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COMMENTARY ON THE PSALMS



COMMENTARY ON THE
PSALMS

John Calvin

Abridged by
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THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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FOREWORD

For some years I have used Calvin's commentary on the Psalms in my devotional reading of Scripture and have benefited greatly from the Reformer's expositions, increasingly becoming aware of his method, his faithfulness to the biblical text, and his practical application of its truth to daily living. Yet during my years of ministry at Rutherford House, I was often saddened by the realization that few teachers and preachers of the gospel ever used Calvin's commentaries, either on the Psalms or on the rest of the Christian Scriptures. I suppose the sheer length of Calvin's commentary on the Psalms—five large volumes in the Eerdmans 1949 edition—seems too daunting for busy parish ministers to use. I therefore suggested to the Banner of Truth that an abridged version of the commentary might make the Reformer's expositions more accessible. I am grateful to them for agreeing to publish this volume.

As I have struggled to condense Calvin's work on the Psalms, reducing it to about a quarter of its original size, I have constantly laboured under a sense of guilt that those who read and use this version are being deprived of the full benefit of the unabridged text. Nevertheless, I have consoled myself that my inept *précis* of the wisdom of a master spirit may at least edify some who otherwise would have remained strangers to Calvin's practical and pastoral theology. Therefore I humbly ask readers to forgive me for opening a treasure chest and selecting the merest handful of the 'gold' and 'gems' it contains.

The biblical references within the text are as cited in the original. (I doubt whether I have omitted more than two or three from the entire five volumes.) Square brackets [] always indicate edit-

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orial glosses which I have added, including the occasional Latin or Hebrew word that Calvin used. I have added in a footnote a definition of the figure of speech ‘synecdoche’ at its first occurrence in the comment on Psalm 14:4—it occurs 28 times in the original text; Calvin’s own explanation of ‘synecdoche’ is ‘a figure of rhetoric, by which a part is put for the whole’.

The biblical text quoted throughout this book, unless otherwise stated, is that of the English Standard Version (ESV). I began this task using several English translations which I compared with Calvin’s own translation of the Hebrew text, but I quickly concluded that the ESV was consistently the most suitable. Almost invariably when Calvin’s translation varies from this version, a marginal footnote in the ESV accords with his, and so I use square brackets to indicate this.

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DCS

Arbroath

January 2009

INTRODUCTION

Although John Calvin's first commentary (on Romans) was published in 1537 when he was only 28 years of age, it is perhaps surprising that it was a further twenty years before his massive work on the Psalms appeared in print—surprising because, as he tells us, he believed there was no better guide than the Psalms for leading us to seek God and so to advance in our understanding of heavenly doctrine.¹ He tells us that, prior to beginning work on his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, he had expounded them three years earlier 'here in our small school' in Geneva. As the commentary took him two years to prepare and was completed and published in July 1557,² his teaching on this book will have been started in 1552.³ He tells us that many had urged him not to allow these lectures 'to be lost to the world'. His intention had been to write in French for the benefit of 'my countrymen' but, using the notes which some of his students 'had taken down carefully, faithfully and not without great labour', he began in Latin 'in the way of trial' and, finding that the result 'corresponded to my desire far beyond what I had ventured to anticipate', he continued in Latin. A French translation by Calvin himself followed in 1558, with a revised, more accurate French edition appearing in 1563; the

¹ Calvin's Introduction to his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh, 1845; republished Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1949), p. xxxvii. Unless otherwise indicated, the following quotations are taken from the Introduction, pp. xxxv–xxxix.

² He had begun writing in June 1555 and completed the work in March 1557 (*Prolegomena*, CO 31.10); cf. W. de Greef, *The Writings of John Calvin* (Eng. trans., Baker, Grand Rapids, 1993) p. 105.

³ CO 31.10.

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title-page described it as ‘So carefully revised, and so faithfully compared with the Latin version, that it may be considered a new translation’.⁴ An English translation was published in 1571.

‘AN ANATOMY OF ALL THE PARTS OF THE SOUL’

Calvin tells us that he had been accustomed to call the Psalms ‘An Anatomy of All the Parts of the Soul’, for ‘there is not an emotion (*nullum affectum*) of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror’. In the Psalms, the Holy Spirit has delineated ‘all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions (*motus*)’ with which the human mind is often agitated. Here we find the prophets⁵ portrayed as laying open to God all their inmost thoughts and feelings (*sensus*), summoning us also to examine ourselves so that none of our weaknesses and guilty secrets may remain concealed. ‘It is certainly a great benefit to us when all hidden places are discovered, and the heart is brought into the light, purged from that most baneful infection, hypocrisy.’

Calvin then asserts that this book will train believers in earnest and genuine prayer, two requirements for which are ‘a sense of our need’ and ‘faith in the promises of God’. Often in the Psalms we witness ‘one standing, as it were, amid the invitations of God on the one hand, and the impediments of the flesh on the other, girding and preparing himself for prayer’, thus teaching us in the midst of our doubts and distresses to resist and fight until we are able ‘to rise up to God’. He continues that in the Psalms we will constantly find believers who are almost overwhelmed by fear of failure, but who gain the prize only by strenuous exertions in prayer. As we meditate on such spiritual conflicts, we will see fallen humanity in its great weakness, but we will also see faith putting forth its power and resolving to fight through to victory.

⁴ Introduction to Anderson’s 1845 translation, p. xv.

⁵ Latin *prophetae*; throughout his commentary, Calvin frequently refers to the Psalmist as ‘the prophet’ who is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

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Having made much of the instruction the Psalms offer in the conflict of prayer, Calvin then chooses to mention some other prominent theological features of this Old Testament book. There is ‘its infallible rule’ in directing us in ‘the right manner of offering to God the sacrifice of praise, which he declares to be most precious in his sight, and of the sweetest odour’. Further, although the Psalms abound with guidance on holy and righteous living, ‘they will principally teach and train us to bear the cross’, which is ‘a genuine proof of our obedience’; for in bearing the cross we renounce the impulses of our own desires and submit ourselves to God’s will and rule. He tells us that we will discover how the bitter and distressing trials of life become sweet to us when we have learned that all the issues of life are in God’s fatherly hands; therefore we must place our whole confidence in the Lord and look to him alone for help in life’s exigencies. The Psalms also teach us where to find that full forgiveness of our sins which alone reconciles God towards us and procures for us lasting peace with him; for in this book ‘there is nothing wanting which relates to eternal salvation’.

So much for Calvin’s own summary of some of the great themes embedded in the Psalms.

DISTINCTIVE DOCTRINES

However, as one would expect, there are many other distinctive doctrines of Reformed theology which readers will repeatedly meet as they study this commentary. It is not that these expositions are in any sense a text-book of systematic theology; rather Calvin’s theology is invariably practical and pastoral, arising spontaneously from the biblical text. I refer to several of these doctrines, but not in any particular order.

First, there is frequent reference to what Calvin calls ‘general grace’, that is, God’s compassion for all of humanity.⁶ Expounding Psalm 95:7, he speaks of ‘common providence’ and of the

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.2.17, n. 63, 64.

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‘common nourishment, support and government which [God] extends unconditionally to the whole human family’ (1845).⁷ Several times (e.g. see *Psa.* 16:3; 30:4; 31:19, etc.) he cites Matthew 5:45, ‘[God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good’; although unbelievers do not appreciate their Creator’s goodness to them, it is not withdrawn from them. Psalm 145:9, *The LORD is good to all, etc.*: ‘Men’s depravity does not prevent him showing his benefits upon them, even though they are not aware of it (*Matt.* 5:45). However, only believers enjoy a reconciled God (*Psa.* 34:5, 8); nevertheless, his *mercy is over* even a fallen world’ (1845).

Second, there is what is sometimes termed ‘Calvin’s accommodating God’. He held the view that from the heights and unfathomable depths of the Almighty’s wisdom he condescends to speak to humankind as a mother uses baby-talk to the child at her breast, ‘accommodating’ himself to our limited capacity.⁸ I offer three examples. On Psalm 49:4 he writes, ‘The point is that the Holy Spirit accommodates profound mysteries to our limited capacity so that all Scripture should be profitable for instruction and therefore none can plead ignorance.’ On Psalm 78:1–4, ‘If the Word is presented simply for the simple, some despise it as being too simple; if its mysteries are presented in their lofty majesty, others claim it is too difficult. Therefore the Spirit tempers his style so that the truth is not hidden from those of limited ability, provided they are submissive and teachable.’ Or again, on Psalm 148:3 he writes, ‘We know that Moses and the prophets ordinarily speak in a popular style, suited to the lowest understanding’ (all quotes 1845).

Third, there is the divine inspiration of Scripture. There are over 220 references to the Holy Spirit in the 1845 translation of the commentary on the Psalms; the majority of these refer either directly or indirectly to the Psalms being divinely inspired. For example, commenting on Psalm 8:1, he writes, ‘The Holy

⁷ Quotations from the 1845 translation are indicated (1845) and from my abridged version (2009).

⁸ See *Institutes*, 1.13.1.

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Spirit, who directed David's tongue, doubtless intended by his instrumentality to awaken men from their torpor and indifference . . .' (1845). Or again, on Psalm 10:17, 'By these words, also, the Holy Spirit assures us, that what of old God granted to the fathers in answer to their prayers, we at the present day will obtain' (1845). The Holy Spirit is also 'accommodating': on Psalm 13:3, 'It has been already stated in a preceding psalm, and we will have occasion afterwards frequently to repeat the statement, that the Holy Spirit purposely accommodates to our understanding the models of prayer recorded in Scripture' (1845). Finally, a quotation from his comment on Psalm 18:7: 'Some think that these miracles were actually wrought, and performed exactly as they are here related; but it is not easy to believe this, since the Holy Spirit, in the narrative given of David's life, makes no mention whatever of such wonderful displays of divine power in his behalf' (1845). Acknowledging that the description of the storm is poetic in *genre*, he goes on to say that the metaphorical language of this and the following verses is to be understood as being highly hyperbolic. Nonetheless, those who read the Reformer's expositions will be left in no doubt regarding his firm conviction that all Scripture is given through the inspiration of the Spirit of God.⁹

Fourth, we find Calvin asserting that God's offer of grace is unconditionally made to the whole of humankind. Contrasting God's relationship with Israel 'under the law' with the reconciliation effected through Christ, on Psalm 81:12 f. Calvin states: 'God, while he passed by all the rest of the world, was graciously pleased to bring the posterity of Abraham, by peculiar and exclusive privilege, into a special relation to himself. At the present day, I admit this distinction has been abolished and the message of the gospel, by which God reconciles the world to

⁹ Those interested to read further on this subject should consult Calvin's sermons on 2 Timothy 3:15–16, *John Calvin's Sermons on Timothy and Titus*, 23rd and 24th Sermons (Facsimile of 1579 translation, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh), pp. 921–45; also Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of Word and Sacrament* (Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh, Fifth impression, 1995).

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himself, is common to all men . . . God, in coming down to us by his word, and addressing his invitations to all men without exception, disappoints nobody. All who sincerely come to him are received, and find from actual experience that they were not called in vain. At the same time, we are to trace to the fountain of the secret electing purpose of God this difference, that the word enters into the heart of some, while others only hear the sound of it' (1845). Psalm 86:5 reads, *For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving . . . to all who call upon you*, and Calvin comments: 'Although David magnifies the plenteousness of God's mercy, yet he immediately after represents this plenteousness as restricted to the faithful who call upon him, to teach us that those who, making no account of God, obstinately chafe upon the bit, deservedly perish in their calamities. At the same time, he uses the term *all*, that every man, without exception, from the greatest to the least, may be encouraged confidently to betake himself to the goodness and mercy of God' (1845).

Fifth, what became popularly known through Max Weber's research¹⁰ as 'the Protestant work ethic' is clearly unfolded in this commentary: believers whom God prospers materially must live frugally and without undue ostentation, for a bountiful supply of this world's goods is given so that the wealthy can help those in need. Commenting on David's words, *You prepare a table before me (Psa. 23:5)*, Calvin writes: 'There are lessons here for the wealthy, some of whom have no sense or taste of God's goodness towards them; David's example admonishes them. Further, those who are more abundantly blessed with riches than others are bound to observe moderation no less than if they possessed only the minimum of life's necessities. By nature we are all inclined to excess; God's bounty to some is never to nourish in them this disease. All of us should follow Paul's rule when he says, "I know how to be brought low, and how to abound . . ." (*Phil. 4:12*).

¹⁰ The German Sociologist, Maximilian Carl Emil Weber's work on this subject is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). See also the assessment of Weber's thesis by Sir Fred Catherwood, *The Christian in Industrial Society*, Appendix: 'The Weber-Tawney thesis' (IVP, Leicester, 1980), pp. 172-84.

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While David knew how to distinguish between the table God provided for him and a swine's trough, and while it is likewise lawful for rich men to enjoy what they possess, they should beware lest they be overcome by a surfeit of pleasures' (2009).

On Psalm 104:14f. Calvin writes: 'Paul properly exhorts us to "make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (*Rom.* 13:14). While considering God's bounty, there is another principle we must observe—moderation and voluntary restraint in the enjoyment of abundance. The rule with respect to food is to partake of it that it may sustain us, not oppress us. Greed and excess must be avoided. While God has given us wine that we may be merry, our mirth must be tempered with sobriety; we must never forget ourselves or dull our senses, otherwise how could we rejoice before the Lord as we ought (*Lev.* 23:40)? We need sobriety so that when God is pleased to send sadness into our lives, we may be able to endure it. As for the rich, they are blessed with abundance that they may relieve the needs of their poorer brothers and sisters. Paul has given another rule: "I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need" (*Phil.* 4:12). We must learn contentment with what we have, and submissively wean ourselves from those luxuries that God may withhold from us. We must not aimlessly wallow in extravagances. God's fatherly kindness should be a mistress to teach us moderation' (2009).

Sixth is the Reformer's conviction that because God is merciful towards all those whom he has created, believers also should imitate their heavenly Father and treat with kindness and generosity every man, woman and child they may encounter. On Psalm 68:4–6 he writes, 'David speaks of God's transcendent goodness and condescension towards widows and orphans, who undoubtedly represent those whom the world despises, for generally we pay attention to those from whom we expect some return. Although God does not dwell *in his holy habitation* to indulge his own ease but from his throne judges the world, nevertheless the poor are cheered that he draws near to them, invit-

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ing them to come to him, providing for them and setting them free' (2009).

Seventh, Calvin sternly warns against believers using the imprecatory psalms as a warrant for taking personal, unilateral action against any kind of wickedness or revenge in response to persecution. His message is clear. On Psalm 69:22 ff. he writes: 'The next seven verses are imprecatory. Unlike those who are motivated by their passions to cry for revenge when they feel wronged, David prays under the guidance of the Spirit of wisdom, moderation and uprightness, for justice to be done before God's judgment seat. He is neither praying in self-vindication nor promoting his own personal interests. In our prayers, great discernment is needed to distinguish between those who have irrevocably turned their backs on God and those for whom there is yet hope of repentance. The guiding principle for our prayers (as well as avoiding blind impetuosity, one's own private interests and personal passion) is to seek only the glory of God. In short, we must clothe ourselves with the Spirit of Christ lest he rebuke us as he did his disciples (*Luke* 9:55 [see ESV margin]) (2009).'

Those who make use of this commentary will encounter many other biblical truths, unfolded simply and yet without any weakening of their theological profundity: the relationship of law to gospel; obedience as the condition of divine blessing, although the covenants, old and new, are always unconditional and arise from unmerited, gratuitous grace; the light of reason remaining in fallen humanity; believers living in peace with unbelievers, so far as they are able; the fallacy of free will; children of believers; ecclesiology, and much else besides.

CALVIN'S HERMENEUTICS

Much has already been written on this subject.¹¹ I merely refer to a few points which readers using this commentary should be

¹¹ See, for example, T. F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh, 1988); T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1992).

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aware of. First, in his commentary, he constantly refers to the *scopus* (target, goal, purpose) of the Psalmist. In other words, he is viewing each psalm as a whole and recognizing that the author is not simply setting down a random collection of thoughts but has a definite purpose and theme to unfold. A couple of examples will illustrate his use of the Latin word *scopus* (occurring 112 times and usually translated in the 1845 edition as ‘scope’). Commenting on the final sentence of Psalm 2, *Blessed are all who take refuge in him*, he writes: ‘The pronoun *him* may be referred as well to God as to Christ, but, in my judgment, it agrees better with the whole scope of the psalm to understand it of Christ, whom the Psalmist before enjoined kings and judges of the earth to kiss’ (1845). On Psalm 9:20, *Put them in fear, O Lord*, he writes: ‘The Septuagint translates [the Hebrew] ‘*morah*’ as *a lawgiver*, deriving it from ‘*arah*’ which sometimes signifies ‘to teach’. But the scope of the passage requires that we should understand it of fear or dread; and this is the opinion of all sound expositors. Now, it is to be considered of what kind of fear David speaks . . .’ (1845).

At times the reader may question whether Calvin’s interpretation of one or two verses is on the right track until, reading on, it becomes clear that he has in his mind the content and ‘target’ or ‘goal’ of the entire psalm; thus the reader finds that, in their context, the verses have been appropriately and accurately expounded. In my work of abridging the 1845 translation, I often asked myself whether Calvin had correctly understood a section or verse; as I proceeded, I generally found myself gladly submitting to his skill and wisdom as an expositor.

In his ‘Introductory Notice’ to the 1845 translation James Anderson refers to Calvin’s agreement with Melancthon’s principle ‘that Scripture cannot be understood theologically, unless it be first understood grammatically’.¹² Rejecting the highly misleading interpretations of most of his predecessors who constantly looked for hidden and mystical meanings in Scripture,

¹² *Calvin’s Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, Introductory Notice, vol.1, p. vii.

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‘Calvin set himself to the investigation of the grammatical and literal sense [of Scripture] by a careful examination of the Hebrew text, and by a diligent attention to the drift and intention of the writer’s discourse’.¹³ It is this ‘diligent attention to the . . . intention of the writer’ which is one of the most important aspects of the Reformer’s hermeneutic. Anderson (rightly, in my view) uses the word ‘intention’ to translate various Latin phrases which Calvin uses: *prophetae propositum*, the prophet’s intention; *non voluit*, it was not his intention; *prophetae consilium*, the intention of the prophet; *teneamus eius mentem*, to understand his intention, etc.¹⁴ Together with his insistence on holding to the whole *scopus* (purpose, goal) of the passage, this practice of understanding the grammatical meaning of a text and then seeking to penetrate through it to the author’s intention (*propositum*, *consilium*, *eius mens*) unquestionably marks out Calvin as quite revolutionary in both the accuracy and relevance of his exposition of Scripture.

The importance of Calvin’s method of first understanding and following through the intention behind the words of Scripture cannot be overemphasized. Readers who carefully follow Calvin’s approach here and ask themselves if his exposition is true to the intention of the text (or at least to what is most likely to have been the author’s intention), will find their understanding of Scripture—and their ability to use it faithfully in preaching—greatly deepened. Although his expositions are characterized by practical and pastoral applications and although frequently he is able to ‘extrapolate’ from the plain text to a fuller meaning (often by arguing that a phrase should be understood as ‘synecdoche’, the figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole)¹⁵, his primary concern is always to establish the author’s original intention. Only when he has ascertained that does he feel able to extract from it—without doing any violence to the text—wholly legitimate lessons and doctrines for the edification

¹³ *Idem*, p. viii.

¹⁴ In the order given, Psalms 104:30; 36:10; 49:10; 119:105.

¹⁵ See the Foreword above for comment on Calvin’s frequent use of ‘synecdoche’.

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of both his readers and the church. Perhaps it was Calvin's conviction that it was the Holy Spirit who had inspired the text that enabled him to write with such authority. Be that as it may, his expositions unquestionably led the 16th century church into a new depth of understanding of the self-revelation of God in Christ Jesus.

I must add a further point regarding the practical application Calvin draws from each psalm. Many of the psalms may be termed 'persecution prayers' (e.g. Psalms 52 to 59). As one reads the great Reformer's expositions, one becomes acutely aware of how relevant and poignant they must have been for those in his day who were subjected to ongoing and severe persecution in France and for those who had fled to Geneva in fear for their lives and now sat under Calvin's ministry. It has often been remarked that his preaching and commentaries are surprisingly 'modern' considering that his material was delivered and published 450 years ago. Without any doubt, that is because he goes straight to the 'scopus' of the Word of God and applies it to the human condition. In doing so, he reads his own heart, implicitly alluding to his own fears, trials and conflicts.¹⁶ So, because human sinfulness, weakness and temptations have not changed one iota since the sixteenth century, the practical applications given throughout this book are as relevant as they have ever been since our first parents were alienated from their Creator.

Finally, it remains to remark that Calvin has broken completely free of the pernicious practice of so many of the medieval schoolmen and clergy who allegorized biblical texts.¹⁷ Not only does he

¹⁶ In his Introduction to the *Commentary* Calvin wrote: 'Now if my readers derive any fruit and advantage from the labour which I have bestowed in writing these commentaries, I would have them to understand that the small measure of experience which I have had by the conflicts with which the Lord has exercised me, has in no ordinary degree assisted me, not only in applying to present use whatever instruction could be gathered from these divine compositions, but also in more easily comprehending the design of each of the writers,' p. xxxix.

¹⁷ For example, when Thomas à Becket was assassinated in 1170 in Canterbury Cathedral by followers of Henry II, the Archbishop of York preached a sermon the following Sunday on the lamentable state of the church, taking as his text the cry of the Shunammite's son when he was taken ill and before he died, 'My head!

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recognize and respect the particular literary *genre* he is expounding, interpreting each with an appropriate hermeneutic—treating *law* as ‘law’, *narrative* as ‘narrative’, *poetry* as ‘poetry’, *didactic* as ‘didactic’ etc, he also goes—as we have seen—unerringly to the purpose (*scopus*) of the text, first explaining its primary meaning, then drawing out legitimate implications, both negative and positive, but always eschewing human inventions, imaginations and absurd interpretations. His method, along with his warm pastoral heart (albeit, often with a correcting rod in his hand, faithfully administered!) makes his expositions relevant, poignant and challenging.¹⁸

In the task of abridging the work of a master theologian and pastor, I have sought as much as possible to retain Calvin’s simplicity of language, while expressing as accurately as I have been able the essence of his expositions. To any adventurous persons who may take up the full text, whether Anderson’s translation or the original Latin, and seek to compare and evaluate my (too often) inadequate précis, I freely confess all shortcomings to be entirely my fault—‘*mea culpa*’. Nevertheless, as I have worked at this task, my constant prayer has been that something of the unsurpassed excellence of Calvin’s instruction will have been preserved and made available to a wider public than would ever make use of the original massive and magisterial work.

My head!’ (2 *Kings* 4:18f.). One of many examples of Calvin dismissing a fanciful interpretation is found in his comment on Psalm 49:4: ‘I see little force in the idea suggested by several interpreters of the Psalmist having employed his *lyre* that he might render a subject in itself harsh and disagreeable more engaging by the charms of music. He would merely follow the usual practice of accompanying the psalm with the lyre.’

¹⁸ Professor Paul Helm helpfully pointed out to me out regarding 16th centuries expositions: ‘It was the fashion to “interrupt” Bible exposition to insert learned *scholia* on points of doctrine. Vermigli, for example, has one on the resurrection of the body going to 30,000 words before he resumes the exposition.’

PSALM I

THE GRACE OF LAW

1:1–2. *Blessed is the man.* The sum of the whole Psalm is that the servants of God must endeavour utterly to abhor the life of the ungodly. But as it is the policy of Satan to insinuate his deceits in a very crafty way, the prophet, in order that none may be unwittingly deceived, shows how by little and little men and women are ordinarily seduced into turning aside from the right path. They do not, at the first step, advance so far as a proud contempt of God; but having once begun to listen to evil counsel, Satan leads them step by step further astray until they rush headlong into open transgression. So he begins with *counsel*, by which term I understand the wickedness which does not show itself openly. Then he speaks of the *way* which is to be understood of the customary manner of living. Then he places at the top the *seat* by which metaphor he refers to the obstinacy produced by the habit of a sinful life. Thus ought the three phrases, *to walk*, *to stand*, and *to sit*, be understood.

In the second verse, the Psalmist does not pronounce those happy who fear God (as he does elsewhere), but he designates godliness by *the study of the law*, teaching us that God is only rightly served when his law is obeyed. It is not left to each of us to frame a system of religion according to our own judgment, but our standard of godliness is to be taken from the Word of God. When David here speaks of *the law*, it is not as if the other parts of the Scripture are being excluded, but rather, since the whole of Scripture is nothing else than an exposition of the law, under the law as the head is comprehended the whole body.

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1:3. *He shall be like a tree.* There is an implied contrast between the vigour of a tree planted in a situation well watered, and the decayed appearance of one which, although it may flourish beautifully for a time, yet soon withers on account of the barrenness of the soil in which it is placed. Yet the children of God constantly flourish, and are always watered with the secret influences of divine grace, so that whatever may befall them is conducive to their salvation. On the other hand, the ungodly are carried away by a sudden tempest or consumed by the sun's scorching heat.

1:4–6. *The ungodly are not so.* Now the Psalmist teaches us to contemplate with the eye of faith what might otherwise seem incredible. For though the ungodly may rise high and appear to great advantage like a stately tree, we may rest assured that they will become as chaff or refuse whenever God chooses to cast them down with the breath of his mouth. The prophet also tacitly acknowledges that the ungodly please and enjoy themselves, and appear to triumph during the reign of moral disorder in the world—just as robbers revel in woods and caves when they are beyond the reach of justice. But he pronounces them to be miserable when they shall be reduced to their proper order and discover that they were merely infatuated when they thought themselves to be happy. We see now, therefore, that the Psalmist teaches us that happiness is the inward blessing of a good conscience.

Finally, we are told that even in this present life the prosperity of the ungodly begins to pass away as often as God manifests the tokens of his judgment. For then, being awakened out of their sinful stupor, they are obliged to acknowledge they have no part with the people of God. But because this is not always accomplished in this present life, believers must wait patiently for the day of final separation, when Christ will separate the sheep from the goats. Because it is the office of God to defend his servants and take care of their safety, we are to be happy under his protection. Certainly, he is the avenger of wickedness.

Psalms 1-2

Therefore, we must never allow ourselves to be deceived by the imaginary happiness of the ungodly, but in the circumstances of our distress, we must keep before us the providence of God who ultimately will bring order out of confusion.

PSALM 2

THE REIGN OF THE LORD'S ANOINTED

2:1-2. *Why do the nations rage?* In these verses, David confesses he had a sore battle to fight against whole nations with their kings who had conspired against him. But he courageously boasts that their attempts were vain because they waged war, not against mortal man, but against God himself. By honouring himself with the title his Anointed One (Messiah), he declares that he reigned only by the authority and command of God, inasmuch as the oil brought by the hand of Samuel made him king who formerly was only a private person. And God could not but show himself the defender of the kingdom of which he was the founder.

That David prophesied concerning Christ is clear from this, that he knew his own kingdom to be merely a shadow. We meet with this principle in all the prophets, that David (with his posterity) was made king not so much for his own sake but to be a type of the Redeemer. For David's temporal kingdom was a kind of promise to God's ancient people of the eternal kingdom which at length was truly established in the person of Christ. Indeed, the things David declares concerning himself are not violently, or even allegorically, applied to Christ, but were truly predicted concerning him.

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We learn then that we are to be consoled when the world rages to disturb and even end the prosperity of Christ's kingdom; for we remember that this is but a fulfilment of what was long ago predicted. We should compare what we witness at the present time with those things that the apostles experienced. From Christ's kingdom true peace issues forth to the world, nevertheless, through the wickedness of men, whenever it rises from obscurity into open view, disturbances are aroused.

There is here also a second consolation. When the ungodly have mustered their forces and not only pour forth their proud blasphemies, but furiously assault heaven itself, we may safely laugh them to scorn because he whom they are assailing is the God in heaven. And they who make war against God shall not prevail. This truth runs through the whole gospel; for the prayer of the apostles (*Acts 4:24ff.*) clearly testifies that it ought not to be restricted to the person of Christ, but also encompasses the church.

2:3. *Let us burst their bonds.* This is a personification [a figure of speech in which persons are supposed to speak], in which the prophet introduces his enemies as speaking. Since they are determined to drive David from the throne, their aim is to overthrow the kingdom God has set up. The words *bonds* and *cords* denote their pride. So it is with the enemies of Christ who refuse his authority which they regard as humiliating them.

2:4–6. *He who sits in the heavens.* In opposition to the counsel, pride, preparation, resources, strength and efforts of his enemies, David places the power of God alone. By calling them kings of the earth (verse 2), he has expressed their feeble and perishable condition. Now, in the lofty title of he who sits in the heavens, he extols the power of God, as if he had said, that power remains intact and unimpaired, whatever men may attempt against it. Such men resemble so many grasshoppers, and meanwhile the Lord undisturbed watches from on high their infatuated evolutions.

David ascribes *laughter* to God on two counts. First, to teach us that the Lord does not stand in need of great armies to

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repress the rebellion of wicked men, as if this were an arduous and difficult matter; on the contrary, he could subdue their rebellion whenever he pleases with the most perfect ease. Second, he would have us understand that when God permits the reign of his Son to be troubled, he does not desist from interfering because he is employed elsewhere and so unable to afford assistance, or because he is neglectful of the honour of his Son. No, he purposely delays the inflictions of his wrath to the proper time, namely, until he has exposed their infatuated rage to general derision.

Therefore, let us assure ourselves that if God does not immediately stretch forth his hand against the ungodly, it is now his time of laughter. Although in the meantime we ought to weep, let us assuage the bitterness of our grief and wipe away our tears knowing that God does not connive at the wickedness of his enemies, as if from indolence or feebleness, but because for the time he would confront their insolence with quiet contempt. Mention is made of *Zion, my holy hill* because at length in God's own time the truth of this prophecy was actually established by the solemn rite of David's consecration as king. Although David in these words recalls the promise of God, yet he also signifies that his own reign is holy and connected with the temple of God. But this applies more appropriately to the kingdom of Christ which we know to be both spiritual and joined to the priesthood, and this is the principal part of the worship of God.

2:7. I will tell. David, assuming the office of a preacher, protests that he did not come to the throne without a sure and clear proof of his calling. It is as if he had said, 'I did not usurp the kingdom, but I brought with me the command of God without which I would have acted presumptuously in advancing myself to such an honourable station.' But this was more truly fulfilled in Christ, and David, under the influence of the spirit of prophecy, makes special reference to him. In this way all the ungodly are rendered inexcusable because Christ proved himself to be endowed with lawful authority from God, not only by his miracles

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but by the preaching of the gospel. Indeed, through first the apostles and after them pastors and teachers, the very same testimony resounds through the whole world.

David, individually considered, was inferior to the angels, but in so far as he represented the person of Christ, he is with very good reason preferred far above them—as the Lord says, *You are my son*. Nevertheless, here we are to understand not one son among many, but his only begotten Son, that he alone should have the pre-eminence both in heaven and on earth. *Today I have begotten you* is to be understood as denoting the time of this revelation. He is only said to be begotten in the sense that the Father has now borne testimony to him as being his own Son. *He* who from the beginning had been hidden in the sacred bosom of the Father, and who had been obscurely shadowed forth under the law, was known to be the Son of God from the time when he came forth with authentic and evident marks of Sonship, as John says, ‘We have seen his glory, as of the only begotten of the Father’ (*John* 1:14).

2:8. *As of me.* Christ is introduced as presenting himself before the Father with prayers, in order to illustrate the free liberality of God in conferring upon men the honour of constituting his own Son governor over the whole world. We know that David reigned over a large extent of territory and that many nations became tributaries to him; but what is said here was not fulfilled in him. Rather, this title is applied to Christ not only as God but is extended to the whole person of the Mediator. For after he had emptied himself, there was given to him a name which is above every name, that before him every knee should bow (*Phil.* 2:9).

2:9. *You shall break them.* This verse teaches us that Christ is furnished with power to reign even over those who are averse to his authority and refuse to obey him. The language implies that all will not voluntarily receive his yoke but that many will be rebellious, whom notwithstanding he will subdue and compel to submit to him. It remains true, however, that the beauty

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and glory of the kingdom of which David speaks are more illustriously displayed when a willing people run to Christ in the day of his power, to show themselves his obedient subjects.

The severe and dreadful sovereignty set before us here which strikes alarm into his enemies is not at all inconsistent with the kindness with which Christ tenderly and sweetly cherishes his own people. For he who shows himself a loving shepherd to his gentle sheep, must treat the wild beasts with a degree of severity, either to convert them from their cruelty or effectually to restrain them.

It can be gathered from Paul (2 *Cor.* 10:4) that the gospel may become an iron rod, for he teaches that Christ's ministers are equipped with spiritual weapons to cast down everything that exalts itself against the Lord. Even the faithful themselves may be offered in sacrifice to God that he may revive and renew them by his grace, for it is only right that we should be humbled in the dust before Christ stretches forth his hand to save us. But he leads his disciples into repentance in such a way as not to appear terrible to them. Rather, by showing them his shepherd's rod, he quickly turns their sorrow into joy, protecting them under the healing shadow of his hand.

2:10-11. *Now therefore, O kings.* David addresses kings and rulers who are not easily brought into a submissive state of mind, for they are prevented from learning what is right by the foolish conceit of their own wisdom with which they are puffed up. His exhortation also applies to the common classes so that all, from the highest to the lowest, may humble themselves before God. He also warns of the necessity of speedy repentance since not always will they be favoured with such opportunities. *Be wise*, he says, for however good opinion sinners may have of their own shrewdness, we may be sure they are arrant fools until they become humble scholars at the feet of Christ. The manner in which they may be wise is to *serve the LORD with fear*; and certainly, since they are so hardened by security as to withdraw their obedience from God, strong measures are initially employed to recover them from their rebelliousness.

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Lest they suppose the service to which he calls them is grievous, he teaches them by the word *rejoice* how pleasant and desirable it is. But lest, intoxicated with vain pleasures, they imagine themselves happy while they are enemies of God, he exhorts them further by the words *with trembling* to a humble and dutiful submission. For the only true and salutary joy is that which arises from resting in the fear and reverence of God. But what kind of fear and service does God require? Since it is God's will to reign by the hand of his Son, and since he has engraved on his person the marks and insignia of his own glory, the proper proof of our obedience and piety towards him is to embrace his Son, whom he has appointed king over us (*John 5:23*). The term *kiss* refers to the solemn sign of honour which subjects in those days yielded to their sovereigns. Therefore the sum is that God is defrauded of his honour if he is not served in Christ. Thereafter is a warning to those who despise Christ. It is as if he had said, 'As Christ is not despised without indignity being done to the Father, who has adorned him with his own glory, so the Father himself will not allow such an invasion of his sacred rights to go unpunished.' To teach them to beware of deceiving themselves in the hope of a long delay, he says plainly that *his wrath is quickly kindled*: the proud should not harden themselves in their stupidity nor flatter themselves from the patience of God, in the hope of escaping unpunished.

2:12. *Kiss the Son.* The concluding sentence of the Psalm qualifies what has been said concerning the severity of Christ; for his iron rod and the fiery wrath of God would strike terror into us all unless this comfort had been added. Therefore he now encourages God's faithful servants to entertain good hope by setting forth the sweetness of his grace. Lest believers apply to themselves the severity of which he has spoken, a sanctuary of hope is opened to them to which they can flee so they will not be overwhelmed by the terror of God's wrath. I consider this final sentence to be understood of Christ for it is him we are enjoined to kiss.