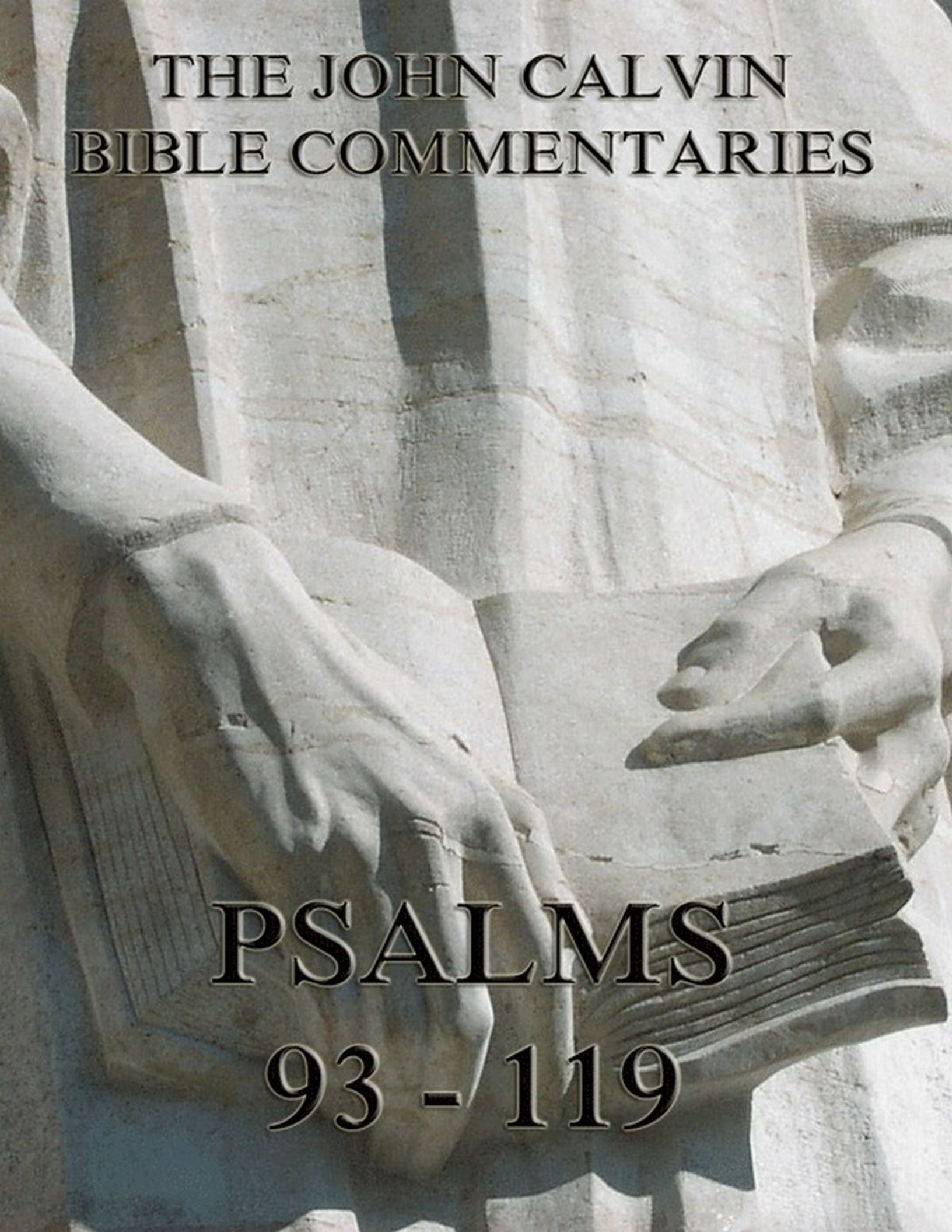

THE JOHN CALVIN BIBLE COMMENTARIES

PSALMS 93 - 119

Commentaries On The Psalms 93 - 119

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 93 - 119

PSALM 93

The psalm commences with the celebration of the infinite glory of God. It is then declared that such is his faithfulness that he never deceives his own people, who, embracing his promises, wait with tranquil minds for their salvation amidst all the tempests and agitations of the world.

Psalm 93:1-2

1. Jehovah hath reigned, he hath clothed himself with majesty: [fd1] Jehovah hath clothed himself with strength, he hath girded himself: [fd2] he hath also established the world, it shall not be moved. **2**. Thy throne is stable; [fd3] from then, from everlasting art thou.

1. *Jehovah hath reigned.* We here see what I have lately adverted to, that in the power of God there is exhibited to us matter of confidence; for our not investing God with the power which belongs to him, as we ought to do, and thus wickedly despoiling him of his authority, is the source of that fear and trembling which we very often experience. This, it is true, we dare not do openly, but were we well persuaded of his invincible power, that would be to us an invincible support against all the assaults of temptation. All admit in word what the prophet here teaches, That God reigns; but how few are there who oppose this shield to the hostile powers of the world, as it becomes them to do, that they may fear nothing however terrible? In this then consists the glory of God, that he governs mankind according to his will. It is said that *he clothes himself with majesty and strength;* not that we ought to imagine that

there is any thing in him which is derived from another, but it is intended by the effect and indubitable experience to show his wisdom and righteousness in the government of mankind. The Psalmist proves that God will not neglect or abandon the world, from the fact that he created it. A simple survey of the world should of itself suffice to attest a Divine Providence. The heavens revolve daily, and, immense as is their fabric, and inconceivable the rapidity of their revolutions, we experience no concussion — no disturbance in the harmony of their motion. The sun, though varying its course every diurnal revolution, returns annually to the same point. The planets, in all their wanderings, maintain their respective positions. How could the earth hang suspended in the air were it not upheld by God's hand? By what means could it maintain itself unmoved, while the heavens above are in constant rapid motion, did not its Divine Maker fix and establish it? Accordingly the particle ãa*, aph,* denoting *emphasis,* is introduced — Yea, *he hath established it.*

2. *Thy throne is stable.* Some read, *is prepared,* and this agrees well with the context. provided we take the two clauses as one sentence, meaning — *O Lord, as thou art from eternity, even so thy throne is erected or prepared from that time.* For the sense which some have attached to the words, as if they contained a simple assertion of God's eternity, is poor; and the Psalmist evidently intends to say that as God is eternal in essence, so he has always been invested with power and majesty. The term *throne* signifies, by the figure synecdoche, righteousness, and office or power of government; it being customary to transfer such images taken from men to God, in accommodation to our infirmity. [fd4] By this ascription of praise the Psalmist effectually disposes of all the absurd ideas which have been broached, tending to deny or disparage the power of God,

and declares, upon the matter, that God may sooner cease to be, than to sit upon his throne in the government of this world.

Psalm 93:3-5

3. The floods have lifted up, O Jehovah! the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods shall lift up their waves. **4**. The waves [fd5] of the sea are terrible, by reason of the noise of great waters, Jehovah is terrible above. **5**. Thy testimonies are singularly true: holiness is the glory of thy house, O Jehovah! for length of days. [fd6]

3. *The floods have lifted up, O Jehovah!* Various meanings have been attached to this verse. Some think there is an allusion to the violent assaults made upon the Church by her enemies, and the goodness of God seen in restraining them. [fd7] Others are of opinion that the words should be taken literally, and not figuratively, in this sense — Though the noise of many waters be terrible, and the waves of the sea more fearful still, God is more terrible than all. I would not be inclined to insist too nicely upon any comparison that may have been intended. I have no doubt the Psalmist sets forth the power of God by adducing one brief illustration out of many which might have been given, [fd8] Intimating that we need not go farther for a striking instance of Divine power — one that may impress us with an idea of his tremendous majesty — than to the floods of waters, and agitations of the ocean; as in Psalm 29:4, the mighty voice of God is said to be in the thunder. God manifests his power in the sound of the floods, and in the tempestuous waves of the sea, in a way calculated to excite our reverential awe. Should it be thought that there is a comparison intended, then the latter clause of the verse must be understood as added, with this meaning, That all

the terror of the objects mentioned is as nothing when we come to consider the majesty of God himself, such as he is in heaven. There is still another sense which may be extracted from the words, That though the world may to appearance be shaken with violent commotions, this argues no defect in the government of God, since he can control them at once by his dreadful power.

5. *Thy testimonies* [fd9] *are singularly true.* As yet the Psalmist has insisted upon the excellency of God in the work of creation, and the providential government of the world. Now he speaks of his distinguishing goodness to his chosen people, in making known to them the doctrine which bringeth salvation. He begins by commending the absolute trust-worthiness and truthfulness of the law of God. This being a treasure which was not extended to all nations promiscuously, he adds immediately that the house of God would be adorned with a glory which should last for ever. The Divine goodness is displayed in every part of the world, but the Psalmist justly considers it as of all others the most inestimable blessing, that God should have deposited in his Church the covenant of eternal life, and made his glory principally to shine out of it. Some translate the Hebrew word hwan*, naävah, desirable,* [fd10] as if the Psalmist had said that *the adorning of the temple was precious;* but the grammatical construction will not admit of this. By *length of days* is meant *perpetual succession,* [fd11] and to this we find Isaiah referring in striking terms, that the Divine truth might be preserved in faithful custody through successive ages.

> "Behold, I have put my word in thy mouth, in the mouth of thy seed, and of thy seed's seed," (Psalms 59:21)

PSALM 94

The Psalmist implores Divine assistance against wicked and violent men, who persecuted the upright in a cruel and tyrannical manner. It is evident that he refers to domestic foes, whose unrighteous domination was as vexatious and oppressive to the Lord's people, as all the injuries received from the Gentile nations without.

Psalm 94:1-6

1. O Jehovah! God of vengeances; God of vengeances, [fd12] shine forth. [fd13] **2**. Lift up thyself, thou Judge of the earth! render a reward to the proud. **3**. O Jehovah! how long shall the wicked — how long shall the wicked triumph? **4**. They pour forth, they speak hard things, all the workers of iniquity lift up themselves. **5**. They break in pieces thy people, O Jehovah! and afflict thy inheritance. **6**. They slay the widow, and the stranger, and murder the fatherless.

1. *O Jehovah! God of vengeances.* We know that the Jews were surrounded by many neighbors who were not well affected towards them, and were thus incessantly subject to the assaults and oppression of bitter enemies. As this intestine persecution was even more afflictive than the rampant and unrestrained violence of the wicked, we need not wonder that the Psalmist should earnestly beseech God for deliverance from it. The expressions which he uses, calling upon God to *shine forth* conspicuously, and *lift himself up on high,* amount in common language to this, that God would give some actual manifestation of his character as judge or avenger; for in that case he is seen ascending his tribunal to exact the punishment due to sin, and demonstrate his power in preserving order and government in the world. The phraseology is used only in reference to ourselves, disposed as we are to feel as if he

overlooked us, unless he stretched out his hand to help us in some visible and open manner. In calling him twice successively *the God of vengeances,* and then, *judge of the earth,* the Psalmist uses these titles as applicable to the present situation in which he stood, reminding Him in a manner of the office which belonged to him, and saying — O Lord! it is thine to take vengeance upon sinners, and judge the earth — see how they take advantage of the impunity which is extended to their guilt, and triumph audaciously in their wickedness! Not that God needs to be admonished of his duty, for he never resigns himself to indifference, and even when he seems to delay his judgments, is only adjusting them according to what he knows to be the best season; but his people conceive of him in this way to themselves, and take occasion from this to embolden and stimulate themselves to greater vehemency in prayer. [fd14] The same may be said of the repetition which the Psalmist uses. When the wicked then indulge in unrestrained excesses, we are to remember that God can never cease to assert his character as the judge of the earth who takes vengeance upon iniquity. Does he seem in our carnal apprehension to have at any time withdrawn and hidden himself? let us put up without hesitation the prayer which is here taught us by the Holy Spirit, that he would *shine forth.*

3. *O Jehovah! how long shall the wicked?* The Psalmist justifies himself in this verse for the fervent importunity which he showed in prayer. There was need of immediate help, when the wicked had proceeded to such an extent of audacity. The necessity of our case may justly embolden us in our requests, which must be all the more readily heard as they are reasonable; and here the Psalmist insists that his complaints were not without cause, nor originated in trifling reasons, but were extorted by injuries of the most

flagrant description. Notice is taken of the length of time during which their persecutions had lasted, as an aggravating circumstance. They had become hardened under the long-continued forbearance of God, and had in consequence contracted a shamelessness, as well as obstinacy of spirit, imagining that he looked upon their wickedness with an eye of favor. The term *how long* twice repeated, implies the extent of impunity which had been granted, that it was not as if they had newly started upon their career, but that they had been tolerated for a length of time, and had become outrageously flagitious. It was thus that in former times wicked men tyrannized to such a degree over the Church, while yet God did not interfere to apply a remedy; and we need not be surprised that he should subject her now to protracted persecutions, nor should we conclude that, because he does not immediately proceed to cure existing evils, he has utterly forsaken her. The term *triumph* denotes that fullness of audacious and boasting exultation which the wicked feel when they are intoxicated with continued prosperity, and conceive that they may indulge in every excess without restraint.

4. *They pour forth, they speak hard things.* [fd15] He shows in still clearer terms, how their fierceness in persecution was such that they did not scruple to glory in their guilt. The Hebrew verb [bn, *nabang,* means more than *to speak.* Literally it signifies *to rush* or *boil forth,* and comes to denote figuratively the uttering of reckless or rash words. We see how wicked men are instigated by pride and vain-glory, to demean and disgrace themselves so far as to boast vain-gloriously of their power, breathing forth threatenings of bloodshed, violence, and monstrous cruelty. It is to such ebullitions that the Psalmist refers, when men who are lost to all sense of shame and modesty boast of the wickedness which they can perpetrate at will. This is what he means by

their *speaking hard things,* uttering discourse which is under no restraint of fear, or prudential consideration, but which launches into the most unbridled license. As the Lord's people had formerly to endure the heavy trial of seeing the Church subjected to this wild tyranny and misrule, we should account it no strange thing to see the Church suffering still under miserable misgovernment, or positive oppression, but should pray for help from God, who, though he connives at wickedness for a time, eventually comes to the deliverance of his children.

5. *They break in pieces thy people, O Jehovah!* Having spoken of their discourse or language as vain-glorious and shameless, he proceeds to speak of their deeds, in cruelly persecuting the Church. It is hard that even the subjects of heathen princes should be subjected to unjust persecution, but a more intolerable thing still, that those who are God's own people, his peculiar inheritance, should be trampled under the foot of tyranny. The prayer before us is one which, as I have already remarked, is given with the intention that we should prefer it ourselves, when we or others may be persecuted by wicked men, and especially intestine enemies. Our safety is dear to the Lord, not only as we are men, the workmanship of his hand, but as we are his peculiar heritage; and this should lead us, when wronged at any time, to betake ourselves to God with the more confidence. It is farther added — that they spare not *the widow,* and *the orphan, and murder the stranger.* God, while he has commanded us in general to cultivate equity and justice in our common intercourse, has commended the orphan, widow, and stranger, to our peculiar care, as being more exposed to injury, and therefore more entitled to humanity and compassion. To treat such objects with cruelty argues a singular degree of impiety, and contempt of divine authority, and is not only an outrage of common

justice, but the infraction of a privilege of special protection which God has condescended to cast around them. [fd16] They who are chargeable with such conduct, particularly provoke the divine anger. As to little children especially, their helplessness and tender age will even protect them from being attacked by dogs and wild beasts. And what shall we think of the monstrous inhumanity of men, who would make them the objects of their assault? We have here a specimen of the dreadful state of matters which must then have prevailed in the Church of God. The law was there, and the ordinances of divine appointment, yet we see to what an awful extent every species of wickedness abounded. Let us beware lest we fall into a similar state of corruption, and should it so happen under our own observation that men persecute the stranger, seize the widow, and rob the fatherless, let us, in imitation of the Psalmist, who would have us alleviate their misfortunes, pray God to undertake their defense.

Psalm 94:7-10

. **7**. And they have said, God shall not see, the God of Jacob shall not know. **8**. Understand, ye stupid [fd17] among the people: and ye fools, when will ye be wise? **9**. He that planted [fd18] the ear, shall he not hear? he that formed the eye, shall he not see? **10**. He that chastiseth the nations, shall not he correct? he that teacheth man knowledge. [fd19]

7. *And they have said, God shall not see.* When the Psalmist speaks of the wicked as taunting God with blindness and ignorance, we are not to conceive of them as just exactly entertaining this imagination of him in their hearts, but they despise his judgments as much as if he took no cognisance of human affairs. Were the truth graven upon

men's hearts that they cannot elude the eye of God, this would serve as a check and restraint upon their conduct. When they proceed to such audacity in wickedness as to lay the hand of violence upon their fellow-creatures, to rob, and to destroy, it shows that they have fallen into a state of brutish security in which they virtually consider themselves as concealed from the view of the Almighty. This security sufficiently proves at least, that they act as if they never expected to be called to an account for their conduct. [fd20] Though they may not then be guilty of the gross blasphemy of asserting in so many words that God is ignorant of what goes forward in the world, a mere nothing in the universe — the Psalmist very properly charges them with denying God's providential government, and, indeed, avowedly stripping him of the power and function of judge and governor, since, if they really were persuaded as they ought of his superintending providence, they would honor him by feeling a reverential fear — as I have elsewhere observed at greater length. He intends to express the lowest and most abandoned stage of depravity, in which the sinner casts off the fear of God, and rushes into every excess. Such infatuated conduct would have been inexcusable even in heathens, who had never heard of a divine revelation; but it was monstrous in men who had been brought up from infancy in the knowledge of the word, to show such mockery and contempt of God.

8. *Understand, ye stupid among the people.* As it was execrable impiety to deny God to be Judge of the earth, the Psalmist severely reprimands their folly in thinking to elude his government, and even succeed by artifices in escaping his view. The expression, *stupid among the people,* is stronger than had he simply condemned them as foolish. It rendered their folly more inexcusable, that they belonged to the posterity of Abraham, of whom Moses said,

> "What people is there so great, who have their gods so near unto them, as the Lord thy God hath this day come down unto thee? For this is your understanding and wisdom before all nations, to have God for your legislator." (Deuteronomy 4:7)

[fd21] Perhaps, however, he may be considered as addressing the rulers and those who were of higher rank in the community, and styling them *degraded among the people,* that is, no better than the common herd of the vulgar. Proud men, who are apt to be blinded by a sense of their importance, require to be brought down, and made to see that in God's estimation they are no better than others. He puts them on a level with the common people, to humble their self-complacency; or we may suppose that he hints with an ironical and sarcastic allusion to their boasted greatness, that they were distinguished above others chiefly for pre-eminent folly — adding, at the same time, as an additional aggravation, that they were obstinate in their adherence to it; for as much is implied in the question, *When will ye be wise?* We might consider it an unnecessary assertion of Divine Providence to put the question to the wicked, *Shall not he who made the ear hear?* because there are none so abandoned as openly to deny God's cognisance of events; but, as I have observed above, the flagrant audacity and self-security which most men display in contradicting his will, is a sufficient proof that they have supplanted God from their imaginations, and substituted a mere dead idol in his place, since, did they really believe him to be cognisant of their actions, they would at least show as much regard to him as to their fellow-creatures, in whose presence they feel some measure of restraint, and are prevented from sinning by fear and respect. To arouse them from this stupidity, the Psalmist draws an argument from the very order of nature, inferring that if men both

see and hear, by virtue of faculties which they have received from God the Creator, it is impossible that God himself, who formed the eye and the ear, should not possess the most perfect observation.

10. *He that chastiseth the nations, shall not he correct?* He would have them argue from the greater to the less, that if God did not spare even whole nations, but visits their iniquity with punishment, they could not imagine that he would suffer a mere handful of individuals to escape with impunity. The comparison intended, however, may possibly be between the Gentiles and the Jews. If God punished the heathen nations, who had not heard his word, with much severity, the Jews might expect that they, who had been familiarised to instruction in his house, would receive still sharper correction, and that he would vindicate his justice most in that nation over which he had chosen to preside. Still the former sense of the passage appears to me preferable, That it is folly in any number of individuals to flatter themselves with impunity, when they see God inflicting public punishment upon collective people. Some think there is an exclusive allusion to the signal and memorable instances of Divine judgment recorded in Scripture, as in the destruction of Sodom with fire from heaven, (Genesis 19.) and of the whole human family by the flood, (Genesis 7.) But the simpler meaning is best, That it were the height of madness in individuals to think that they could escape when nations perish. In adding that God *teacheth men knowledge,* [fd22] the Psalmist glances at the overweening confidence of such as despise God, and pride themselves in their acuteness and shrewdness, as we find Isaiah denouncing a woe against those crafty enemies of God who dig deep, that they may hide themselves from his sight, (Isaiah 29:15.) It is a disease prevalent enough in the world still. We know the refuges under covert of which both

courtiers and lawyers take occasion to indulge in shameless mockery of God. [fd23] It is as if the Psalmist had said — You think to elude God through the confidence which you have in your acute understandings, and would pretend to dispute the knowledge of the Almighty, when, in truth, all the knowledge which is in the world is but as a drop from his own inexhaustible fullness.

Psalm 94:11-13

11. Jehovah knoweth the thoughts of men, [fd24] that they are vain. [fd25] **12.** Blessed is the man whom thou hast instructed, O God! And taught out of thy law; **13**. To give him rest from days of evil whilst the pit is digged for the wicked.

11. *Jehovah knoweth the thoughts of men, etc*. He again insists upon the folly of men in seeking to wrap themselves up in darkness, and hide themselves from the view of God. To prevent them from flattering themselves with vain pretexts, he reminds them that the mists of delusion will be scattered at once when they come to stand in God's presence. Nothing can avail them, so long as God from heaven stamps vanity upon their deepest counsels. The Psalmist's design in citing them before the Judge of all, is to make them thoroughly search and try their own hearts; for the great cause of their self-security lay in failing to realize God, burying all distinction between right and wrong, and, so far as that was possible, hardening themselves against all feeling. They might contrive to soothe their minds by means like these, but he tells them that God ridiculed all such trifling. The truth may be a plain one, and well known; but the Psalmist states a fact which many overlook, and which we would do well to remember, That the wicked, when they attempt to hide themselves under subtile

refuges, cannot deceive God, and necessarily deceive themselves. Some read — *They* (that is, men themselves) *are vanity;* but this is a forced rendering, and the form of expression is one which both in the Greek and Hebrew may be translated, *God knows that the thoughts of men are vain.*

12. *Blessed is the man whom thou hast instructed, O God!* The Psalmist now passes from the language of censure to that of consolation, comforting himself and others of the Lord's people with the truth, that though God might afflict them for a time, he consulted their true interests and safety. At no period of life is this a truth which it is unnecessary to remember, called as we are to a continued warfare. God may allow us intervals of ease, in consideration of our weakness, but would always have us exposed to calamities of various kinds. The audacious excesses to which the wicked proceed we have already noticed. Were it not for the comfortable consideration that they are a blessed people whom God exercises with the cross, our condition would be truly miserable. We are to consider, that in calling us to be his people, he has separated us from the rest of the world, to participate a blessed peace in the mutual cultivation of truth and righteousness. The Church is often cruelly oppressed by tyrants under color of law — the very case of which the Psalmist complains in this psalm; for it is evident that he speaks of domestic enemies, pretending to be judges in the nation. Under such circumstances, a carnal judgment would infer, that if God really concerned himself in our welfare he would never suffer these persons to perpetrate such enormities. To prevent this, the Psalmist would have us distrust our own ideas of things, and feel the necessity of that wisdom which comes from above. I consider the passage to mean that it is only in the Lord's school we can

ever learn to maintain composure of mind, and a posture of patient expectation and trust under the pressure of distress. The Psalmist declares that the wisdom which would bear us onward to the end, with an inward peace and courage under long-continued trouble, is not natural to any of us, but must come from God. [fd26] Accordingly, he exclaims, that those are the truly blessed whom God has habituated through his word to the endurance of the cross, and prevented from sinking under adversity by the secret supports and consolations of his own Spirit.

The words with which the verse begins, *Blessed is the man whom thou hast instructed,* have no doubt a reference to chastisements and experience of the cross, but they also comprehend the gift of inward illumination; and afterwards the Psalmist adds, that this wisdom, which is imparted by God inwardly, is, at the same time, set forth and made known in the Scriptures. [fd27] In this way he puts honor upon the use of the written word, as we find Paul saying, that all things

> "were written for our learning, that we, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, might have hope" (Romans 15:4)

This shows from what quarter we are to derive our patience — the oracles of God, which supply us with matter of hope for the mitigation of our griefs. In short, what the Psalmist means is summarily this: Believers must, in the first place, be exhorted to exercise patience, not to despond under the cross, but wait submissively upon God for deliverance; and next, they must be taught how this grace is to be obtained, for we are naturally disposed to abandon ourselves to despair, and any hope of ours would speedily fail, were we not taught from above that all our troubles