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# Faith between God and the Devil: Calvin's doctrine of faith as reflected in his Commentary on the Psalms

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The idea that John Calvin was the first "unmoved mover" of the people called Calvinists is certainly mistaken. Should we regard John Calvin as an unshakable rock of faith, close study of his commentary on the Psalms would soon teach us otherwise. From it we learn that Calvin saw himself and other believers as weak and vulnerable, constantly under siege by the devil and constantly in need of being saved by God. John Calvin was as much a man caught between God and the devil as Luther was. Certainly his doctrine of faith as described in its many aspects in his commentary on the Psalms will make this abundantly clear, as well as reveal the roots of the centuries-long international tradition of a Calvinistic way of believing.

## The road to faith

Calvin describes the order of salvation when he says that God "having delivered me from the tyranny of the devil, adopts me as his child, washes away my impurities in the blood of Christ, renews me by his Holy Spirit, incorporates me in the body of his Son and leads me to the life of heaven."<sup>1</sup> Calvin, however, knows of no strictly chronological order, but lists all the aspects of the transition from being lost to being righteous. He does indeed know an "order of salvation" in the sense that the knowledge of sin and repentance constitutes a necessary element in the process of justification. God only receives in grace those who repent from their sins. This does not mean that forgiveness is purchased by repentance, but that repentance is inseparably bound up with faith. Repentance, in the thought of Calvin, is a fruit of the Spirit and a part of regeneration.<sup>2</sup> Repentance, accordingly, is a sign of faith. Repentance and confession

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<sup>1</sup>Ps. 109:21; 155

<sup>2</sup>"...non quod poenitentia sibi veniam acquirant, sed quia a spiritu regenerationis divelli nunquam potest fides.", Ps.32:11; 323.

of sin, while they are not the conditions for the reception of grace, are the way by which a person is reconciled to God.<sup>3</sup> Forgiveness of sin is not obtained apart from the knowledge and confession of sin.<sup>4</sup> Calvin states this to indicate that the reception of grace is something people consciously experience and also makes them conscious of the consequences of grace, viz. the giving up of sin and the praising of God. In line with this, Calvin says that God only wants to be a physician to those who humble themselves before him.<sup>5</sup>

Humbling ourselves as a confession of our own sin is the first step toward reconciliation with God, for God himself says that our misery moves him to be conciliatory toward us.<sup>6</sup> There is no true faith without sincere repentance and without a sense of guilt before God. After all, “those who do not feel the disease will also reject the remedy.”<sup>7</sup> It is not sufficient for people, however, just to feel their own misery; they must also be convinced that they cannot deliver themselves from it and must therefore commit themselves to the one true God.<sup>8</sup> This misery is the extreme inner trial which arises because the sinner feels God’s hand pressing heavily upon him, and he knows that he has to do with a Judge whose severity includes many deaths besides eternal death.<sup>9</sup> We shall never experience the true joy of faith until we have felt, in intense conflicts with inner temptations, how fearful the wrath of God is.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, this sense of misery is not a condition for justification but a part of it, for we are here dealing with a sense that God is at work within us. God must first reveal himself to us and only then will our own weakness be a reason for us to surrender to him.<sup>11</sup>

Because human beings are by nature spiritually dead and buried, their coming to faith means “a resurrection from the grave.”<sup>12</sup> About the moment at which a person comes to faith Calvin says no more than that rebirth or regeneration occurs by the operation of God’s Word and Spirit.<sup>13</sup> How true it is that faith is a work of God Calvin makes equally clear by drawing a comparison with the act of creation. Being dead, we are made alive by God “just as it is totally his own unique way of working when he creates all things out of nothing.”<sup>14</sup> The

<sup>3</sup>Ps. 32:5; 320.

<sup>4</sup>Ps. 106:6; 118

<sup>5</sup>Ps. 109:21; 155

<sup>6</sup>Ps. 102:76; 73.

<sup>7</sup>Ps. 32:2; 317.

<sup>8</sup>Ps. 28:1; 281.

<sup>9</sup>Ps. 32:4; 318.

<sup>10</sup>Ps. 32:3; 318.

<sup>11</sup>Ps. 39:8; 401.

<sup>12</sup>Ps. 103:4; 76.

<sup>13</sup>“...hominum multitudinem Christi spiritu et evangelio esse regnitum...”, Ps. 110:3; 163.

<sup>14</sup>“...sicuti proprium munus eius est, ex nihilo omnia creare.”, Ps. 39:8; 401.

believer is a creation out of nothing. It is only when God intervenes that "a person who is nothing starts to become something."<sup>15</sup>

### The primacy of grace

Fundamental for the God-man relation is the unconditional grace of God. Calvin does not devote a separate exposition to that subject because it really functions as the presupposition of his entire commentary. He succinctly defines grace as the love with which God embraces the elect without their deserving it.<sup>16</sup> Equally brief and clear is his comment that there is no middle course between justification by works and justification by faith.<sup>17</sup> Granted, when he speaks of grace, his discourse is regularly characterized by marginal comments designed to prevent a mistaken assessment and handling of grace.

God not only initiates us into the state of grace but also keeps us in it. It is one kind of grace by which God makes us alive; another by which he keeps us in the restored relationship with him. Calvin sharply rejects the view of Rome that God takes care of the first kind of grace whereas man produces the second, as well as the Anabaptist view that a person can attain to perfect righteousness and no longer needs the second kind of grace.<sup>18</sup> In both views God recedes into the background, whereas Calvin wants to keep God as the central figure in our salvation, and in part for that reason points to the daily forgiveness which God provides.<sup>19</sup> There is not a day in which a person can do without God's grace. The error of Rome is precisely that it takes away the blessing of forgiveness when it says that humans must make their own contribution.<sup>20</sup> It is not the exertion of man but the forgiveness of God which is the door to eternal life.<sup>21</sup> This does not cancel out our own responsibility. While it is true that God must turn the hearts of people to himself, they are nevertheless guilty when covetousness leads them into sin.<sup>22</sup>

Calvin describes the gulf between sinful humans and a righteous God. The human situation before God is such that no matter how energetically people work at righteousness, in the sight of God they nevertheless fail to produce a satisfactory result. Our efforts can never bring us to his level—in the first place,

<sup>15</sup>Ps. 39:8; 401.

<sup>16</sup>Ps. 106:4; 116.

<sup>17</sup>"Atqui inter haec duo, quae scriptura inter se opponit, nihil est medium, Iustificari operibus et Iustificari fide.", Ps. 143:2; 401.

<sup>18</sup>Ps. 103:11; 80.

<sup>19</sup>"...quotidiane venia...", Ps. 103:11; 80.

<sup>20</sup>Ps. 32:1; 316.

<sup>21</sup>Ps. 32:1; 316.

<sup>22</sup>Ps. 78:8; 725.

because he does not need anything from us and in the second, because we have nothing with which we could honor him. God, accordingly, will never owe us anything. Calvin's conclusion is simply that those who come to him must put aside all self-confidence, for those who fancy that there is something good in themselves thereby take away a significant part of his honor. For Calvin that is the essential point in his account of the human position: every percentage point of good we think we possess by that much detracts from the 100 percent goodness of God. But when we honestly admit to him that we possess nothing and deserve nothing, "then this humility before God is to him as a wonderfully sweet perfume that will prompt him to be gracious."<sup>23</sup> Calvin's emphasis, accordingly, is not on human poverty but on the all-sufficient riches of God. Nor is this emphasis diminished when Calvin says that "only those have access to God who are his true servants and live a holy life."<sup>24</sup>

Sometimes Calvin also describes our attainment of a right relationship to God in terms of reconciliation. Reconciliation means that God acknowledges as his children people toward whom he should actually be hostile. Here the accent lies, not on our enmity toward God, but on God's enmity toward us.<sup>25</sup> From the human perspective we are talking about the loss of our status as children as a result of the Fall. For us humans there is no hope other than that God in his gracious election will again adopt us unworthy people as his children.<sup>26</sup>

Reconciliation with God is also the absolute condition for a blessed life. No "blessed life" exists unless a person is reconciled to God.<sup>27</sup> The greatest happiness is to be reconciled to God.<sup>28</sup> Reconciliation to God is the source from which all God's blessings flow.<sup>29</sup> The human problem in fact is not, say, sickness but sin, not suffering but guilt. One can therefore only speak of happiness when there is reconciliation to God.<sup>30</sup> Nothing is more important for a human being than to be reconciled to God. A person may suffer injustice and poverty, be hungry and thirsty, and have numerous other problems, yet be happy because she has peace with God.<sup>31</sup> Pivotal to Calvin is the relation to God. The

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<sup>23</sup>Ps. 16:2; 150.

<sup>24</sup>Ps. 15:1; 144.

<sup>25</sup>"...quibus placatus esset Deus, ut pro filiis agnoscat, quibus merito inimicus esset." Ps. 32:1; 314.

<sup>26</sup>"...nec alia est felicitates ianua, quam ut mero beneplacito indignos eligat.", Ps. 33:12; 330.

<sup>27</sup>"...hoc summum et unicum esse beatae vitae caput, si Deus hominem abolito reatu sibi gratuito reconciliet.", Ps. 32: intro; 314.

<sup>28</sup>Ps. 17:15; 167-168.

<sup>29</sup>Ps. 103:3; 75.

<sup>30</sup>Ps. 130:8; 338.

<sup>31</sup>Ps. 63:4; 595.

essential thing is not that one's sins are forgiven but that thereby things have again been set right between us and God.<sup>32</sup>

### The value of faith

Within this context of the grace-conditioned character of salvation, Calvin manages nevertheless to create room for the value of faith. Faith not only reconciles a person to God but also sanctifies in him everything that is imperfect, and so—by the free grace of God—he becomes righteous before God.<sup>33</sup> It turns out that Calvin even assigns to faith such high significance that at times God's action becomes dependent on man's faith. In Psalm 17:7 David speaks about God as the redeemer of those who seek refuge in him. Without discussing the possible question whether God's act of redemption ever depends on our seeking refuge in him, Calvin, linking up with David's words, comments that God undertakes to protect everyone who trusts in him. This means that we do not call in vain upon God as our protector and need not doubt that he will help us, provided our faith continues to rely on his grace.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, it is also true that those who call upon God without believing in him reject his grace by their unbelief.<sup>35</sup> A similar idea occurs in Calvin's exposition of Psalm 37:19 where he states that our unbelief stands in the way of God's liberality.

### To believe is to love

To know God, to trust God, to honor God, and to believe in God, to Calvin, are all on the same plane. We show that we know God well only when we give him the honor which is his due, and we cannot honor him better than by trusting in him.<sup>36</sup> The most important part of believing, however, is loving God. "There is no better way to honor God than by loving him."<sup>37</sup> To believe is to love God on account of his goodness toward us.<sup>38</sup> The attitude we must assume toward God is best expressed in the word "reverence," but because he wants us to serve him with our whole heart there is no better form of self-giving than that we be bound to God by "a bond of heartfelt and spontaneous love."<sup>39</sup> For that

<sup>32</sup>Ps. 79:9; 751.

<sup>33</sup>Ps. 32:11; 323.

<sup>34</sup>"...quia non frustra vocatur Deus sperantium servator, modo in eius gratiam recumbat fides nostra, minime timendum esse quin paratus sit ad opem nobis ferendam.", Ps. 17:7; 163.

<sup>35</sup>Ps. 28:6; 285.

<sup>36</sup>"Interea tenendum est, tunc rite a nobis Deum cognosci, dum ei suum honorem tribuimus, nempe sit in eum recumbat nostra fiducia.", Ps. 36:11; 364.

<sup>37</sup>Ps. 18:2; 170.

<sup>38</sup>Ps. 5:12; 72.

<sup>39</sup>Ps. 18:2; 170.

reason Scripture also from time to time describes believers as people who love God. Love for God is “the root of true godliness,” for from it flows the heartfelt desire to submit to him.<sup>40</sup> “Most important in the service of God is uprightness of heart.” For God accepts uprightness of heart as though the whole heart were pure and perfect.<sup>41</sup>

### Faith, assurance, and promise

In his commentary on the Psalms Calvin strongly stresses the assurance of faith. However, in this connection the reference is not so much to assurance of God’s grace as to assurance of God’s care, even though these two are inseparably connected: God’s grace is manifested in God’s care. Calvin, accordingly, does not so much address the question whether a person is a child of God as whether God still cares for that child. Believers, for example, seeing that unbelievers prosper in this world while they themselves have to deal with all kinds of trouble, have their faith shaken. Over against this, they need the assurance that God will protect them, but that assurance exists only because God is gracious to them. Since God forgives their sins, he will also protect them. Grace and protection are inseparably connected, so that Calvin can say that believers “seek refuge in God’s grace” when their difficulties threaten to become too much for them.<sup>42</sup>

Calvin, therefore, does not isolate the faith-relation [to God] from the world in which the believer functions. The grace which puts people in the right relation to God also gives them the strength to continue to function in this world: “If only we are persuaded that we belong to the number of those whom God cherishes because he has embraced them in his fatherly love, we may also apply to ourselves everything the Bible says about God’s power.”<sup>43</sup>

Believers find assurance by holding onto God’s covenant promises that he will save his own.<sup>44</sup> A person only manages to struggle through situations of fear, conflict, and death by clinging to God’s promises.<sup>45</sup> The assurance of faith delivers us from all anxiety and dread.<sup>46</sup> The fear of death and the grave, in fact, flows from a lack of faith. Believers become afraid because they do not sufficiently entrust themselves to God,<sup>47</sup> even though Calvin recognizes that there is in us also a natural reaction of fear to the violent aspects of death.<sup>48</sup> While people

<sup>40</sup>Ps. 145:20; 420.

<sup>41</sup>Ps. 32:11; 323.

<sup>42</sup>Ps. 10:5; 113

<sup>43</sup>Ps. 46:8; 464.

<sup>44</sup>Ps. 68:29; 633.

<sup>45</sup>Ps. 119:25; 225.

<sup>46</sup>Ps. 16:10; 156.

<sup>47</sup>Ps. 49:16; 491.

<sup>48</sup>“...violentiam mortem naturaliter magis horremus.”, Ps. 86:6; 807.

experience “instability” they find “stability” in the promise.<sup>49</sup> The assurance of salvation, accordingly, is grounded in God and believers therefore “cast the anchor of faith into heaven.”<sup>50</sup> Faith is thus capable of pulling us up to God out of the deepest depths.<sup>51</sup> Calvin consequently points out that the poet of Psalm 85:8 says he wants to *hear* what God says, not that he wants to *see* what God will do. He refers believers to God’s mouth and not to God’s hand, for the benefits of God flow forth from God’s promises.<sup>52</sup> For Calvin, as it was for Luther, the rule is that faith comes by hearing (*fides ex auditu*).<sup>53</sup> Faith must again and again direct itself to God’s mouth.<sup>54</sup> Faith, for that matter, has no alternative, for “without that Word of God we have no reason whatever to believe that he is gracious.”<sup>55</sup>

That faith focuses on the promise of God becomes especially clear at times when God conceals the signs of his favor: “If believers regain their peace of mind only when God manifests himself as their liberator, what room is left for the exercise of faith and what then is the power of the promises?”<sup>56</sup>

God’s actions may lead us to doubt, but his speech cannot. Faith meets the test when amidst the greatest darkness it is able to let itself be guided by the light of God’s promise.<sup>57</sup> It is precisely “the peculiar property of faith”<sup>58</sup> that even amidst the most trying circumstances it finds peace and waits for God and his help. Calvin’s strong conviction that faith does not let itself be defined by the things that are visible is also evident when he says that the confidence of faith implies a “patient waiting for grace even though it is hidden and trusting in God’s Word whatever delays there may be in the visible fulfillment of it.”<sup>59</sup> Faith knows how to connect heaven with the earth, so that “in all the perils of shipwreck to which we are exposed we may hurl the anchor of our faith and prayers directly into heaven.”<sup>60</sup>

The assurance that faith will win under all circumstances does not mean “that God’s children, when in danger, stand around laughing or making fun of

<sup>49</sup>Ps. 10:5; 113.

<sup>50</sup>Ps. 102:29; 74.

<sup>51</sup>Ps. 69:4; 638.

<sup>52</sup>“...sed quoniam beneficia quibus ecclesiam prosequitur, ex promissionibus fluunt, os potius quam manum posuit.”, Ps. 85:9; 788.

<sup>53</sup>“Fides, quae ipsa ex auditu nascitur.”, Ps. 132:6; 344.

<sup>54</sup>“...ex ore Dei pendere debet fides.”, Ps. 89:4; 812.

<sup>55</sup>“...nihil nobis sine verbo Dei imaginari fas est de eius gratia.”, Ps. 89:4; 813.

<sup>56</sup>Ps. 116:7; 194.

<sup>57</sup>Ps. 71:14; 658.

<sup>58</sup>“...fidei proprium...”, Ps. 25:4; 252.

<sup>59</sup>Ps. 52:11; 530.

<sup>60</sup>Ps. 88:7; 808.



death, but they regard the help God has promised them as much superior to all the dangers which may inspire fear in them.<sup>61</sup> It is not the case that believers are fearless, for they too have feelings. "There is a big difference, after all, between an absence of feeling and the confidence of faith." Believers are not overwhelmed by fear but consistently manage to control it.<sup>62</sup> For an understanding of the fear of the believer Calvin points to David's words in Psalm 23. When David says he fears no evil (vs. 4), this does not mean that he knows no fear, but that he knows he will surmount that fear by entrusting himself to God. Knowing that God is with you does not mean you are not afraid.<sup>63</sup>

God's promise and God's Word are identical, so that Calvin can also say that the Word brings assurance precisely in times when we do not see the evidence of God's power and grace. In times of trial, only the Word keeps us on our feet.<sup>64</sup> In his exegesis of Psalm 56:11 Calvin refers as often as three times to the significance of the Word.<sup>65</sup>

Even more deeply, Calvin grounds the assurance of faith in God's being God. "Certainly it must be for us an established fact that God's benevolence can never be exhausted and that his generosity never makes him poor." God does not change his nature, and since his goodness belongs to that nature, he can never divest himself of his goodness.<sup>66</sup> God's being God is the source of the hope of believers.

### Experiencing the faith

Especially against the Roman Catholic concept of "implicit faith," Calvin asserts that faith must be consciously experienced. "It is not enough for us to be loved by God unless the sense of that love comes home to our hearts."<sup>67</sup> That experience is the work of the Holy Spirit, for God "floods our hearts with his Spirit and delights us with true and solid joy."<sup>68</sup> With his power and grace God is present on this earth and that presence is something we also experience.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>61</sup>Ps. 46:4; 461.

<sup>62</sup>Ps. 46:2; 461.

<sup>63</sup>"...neque enim Dei praesentiam requireret timoris vacuitas.", Ps. 23:4; 240.

<sup>64</sup>"Multum ergo profecit qui inter tentationes unico Dei verbo fretus viriliter pergit in eius laude.", Ps. 56:5; 549.

<sup>65</sup>"...verbo soldiam gloriam tribuere..." "..."in eius tamen verbo quiescam..." "..."ut inter tentationes firmam gloriam retineant, nudo verbo contenti..."", Ps. 56:11; 552.

<sup>66</sup>"...quia Deus naturam non mutat, nec bonitatem, qua praeditus est, potest exuere.", Ps. 138:8; 376.

<sup>67</sup>Ps. 4:7; 63.

<sup>68</sup>Ps. 4:7; 63.

<sup>69</sup>"...sed ad sensibilem eius gratiam referrī debet, quia experientia docebat, quamvis coelum et terram impleat eius maiestas, virtute et gratia suis esse praesentem.", Ps. 135:15; 363.

Calvin does not so much look for the “real presence” in the sacrament but in this world as a whole. Still he emphatically cautions against regarding the experience of faith as normative. When the experience of God’s benefits is not linked up with his Word, those experiences leave us cold. Conversely, it is also true that the fact that God is generous only inspires us when we also experience those benefits.<sup>70</sup> Our heart again comes alive through the Word, at least if we believingly accept it.<sup>71</sup> It is not enough to say Amen to the Word if this is not followed up by the consent of the heart.<sup>72</sup>

Calvin apparently speaks from experience when he indicates how the circumstances of the weather can impact the experience of our faith:

When dense fogs fill the sky, it is as if the clouds are coming down upon us. Not that only, but it is also exactly as if the majesty of God comes closer so as to make us afraid. Dread seizes us, whereas when the sky still looked so cheerful we were full of cheer as well. Meanwhile we must not forget that the image of a dark cloud is used to describe to us the wrath of God. For when the sky is clear it seems as if the face of God cheers us up, but when there is turmoil in the air it is as if God comes at us threateningly with knitted eyebrows and then, whether you want to or not, you start to look dejected and sad.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to this attention to the aspect of the *experience* of faith there is Calvin’s interest in the necessity of our *maturation* in faith. God does not dispense the gifts of the Spirit all at once, but he gives them more gradually, depending on what is best for each individual. In this manner he leads believers to “permanent perfection.”<sup>74</sup> Maturation in faith is an increase in the practical knowledge of life with God. This growth, moreover, means that the believer in fact becomes smaller, for the more a person trusts in God the less he will trust in himself.<sup>75</sup>

That growth consists in seeing that the goal is still far from having been reached. Certainly, “the more a person advances in the doctrine of piety the more he will note how far removed he still is from the goal.”<sup>76</sup> Whether we have also in fact matured is something we can test by examining whether we are able to so oppose the comfort that comes from God’s Word to the troubles which come at us that all dejectedness vanishes from our heart.<sup>77</sup> To Calvin this means

<sup>70</sup>“...ubi tamen ad verbi testimonium accedit experientia, non vulgariter nos animat.”, Ps. 80:9; 756.

<sup>71</sup>Ps. 107:20; 140.

<sup>72</sup>Ps. 78:34; 733.

<sup>73</sup>Ps. 18:8-10; 175.

<sup>74</sup>“...donec adducat ad solidem perfectionem.”, Ps. 65:5; 606.

<sup>75</sup>Ps. 84:6; 782.

<sup>76</sup>Ps. 86:11; 795.

<sup>77</sup>Ps. 119:142; 279.

growth—growth which occurs through an increase in the knowledge of faith when he says that throughout our life as students in the school of God,<sup>78</sup> we must unlearn futile thoughts in order thus to let our light shine all the more clearly, and in all sorts of ways gather more spiritual wisdom. Thus piety and knowledge go hand in hand. To be sure, the essence of piety consists primarily in reverence and awe before God but, inseparable from it as a second component, we must add “the knowledge of the doctrine of heaven.”<sup>79</sup>

### The joy of faith

To Calvin joy is an essential component of the faith. Also joy comes forth from the Word of God, for in that Word the promises of grace and providential care come to us.<sup>80</sup> In the case of Calvin we can also say: joy comes from what is heard (*gaudium ex auditu*). Faith and joy are inseparable.<sup>81</sup> Calvin’s reference is to the joy that consists in experiencing God’s fatherly love.<sup>82</sup> Genuine joy comes from the assurance of God’s protection.<sup>83</sup> The knowledge that we live under the caring hand of God not only gives us peace of mind but also joy and good cheer.<sup>84</sup> Believers are glad because nothing is more beautiful than the knowledge that God is near.<sup>85</sup> Synonymous with this is the remark that true joy arises from the assurance of God’s protection.<sup>86</sup> Believers in that case do not so much derive that joy from current circumstances as from the assurance that in the future God will take care of our well-being: “For, though we are not immune from sorrow, it is necessary that the joy of faith rises above it and makes us sing of the joy reserved for us in the future.”<sup>87</sup>

Associated with this eschatological joy is the soteriological, for “if you have God, you are lacking in nothing for a truly happy life.”<sup>88</sup> A person is happy only when reconciled to God.<sup>89</sup> Only the message of reconciliation brings joy, a joy

<sup>78</sup>“...in eius schola proficere...”, Ps. 16:7; 155.

<sup>79</sup>“...discimus quae sit vera pietatis natura, timorem Dei vel reverentiam priore loco ponit: sed mox adiungit coelstis doctrinae scientiam, ut sciamus res esse coniunctos.”, Ps. 119:78; 249.

<sup>80</sup>“Hoc autem gaudium dicit auditu percipi, quia donec verbo Dei exhilaretur peccator ut animum colligat frustra alia solatia sibi accerset.”, Ps. 51:9; 516.

<sup>81</sup>“...gaudium spiritus a fide est inseparabile...”, Ps. 51:9; 516.

<sup>82</sup>Ps. 5:13; 72. Idem Ps. 89:16; 816, “...qui laeti et hilares Deum agnoscant patrem.”

<sup>83</sup>Ps. 5:12, 72.

<sup>84</sup>Ps. 16:9; 155. Idem Ps. 16:9; 156, “Denique nemini placide gaudere contingit, nisi recumbere dedit in unum Deum, suamque salutem in eius manu reponere...”

<sup>85</sup>“...quia nihil illis optabilius quam sentire propinquum sibi esse Deum.”, Ps. 68:4; 620.

<sup>86</sup>Ps. 5:12; 72.

<sup>87</sup>Ps. 13:6; 134.

<sup>88</sup>Ps. 16:6; 154.

<sup>89</sup>Ps. 80:4; 755.

which no trial can take from us: "However, though as long as they are making their pilgrimage through this world, believers constantly have to deal with trouble and are subject to all kinds of fears, dangers and burdens, to ameliorate their sorrows it is already enough for them just to hear of that joy, for the joy of the Spirit is inseparable from faith."<sup>90</sup>

Nothing gives so much joy as a clear conscience, for then we know that our life is pleasing to God. Faith, therefore, is the source of joy, for in the way of faith there is reconciliation with God and that reconciliation yields a clear conscience.<sup>91</sup>

For the joy of faith this linkage between eschatology and soteriology implies that it is determined by what *has* happened (soteriology/reconciliation) and to what *will* happen (eschatology/salvation) and by these two realities the believer is enabled to persevere in the present with joy. Joy amidst adversity—that is the message for the persecuted believers in France and for those who sought and found asylum in Geneva.

Calvin contrasts this cheerfulness—a cheerfulness which flows from the knowledge that one has been reconciled to God—with the unbridled exuberance of those who despise God.<sup>92</sup> Simply the fact that Calvin uses the word "hilaritas" to describe this joy indicates that the difference does not consist in the measure of the joy experienced but in the source.

### The inner struggle of faith

Considering both the content of the Psalms and the experiences of Calvin's public, it is not surprising that in his interpretation Calvin pays a great deal of attention to the difficulties of believing. Calvin is definitely not the "unmoved mover" of a stalwart group of dogmatically oriented believers: "Believers are not made of iron, nor do they know a stoical hardness which renders them insensitive to pain and sorrow, but inwardly they have to struggle intensely against gloominess and fear."<sup>93</sup>

As far as that is concerned, there is no difference between him and Luther, but there is a difference when it concerns the *nature* of the trial. While in Luther the trial (*tentatio*) is more a matter between the righteous God and the sinful believer, in Calvin the emphasis lies on the relation between God and world events. Certainly Calvin also knows the difficulty involved in accepting grace. Thus he remarks that "our hearts tremble and waver, for nothing is harder for us than to see that God is gracious."<sup>94</sup> He also mentions the groan-

<sup>90</sup>Ps. 51:9; 516.

<sup>91</sup>Ps. 19:8; 200-201.

<sup>92</sup>Ps. 2:10; 50.

<sup>93</sup>Ps. 61:1; 581.

<sup>94</sup>Ps. 103: 8; 78-79.

ings of the believer to be freed from the terrors of his conscience.<sup>95</sup> But far outweighed by this concern is the inner struggle prompted by the fact that a believer can hardly square the events in her life and in the world with the omnipotence and providence of God. Calvin strikingly characterizes this struggle when he says that the believer consistently ends up in a situation in which “nothing is certain and nothing is firm” and in which questions like “What must I still believe? What can I still hope for? Where can I still find refuge?” assail him.<sup>96</sup> It is this situation which generates a state of mind which Calvin repeatedly describes as “gloom” (*tristitia*).<sup>97</sup> This gloom turns into desperation when a person does not unburden himself before God but keeps difficulties to himself and as a result becomes entangled in them.<sup>98</sup> Believers can be so dominated by this dejectedness that “the light of faith is extinguished in them.”<sup>99</sup> God does not always comfort them, and therefore even calling on his Name can precipitate disappointment.<sup>100</sup> When the subject is the struggle of faith Calvin repeatedly uses military terminology. This accords with Calvin’s view that life is a “continual warfare.”<sup>101</sup> In this connection he speaks for example of the inner struggle to hope for things from God other than what we see from him.<sup>102</sup> In this battle Calvin guarantees a victory: “Faith, remember, does not immediately gain the victory in the first encounter with the enemy, but only after having been exercised by many adversities does it at last emerges as victor.”<sup>103</sup>

The causes of this struggle are twofold: the opposition which comes to the believer from without and the weakness of one’s own faith. Calvin knows from experience<sup>104</sup> that on account of the weakness of our flesh it is almost certain that occasionally even the most vigorous believer will quail under the savage assaults of Satan. Even though Satan’s attacks are designed to correspond closely to the weaknesses of our faith, yet for the sake of clarity the two causes must be distinguished, and so we will first of all devote a separate discussion to the activities of Satan.

<sup>95</sup>“...e terroribus conscientiae...”, Ps. 51:3; 509.

<sup>96</sup>Ps. 116:11; 197.

<sup>97</sup>Ps. 116:7; 195.

<sup>98</sup>Ps. 62:9; 589.

<sup>99</sup>Ps. 88:6; 807.

<sup>100</sup>Ps. 77:4; 712.

<sup>101</sup>“...in toto vitae cursu, qui in continua militia peragendus nobis est.”, Ps. 94:12; 23.

<sup>102</sup>Ps. 10:12; 115-116.

<sup>103</sup>Ps. 22:2; 221.

<sup>104</sup>“...a proprio experimento nobis petenda est.”, Ps. 119:43; 233.

### The believer between God and Satan

In his commentary on the Psalms Calvin gives considerable attention to the destructive exertions of Satan which will vex us to the end of the world.<sup>105</sup> The moment people begin to put their trust in God they must prepare themselves for the attacks of Satan.<sup>106</sup> Daily he conducts these attacks on our faith, which is the reason why God must not only adopt us as his own but also protect us in this faith relation.<sup>107</sup> For that matter, this position between God and Satan need not surprise believers, for it is inherent in our existence in Christ. Calvin refers to the bond between Christ as the head and believers as his body. Since the Son of God was himself the target of Satan's attacks, he will certainly not spare the members of his body.<sup>108</sup>

Calvin refers to the seductive tendencies of "a theology from below." The danger is that we will draw conclusions about God's attitude and action based on events and experiences on earth. Satan takes advantage of such a theology and the feelings generated by it. We do not feel anything of God's benefits, and so, we think, he has probably forgotten us.<sup>109</sup> In this connection Calvin points out the danger of an overly close linkage between faith and feelings. This temptation arises from our sinful flesh; after all, "the flesh only knows of a God who is either well-disposed or ill-disposed toward us and determines this on the basis of the actual state of affairs."<sup>110</sup> We draw conclusions from our observation of the prevailing state of affairs and thus begin to entertain mistaken notions about God.<sup>111</sup> This "theology" is a threat to believers when from their situation of distress they conclude that God has forgotten them or has even turned away from them: "It is a serious temptation when someone measures God's favor by earthly happiness, for then indeed it is not very surprising that under these circumstances intense confusion results."<sup>112</sup>

Satan's tactics are similarly described by Calvin as the propagation of an alternate theology:

For this is the devil's method. Because he cannot all at once eradicate from our hearts all sense of religion, he tries to deflect us from our conviction by

<sup>105</sup>Ps. 76:11; 709.

<sup>106</sup>Ps. 32:24; 313.

<sup>107</sup>Ps. 16:5; 154.

<sup>108</sup>"Iam quum eodem telo appetitus fuerit filius Dei, nihilo magis fidelibus, qui eius membra sunt, parcat Satan.", Ps. 22:8; 225.

<sup>109</sup>Ps. 77:6; 713.

<sup>110</sup>Ps. 22:2; 220. Cf. "...quo docemur non metiri Dei auxilium externa specie, vel externo modo...", Ps. 27:5; 274.

<sup>111</sup>Ps. 44:24; 448.

<sup>112</sup>Ps. 17:13; 166.

suggesting to us that we must look for another God (*alienum Deum*) than the God we have served up until now, or that we must be reconciled to him in some other way, or that we must seek to obtain the assurance of faith from another source than the law and the gospel.<sup>113</sup>

The issue, therefore, is God's theology versus Satan's. By "the law and the gospel" Calvin means the knowledge of sin and grace. This is clear from his remark that Satan wants to keep people away from God by removing the sense of their misery.<sup>114</sup> Without a knowledge of sin, after all, no one will seek God. Consequently there is a war in the hearts of people when Satan attempts to occupy our hearts<sup>115</sup> with erroneous thoughts about God and ourselves. He aims at furnishing people an alternate "knowledge of God and man." It is Satan's craft to induce people to fashion false gods.<sup>116</sup> For the heart is a busy workshop where at all times all sorts of thoughts are being manufactured, and unless God prevents it is easy for Satan to steer those thoughts in accordance with *his* will.<sup>117</sup> According to Calvin, "Satan has any number of tricks up his sleeve by which he draws a curtain of darkness about us," so that we only still see this world's disorder and no longer perceive that God takes care of this earth.<sup>118</sup>

It is part of his tactics, moreover, to introduce chaos into our thought processes so that our attention is divided and we can no longer focus our minds on God alone.<sup>119</sup> Calvin here makes clear how much chaos and disorder must be viewed as the work of Satan. The reference here is to a conflict between "flesh" and faith, a conflict which is staged in the heart of the believer. In such situations "the knowledge of faith" (*fidei cognitio*) is opposed to "the logic of the flesh" (*carnis ratio*) where the flesh wants to make us believe that God keeps his eyes closed when it comes to us.<sup>120</sup> In the heart of the believer there are two voices, the voice of God and the voice of God's adversary. God's voice comes through in the promise and generates hope but that other voice points to circumstances in order in that way to make a person despair of God.<sup>121</sup> What the flesh calls absurd, namely to continue to trust in God under such situations, faith calls superlative wisdom.<sup>122</sup> Calvin sees a clear proof of this conflict in the

<sup>113</sup>Ps. 44:20; 445.

<sup>114</sup>"...miseriae nostrae sensum nobis adimat..." Ps. 32:2; 318.

<sup>115</sup>"...Satan fallaciis corda nostra occupans, ..." Ps. 32:2; 318.

<sup>116</sup>Ps. 73:25; 688.

<sup>117</sup>Ps. 141:3; 393.

<sup>118</sup>Ps. 73: intro; 673.

<sup>119</sup>"...conatur Satan hucque et illuc distrahere." Ps. 41:11; 423.

<sup>120</sup>Ps. 13:4; 133.

<sup>121</sup>Ps. 3:2; 53.

<sup>122</sup>"Et certe nihil carni videtur magis absurdum...hanc esse optimam prudentiam." Ps. 14:6; 141.

words of the poet of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We are seemingly looking at a contradiction here in which the poet expresses his unbelief by saying that God has abandoned him, while twice in a row he first confesses his faith by calling God "my God." According to Calvin, however, this is the daily experience of the believer; the contradiction indicates the characteristic polarity of life in the faith.<sup>123</sup> In Calvin, this, too, is "a theology of the cross," as is evident when he says that "it is very difficult to tell yourself that God is gracious at the very moment he is angry and that he is near at a moment when he is far away."<sup>124</sup> When circumstances are against us, the flesh concludes that God has rejected and abandoned the believer, whereas faith reacts above all by hanging onto God's invisible grace. This yields the assurance of God's presence. God is near to us even when he seems to be far away.<sup>125</sup>

Faith is continually in motion because the tension between hope and fear is always present. Believers always have to deal with two kinds of emotion. On the one hand, they are torn by feelings of dread and care, and, on the other, God animates them with a hidden joy which keeps them from being swallowed up by those other feelings.<sup>126</sup> Calvin says it may seem as if these feelings are mutually exclusive and do not fit in the same heart, "but experience teaches that hope can only truly govern us where also fear occupies a part of the heart."<sup>127</sup>

The fact of the matter is that hope does not function in a placid state of mind but is only activated when all sorts of adversity come at a person. The tendency to adopt this thought is even reinforced when our enemies use this "theology" and say that in view of the situation in which we find ourselves God evidently no longer takes care of us and instead of our ally has become an enemy.<sup>128</sup> Behind these enemies again is Satan. It is he who uses these situations to drive us to despair with the thought that God no longer supports us with his Spirit and no longer wants to provide for our well being.<sup>129</sup> If only believers would put their trust totally in God, Satan would no longer be able to hurt them. The problem, however, is that the many deaths which threaten them sow doubt, fear, and unrest in their heart, so that even for an experienced believer nothing is more difficult than to understand that God is gracious to us.<sup>130</sup>

<sup>123</sup>Ps. 22:2; 220

<sup>124</sup>Ps. 69:15; 645.

<sup>125</sup>"...ut certi statuamus, etiam quam longissime abesse videtur, eum nobis propinquum esse.", Ps. 16:8; 155.

<sup>126</sup>Ps. 94:18; 27.

<sup>127</sup>Ps. 56:4; 548.

<sup>128</sup>Ps. 3:2; 53.

<sup>129</sup>"Hac vero occasione Satan astute nos ad desperationem(!) sollicitat et impellit, ...", Ps. 55:5; 536.

<sup>130</sup>Ps. 91:5; 3.



According to Calvin, every believer has to deal with this inner conflict every day.<sup>131</sup> It is an inner battle by which a person discovers two things: the weakness of his flesh but also the presence of faith. It is this inner conflict which pitches the believer into that peculiar position between God and Satan. Satan will interpret adversity as a sign of God's wrath which proves that he has allowed the believer to crash. In that way Satan tries to drive the believer to despair and to wipe out his faith.<sup>132</sup> "Satan very craftily seeks to drive us to despair and lead us astray with the thought that God has withdrawn the aid of his Spirit and stopped taking care of our well-being."<sup>133</sup>

But on the other side is God who promises believers that he will again show them his fatherly face. Now faith remains constant by seeking a base of support and guidance in these promises.<sup>134</sup> Satan, too, focuses on God's promises but he does this to persuade believers that these promises are empty. Behind the scenes in which our enemies cry out "Now where is your God?" is the activity of Satan. "Satan has no deadlier dart with which to wound the human heart than when he tries to dislodge our hope by making God's promises look ridiculous."<sup>135</sup> He tries to demolish our faith with the caustic mockery that, in view of our circumstances, we are calling on God in vain.<sup>136</sup> As we stated above, Satan is an adherent of "theology from below," that is, he tries to make us draw inferences about God on the basis of what is happening to us here and now. That is a theology which has its roots in our "flesh," for the flesh "judges God on the basis of what it presently perceives of his grace."<sup>137</sup> Calvin, accordingly, speaks about "the antithesis between the depraved fancies which Satan suggests to us" and the confession that God is gracious to us and watches over our faith.<sup>138</sup> Under such circumstances it is above all faith which knows of another theology, not a theology which judges heaven from the perspective of the earth but one which judges earth from the perspective of heaven. Calvin therefore calls it "a signal proof of faith, when we are surrounded by darkness on earth, to fetch light from heaven in order by it to continue to travel the road of hope for salvation."<sup>139</sup> The reformer is convinced that "when faith reaches out to heaven it is easy to emerge and escape from despair."<sup>140</sup> Those who listen carefully to the

<sup>131</sup>"Idem quotidie quisque fidelium in se experitur...", Ps. 22:2; 220.

<sup>132</sup>Ps. 22:2; 220. Idem Ps. 41:13; 424.

<sup>133</sup>Ps. 55:5; 536.

<sup>134</sup>Ps. 22:2; 220.

<sup>135</sup>Ps. 22:8; 225.

<sup>136</sup>Ps. 22:8; 225.

<sup>137</sup>Ps. 14:6; 141.

<sup>138</sup>Ps. 73:1; 674.

<sup>139</sup>Ps. 11:4; 123. See for 'fidei probatio' also Ps. 31:14; 308.

<sup>140</sup>Ps. 119:87; 252.

voice of God are well armed against the stratagems of Satan.<sup>141</sup> Those, however, who do not imbibe "the doctrine of God" easily fall a prey to Satan.<sup>142</sup> In Calvin, too, the struggle against Satan has a clear cognitive dimension.

Faith, however, is never completely at peace and is continually tossed back and forth.<sup>143</sup> God's children are continually thrust up and down on waves of temptation.<sup>144</sup> Always, when we patiently try to trust in God in a situation in which he exercises us with a cross, Satan checks in to talk us into impatience in the hope that by it we will be induced to rebel against God. The highest level of composure we can reach is the situation of the sea just before a storm, that is, though the waves are not yet very high, the water is definitely in motion. And at that point one often observes Satan starting to stir up new unrest.<sup>145</sup> For Satan steps up his hostilities to the degree we increase our efforts to obey God.<sup>146</sup> This is at the same time a reason for us not to panic when we feel all sorts of temptations and longings arise in our heart. In this connection Calvin offers us a fairly extensive meteorological illustration. A thunderstorm is in the making when the heat of the sun again arises from the earth and then collides with clouds. Something similar happens when believers direct their attention to heaven. The clouds of the flesh try to block this upward movement and vehement conflict results.<sup>147</sup> According to Calvin, this is a good thing for if our thoughts could direct themselves to heaven without constraint a great many vain thoughts could arise as well. Believers often stumble, says Calvin, and Satan then wraps them in such deep darkness that the Word of God means almost nothing to them any more.<sup>148</sup> This explains why in his interpretation of Psalm 119 Calvin mentions Satan by name about as frequently as in all the other psalms together. Satan tries to keep us from taking the road of God's law and will always attempt to get us off that road.<sup>149</sup>

Satan has another tactic for those who prosper. In their case his policy is to build up the power of their faith into self-confidence in order thus to paralyze

<sup>141</sup>"Si enim attenderent ad vocem Dei, probe contra omnes Satanae insidias muniti essent.", Ps. 119:3; 216.

<sup>142</sup>Ps. 119:11; 219.

<sup>143</sup>"Scimus non ita compositas esse piorum mentes, quin saepe alternis fluctuationibus iactari contingat.", Ps. 62:1; 585. Idem Ps. 62:6; 587, "...nunquam ita bene pacatas esse mentes nostras quin sentiant caecos motus."

<sup>144</sup>Ps. 116:7; 194.

<sup>145</sup>Ps. 62:6; 587.

<sup>146</sup>Ps. 119:173; 293.

<sup>147</sup>"...nubes autem oppositae dum liberum cursum impediunt ipso conflictu tonitrua generant. Idem et piis contingit...", Ps. 39:4; 398.

<sup>148</sup>Ps. 116:11; 197.

<sup>149</sup>E.g. in explaining the verses 3, 5, 9, 29, 60, 61, 69, 104.

their faith.<sup>150</sup> This is also what happens to those who do well in the world and consequently forget God's judgments. In that case, says Calvin, a kind of spiritual inertia takes over and chills our prayer life. While our dependence on God's grace decreases, our reliance on perishable prosperity increases.<sup>151</sup> Calvin, accordingly, regards this as a process in which Satan gradually weans a person away from God.

It is remarkable in this connection how little—in distinction from Luther—this inner temptation and conflict is related to the question of our adoption as children of God. This does not mean, however, that this question is not present here, but it does mean that it is much less prominent, because the questions which engage Calvin and his readers are framed differently. In Calvin it is not first of all the struggle with one's own sins which causes the inner conflict; it is rather the adversities and troubles of life which makes believers wonder whether they have received forgiveness from God. Doubt whether God is reconciled to us arises when the signs of that reconciliation—mainly the sign of deliverance from distress—disappear.<sup>152</sup> Satan, that is, tries to get us to the point where we begin to imagine that, in view of our circumstances, God is evidently not gracious toward us and no longer cares for our well-being.<sup>153</sup> To offset that notion Calvin refers to the words of Psalm 32:1, where he comments that “the Holy Spirit with many words confirms and ratifies the forgiveness of sins that amid all the adversities which strike believers they would not be overwhelmed by despair.”<sup>154</sup> Another difference between Calvin and Luther is that whereas in Luther Satan confronts us with our sins, in Calvin Satan makes us blind to our sins. Satan manages so hopelessly to entangle people in all sorts of snares that there is hardly a person left who still has any consciousness of sin. Even believers can be so craftily manipulated by Satan that they do not even regard gross sins as sin.<sup>155</sup> In that way he keeps people away from God, for those who have no sense of sin will not fear God's judgment and ask about God's forgiveness.

By way of summary we can refer to what Calvin says in his commentary on Psalm 4:2. To believe is to come down into the arena where we must fight against our foes. At the same time we know that “God is on our side” and our foes, therefore, will never win.

Text by Herman Selderhuis  
Translated by John Vriend

<sup>150</sup>“Haec enim Satanae astutia est, ex virtute fabricare carnis confidentiam quae torporem inducat.”, Ps. 17:5; 161.

<sup>151</sup>“...ne inter laetos successus blanditiis suis nos fascinet Satan.”, Ps. 30:7; 296.

<sup>152</sup>Ps. 109:26; 157.

<sup>153</sup>“Ita subest antithesis inter pravas imaginationes quas suggesserat Satan...”, Ps. 73:1; 674.

<sup>154</sup>Ps. 32:1; 316.

<sup>155</sup>Ps. 19:12; 204.

<sup>156</sup>Ps. 4:3; 59.