

The Call to Witness

[John Calvin](#)

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Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel, according to the power of God;

Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began,—II TIMOTHY 1:8-9.

ALTHOUGH God shows His glory and majesty in the gospel, yet the unthankfulness of men is such, that we have need to be exhorted, not to be ashamed of this gospel. And why so? Because God requires all creatures to do Him homage: yet the greater part rebel against Him; despise, yea, and are at defiance with the doctrine whereby He would be known and worshipped. Although men are so wicked as to lift up themselves against their Maker, let us, notwithstanding, remember that which is taught us in this place; to wit, that we be not ashamed of the gospel; for it is the witness of God.

If the gospel be not preached, Jesus Christ is, as it were, buried. Therefore, let us stand as witnesses, and do Him this honor, when we see all the world so far out of the way; and remain steadfast in this wholesome doctrine. St. Paul here setteth his own person before us: not that he wished particularly to be approved, but because we often get in difficulty, if we separate ourselves from the servants of God. When there is a minister of the Word of God troubled, molested, and persecuted, we are apt to forsake him in time of need, thinking it is but mortal man: but in doing this, we offend God; because this man that suffereth, beareth the mark of the gospel: thus the cause of God is betrayed. Therefore, St. Paul saith to Timothy, be not ashamed of me.

The mind of Timothy might have been shaken; therefore, St. Paul saith to him, though the world despise me, though they mock and hate me, yet must thou not be moved by these things; for I am the prisoner of Jesus Christ. Let the world speak evil of me; it is not for my offences: God alloweth my cause; for indeed it is His. I suffer not for mine own evil doings, having His truth always on my side. Therefore, the cause of my persecution is, because I have maintained the Word of God, and continue to maintain it. Thou shouldest not be guided by the world's judgment, for men are carried away with evil affections. Let it be sufficient for thee then, that I am as it were a pledge for the Son of God; that He magnifieth my person; that if it be reproachful to the world, it ceases not to be honored before God, and His holy angels.

Let us not deceive Jesus Christ in the testimony we owe Him, by stopping our mouths, when it is needful to maintain His honor, and the authority of His gospel. Yea, and when we see our brethren afflicted for the cause of God, let us join with them, and assist them in their affliction. Let us not be shaken by the tempests that arise, but let us always remain constant in our purpose; and stand as witnesses for the Son of God, seeing He is so gracious as to use us in such a good cause. Let us mark well, whether men suffer for their sins, or for the truth of God. When we see one oppressed, we must not despise him, lest we do injury to God: we must ascertain for what cause men suffer. If they have walked in a good conscience, and are blamed, if they are tormented because they serve God, this is enough to remove whatever the wicked world can say against them. Therefore St. Paul adds, "Be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel."

There is no man but what would willingly escape affliction; this is according to human nature; and although we confess, without dissembling, that it is a singular grace which God bestows, when He enables men to bear affliction, and maintain His cause, yet there is not one of us, but what would willingly draw his neck out of persecution. For we look not at the lesson given by St. Paul, which saith, the gospel bringeth troubles. Jesus Christ was crucified in His own person, and His doctrine is joined with many miseries. He could, if it pleased Him, cause His doctrine to be received without any gainsaying. But the Scripture must be fulfilled: "Rule thou in the midst of thine enemies" (Psalm 110).

We must come to Him upon this condition; to be willing to suffer many bickerings; because the wicked lift up themselves against God, when He calleth them to Him. Therefore, it is impossible for us to have the gospel without affliction. We must be exercised; we must fight under our Lord Jesus Christ. Doth he not then renounce his salvation, that would get rid of the cross of Christ? What is the hope of life? Only in this, that we are bought by the sacrifice of the Son of God. Then will He have us made like unto Him, and have us transformed into His image.

We must not be ashamed of our brethren; when we hear evil reports of them, and see them cast off by the world, let us always be with them, and endeavor to strengthen them; for the gospel cannot be without affliction; as I have already said. It pleaseth God, that men should be so divided. But He calleth all to the unity of faith; and the doctrine of the gospel is the message of atonement; but yet the faithful are drawn by the virtue of

His Holy Spirit (as we shall notice more particularly hereafter) ; but the unbelievers remain in their hardness: thus the fire kindleth; as when thunder engendereth in the air, there must needs be trouble; so it is when the gospel is preached.

Now, if the gospel bring affliction, and it be the mind of Jesus Christ, that what He suffered in His person, shall be fulfilled in His members, and be daily crucified, is it lawful for us to withdraw ourselves from that situation? Seeing it is so, that all hope of salvation is in the gospel, we must rest thereon; and mark what St. Paul saith; to wit, we must assist our brethren when we see them in trouble, and when they are reviled by the wicked; and choose rather to be their companions, and suffer the rebukes and scoffs of the world, than to be otherwise honored with a good reputation, having our faces turned from them that suffer for that cause, which is ours, as well as theirs.

We are apt to be weak, and think we shall be swallowed up by persecutions, as soon as our enemies assail us: but St. Paul observes, we shall not be destitute of the aid and succour of our God. He armeth us forthwith, and giveth us an invincible power, that we may remain sure and steadfast. For this reason St. Paul adds, "according to the power of God." But as we have said, every man would be glad to have some cover or cloak, whereby he might withdraw himself from persecution. If God would give me grace I would gladly suffer for His name; I know it is the greatest blessing that I could receive.

Every man will confess this: but they add, we are weak, and shall quickly be beaten down by the cruelty of our enemies. But St. Paul taketh away this excuse, by saying, God will strengthen us, and that we must not look to our own strength. For it is certain, if we never come into conflicts with our enemies, we shall be afraid of our own shadows. Seeing we know this weakness, let us come to the remedy. We must consider how hard it is to withstand our enemies; therefore let us humble ourselves before God, and pray Him to extend His hand, and uphold us in all our afflictions. If this doctrine were well imprinted in our hearts, we should be better prepared to suffer than we are.

But we are apt to forget it; yea, we stop our ears, and close our eyes, when we hear it spoken of. We pretend that we wish God to strengthen us, but we cannot bring our sight to the power that St. Paul speaks of; we are apt to think, that we have nothing to do with it; although the Lord hath shown us, that His power will always uphold us. Therefore, let not our weakness cause us to withdraw ourselves from the cross, and from persecution; seeing God hath received us into His hands, and promised to supply our needs. St. Paul here addeth a lesson to make us greatly ashamed, if we be not enticed to glorify Jesus Christ by suffering persecution; he saith, "God hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling."

Behold! God hath drawn us out of the gulf of hell! We were utterly cast away and condemned: but he hath brought us salvation, and hath called us to be partakers of it. Therefore, seeing God hath showed Himself so liberal, if we on our parts turn our backs to Him, is not this a shameful malice? Let us mark well the accusation of St. Paul against those that are inconstant; those that are unwilling to suffer the assaults made against them for the sake of the gospel. Undoubtedly his mind was to comfort the

faithful, for the time to come; he therefore showeth what God hath done for them already.

When God giveth us any token of His goodness, it is to the end we should hope for the like at His hands again; and wait till He bring to pass what He hath begun. Therefore, if God hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, do we think that He will leave us at midway? When He hath showed us our salvation, and given us His gospel whereby He calleth us to His kingdom, and openeth the gates unto us; when He hath done all this, do we think He will leave us here, and mock us, and deprive us of His grace, or make it unprofitable? No, no; but let us hope that He will bring his work to a perfect end.

Therefore, let us go on with good courage; for God hath already displayed His power toward us. Let us not doubt but what He will continue it, and that we shall have a perfect victory over Satan and our enemies; and that God the Father hath given all power into the hands of Jesus Christ, who is our head and captain; that we may be partakers of it. Thus we see St. Paul's meaning. God hath witnessed, and we know it by experience, that He will never fail us in time of need. And why so? For He hath already saved us, in that He hath called us to the gospel, and redeemed us from sin. He hath called us with an holy calling; that is to say, He hath chosen us to Himself, out of the general confusion of mankind.

The Lord having drawn us to Him, will He not uphold us, and guide us to the end? This is a sure confirmation of the power of God; that we always find Him ready to help us: therefore we put our trust in Him, knowing that we have already felt His power. That we may profit by this doctrine, let us know first of all, that whereas God hath given us the knowledge of His truth, it is as much as if He had shown us already that we belonged to His heavenly inheritance, and that we were His, and of His flock. If we are persuaded of this, and resolved therein, we shall always go forward in the cause, knowing that we are under His protection. He hath sufficient strength to overcome all our enemies, which makes our salvation sure.

Let us not fear, on account of our weakness, for God hath promised to assist us. We should think upon this, and endeavour to receive that which is said to us. The Lord will bring our salvation to an end! He will assist us in the midst of persecutions, and enable us to overcome them. When we are once convinced of these things, it will not require much power of rhetoric to strengthen us against temptations. We shall triumph over all our enemies: notwithstanding we seem to the world to be trodden under foot, and utterly overwhelmed. But we must come to this declaration which St. Paul addeth, concerning the salvation of which we have spoken, and the holy calling. He saith, "Not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace."

For He had no respect to our works or dignity, when He called us to salvation. He did it of mere grace. Therefore we shall be less excusable, if we disobey His requirements, seeing we have not only been purchased by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, but He had a care of our salvation before the world was made. Let us here observe that St. Paul condemns our unthankfulness, if we be so unfaithful to God, as not to bear witness

of His gospel; seeing He hath called us to it. And that He may better express this purpose, the apostle adds, that this "was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began; before the world had its course, or beginning: it was revealed at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When this great Savior made His appearance, the grace that was hid before, yea, and could not be reached by the knowledge of man, was made clear and manifest. And how so? The Son of God destroyed death, and also brought everlasting life! And we need not go afar off to find it, for the gospel leadeth us to it. When God sendeth us this message of salvation, we have only to receive the inheritance which He promised us. Let us open our mouths, that He may fill them; let us open our hearts, and give this testimony of the gospel leave to enter; and the immortality of the kingdom of heaven shall dwell within us; though we be poor, frail vessels, and have nothing but corruption and rottenness in us; yet notwithstanding, we do already lay hold upon this immortality, and have a sure witness of it, when we can accept this grace that is offered in the gospel.

That we may better understand what is here contained, let us remark that this word *purpose*, signifieth the everlasting decree of God; which hath no causes whatsoever. For when we speak of God's counsels, we need not dispute about who moved Him: as though we should imagine reasons, and say, this is the reason why God hath determined after this sort; this is the cause why He would have it so. For God will have us use such soberness, that His bare will may suffice us for all reason. When it is said, God hath thus appointed it, though our eyes be dazzled, and the matter seem strange to us, and we see no reason why it should thus be, yet we must not find fault. It is wisdom in us to do whatever God appointeth, and never ask why.

But because men have busy heads, and given much to curiosity, St. Paul bringeth us to God's purpose; and telleth us plainly, that we must consider it so deep that we cannot enter into it, to know who moved Him. He was moved only by His just will; which is a rule of all justice. Therefore, we are hereby informed, that our salvation depends not upon our deserts: God never examined what we were, nor what we were worthy of, when He chose us to Himself; but He had His purpose; that is, He sought no cause of our salvation but in Himself. St. Paul showeth evidently that this word *purpose* signifieth this decree. But because men cannot by reason of the pride that is in them withhold themselves from imagining some worthiness of their own, they think that God is under an obligation to seek them: but St. Paul saith pointedly, *purpose and grace*. This is as much as if he had said *free purpose*.

This is therefore to beat down all our works: that we be not so foolish and stubborn, as to think God chose us because there was something in us worthy of it. No, no; but we must know that God never went farther than Himself, when He chose us to salvation. For He saw that there was nothing but condemnation in us: therefore He contented Himself, by mere grace and infinite mercy, to look upon our misery, and help us;

although we were not worthy. For better proof hereof, St. Paul saith that this grace was given us before the world began.

We perceive by this, how void of sense men are when they vaunt themselves of believing that they are the cause of their own salvation; and have prevented God's goodness, or were before Him, and met with Him. Whereupon hangeth our salvation? Is it not upon the election and choice that hath been from everlasting? God chose us before we were. What could we do then? We were made fit, we were well disposed to come to God. Nay, we see that our salvation doth not begin after we have knowledge, discretion, and good desires; but it is grounded in God's everlasting decree, which was before any part of the world was made.

What can we do then? Have we any means to put forth ourselves? Can we give God occasion to call us, and separate us from the rest of the world? Are we not then marvellously mistaken, when we think we have some worthiness of our own, and exalt our deserts to darken God's grace, and be thus prepared of ourselves to have access to Him? We must mark well for what purpose St. Paul here mentions the election of God; saying, that grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began. They that think to abolish the doctrine of God's election, destroy as much as possible the salvation of the world.

This is the most fit instrument, used by the devil, to deface the virtue of the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ; to bring to naught, and destroy the gospel; yea, and to put the goodness of God out of man's memory. The devil hath no fitter instruments than those who fight against predestination; and cannot in their rage suffer it to be spoken of, or preached as it ought to be. If we detest the *papists* (as indeed they ought to be detested), because they have profaned the Holy Scripture, and have marred and depraved the truth of the gospel and the service of God, by infecting all the world with superstition and idolatry, much more are they to be detested who go about to bring to naught God's election; and endeavour, by indirect and crooked ways, to stop men from speaking of it plainly and openly, and of preaching it as it ought to be.

Wherein consisteth the salvation of the faithful, only in God's free election? Would we not have men preach that God hath chosen His, of mere goodness, without regard to any thing whatsoever? Will we not admit this to be such a mystery as cannot be attained to, showed and declared to us as far as God wished to reveal it? If we do not admit this, we enter into a conspiracy with Satan; as though Jesus Christ suffered in vain, and the passion that He suffered profited the world nothing. We may here remark that the gospel cannot be preached, that it is a profane gospel, or the doctrine of Mahomet, that there is no church nor Christianity, if God's election be abolished.

The Holy Ghost that speaketh here must needs be proved a liar, if this doctrine be not received. Therefore, let us fight constantly; for it is the groundwork of our salvation. How can we build, and maintain the building, if the foundation be destroyed? St. Paul

showeth us here with what virtue we must fight, and how we shall come to this inheritance which was so dearly purchased for us: he showeth us how we shall enter into the possession of the glory of God and make an end of this building and faith. My friends, we must be grounded upon the grace that was given us, not today nor yesterday, but before the world began.

It is true, God calleth us at this day, but His election goeth before; yea, and God chose us without any respect to our works, as we could have done nothing before: but we are debtors to Him for all; for He drew us out of the bottomless pit of destruction, wherein we were cast, and past all hope of recovery. Therefore, there is good reason for us to submit ourselves wholly to Him, and rely upon His goodness, and be thoroughly ravished with it. Let us hold fast this foundation, as I said before, unless we will have our salvation perish and come to naught. This doctrine is profitable for us if we can apply it well to our own use.

They that would not have us speak of God's election will say, it is not necessary. But such men never tasted God's goodness, neither do they know what it is to come to our Lord Jesus Christ. If we know not that we are saved because it pleased God to choose us before the world began, how can we know that which St. Paul saith to us; to wit, that we should give ourselves wholly to God, to be disposed of at His will, and to live and die in His service? How can we magnify His name? How can we confess that our salvation cometh from Him only, that He is the beginning of it, and that we have not helped Him therein? We may say it with our mouths, but unless we believe it, as here set forth, it will only be hypocrisy.

Therefore, let us learn that the doctrine of God's election, whereby we are taught that He predestinated us before the world began, ought to be preached openly and fully, in despite of all the world that would stand against it. And not only so, but we should know that it is a very profitable doctrine for us; because we cannot lay hold upon the infinite goodness of God, until we come thither. Unless this point be well cleared, God's mercy will be always disguised. I say, unless this be made plain to us, that He hath chosen us before we were born, and before we could prevent Him.

Men will frequently say that we were bought with the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that we are not worthy that God should show us such great mercy: they will likewise say, who hath part and portion in such a redemption as God hath made in the person of His Son? Even they that will; they that seek God; even they that submit themselves to Him. They that have some good motives, and are not rude; those that are good natured, and have some good devotion. When men make such a mixture, and think they are called to God, and to His grace, for something that is in themselves, that they bring something to recommend them to the favor of God whereby they may attain salvation, the grace of God is darkened, and rent asunder.

This is a sacrilege that ought not to be countenanced. For this cause, I said the goodness of God shall never be thoroughly known until this election be laid before us; and we are taught that we are called at this time, because it pleased God to extend His

mercy to us before we were born. This doctrine must be explained more at large; but as time will not admit at present, we shall attend to it in the latter part of the day.

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