", who had been preacher to the exiles in that city, his native land accepted the discipline of the Presbytery and the doctrine of predestination as expounded in Calvin's "Institutes". The Puritans in England were also descendants of the French theologian. His dislike of theatres, dancing and the amenities of society was fully shared by them. The town on Lake Leman was described as without crime and destitute of amusements. Calvin declaimed against the "Libertines", but there is no evidence that any such people had a footing inside its walls The cold, hard, but upright disposition characteristic of the Reformed Churches, less genial than that derived from Luther, is due entirely to their founder himself. Its essence is a concentrated pride, a love of disputation, a scorn of opponents. The only art that it tolerates is music, and that not instrumental. It will have no Christian feasts in its calendar, and it is austere to the verge of Manichaean hatred of the body. When dogma fails the Calvinist, he becomes, as in the instance of Carlyle, almost a pure Stoic. "At Geneva, as for a time in Scotland," says J. A. Froude, "moral sins were treated as crimes to be punished by the magistrate." The Bible was a code of law, administered by the clergy. Down to his dying day Calvin preached and taught. By no means an aged man, he was worn out in these frequent controversies. On 25 April,

1564, he made his will, leaving 225 French crowns, of which he bequeathed ten to his college, ten to the poor, and the remainder to his nephews and nieces. His last letter was addressed to Farel. He was buried without pomp, in a spot which is not now ascertainable. In the year 1900 a monument of expiation was erected to Servetus in the Place Champel. Geneva has long since ceased to be the head of Calvinism. It is a rallying point for Free Thought, Socialist propaganda, and Nihilist conspiracies. But in history it stands out as the Sparta of the Reformed churches, and Calvin is its Lycurgus.

COMMENTARIES ON THE PSALMS 119 - 150

PSALM 119.

Psalm 119:121-128

121. [I have done judgment and righteousness: give me not up to my oppressors. **122.** [Become surety for thy servant for good, that the proud may not oppress me. **123.** [My eyes have failed for thy salvation, and for thy righteous word. ^{fe2} **124.** [Deal with thy servant according to thy goodness, and teach me thy statutes. **125.** [I am thy servant, give me understanding, that I may learn thy testimonies. **126.** [It is time for thee, O Jehovah! to be doing for they have destroyed thy law. **127.** [And therefore I have loved thy statutes above gold, ^{fe3} yea even above the most fine gold ^{fe4} **128.** [Therefore I have esteemed all thy commandments to be altogether right, and have hated every way of lying.

121. *I have done judgment and righteousness.* The Prophet implores the help of God against the wicked who troubled him, and he does so in such a manner as at the same time to testify that the harassing treatment he received from them was on his part altogether undeserved. If we would have God to come down to succor us, it becomes us to see to it that we meet him with the testimony of a good conscience. As He everywhere promises his aid to the afflicted who are unrighteously oppressed, it is no superfluous protestation which the Prophet makes, that he had not provoked his enemies, but had restrained himself from all injury and wrong-doing, and had not even attempted to requite evil for evil. In asserting that he had at all times *done judgment*, he means that whatever rite wicked practiced, he steadfastly persevered in following after integrity, and never turned aside from what was just and right in any of his public or private transactions.

122. Become surety for thy servant for good. This prayer is almost similar to that of the preceding verse; for I prefer translating the Hebrew verb bwr[, *arob*, by *Become surety* for, to rendering, as others do, Delight thy servant in good, or *Make thy servant to delight in good*. According to this second version, the words are a prayer that God would rejoice his servant with his benefits. There is a third translation, by which they become a prayer that God would inspire his heart with the love and desire of rectitude; for true perfection consists in our taking pleasure in justice and uprightness. But as from the last clause of the verse it is obvious that David here desires succor against his enemies, the verb *Become surety* is the more appropriate rendering ^{fe5} Lord, as if he had said, since the proud cruelly rush upon me to destroy me, interpose. thyself between us, as if thou weft my surety. The letter l, *lamed*, which signifies *for*, is not indeed prefixed to the noun, but this is

no valid objection to our translation, as that letter is often understood. It is a form of expression full of comfort, to represent God as performing the office of a surety in order to effect our deliverance. He is said metaphorically to become surety for us, just as if, on finding us indebted in a large sum of money, he discharged us of the obligation, by paying down the money to our creditor. The prayer is to this effect, That God would not suffer the wicked to exercise, their cruelty against us at their pleasure, but that he would interpose as a defender to save us. By these words the Prophet intimates, that he was in extreme danger, and that he had nothing else left him in which to hope but the help of God.

123. *My eyes have failed for thy salvation.* ^{fe6} In the first; place he testifies, that he had been afflicted with severe troubles, and that not for a short time only, but for a period so protracted as might have exhausted his patience and occasioned despondency. But so far was this from being the effect they produced, that he declares that in all these long and wearisome conflicts his heart had never sunk into despair. We have before explained *failing for salvation* as denoting that although there was no prospect of an end to his calamities, and although despair presented itself on every side, yet he strove against temptation even to the fainting of his soul. Should we understand the past tense of the verb as put for the present, in which sense it seems to be employed, the Prophet in that case intimates, that his eves fail him not because they become fatigued, but Because through earnest looking they contract as it were a dimness, and that yet he does not cease to wait continually for the salvation of God. In short, the failing of his eyes indicates perseverance combined with severe and arduous effort, and it is opposed to the momentary ardor of those who immediately faint, if God does not grant their requests.

This expression also denotes a painful earnestness, which almost consumes all the senses. As to the term *salvation*, he does not limit it to one kind of help, but comprehends under it the continual course of God's grace, until he put his believing people in the possession of *complete* salvation. He expresses the manner in which he waited for salvation, which was by depending upon God's word in which two things are to be attended to, first, that we can only be said to wait for salvation from God, when, confiding in his promises, we actually betake ourselves to him for protection; and secondly, that we then only yield to God the praise of salvation, when we continue to keep our hope firmly fixed on his word. This is the way in which He is to be sought; and although he may conceal from our view the working of his hand, we ought to repose in his bare promises. This is the reason why David calls God's word *righteous.* He would hereby confirm his faith in the truth of the divine promises for God in promising liberally does not cherish in his people delusive expectations.

124. *Deal with thy servant according to thy goodness.* The two clauses of this verse must be read correctly; for he does not first separately desire God to deal well with him, and next desire him to be his master and teacher. He rather beseeches him in the exercise of that goodness and mercy, which he is wont to display towards all his people, to instruct him in his law. The object of the Prophet's request then is, that God would teach him in his statutes. But he begins with the divine mercy, employing it as an argument to prevail with God to grant him what he desires. This prayer then must be resolved thus: Lord, deal gently with me, and manifest thy goodness towards me by instructing me in thy commandments. Our whole happiness undoubtedly consists in our having that true wisdom which is to be derived from the word of God; and our only hope of

obtaining this wisdom lies in God's being pleased to display his mercy and goodness towards us. The Prophet, therefore, magnifies the greatness and excellence of the benefit of being instructed in the divine law, when he requests that it may be bestowed upon him as a free gift.

125. *I am thy servant, give me understanding.* Here the prayer of the preceding verse is repeated. The repetition shows how ardently he wished the blessing prayed for, and how earnest and importunate he was in pleading with God for it. By the words he expresses still more plainly in what way it is that God teaches his own people — that he does so by illuminating with sound knowledge their understandings, which otherwise would be blind. It would profit us little to have the divine law sounding in our ears, or to have it exhibited in writing before our eyes, and to have it expounded by the voice of man, did not God correct our slowness of apprehension, and render us docile by the secret influence of his Spirit. We are not to suppose that David advances any meritorious claims before God when he boasts of being his servant. Men, indeed, commonly imagine that when we are previously well prepared, God then adds new grace, which they term *subsequent grace*. But the Prophet, so far from boasting of his own worth, rather declares how deep the obligations were under which he lay to God. It is not in the power of any man to make himself a servant of the Most High, nor can any man bring anything of his own as a price with which to purchase so great an honor. Of this the Prophet was well aware. He knew that there is not one of the whole human family who is worthy of being enrolled among that order; and therefore he does nothing more than adduce the grace he had obtained, as an argument that God according to his usual way would perfect what he had begun. In a similar manner he speaks in Psalm 116:6,

"I am thy servant and the son of thine handmaid:"

in which place it is abundantly manifest that he does not boast of his services, but only declares that he is one of the members of the Church.

126. It is time for thee, O Jehovah! to be doing. It being the object of the Prophet to imprecate upon the impious and wicked the vengeance which they have deserved, he says, that the fit time for executing it had now arrived, inasmuch as they had carried to a great extent their wanton forwardness against God. The general verb *doing* is more emphatic than if one more specific had been used. The language is as if he had said, that God would seem to delay too long, if he did not now execute the office of a judge. It is the peculiar work of God to restrain the wicked, and even to punish them severely when he finds that their repentance is utterly hopeless. If it is alleged, that this prayer is inconsistent with the law of charity, it may be replied, that David here speaks of reprobates, whose amendment is become desperate. His heart, there is no doubt, was governed by the spirit of wisdom. Besides, it is to be remembered, that he does not complain of his own private wrongs. It is a pure and honest zeal which moves him to desire the destruction of the wicked despisers of God; for he adduces no other reason for the prayer, than that the wicked *destroyed God's law.* By this he gives evidence, that nothing was dearer to him than the service of God, and that nothing was held by him in higher recommendation than the observance of the law. I have already repeatedly warned you, in other places, that our zeal is forward and disordered whenever its moving principle is a sense of our own personal injuries. It is, therefore, to be carefully noticed, that the Prophet's grief

proceeded from no other cause than that he could not endure to see the divine law violated. In short, this is a prayer that God would restore to order the confused and ruinous state of things in the world. It remains for us to learn from David's example, whenever the earth is fraught and defiled with wickedness to such a degree that the fear of him has become almost extinct, to call upon him to show himself the maintainer of his own glory. This doctrine is of use in sustaining our hope and patience whenever God suspends the execution of his judgments longer than we would incline. Previous to his addressing himself to God, the Prophet adopts it as a principle, that, although God may seem for a time to false no notice of what his creatures do, yet he never forgets his office, but delays the execution of his judgments for wise reasons, that at length he may execute them when the seasonable time arrives.

127. And therefore I have loved thy statutes above gold. This verse, I have no doubt, is connected with the preceding; for otherwise the illative particle *therefore* would be without meaning. Viewing it in this connection, I understand the Psalmist as intimating, that the reason why he esteemed God's law as more valuable than gold and precious stones, was because he had fixed in his mind a thorough persuasion of the truth, that although God may connive for a time at wickedness, the making havoc of all uprightness and equity will not always remain unpunished. Yea, the more he saw the wicked outrageously breaking forth into wickedness, the more was he incited by a holy indignation burning in his heart, to love the law. This is a passage deserving of special attention, for the baneful influence of evil example is well known, every man thinking that he may lawfully do whatever is commonly practiced around him. Whence it comes to pass, that evil company carries us away like a tempest. The more diligently then

ought we to meditate on this doctrine, That when the wicked claim to themselves an unbridled liberty, it behoves us to contemplate with the eyes of faith the judgments of God, in order to our being thereby quickened to the observance of the divine law. If attention to this doctrine has been needful from the beginning, at the present day it is necessary to exert ourselves, that we may not be involved in violating the law of God with the wicked conspiracy which almost the whole world have formed to violate it. The more outrageously the wicked vaunt themselves, let our veneration for and our love of the divine law proportionally increase.

128. Therefore I have esteemed all thy commandments to *be altogether right*. ^{fe7} This verse, like the preceding, is connected with the 26th, and the connection may be brought out by observing, that the Prophet, waiting patiently for God's judgments, and also earnestly calling for their infliction, had subscribed to the law of God in every particular, and embraced it without a single exception and moreover, that he hated every false way. Literally, it is all the commandments of all; but the words of all are to be referred to things and not to persons, as if he had said, that he approved of all the laws which God had ordained, whatever they enjoined. ^{fe8} A similar form of expression occurs in Ezekiel 44:30, "all oblations of all things" - that is to say, whatever kind of oblations men offer. The Prophet has not laid down this sentiment in such express terms without good reason; for there is nothing to which we are naturally more inclined than to despise or reject whatever in God's law is not agreeable to us. Every man, according as he is tainted with this or that particular vice, would desire their the commandment which forbids it were razed out of the law. But we cannot lawfully make any addition to it, or take away anything from it; and since God has joined

his commandments together by a sacred and inviolable bond, to separate any one of them from the rest is altogether unwarrantable. We perceive then how the Prophet, inspired with a holy jealousy for the law, contended against the wicked rebellion of those who despised it. And assuredly, when we see that the ungodly mock God with such effrontery, at one time rising up audaciously against him, trod at another perverting every part of the law, it becomes us to be the more inflamed with zeal, and to be the more courageous in maintaining the truth of God. The extreme impiety of our age especially demands of all the faithful that they should exercise themselves in this holy zeal. Profane men strive to outdo one another in scornfully aspersing the doctrine of salvation, and endeavor to bring God's sacred Word into contempt by their derisive jeers. Others pour forth their blasphemies without intermission. We cannot, therefore, avoid being chargeable with the crime of treacherous indifference, if our hearts are not warmed with zeal, and unless we burn with a holy jealousy. The Prophet not merely says, that he approved of God's law wholly and without exception, but he adds, that he hated every way of *lying,* or *every false way.* And, undoubtedly, no one subscribes in good earnest to the law of God, but he who rejects all the slanders by which the wicked taint or obscure the purity of sound doctrine. By way of lying, the Prophet doubtless means whatever is opposed to the purity of the law, intimating that he detested all corruption's which are contrary to the Word of God.

Psalm 119:129-136

129. p Thy testimonies are marvelous; therefore my soul hath kept them. **130.** p The entrance of thy words is light, which giveth understanding to the little ones. **131.** p I opened my mouth and panted, because I loved thy commandments. Look upon me, and be merciful to me, according to thy judgment towards them that love thy name. **133.** p Direct my steps according

to thy word, and let no iniquity have ^{fe9} dominion in me. **134.** p Deliver me from the oppression of men; and I will keep thy precepts. **135.** p Make thy face to shine upon thy servant; and teach me thy statutes. **136.** p Rivers of waters run from my eyes, because they have not kept thy law.

129. *Thy testimonies are marvelous.* I have given this translation to avoid an ambiguous form of expression. The Prophet does not. simply mean, that the doctrine of the law is wonderful, but that it contains high and hidden mysteries. Accordingly he declares, that the sublime and admirable wisdom which he found comprehended in the divine law led him to regard it with reverence. This is to be carefully marked, for the law of God is proudly despised by the great majority of mankind, when they do not duly taste its doctrine, nor acknowledge that God speaks from his throne in heaven, that, the pride of the flesh being abased, he may raise us upward by the apprehension of faith. We also gather from this passage, that it is impossible for any man to keep the law of God from the heart, unless he contemplate it with feelings of reverence: for reverence is the beginning of pure and right subjection. Accordingly, I have said that many despise God's Word, because they think it inferior to the acuteness of their own understandings. Yea, many are led to break forth more audaciously into this heaven-daring contempt, from the vanity of showing their own ingenuity. But, although worldly men may flatter themselves in that proud disdain of the divine law, yet the commendation which the Prophet pronounces upon it still holds true, that it comprehends mysteries which far transcend all the conceptions of the human mind.

130. *The entrance of thy word is light.* The amount is, that the light of the truth revealed in God's word, is so distinct

that the very first sight of it illuminates the mind. The word jtp *pethach,* properly signifies *an opening,* ^{fe10} but metaphorically it is taken for *a gate.* Accordingly the old translator has rendered it *beginning,* which is not improper, provided it is understood of the rudiments or first elements of the divine law. It is as if the Prophet had — "Not only do those who have attained an accurate acquaintance with the whole law, and who have made the study of it the business of their lives, discern there a clear light, but also those who have studied it even very imperfectly, and who have only, so to speak, entered the porch." Now we must reason from the less to the greater. If tyroes and novices begin to be enlightened at their first entrance, what will be the case when a man is admitted to a full and perfect knowledge?

In the second clause the Prophet unfolds his meaning more fully. By *little ones* he denotes such as neither excel in ingenuity nor are endued with wisdom, but rather are unskilled in letters, and unrefined by education. Of such he affirms that, as soon as they have learned the first principles of the law of God, they will be endued with understanding. It ought to have a most powerful influence in exciting in us an earnest desire to become acquainted with the law of God, when we are told that even those who, in the estimation of the world, are fools, and contemptible simpletons, provided they apply their minds to this subject, acquire from it wisdom sufficient to lead them to eternal salvation. Although it is not given to all men to attain to the highest degree in this wisdom, yet it is common to all the godly to profit so far as to know the certain and unerring rule by which to regulate their life. Thus no man who surrenders himself to the teaching of God, will loose his labor in his school, for from his first entrance he will reap inestimable fruit. Meanwhile we are warned, that all who follow their own understanding, wander in darkness. By

affirming that *the little ones are enlightened,* David intimates, that it is only when men, divested of all self confidence, submit themselves with humble and docile minds to God, that they are in a proper state for becoming proficient scholars in the study of the divine law. Let the Papists mock, as they are accustomed to do, because we would have the Scriptures to be read by all men without exception; yet it is no falsehood which God utters by the mouth of :David, when he affirms that the light of his truth is exhibited to fools. God will not, therefore, disappoint the desire of such as acknowledge their own ignorance, and submit themselves humbly to his teaching.

131. *I opened my mouth and panted.* ^{fe11} By these words the Psalmist would have us to understand that he was inflamed with such love to and longing for the divine law, that lie was unceasingly sighing after it. In comparing himself to such as are hungry, or to such as burn with parching thirst, he has used a very appropriate metaphor. As such persons indicate the vehemence of their desire by opening the mouth, and by distressful panting, as if they would suck up the whole air, even so the Prophet affirms that he himself was oppressed with continual uneasiness. The opening of the mouth, then, and the drawing of breath, are. set in opposition to a cold assent to the word of God. Here the Holy Spirit teaches with what earnestness of soul the knowledge of divine truth is to be sought. Whence it follows, that such as make little or no proficiency in God's law, are punished by their own indolence or carelessness. When David affirms that he panted continually, he points out not only his ardor but also his constancy.

132. Look upon me, and be merciful to me. In this verse he beseeches God to have a regard to him: as he is accustomed always to look to those who are his people. The

Hebrew word fpcm *mishpat*, translated *judgment*, signifies in this passage, as in many others, *a common rule*, or ordinary usage. ^{fe12} He next adds the purpose for which he desires that God would look upon him, namely, that he may be relieved from his miseries. This, then, is the prayer of an afflicted man, who, when apparently destitute of all help, and unable to come to any other conclusion than that he is neglected and forsaken of God, yet reflects with himself, that, for God to forsake him, was foreign to his nature and to his usual manner of procedure. It is as if he had said — Although I can perceive no token of thy favor, yea, although my condition is so wretched and desperate, that, judging according to sense and reason, I deem that thou hast turned the back: upon me; yet, as from the beginning of the world to the present day, thou hast testified, by numberless proofs, that thou art merciful to thy servants, I beseech time that, acting according to this rule, thou wouldst now exercise the like loving-kindness towards me. It is to be particularly noticed, lest those whom God does not immediately answer may become discouraged, that the Prophet had been long oppressed by miseries, without any prospect of relief. Yet it is at the same time to be observed, that the Prophets sole ground of confidence in asking this from God is his free goodness. Whence we gather that, although he was a man of eminent sanctity, yet the undeserved grace of God was his only refuge. With respect to the word *judgment*, let us learn from the Prophet's example to acquaint ourselves with the nature of God, from the various experiences we have had of it that we may have certain evidence that he is merciful to us. And, in truth, were not his grace known to us from the daily experience we have of it, which of us would dare to approach him? But if our eyes are not blind, we must perceive the very clear testimonies by which he fortifies our faith, so that we need not doubt that all the godly are the objects of his regard;

only we must endeavor to be among the number of those *who love his name.* By this title is meant genuine believers; for those who only slavishly fear God are not worthy of being reckoned among his servants. He requires a voluntary obedience from us, so that nothing may be more delightful to us than to follow whithersoever he calls us. It is, however, at the same time to be observed, that this love proceeds from faith; yea, the Prophet here commends the grand effect of faith, by separating the godly, who lean upon the grace of God, from worldly men, who, having given their hearts to the enticements of the world, never lift up their minds towards heaven.

133. *Direct my steps according to thy word.* By these words he shows, as he has often done before in other places, that the only rule of living well is for men to regulate themselves wholly by the law of God. We have already repeatedly seen in this Psalm, that so long as men allow there-selves to wander after their own inventions, God rejects whatever they do, however laborious the efforts they may put forth. But as the Prophet declares that men's lives are then only framed aright when they yield themselves wholly to the obeying of God, so, on the other hand, he confesses that to do this is not within their own will or power. God's law, it is evident, will not make us better by merely prescribing to us what is right. Hence the outward preaching of it is compared to a dead letter. David, then, well instructed in the law, prays for an obedient heart being given him, that he may walk in the way set before him. Here two points are particularly deserving of our notice — first, that God deals bountifully with men, when he invites them to himself by his word and doctrine; and, secondly, that still all this is lifeless and unprofitable, until he govern by his Spirit those whom he has already taught by his word. As the Psalmist desires not simply to have his

steps directed, but to have them directed to God's word, we may learn that he did not hunt after secret revelations, and set the word at nought, as many fanatics do, but connected the external doctrine with the inward grace of the Holy Spirit; and herein consists the completeness of the faithful, in that God engraves on their hearts what he shows by his word to be right. Nothing, therefore, is more foolish than the fancy of those who say, that in enjoining upon men what lie would have them to do, God estimates the strength which they have to perform it. In vain does divine truth sound in our ears, if the Spirit of God does not effectually pierce into our hearts. The Prophet confesses that it is to no purpose for him to read or hear the law of God, unless his life is regulated by the secret influence of the Holy Spirit, that he may thus be enabled to walk in that righteousness which the law enjoins. In the second clause he reminds us how necessary it is for us to be continually presenting this prayer at the throne of grace, acknowledging that he is the bond-slave of sin until God stretch forth his hand to deliver him. *direct* me, says he, that iniquity may not have dominion in me. fe13 So long, then, as we are left to ourselves, Satan exercises', over us his despotic sway uncontrolled, so that we have not power to rid ourselves of iniquity. The freedom of the godly consists solely in this — that they are governed by the Spirit of God, and thus preserved from succumbing to iniquity, although harassed with hard and painful conflicts.

134. Deliver me from the oppression of men. When recounting what had befallen himself, the Prophet shows, by his own example, that all the godly are exposed to rapine and oppression, and that, like sheep in the mouths of wolves, they will be inevitably destroyed unless God defend them. As very few are governed by the Spirit of God, it is no wonder if all love of equity is banished from