
Calvin's Theology of the Psalms

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God: The Hidden One

Implied in the deity of God, insofar as that has been revealed to us, is that both his essence and his actions are, in part, hidden from us. That hiddenness can plunge the faith of a believer into the greatest difficulty: doubts about God's care and even intense dread of God, experienced as fierce assaults at the core of one's faith life, can weigh it down.

In Calvin research scant attention has been paid to Calvin's treatment of the hiddenness of God.¹ A possible reason for this is that a God who is hidden and keeps himself hidden does not fit the picture we have of Calvin's image of God. The plausibility of this thesis is supported, for example, in the English translation of Calvin's commentary on the Psalms published in 1846 by the Calvin Translation Society. The translator, the Rev. James Anderson, repeatedly reproduces Calvin in this connection as though Calvin had spoken of the *appearance* of God's hiddenness, whereas Calvin himself never uses the verb "to seem" but, on the contrary, refers to

¹ A conspicuous exception here is the study of Brian Gerrish entitled "To the Unknown God, Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," in: *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 131-149.

the reality of that hiddenness.² However, the supposed distinction between Calvin and Luther—who is said to have spoken much more about God’s hiddenness—proves not to be real, even though the numerous studies devoted to Luther’s ideas on this theme and the extremely few such studies devoted to those of Calvin would make us suspect otherwise.³ In the *Commentary on the Psalms*, Calvin makes clear that he was a pupil of Luther on this subject, although with slight differences in emphasis and with much greater economy of expression.

Upon examining this subject in greater detail, we note that Calvin speaks of the hiddenness of God in three ways. In the first place, it may be that God is in part hidden from us because as humans we simply cannot see everything there is about God. Here God’s hiddenness has to do with our humanness. In the second place, it may also be the case that we hide God [from ourselves], because—for example—by our sins we put up a kind of smoke screen between God and ourselves. Here the hiddenness of God is due to our sinfulness. The last and most important reason for God’s hiddenness may be that it results from God’s own act of deliberately concealing himself from us. Here we are dealing with a hiddenness which springs from the *deity* of God. It is this hiddenness which occasions the greatest difficulty and accordingly also receives the most attention in Calvin. In connection with each of these three “kinds” of hiddenness Calvin discusses the causes and points out a way of dealing with the hiddenness of God. Each kind has its own cause and requires a distinct approach.

Since the two “kinds” of hiddenness which pertain to our being human and sinful are closely associated, and while they are distinguished they are barely separated from each other in Calvin, they are here treated together. First, then, we will take a look at God’s passive hiddenness (God concealed by us); next we will consider his active hiddenness (God concealing himself from us).

God is hidden from us

In the section on Calvin’s anthropology it has already become clear that as creature a human being is limited in knowledge and insight. This limitation is especially evident

²For example: “...though God may seem to have overlooked and deserted us” (Vol. V, 178), as the translation of “... qui utcunque open suam ad tempus occultet...” (Ps. 135:13; 361). Similarly: “...although God may seem to dissemble for a time...,” (Vol. V, 124), as the translation of “Quamuis ad tempus dissimulet Deus...” (Ps. 129:3; 331).

³“Surprisingly, however, there is no such body of literature on what Calvin thought about God’s hiddenness,” Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New...*, 141.

when it concerns the appraisal of God's action. Much of God's activity and essence remains hidden from people, simply because it is not visible to us.⁴ Psalm 9:18, for example, speaks of the hidden working of God's hand, which can imperceptibly combat the adversaries of God's people. God's hiddenness here is not due to sin, nor to deliberate concealment by God, but simply to the fact that we humans cannot see God's actions.⁵ Calvin succeeds in powerfully describing this reality when in Psalm 39:11 he reads that God is comparable to a moth. Calvin notes that at first blush this comparison seems rather absurd, for what connection could there be between such a tiny clothes moth and the infinite majesty of God? Still, says Calvin, David very properly made use of this simile since, just as the moth, though unperceived, by its secret gnawing ruins articles of clothing, so God's curse invisibly has its effect upon the ungodly.⁶ God's hiddenness here clearly relates to our humanity. God's work is obvious but we, being human, cannot see it clearly.

This faulty insight, however, can lead to mistaken and unfounded sentiments and ideas. Thus it sometimes seems to us that God is deaf, an impression which arises because we humans judge situations by our own standards. God accommodates himself to humans, but humans in their contacts with God do not accommodate themselves to him. Our conclusions are based on "fleshly" considerations, with the result that we lose the proper view of God. The logic of the flesh, after all, is this: since God does not directly answer our prayer, he is deaf to our praying.⁷ Another typically human form of reasoning is this: I am experiencing adversity, therefore God must be far away (on Ps. 6:4). Or this: Since God has not come to help me, it must be that he has forgotten me (on Ps. 13:2). In time of adversity I see no sign of God's help, therefore he probably makes no distinction between the righteous and unbelievers.⁸ The mistake we humans make is that we measure God's help by our criteria; as a result, we soon lose courage and even begin to despair when we call out to God and God does not immediately answer with an act of intervention. From this we draw the conclusion that he does not listen to us.⁹ We judge things from an earthly perspective and so arrive at wrong conclusions.

⁴ "Si de essentia eius agitur, habitat certe lucem inaccessam," 104:1, 85.

⁵ 106.

⁶ "...occulta eius maledictione..." 403.

⁷ "...ex sensu carnis dicit propheta eum esse surdum ad preces," on 80:5, 755.

⁸ On Ps. 125:4, "Et certe quia in afflictionum tenebris non perspicitur Dei auxilium, quin potius videtur coram Deo nullum esse iustorum et impiorum discrimen," 315.

⁹ Ps. 9:13, 103.

The extent to which these experiences, and the faulty conclusions we draw from them, impact our fellowship with God is clearly evident, according to Calvin. As evidence, he cites the prayer in which David asks God to let his face shine upon him. A person can utter such a prayer only if experiences determine his or her image of God. The commentary reads as follows:

We have already said elsewhere—and we will see in other places hereafter—that this way of speaking stems from a common sentiment of people who think that God does not bother about them, unless he clearly shows that he cares for them. Adversities, after all, hide God's face, just as clouds obscure the brightness of the sun. David, accordingly, asks that God, by immediately helping him, will make it evident to him that he is reconciled to God and enjoys God's favor, a reality which is not so easy to discern amidst the darkness of adversity. Now God is said to lift the light of his face upon us in two ways: either he opens his eyes to take care of us or he shows us his favor. Yet these two things are closely connected; indeed, the one even depends on the other. In the first manner of speaking, however, we attribute to God a change which, properly speaking, does not fit him. The second indicates that our own eyes, not his, are closed and dull as long as he does not seem to have any concern about our misery.¹⁰

Another reason for the origin of the impression that God keeps himself hidden is our forgetfulness. This is how the people of Israel during their sojourn in the wilderness began so seriously to doubt God's presence among them. It was as if up until then he had for years already kept himself hidden from them. They believed God's hidden because they had forgotten his revelation in the liberation from Egypt—a conclusion Calvin calls an "indictment of God."¹¹

We can also let the impression of God's absence expand in us by so inflating our cares and troubles that God completely disappears behind them. To illustrate his meaning, Calvin uses the example of the fly which becomes an elephant. From the moment even one attack urges itself upon us, we immediately turn a fly into an elephant. Indeed, we all at once conjure up such high mountains that we begin to think that God's hand can no longer reach us.¹²

Still, there is a clear connection between the fact that God is concealed from us and that he actively conceals himself from us. Thus on Psalm 43:2 Calvin comments that our adversities function like clouds which hide the face of God from us. However,

¹⁰ Ps. 31:16, 308.

¹¹ "...ubi dubitant de eius praesentia ac si ante fuisset absconditas, perversa oblivio crimen auget," 95: 9, 34.

¹² CO 31:661.

a few lines further down, Calvin immediately adds that all our adversity arises because God withdraws from us the signs of his paternal love, and that is the same as God hiding his face from us.¹³ The consequence of adversity is that God is hidden from us, but the cause of adversity is that God conceals himself from us. With that we have come to the active hiddenness of God.

God conceals himself

This other kind of divine hiddenness springs, not from our being human and sinful, but from the essence of God. God sometimes hides himself. It is well known that Luther spoke a great deal about this hiddenness of God; what is less well known is that he did this much more in his earlier writings than in his later ones. Calvin also uses the theme of hiddenness, even though it has received little attention. While hiddenness never comes up in a conspicuous and extensive way, it is still there.

REAL HIDDENNESS

Calvin frequently refers to the reality of God's hiddenness. God can hide his face in such a way that he begins to look like our enemy.¹⁴ Recurrent is the image of the clouds which hide God's face. In the Bible, accordingly, there is mention of "the light of his countenance," "because in a sense he surrounds his face with clouds when he sends us affliction."¹⁵ In this case, adversity is clearly both expression and cause of God's concealment. God also covers his face with clouds when he deprives us of the enjoyment of his Word. According to Calvin, it even frequently happens that God conceals himself from us by seeing to it that his Word no longer "tastes" good to us.¹⁶ Sometimes God delays the fulfillment of his promises and then it seems his own wander about for a time.¹⁷ This mention of "wandering about" is evocative of sheep, which is precisely how Calvin views believers. Believers are sheep who are, for a time, without a Shepherd. They are also sheep who, considering the hostility which comes

¹³ Ps. 43:2; 434.

¹⁴ "...quamvis ad tempus faciem suam occultet Deus, imo speciem alienationis praebeat..." Ps. 80:15; 757.

¹⁵ Ps. 44:4; 438.

¹⁶ "Saepe autem contingit ipsis quoque obnubilari in hac parte Dei faciem, dum genuino verbi sui gustu eos privat..." Ps. 119:135, 276.

¹⁷ Ps. 13:3; 133.

upon them, are destined for slaughter.¹⁸ Nevertheless, as real as God's hiddenness is when they wander about, so real, but no less hidden, is God's protection in the face of hostility.

In these situations it seems as if God makes no distinction between believers and unbelievers, treating everyone alike. Calvin opposes this idea and asserts that God has hidden his justice. Since he does not immediately offer help, a cloud materializes between God and ourselves, between God's care and the experience of that care,

...and, the light of God's justice is obscured by clouds so that the administration of justice is in a sense separated from justice.¹⁹

A day will come, however, when God will undo that hiddenness, which means that God's justice and righteousness will again be clearly visible and that thus everything will be restored to proper order.²⁰ Consequently, it is of importance for us to consider the end, for in the end it will become evident that, though God puts both the good and the evil at risk, the outcome for these two groups of people will be different.²¹ Here Calvin uses terms like "promiscue" and "confuse" to indicate how this action of God appears to us and at the same time to make clear that God himself will show that the reality is actually different. In Calvin, God's hiddenness and *confusion* are connected as much as God's presence and *order*.

This is also the reason why Calvin has so much difficulty with the reality of God's hiddenness. That difficulty is not surprising in a person who is so fond of "order" and dreads chaos. For Calvin, as indicated above, the contrasting notions of order and confusion are directly linked with the difference between God's presence and his hiddenness. When God hides himself, this world is immediately plunged into confusion—producing darkness, but he restores order the moment he again shows his face.²² Calvin conceals his difficulty with the hiddenness of God by pointing out that the hidden God is not the real God. In his comments on Psalm 90:16, Calvin notes that God assumes an alien role, pretending to be someone other than he really is,

¹⁸ "...fideles...oves sint mactationi destinatae, prope tamen esse eorum salutem, quae occulta Dei custodia protegitur..." Ps. 119:155; 284.

¹⁹ Ps. 94:15; 26.

²⁰ "Rebus autem in verum ordinem restituis..." op. cit.

²¹ "Nam quum promiscue in discrimen coniciat bonos et malos, diverso exitu tandem probat se non confuse miscere paleam tritico, quia suos separatim colligit," Ps. 17:7; 162.

²² "Nam hic primum tacita comparatio est inter statum bene ordinatum, ubi Deus suo iudicio restituet quae nunc confusa sunt, et turbulentam caliginem, quae tacente Deo faciemque suam occultante mundum occupat," 167.

when he withdraws himself from the church, for his real work is above all the protection of the church.²³ To give expression to this unreality of God, Calvin makes frequent use of the term “for a time” (*ad tempus*).²⁴ God only temporarily conceals himself, for his office is really to be present to his people in a helpful and protective way.

God can also conceal himself in ordinary things, i.e. in the means. Calvin points this out in his comments on Psalm 98:1, where the poet speaks of “the right hand” of God which has gotten victory for the people. According to Calvin, the poet here contrasts the hand of God with his ordinary means of helping. Those ordinary means in no way detract from God’s power, yet at the same time conceal that power somewhat. In this connection Calvin speaks of cloths in which God’s power is wrapped and is therefore hidden. Sometimes God personally appears on the scene and is therefore personally and hence emphatically recognizable, but as a rule he conceals his power in the means he uses.²⁵

CONCEALMENT AS AN EXPRESSION OF WRATH

Calvin points out that God can also hide himself from his people as an expression of his wrath. That wrath can touch not only his people but the entire world. When God perceives that piety in this world is declining, he withdraws his hand or no longer lets it be shown so clearly.²⁶ Precisely here it is evident that it is God’s essence and office to be gracious because, for Calvin, God’s face is identical with God’s grace.

This association is clear, for example, from his commentary on Psalm 74:9. Calvin assumes that this psalm originated in the period of the Babylonian exile. The poet recognizes that exile was a just punishment for the sins of the people. Yet, at the same time, he laments that this punishment is lasting so long. The people are living in great darkness, for God has hidden his face and deprives them of all signs of his grace. The manner in which Calvin links the hiddenness of God’s face with

²³ “Quia Deus ecclesiam suam deserens, quodammodo *alienam personam* induit, scite Moses *proprium eius opus* nominat protectionis gratiam ...” 840.

²⁴ Examples: “... *ad tempus* discurrem ...,” Ps. 13:3; 133; “... *ad tempus* faciem subducat ...,” Ps. 18:15; 167; “... *ad tempus* subtrahat ...,” Ps. 25:6; 252; “... *ad tempus* occultet ...,” Ps. 80:15; 757; “... *ad tempus* dissimulat ...,” Ps. 110:5; 165; “... *ad tempus* dissimulet ...,” Ps. 129:3; 331; “... *ad tempus* occultet ...,” Ps. 135:13; 361.

²⁵ 48.

²⁶ Ps. 99:8; 53.

punishment and wrath shows that God's face is synonymous with his grace.²⁷ In terms of his essence God is gracious; therefore, if he wants to show his wrath, he has to do that by temporarily concealing himself. At the same time, however, God's punishment is an expression of his love and care, for the fact of his punishment implies that his people are precious to him and that he is still involved with them. It is much more shocking when God becomes totally silent

When God hides himself from us and is silent to the extent that he no longer even administers the medicine of punishment, then that is the worst kind of punishment which can strike us, a sign of a dreadfully hopeless situation. It is the case, after all, that so long as he admonishes us and summons us to appear before his judgment seat and he terrifies us with his judgment, he is by that token simultaneously inviting us to do penance. But when he sees that all this effort is futile and his admonitions in no way help, then by his silence he declares that he has given up concern for our salvation.²⁸

That concealment of God, according to Calvin, actually results in God's abandoning us and surrendering us to the guidance of Satan.

ARE WE HIDDEN FROM GOD?

The fact that God conceals himself from us, in any case, does not mean that we are for that reason concealed from him. That we cannot see him does not mean, as the reverse implication, that he does not see us, even though this is how we may sometimes experience it. Yet, in Psalm 10:1, David complains that God is far away, and that God seems to have no eye for the distress of his people. Is it the case that is God so far from us that he cannot see our distress?

Calvin resolves this difficulty by explaining David's complaint in light of the anthropomorphic language of the Bible.²⁹ At stake, therefore, is a figurative way of speaking when it is said that God is far away and can therefore have no eye for our troubles, for he is always present and nothing is hidden from him. However, God permits us to speak to him in the same language in which we speak to each other, with the caveat that we must remember that this manner of speaking cannot help us draw any conclusions about God's essence. We speak in terms of what we experience in a given situation and in that situation it may seem that God is far away from us.

²⁷ "Atqui potius queruntur fideles ablata sibi esse signa gratiae, quod Deus faciem suam quodammodo absconderit," Ps. 74:9; 695.

²⁸ Ps. 81:14; 764-765.

²⁹ "Improperie tamen et per anthropopathiam Deum in loco remoto stare dicit ...," Ps. 10:1, 108.

Calvin, therefore, does not deny the hiddenness of God, nor does he declare that hiddenness to be mere appearance, but he does reject the inference that we are then hidden from God as well. The idea that anything can be hidden from God is contrary to his nature. Anyway, as Calvin astutely comments, David himself must also have been aware that his words were not consistent with the facts,

for, though he complains that God is far away, he is nevertheless very sure that God is near, inasmuch as otherwise he would certainly not have called upon him.³⁰

We also find this dualism between what is experienced and what is believed in Psalm 59:4, where David summons God to come and see. Calvin observes here “that the sense of the flesh is mixed with the teaching of faith.”³¹ When as believers we suffer all sorts of injustice, we experience it as though God keeps his eyes shut. At the same time, since David in these words acknowledges that God can see, it is clear that faith is aware that nothing is hidden from God.³²

Calvin consistently warns against judging the heavenly situation from the perspective of our earthly experiences. He wants nothing to do with a theology from below, with an image of God based on our own experience or on history. We also learn how dangerous it is to take our own experience as criterion, when, after the Lord has given him the victory, David exclaims that God *lives*. To Calvin it seems better not to link any conclusions about God’s existence to this fact, but rather to view this statement as an expression of the way David experienced God. In fact, we often say that God lives when he clearly manifests his power to us, but “the moment he conceals his power from us, not only the feeling but also the knowledge that he lives vanishes from our minds.”³³

A theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*)

As in Calvin’s description of the Christian life, so in his speaking of the hiddenness of God, it becomes clear that his theology is a *theologia crucis*. Characteristic for a theology of the cross is that reality manifests itself in its opposite, as Christ’s victory, for example, conceals itself in his death. God hides the purpose of his action by doing the opposite of what he intends. Thus God can take away all his gifts in order thereby

³⁰ Op. cit.

³¹ “Porro quum dicit vide, sensum carnis permiscet doctrinae fidei ...,” 566.

³² “... fide agnoscit nihil eius providentiae esse absconditum,” op. cit.

³³ “... evanescit etiam ex animis sensus ac notitia vitae eius,” Ps. 18:47, 192.

to restore to us our confidence in him. God gives by the act of taking away. Calvin calls this

...a marvelous and incredible way of doing things, surely, that God, by hiding his face and as it were covering us with darkness, should illumine the eyes of his servant—eyes which saw nothing at all in the full light of day.³⁴

Since we are frequently blind to God when his face shines upon us in friendly fashion, we must not be surprised that God sometimes hides his face from us when he wants us to see him again.

The distinction between *coram Deo* (“in the sight of God”) and *coram mundo* (“in the eyes of the world”) is one that fits the theology of the cross. So, when God conceals his help and delays his saving intervention, causing the world to view believers as poor and miserable,³⁵ from God’s viewpoint they are enormously happy, because in his fatherly grace they have received the greatest possible blessing. Similarly, as Calvin concludes from Psalm 9:10, it is possible to have a clearer view of God’s judgments through tear-filled eyes. When God is “silent”³⁶ in times of affliction, this occasions severe temptation among his people. God, however, delays his assistance in order

to exercise his people with tears and sighs. In this way he kindles a light to enable them to see his judgments the more clearly.³⁷

The purpose of God’s hidden activity may be to make clear to his children that God helps them without others even noticing it. It is frequently the case, says Calvin, that God conceals himself in the course of his saving actions and pretends to be weak while in fact he is working with a strong hand.³⁸ Such a seeming contradiction also occurs in Psalm 96. Calvin considers it most remarkable that the poet, at length and unrestrained by any scruples, summons the whole world to sing the praise of the Lord in a situation where Israel has to fight hard against the numerous idols which existed in the world at that time. Asia, Europe, and Africa adore Jupiter, but the poet cries out that Israel’s God is to be feared above all gods, and that while this God has hidden himself in Judea, an obscure corner of the world!³⁹

³⁴ 30:8, 297.

³⁵ “... censeri coram mundo pauperus et miseros,” 100.

³⁶ “... silente Deo ...,” 100.

³⁷ *idem*.

³⁸ “Saepe enim occulte et sub specie infirmitatis Deus fideles suos liberat, ut sentiant quidem ipsi se manu eius fuisse ereptus, hoc autem aliis non sit perinde cognitum ...,” Ps. 118:15, 206.

³⁹ “Verus enim Deus in Iudaea, quasi in obscuro recessu, latebat,” Ps. 96:4; 38.

Pedagogical hiddenness

As a rule, when Calvin speaks of God's hiddenness, as we saw above, he immediately adds an explanation: God does not act randomly but has a purpose in everything he does. By adding an explanation, Calvin knows he is relating God and man to each other. Thus God can hide himself in order to teach us something. He may, out of anger, conceal himself in order to bring us to repentance. In the explanations Calvin offers for the hiddenness of God, he consistently lets the goodness of God come through. For example, God sometimes hides his grace and therefore himself from us, for if he always immediately intervened to help, we would not know adversity and consequently cling too much to this life.⁴⁰

In his commentary on Psalm 9 Calvin suggests another possible reason for God's silence. It may sometimes seem as if God is not the least bit interested in our oppression, when in fact he wants to stir us to prayer. He only wants to let his "hand" take action when we ask him for this. It may seem, then, that he only remembers us when we pray to him.⁴¹ Still another reason is that God sometimes wants to test us to see if we will also remain obedient to him when he seems to allow his people to be persecuted and his name to be despised. To test that obedience he conceals his judicial intervention to a level that is far above our grasp.⁴² Calvin also brings up the idea of testing in his comments on Psalm 116:7, where the poet summons himself to return to confidence in God. In this connection Calvin notes that there would be little room left for faith and for the power of God's promises if believers had peace only as long as God actually manifested himself as their Deliverer. True evidence of faith emerges, however, when a person quietly continues to expect proof of God's favor in a situation in which God still conceals that favor.⁴³ Another purpose of God's self-concealment may be to humble his people. Hence he may conceal his help for a time until he sees that we have sufficiently humbled ourselves before him. At that time he will clearly manifest his help.⁴⁴

Nowhere do we find Calvin ending with the inscrutability of God, for he is never at a loss to find an explanation for his concealment. Calvin's explanations bear a

⁴⁰ Ps. 9:13; 103.

⁴¹ 106.

⁴² "... quia deus, ut obsequium nostrum probet, arcana sua iudicia longe supra captum attolit," Ps. 92:6; 12.

⁴³ 194.

⁴⁴ "... cruce et miseriis suos humiliat Deus, ... ad tempus faciem ab illis suam subducat ...," Ps. 18:15; 167.

strongly apologetic character. He clearly attempts to defend God's deity, his being God.

Calvin's pastorate

The question which occupies Calvin as pastor is how people should deal with God's hiddenness. In his exposition of Psalm 73:10-11 Calvin gives a lot of attention to the inner turmoil people suffer when God for a time refrains from revealing himself. Believers then have to deal with the temptation inherent in the question whether God really exists. Though in their questions and complaints they may not go as far as unbelievers, they do have to stomach a lot!

David here informs us that even believers begin to waver: not that they break out into such blasphemy, but it is true that they cannot immediately restrain themselves when it seems God has stopped performing his task.⁴⁵

In part Calvin already shows a way out of such situations by stressing that God aims at a positive effect when he hides himself, a way described above as the pedagogical character of the hiddenness of God. Calvin shows his readers another way by reminding them of God's providence. It is God's office to care for and protect [his people]; and his deity implies that he will never relinquish this office. God is never "otiose" and for that reason will never cease to exercise his providence even when he hides himself. The consequence of this, writes Calvin, is that

...we can be assured that, though he does not immediately rush to assist those who are unjustly oppressed, he never relinquishes his care for them. And this is especially certain: when he hides himself, he does not neglect his obligations but tests his people's patience, so that we can confidently await a favorable outcome.⁴⁶

The extent to which God's "deity" helps us through a period of his hiddenness is especially evident from Psalm 25:6, in David's prayer that God will remember him. In his comments on this psalm Calvin remarks that God is by nature merciful and that, therefore, though he may temporarily withdraw his hand and conceal himself from us, he cannot ever deny himself. He simply cannot divest himself of his merciful tendencies. The hard truth is, says Calvin, that God can no more detach himself from his feelings of mercy than from the eternity of his being.⁴⁷ Only if we know this God

⁴⁵ 680.

⁴⁶ 100; idem bij 12:8, "Quod si occulta erit Dei custodia, patienter expectent fideles donec exurgat Deus," 131.

⁴⁷ 253.

and his providence are we able “to bear our cross patiently when God for a while conceals himself at a time when our enemies go on a savage rampage. For God knows when the time is ripe and the proper moment for vengeance has come.”⁴⁸

In the temptations which arise when God hides himself, prayer is the means by which a person can remain standing and at the same time call on God to show his face again. Here, again, David can be our example:

We may further learn here that, although for a time God may withdraw from us every sign of his goodness and close his eyes to all the evil that afflicts us (as if he were abandoning us like so many strangers), *we* nevertheless must vigorously fight until, set free from the temptation, we are able to pray and dare pour out our heart before him. Then it will be with us as if God had returned to his earlier custom and he had again begun to deal more mercifully with us. There is only room for this kind of prayer, however, when God first hides his face from us and it seems he takes no interest in us at all.⁴⁹

We can only offer resistance to the temptation that arises from God’s hiddenness when our prayer is based on the certain hope of grace, for then God will also respond to it gracefully.⁵⁰ Here as well we note how humans themselves must do their level best to remain standing in the struggle of faith. The all-embracing activity of God does not imply a restriction of the activity of humans.

Faith

In a preceding section we saw that the hiddenness of God is linked to the distance between heaven and earth. There is mention even of a chasm between heaven and earth, between darkness and light, between experience and fact, between what we see and what really is. In the face of my faith’s experience of the distance between God and myself, the only way to bridge that chasm is to scale the heights of heaven and, from that vantage point, to see how things really are. In this connection Calvin speaks of our “penetrating into heaven.”⁵¹

Faith which permits itself to be determined, not by experience, but by the knowledge of God, knows how to bridge the chasm, to break through the clouds and to see the hidden righteousness of God.⁵² With the eyes of faith we can break through to

⁴⁸ 110:5, 165.

⁴⁹ Ps. 25:6; 252-253.

⁵⁰ Ps. 80:15; 757.

⁵¹ “... penetrare in coelum ...,” 755.

⁵² “Fide quidem in rebus confusis iustitiam Dei licet absconditum, apprehendere nos decet ...,” Ps. 94:15; 26.

God's grace, even though it is hidden,⁵³ for faith enables us to transcend the thinking of the flesh.⁵⁴ Faith functions like wings with which a person can fly past the clouds which conceal God from us, into a region of rest. At this height, God's face again becomes visible and we can see how things are really put together.⁵⁵ Granted, it is hard to trust God when he keeps himself hidden, but *it is possible*, indeed it is the only way to get through this temptation.

At times when God keeps himself hidden and delays his help nothing is harder than to still pay him the tribute of trusting him. It is for that reason that David stirs himself up to gather strength, as if to say: when fear creeps up on you, when temptation challenges your faith, when the feelings of the flesh hurl you back and forth, be on your guard that you do not give in, but work yourself through it with tireless strength of mind.⁵⁶

Because people continually allow themselves to be influenced by experiences, by those "feelings of the flesh," this faith is always subject to tension. On the one hand, faith manages to scale the heights where it is certain of God's presence; on the other, temptations exist which arise from our experiences, on the basis of which "fleshly" (carnal) judgment determines whether God exists or not.⁵⁷ Faith lives by the paradox of experience and reality, where we experience God as far away and nevertheless speak to him. Life based on this paradox can be maintained, provided faith focuses on God's promises, for in that case faith can see the invisible. Thus, at least, Calvin comments on Psalm 102:16:

Though amidst adversities God's power is hidden from believers, they nevertheless see it by the eye of faith and in the mirror of God's promises.⁵⁸

Faith, accordingly, is not abandoned to itself but can hold onto God's promises. "This is the way we must seek him, for although he hides his power from us, we must find rest in his promises and *they* are not hidden."⁵⁹ As far as this is concerned, New Testament believers have a firmer handhold on reality than those under the old covenant. In the Old Testament prophets were the persons who—when God had

⁵³ "Simul tamen, praecunte fidei luce usque ad Dei gratiam (quamvis esset abscondita) mentis oculis penetravit," 132.

⁵⁴ "...fide se altius attoli, ut praeter carnis iudicium," 1.c.

⁵⁵ "... alis fiducia se attolit in serenam tranquillitatem, iin qua res legitimo suo ordine compositas videat," Ps. 18:15; 167.

⁵⁶ Ps. 27:14; 31/280.

⁵⁷ "... ab effectis metiri solemus Dei praesentiam vel absentiam," 69:19, 645.

⁵⁸ 69.

⁵⁹ Ps. 119:123, 269.

withdrawn himself on account of the sins of the people and the people therefore lived in the darkness of God's absence—came to point out to them God's promises of grace and salvation. These messengers of comfort were always needed. For that reason the lament is so strong when it is said in Psalm 74:9 that there no longer is any prophet. For the church of the New Testament the truth is, however, that now that Christ has come, it is once and for all certain that God cares for his people and is gracious to them. Now it is no longer necessary for believers to be reminded of the promise of deliverance, for that promise has been fulfilled in Christ, so that God's hiddenness can now be more easily endured.⁶⁰

God conceals us

The active concealment of God can also take a very different turn. The point then is not that God conceals himself, but that he conceals believers. In his comments on Psalm 83:3 Calvin emphatically rejects the interpretation of those who say that "God's hidden ones" here means that we cannot see or experience God's care as this is described in Colossians 3:3. Calvin calls this interpretation forced, and inconsistent with the context and the intent of the text. The point of the text is to say that God hides us in the shadow of his wings.⁶¹ He conceals himself, not from the eyes of the believers, but believers from the eyes of their enemy. Calvin stresses the reality of it in his comments on Psalm 91:1 where he speaks—pleonastically as it were—of "the hidden ones who are concealed under God's protection."⁶² It does not fit Calvin's motto of *brevitas et perspicuitas* to use pleonasms. That he nevertheless does it here underscores his pastoral intention in speaking of God's hiddenness.

⁶⁰ Ps. 74:9; 696.

⁶¹ 774.

⁶² "... eos qui absconditi latent sub Dei custodia ..." 1.