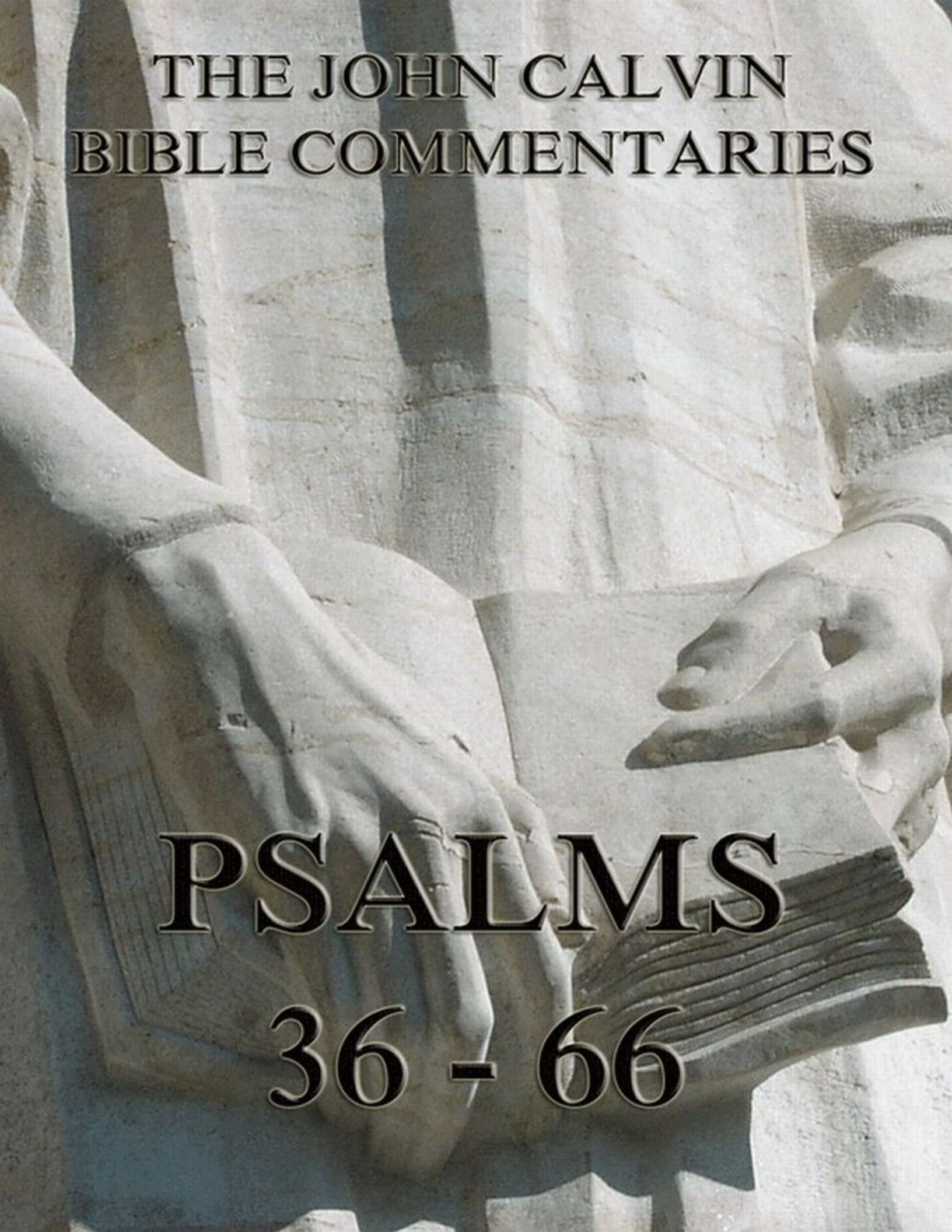

THE JOHN CALVIN BIBLE COMMENTARIES

PSALMS 36 - 66

Commentaries On The Psalms 36 - 66

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 Noyon, 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 well-known 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 educatlon 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 yoke 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 36 - 66

Psalm 36

Almost all interpreters agree in supposing, that in this psalm David in general expresses his wonder and amazement at the goodness of God, because, in the exercise of his favor and mercy, he bears with the wicked, who, notwithstanding, basely contemn him. The opinion which I have formed is somewhat different. I think that the holy prophet, being grievously troubled and harassed by wicked and ungodly men, first complains of their depravity, and then seeks refuge in the infinite goodness of God, which extends not only to all men in general, but in a particular and special manner to his own children; and this he does in order to console, and, so to speak, take his breath, in the assurance that he shall at length be delivered since God is favorable to him. This is evident from the conclusion of the psalm, in which he arms and fortifies himself against all the assaults of the ungodly, by reflecting that he is safe under the protection of God.

To the chief musician. A Psalm of David, the servant of Jehovah.

Why the appellation, *the servant of God,* is ascribed to David only in this place and in the eighteenth psalm, rather than elsewhere, cannot positively be ascertained, unless that having been victorious in a conflict, of all others the most difficult, he proved himself to be a valiant warrior and

an invincible champion in the sight of God. We know how rare and singular a virtue it is, when ungodliness is prevailing without restraint, and when the shade of its obscurity darkens our spiritual vision, to look up, notwithstanding, by the eye of faith, to the providence of God, which, by disposing our minds to patience, may keep us constantly in the fear of God.

Psalm 36:1-4

1. Ungodliness saith to the wicked in the midst of my heart, There is no fear of God before his eyes. **2.** For he flattereth himself in his own eyes, until his iniquity be found to be hateful. [fb1] **3.** The words of his mouth are iniquity [fb2] and deceit; he hath left off to understand that he may do good. **4.** He meditates [or devises] iniquity upon his bed; he setteth himself in a way that is not good; and abhorreth not evil.

1. *Ungodliness saith to the wicked in the midst of my heart.* Commentators are not agreed as to the interpretation of the first verse. Literally it is, *The saying* [or *speech*] *of transgression,* or rather, *Transgression saith to the wicked.* As, however, the letter l*, lamed,* is in Hebrew sometimes used for ˆm*, min,* some translate it thus, *Ungodliness or transgression speaketh of the wicked in my heart;* as if the prophet had said, I clearly perceive from the wickedness which the ungodly commit, that they are not influenced by the fear of God. But as there is no need to depart from the proper signification of the words, I rather agree with others in supposing that the language of the prophet is to this effect: The malice of the wicked, though seemingly hidden and unknown, speaks aloud in my heart, and I am a sure witness of what it says or suggests.

And, first, it is to be observed, that the prophet speaks not of outward faults, but penetrates even to the very source;

as if he had said, Although the wicked cloak their malice with wily dissimulation, yet I know it so well that I seem to hear it speaking. It is indeed true, that as the ungodly and profane rush headlong into every kind of wickedness, as if they were never to be called to render up an account of it, the judgment which David here expresses may be formed even from their life; but his language is much more emphatic when he says, that the servants of God openly perceive the depravity of such persons hidden within the heart. Now David does not speak of the wicked generally, but of the abandoned despisers of God. There are many who indulge in their vices, who, notwithstanding, are not intoxicated by the wretched infatuation which David here censures. But when a man becomes hardened in committing sin, ungodliness at length reduces him to such a state of insensibility, that, despising the judgment of God, he indulges without fear in the practice of every sin to which his depraved appetite impels him. A reckless assurance, therefore, in the commission of sin, and especially where it is associated with a contempt and scorn of every holy admonition, is, as it were, an enchantment of Satan, which indicates that the condition of such a person is indeed hopeless. And although true religion has the effect of keeping the hearts of the godly in the fear of God, and drives wicked thoughts far from their minds, yet this does not prevent them from perceiving and understanding in their hearts how the ungodly are agitated with horrible fury when they neither regard God nor are afraid of his judgments.

There is no fear of God before his eyes. David shows in these few words the end of all evil suggestions; and it is this, that the sense both of good and evil being destroyed or suppressed, men shrink from nothing, as if there were not seated in heaven a God, the Judge of all. The meaning

therefore is, Ungodliness speaks in my heart to the wicked man, urging him to the extremity of madness, so that, laying aside all fear of God, he abandons himself to the practice of sin; that is to say, I know as well what the ungodly imagine in their hearts, as if God had set me as a witness or judge to unveil their hypocrisy, under the mask of which they think their detestable malice is hidden and deeply buried. When the wicked, therefore, are not restrained by the fear of God from committing sin, this proceeds from that secret discourse with themselves, to which we have referred, and by which their understanding is so depraved and blinded, that, like brute beasts, they run to every excess in rioting. Since the eyes are, as it were, the guides and conductors of man in this life, and by their influence move the other senses hither and thither, it is therefore said that men have the fear of God before their eyes when it regulates their lives, and by presenting itself to them on every side to which they may turn, serves like a bridle to restrain their appetites and passions. David, by using here a contrary form of expression, means that the ungodly run to every excess in licentiousness, without having any regard to God, because the depravity of their own hearts has completely blinded them.

2. *For he flattereth himself in his own eyes.* Here the Psalmist shows by their fruits or the marks of their character, that there is no fear of God among the wicked, seeing they take such pleasure in committing deeds of wickedness, that, although hateful in the sight of all other men, they still cherish the natural obstinacy of their hearts, and wilfully harden themselves in their evil course. First, he says that they nourish their vices by flatteries, [fb3] that they may not be dissatisfied with themselves in sinning. But when he adds, *until their iniquity be found to be hateful,* by these words he is to be understood as referring to their

determined obstinacy; for the meaning is, that while they falsely flatter themselves, they proceed to such an extent in their evil course, that their iniquity becomes hateful to all men. Some translate the words thus: *So that he himself finds his own iniquity to be hateful;* and understand them as meaning, that the wicked persist in rushing headlong into sin without restraint, until, satiated or glutted with the indulgence of their depraved desires, they begin to loathe it: for even the most depraved are sometimes dissatisfied with themselves on account of their sinful conduct. The first interpretation is, however, the more natural, namely, that the wicked, though they are hateful to all men on account of their iniquity, which, when once discovered and made manifest, excites a general feeling of displeasure, are not affected by any displeasure against themselves, but, on the contrary, rather applaud themselves, whilst the people despise them, and abhor the wickedness of their lives. The prophet, therefore, condemns them for their infatuation in this, that while all others are offended at their disgraceful conduct, they themselves are not at all affected by it. As far as in them lies, they abolish all distinction between good and evil, and lull their conscience into a state of insensibility, lest it should pain them, and urge them to repentance. Certainly the infatuation here described ought to be the subject of our serious consideration, the infatuation which is manifested in this, that men who are given up to a reprobate mind, while they render themselves hateful in the sight of all other men, are notwithstanding destitute of all sense of their own sins.

3. *The words of his mouth are iniquity and deceit.* The two clauses of this verse may be understood as referring to the same thing, namely, that the wicked indulging in deceit and vanity, will not receive or admit the light of understanding. This, I apprehend, is the meaning of David. He reproves the

wicked not merely for circumventing others by their wiles and stratagems, but especially because they are altogether destitute of uprightness and sincerity. We have already said that the Psalmist is here speaking not of sinful and wicked men, in whose hearts there still remains some fear of God, but of the profane despisers of his name, who have given themselves up entirely to the practice of sin. He therefore says that they have always in their mouth some frivolous excuses and vain pretexts, by which they encourage themselves in rejecting and scoffing at all sound doctrine. He then adds, that they purposely suppress in themselves all knowledge or understanding of the distinction between good and evil, because they have no desire to become better than they are. We know that God has given understanding to men to direct them to do what is good. Now David says that the wicked shun it, and strive to deprive themselves of it, that they may not be constrained to repent of their wickedness, and to amend their lives. We are taught from this passage, that if at any time we turn aside from the path of rectitude, the only remedy in such a case is to open the eyes of our understanding, that we may rightly distinguish between good and evil, and that thus we may be led back from our wandering. When, instead of doing this, a man refuses instruction, it is an indication that he is in a state of depravity altogether desperate.

4. *He meditates iniquity upon his bed.* Here the sacred writer shows that the wickedness of the ungodly man is of a secret and very determined character. It sometimes happens that many, who otherwise are not disposed to wickedness, err and fall into sin, because occasion presents itself all on a sudden; but David tells us, that the wicked, even when they are withdrawn from the sight of men, and in retirement, form schemes of mischief; and thus, although there is not presented before them any temptation, or the

evil example of others to excite them to it, they, of their own accord, devise mischief, and urge themselves to it without being impelled by any thing else. Since he describes the reprobate by this distinguishing mark of character, that *they devise mischief upon their beds,* true believers should learn from this to exercise themselves when alone in meditations of a different nature, and to make their own life the subject of examination, so that they may exclude all evil thoughts from their minds. The Psalmist next refers to their stubbornness, declaring *that they set themselves in a crooked and perverse way;* that is to say, they purposely and wilfully harden themselves in doing evil. Finally, he adds the reason of their doing this: *They abhor not evil.* Wilfully shutting their eyes, they rush forward in their headlong course till they spontaneously yield themselves the slaves of wickedness. Let us now shortly state the contrast between the ungodly and the people of God, contained in the preceding verses. The former deceive themselves by flattery; the latter exercise over themselves a strict control, and examine themselves with a rigid scrutiny: the former, throwing loose the reins, rush headlong into evil; the latter are restrained by the fear of God: the former cloak or disguise their offenses by sophistry, and turn light into darkness; the latter willingly acknowledge their guilt, and by a candid confession are brought to repentance: the former reject all sound judgment; the latter always desire to vindicate themselves by coming to the open light of day: the former upon their bed invent various ways of doing evil; the latter are sedulously on their guard that they may not devise or stir up within themselves any sinful desire: the former indulge a deep and fixed contempt of God; the latter willingly cherish a constant displeasure at their sins.

Psalm 36:5-9

5. O Jehovah! thy mercy is unto the heavens, and thy truth even unto the clouds. **6.** Thy righteousness is as the mountains of God; [fb4] thy judgments are a great deep: [fb5] O Jehovah! thou preservest man and beast. **7**. O God! how excellent [fb6] is thy loving-kindness! therefore, the children of men shall trust in the shadow of thy wings. **8.** They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of thy house; and thou shalt make them to drink of the river of thy pleasures. **9.** For with thee [fb7] is the fountain of life; and in thy light [fb8] shall we see light.

5. *O Jehovah! thy mercy is unto the heavens.* Commentators think that David, after having described the great corruption and depravity which every where prevail in the world, takes occasion from thence to extol in rapturous praises the wonderful forbearance of God, in not ceasing to manifest his favor and good-will towards men, even though they are sunk in iniquity and crime. But, as I have already observed, I am of a somewhat different opinion. After having spoken of the very great depravity of men, the prophet, afraid lest he should become infected by it, or be carried away by the example of the wicked, as by a flood, quits the subject, and recovers himself by reflecting on a different theme. It usually happens, that in condemning the wicked, the contagion of their malice insinuates itself into our minds when we are not conscious of it; and there is scarcely one in a hundred who, after having complained of the malice of others, keeps himself in true godliness, pure and unpolluted. The meaning therefore is, Although we may see among men a sad and frightful confusion, which, like a great gulf, would swallow up the minds of the godly, David, nevertheless, maintains that the world is full of the goodness and righteousness of God, and that he governs heaven and earth on the strictest principles of equity. And certainly, whenever the corruption of the world affects our minds, and fills us with amazement, we

must take care not to limit our views to the wickedness of men who overturn and confound all things; but in the midst of this strange confusion, it becomes us to elevate our thoughts in admiration and wonder, to the contemplation of the secret providence of God. David here enumerates four cardinal attributes of Deity, which, according to the figure of speech called *synecdoche,* include all the others, and by which he intimates, in short, that although carnal reason may suggest to us that the world moves at random, and is directed by chance, yet we ought to consider that the infinite power of God is always associated with perfect righteousness. In saying that the goodness of God is *unto the heavens,* David's meaning is, that in its greatness it is as high as the heavens. In the same sense he adds, *Thy truth is even unto the clouds.* The term *truth* in this place may be taken either for the faithfulness which God manifests in accomplishing his promises, or for the just and well regulated character of his government, in which his rectitude is seen to be pure and free from all deception. But there are many other similar passages of Scripture which constrain me to refer it to the promises of God, in the keeping and fulfilling of which he is ever faithful.

6. *Thy righteousness is as the mountains of God.* In this verse there is a commendation of God's righteousness, which the sacred writer compares to the high mountains, (this being the manner of the expression — "the mountains of God," for we know that the Hebrews were accustomed to distinguish by the appellation *divine,* or *of God,* whatever is excellent,) because his glory shines forth more clearly there. In the last place, it is said, that his *judgments are like a great and bottomless abyss.* By these words he teaches us, that to whatever side we turn our eyes, and whether we look upward or downward, all things are disposed and ordered by the just judgment of God. This

passage is usually quoted in a sense quite different, namely, that the judgments of God far exceed our limited capacity, and are too mysterious for our being able to comprehend them; and, indeed, in this sense the similitude of an abyss is not inappropriate. It is, however, obvious from the context, that the language of the Psalmist is to be understood in a much more extensive sense, and as meaning, that however great the depth of wickedness which there is among men, and though it seems like a flood which breaks forth and overflows the whole earth, yet still greater is the depth of God's providence, by which he righteously disposes and governs all things. Whenever, therefore, our faith may be shaken by the confusion and disorder of human affairs, and when we are unable to explain the reasons of this disorder and confusion, let us remember that the judgments of God in the government of the world are with the highest propriety compared to a great depth which fills heaven and earth, that the consideration of its infinite greatness may ravish our minds with admiration, swallow up all our cares, and dispel all our sorrows. When it is added in the end of the verse, *O Jehovah! thou preservest man and beast,* the meaning is to this effect, that since God vouchsafes to extend his providential care even to the irrational creation, much more does he provide for the wants of men. And, indeed, whenever any doubt may arise in our minds regarding the providence of God, we should fortify and encourage ourselves by setting before us this consideration, that God, who provides food for the beasts of the field, and maintains them in their present state, can never cease to take care of the human race. The explanation which some have given of the term *beasts,* interpreting it allegorically of beastly men, I regard as too forced, and reject it.

7. *O God! how precious is thy loving-kindness!* Some explain these words in this sense: That the mercy of God is precious, and that the children of men who put their trust in it are precious; but this is a sense too far removed from the words of the text. Others understand them as meaning, that the mercy of God is very great to the gods, that is to say, to the angels and the sons of men; but this is too refined. I am also surprised that the Jewish Rabbins have wearied and bewildered themselves, without any occasion, in seeking to find out new and subtile interpretations, since the meaning of the prophet is of itself perfectly evident; namely, that it is because the mercy of God is great and clearly manifested, that the children of men put their trust under the shadow of it. As David has hitherto been speaking in commendation of the goodness of God, which extends to every creature, the opinion of other commentators, who consider that David is here discoursing of the peculiar favor which God manifests towards his children, is in my judgment very correct. The language seems to refer in general to all the sons of men, but what follows is applicable properly to the faithful alone. In order to manifest more clearly the greatness of divine grace, he thus speaks in general terms, telling us, that God condescends to gather together under his wings the mortal offspring of Adam, as it is said in Psalm 8:4,

> "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?
>
> and the son of man, that thou visitest him?"

The substance of the passage is this: The ungodly may run to every excess in wickedness, but this temptation does not prevent the people of God from trusting in his goodness, and casting themselves upon his fatherly care; while the ungodly, whose minds are degraded, and whose hearts are

polluted, never taste the sweetness of his goodness so as to be led by it to the faith, and thus to enjoy repose under the shadow of his wings. The metaphorical expression of *wings,* as applied to God, is common enough in Scripture. [fb9] By it God teaches us that we are preserved in safety under his protecting care, even as the hen cherishes her chickens under her wings; and thus he invites us kindly and affectionately to return to him.

8. *They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of that house.* I have no doubt that by *the fatness of God's house* the prophet means the abundance of good things which is not designed for all men indiscriminately, but is laid up in store for the children of God who commit themselves wholly to his protection. Some restrict the expression to spiritual graces; but to me it seems more likely, that under it are comprehended all the blessings that are necessary to the happiness and comfort of the present life, as well as those which pertain to eternal and heavenly blessedness. It ought, however, to be observed, that in the style of speaking which the prophet here employs, the use of earthly blessings is connected with the gracious experience of faith, in the exercise of which we can alone enjoy them rightfully and lawfully to our own welfare. When the ungodly glut themselves with the abundance of God's benefits, their bodies indeed grow fat like the flesh of cattle or swine, but their souls are always empty and famished. It is the faithful alone, as I have said, who are satisfied with the goodness of God towards them, because it is to them a pledge of his fatherly love. The expression *meat* and *drink* denotes a complete and perfect fullness, and the term *river,* [fb10] denotes an overflowing abundance.

9. *For with thee is the fountain of life.* The Psalmist here confirms the doctrine of the preceding verse, the

knowledge of which is so profitable that no words can adequately express it. As the ungodly profane even the best of God's gifts by their wicked abuse of them, unless we observe the distinction which I have stated, it were better for us to perish a hundred times of hunger, than to be fed abundantly by the goodness of God. The ungodly do not acknowledge that it is in God they live, move, and have their being, but rather imagine that they are sustained by their own power; and, accordingly, David, on the contrary, here affirms from the experience of the godly, and as it were in their name, that the fountain of life is in God. By this he means, that there is not a drop of life to be found without him, or which flows not from his grace. The metaphor of *light,* in the last clause of the verse, is tacitly most emphatic, denoting that men are altogether destitute of light, except in so far as the Lord shines upon them. If this is true of the light; of this life, how shall we be able to behold the light of the heavenly world, unless the Spirit of God enlighten us? for we must maintain that the measure of understanding with which men are by nature endued is such, that

"the light shineth in darkness,

but the darkness comprehendeth it not," (John 1:5;)

and that men are enlightened only by a supernatural gift. But it is the godly alone who perceive that they derive their light from God, and that, without it, they would continue, as it were, buried and smothered in darkness.

Psalm 36:10-12

10. Prolong [fb11] thy mercy to them that know thee, and thy righteousness to the upright in heart. **11.** Let not the foot of pride come upon me, and let not the

hand of the wicked remove me. **12.** There the workers of iniquity are fallen: they are thrust down, and shall not be able to rise.

10. *Prolong thy mercy to them that know thee.* David now sets himself to pray. And, first, he asks in general, that God would continue his mercy to all the godly, and then he pleads particularly in his own behalf, imploring the help of God against his enemies. Those who affirm that God is here said to prolong or extend his mercy because it is exalted above the heavens, indulge in a style of speaking too puerile. When David spake of it in such terms in a preceding verse, his intention was not, as I have already said, to represent the mercy of God as shut up in heaven, but simply to declare that it was diffused throughout the world; and here what he desires is just this, that God would continue to manifest, even to the end, his mercy towards his people. With the mercy of God he connects his righteousness, combining them as cause and effect. We have already said in another place, that the righteousness of God is manifested in his undertaking the defense of his own people, vindicating their innocence, avenging their wrongs, restraining their enemies, and in proving himself faithful in the preservation of their welfare and happiness against all who assail them. Now, since all this is done for them freely by God, David, with good reason, makes mention particularly of his goodness, and places it first in order, that we may learn to depend entirely upon his favor. We ought also to observe the epithets by which he describes true believers; first, he says, that *they know God;* and, secondly, that *they are upright in heart.* We learn from this that true godliness springs from the knowledge of God, and again, that the light of faith must necessarily dispose us to uprightness of heart. At the same time, we ought always to bear in mind, that we only know God aright when

we render to him the honor to which he is entitled; that is, when we place entire confidence in him.

11. *Let not the foot of pride come upon me.* As I have observed a little before, the Psalmist here applies to his own circumstances the prayer which he had offered. But by including in his prayer in the preceding verse all the children of God, he designed to show that he asked nothing for himself apart from others, but only desired that as one of the godly and upright, who have their eyes directed to God, he might enjoy his favor. He has employed the expressions, *the foot of pride,* [fb12] and *the hand of the wicked,* in the same sense. As the wicked rush boldly to the destruction of good men, lifting up their feet to tread upon them, and having their hands ready to do them wrong, David entreats God to restrain their hands and their feet; and thus he confesses that he is in danger of being exposed to their insolence, abuse, and violence, unless God come speedily to his aid.

12. *There the workers of iniquity are fallen.* Here he derives confidence from his prayer, not doubting that he has already obtained his request. And thus we see how the certainty of faith directs the saints to prayer. Besides, still farther to confirm his confidence and hope in God, he shows, as it were, by pointing to it with the finger, the certain destruction of the wicked, even though it lay as yet concealed in the future. In this respect, the adverb *there* [fb13] is not superfluous; for while the ungodly boast of their good fortune, and the world applaud them, David beholds by the eye of faith, as if from a watch-tower, their destruction, and speaks of it with as much confidence as if he had already seen it realised. That we also may attain a similar assurance, let us remember, that those who would hasten prematurely the time of God's vengeance upon the