CRUCIFIED AND RISEN
Title page of the first French edition of Calvin’s *Sermons on the Deity, Humanity and Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and likewise on his Passion, Death, Resurrection, Ascension and Last Advent* (Geneva: Conrad Badius, 1558). The legend around the printer’s mark reads: ‘From empty dwellings full of darkest night, God with Time’s help draws Truth into the light.’
CRUCIFIED AND RISEN

Sermons on Matthew 26–28

John Calvin

Newly translated from the French of 1558

by

ROBERT WHITE

THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST
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Through the death of Christ we are blessed, that is, justified and made alive. As long as sin, death and the curse remain in us, sin damns us, death kills us and the curse curses us; but when these things are transferred to Christ, what is ours becomes his, and what is his becomes ours. Let us learn, therefore, in every temptation, to transfer sin, death, the curse and all the evils that oppress us from ourselves to Christ, and on the other hand to transfer righteousness, life and blessing from him to us. For he does in fact bear all our evils, because God the Father, as Isaiah says, ‘has laid on him the iniquity of us all.’

LUTHER, Lectures on Galatians, LW 26:292.

If we seek for salvation, the name of Jesus alone teaches us that it is in him. … If we desire the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we will find them in his anointing. If we are looking for strength, we have it in his lordship. … If we ask for redemption, his passion provides it. In his condemnation we have our absolution. If we want pardon for sin’s curse, that gift lies in his cross. Atonement we have in his sacrifice and cleansing in his blood. Our reconciliation was effected by his descent into hell; the mortification of our flesh lies in his burial, and newness of life in his resurrection, through which we also have the hope of immortality.

INTRODUCTION

Calvin’s practice, when preaching to his Genevan congregation, was not to deliver homilies on given themes or on discrete portions of Scripture as had been the custom in the medieval church, but to preach through a whole book at a time, verse by verse, chapter by chapter. In the case of a short book like Joel or Obadiah, a month or two might suffice; in the case of a larger book like Isaiah or Ezekiel, a much longer period, measured in years, was required. Even a relatively modest text of four or five chapters, such as 2 Timothy, which is almost wholly concerned with practical issues, provided material enough to occupy the preacher for four months in the summer of 1555.

From time to time, however, Calvin would suspend his current sermon series in order to focus attention on key dates in the Christian calendar: Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. We know, for example, that between 1549 and 1562 he preached regularly from Luke on the nativity, from Matthew and, less often, from John on Christ’s passion, death and resurrection, and from Acts on the descent of the Holy Spirit. A Council ordinance of March 1544 in fact required preachers to ‘preach the passion’ throughout Holy Week, and what evidence we have shows that the Reformer was happy to comply.¹

Calvin’s attitude to the observance of feast days was less strict than is sometimes supposed. Following his return from Strasbourg to Geneva in 1541, he made no attempt to press for the abolition of the established feast days of Christmas, Circumcision, Annunciation and Ascension, and when in November 1550 the authorities voted to retain, out of the four, only Christmas, he claimed to have had no part in the decision. What in a sense resolved the problem for him was the fact that, in Geneva, Easter, Pentecost and the Sunday nearest Christmas were three of the four Sundays set aside by law for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. These, then, came to represent what we might call the high points in the Reformer’s Christian year, and prompted him to preach on their significance.

Given Calvin’s reputation as a preacher and the widespread demand for his sermons in printed form, his Christmas, Easter and Pentecost sermons inevitably attracted the interest of publishers. Accordingly, in July 1558, an edition of selected sermons was issued by Genevan printer Conrad Badius, under the title Plusieurs sermons de Iehan Calvin touchant la divinité, humanité et nativité de nostre Seigneur Iesus Christ. Item, touchant sa passion, mort, resurrection, ascension et dernier advenement. Puis touchant la descente du S. Esprit sur les apostres, et la première predication de S. Pierre. The book consisted of a lengthy exegetical piece (congrégation) on John 1:1-5 and twenty-six sermons, seven of which were on the Servant Songs of Isaiah 52–53. The remaining nineteen comprised one sermon on the nativity (Luke 2:1-14), nine on Christ’s passion, death and resurrection (Matt. 26–28), four on the ascension (Acts 1:1-11), four on the descent of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4, 13-24) and one on the last advent (2 Thess. 1:6-10).

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2 The sermons were recorded by Calvin’s regular stenographer, Denis Raguenier. See, for
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The sermons on Isaiah, the single sermon on 2 Thessalonians, the four sermons on Acts 1 and three of the four on Acts 2 belong to Calvin’s regular pulpit series. Health and other commitments permitting, the Reformer’s custom, as we know, was to preach twice on Sundays and daily on weekdays in alternate weeks. While none of the sermons is dated, the Acts series can be assigned to 1549, and the nativity and passion sermons to 1557–1558. It is possible, moreover, to place them in a narrower temporal framework. Internal evidence shows that, of the sermons on Matt. 26–28, the first two were Sunday sermons, the last sermon, on the resurrection, is explicitly said to have been preached on Easter Day, coincident with the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The remaining six were thus distributed over the daily services of the intervening week (Monday to Saturday), as required by the ordinance of 1544.

The translation offered here is of the nine sermons on Matt. 26–28, the centrepiece, as it were, of the whole collection. Two earlier English translations of the Plusieurs sermons exist, the first done by Thomas Stocker in 1581, the second, after a very long interval, by Leroy Nixon in 1950. The reader, it is hoped, will concede that sufficient time has elapsed to justify the appearance of a third, independent, translation.

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Calvin begins his Easter series with Jesus’ vigil in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–46), and having traced the sequence

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1 Divers Sermons of Master Iohn Calvin concerning the Divinitie, Humanitie and Nativitie of our Lorde Iesus Christe: as also touching his Passion, Death, Resurrection, Ascention, together with the comming downe of the Holy Ghost upon his Apostles (London: Thomas Dawson for George Bishop, 1581).

of events to his death on Calvary (Matt. 26:47–27:66), he concludes with the account of the resurrection (Matt. 28:1–10). The preacher does not, however, confine himself to Matthew’s text, but supplements it with material from the other Evangelists, and notably from John, whom he closely follows in his exposition of Jesus’ trial before Pilate (John 18:36–19:11), his last moments on the cross (John 19:23–37) and his burial (John 19:38–42).

It is not easy to preach on the events of that first Easter week. A bare narrative will not do, yet what is told is absolutely unique, and the conflict portrayed so searing that a rare degree of sensitivity, humility and awe is required if the preacher is to do justice to his text. He is standing, in a real sense, on holy ground. How, after all, can the inexpressible be expressed and mystery fathomed, given that it was the Creator who was mocked by his creatures, the Lord of glory who was crucified, and the sinless Son who was condemned in the place of sinners? Nor is there less mystery in the events of the resurrection. The risen Christ is no Enoch of whom it can be said, ‘he was not, for God took him’ (Gen. 5:24). For a time he continues to walk among men: he speaks, eats, prays, is seen and can be touched, but his body is no longer like ours, and he leaves us with the seemingly paradoxical promise to be absent yet present ‘to the end of the world’.

Calvin’s detailed exposition is determined by one overarching principle: nothing which happens in this, the climax of the gospel story, is the result of chance or accident. Every event, from the least to the greatest, unfolds according to the sovereign will of God. To call Christ’s condemnation a miscarriage of justice is true but scarcely relevant, since it attributes the verdict to the triumph of a determined prosecution over a powerless defence. In Calvin’s mind, the key to understanding is furnished not by reference to the operations of an earthly tribunal, but by the word of divine prophecy: ‘It pleased the Lord to bruise him’ (Isa. 53:10).
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Was there no other way? The preacher briefly entertains the question in his opening sermon before dismissing it. He is not interested in speculative solutions to the problem of sin and of man’s estrangement from the God who made him. Scripture is the record of what God has done, not of what he might have done. The ultimate answer is known to God alone; it is hidden in his secret counsel, to which not even the angels have access. We must be content – better than content, grateful! – that Scripture tells us all we need to know for our happiness and salvation.

God’s sovereignty is nevertheless exercised in such a way that the transgressors – Judas, the priests, scribes and Pharisees, Pilate, the Roman soldiers, the crowd baying for blood – retain full responsibility for their actions. In bondage to Satan, who by God’s leave contrives to do his worst, men are his willing agents, his accomplices, his ministers. Like Adam their father they sin knowingly against the light. The evil they do is theirs, not God’s, although God is able in his providence to make their evil serve his purposes for good.

Visual representations of Christ’s suffering and death, and the meditative exercises associated with them, were a staple ingredient of traditional piety, then as now. To most of Calvin’s adult hearers the ritual of the Mass, the Stations of the Cross, the annual feast and eucharistic procession of Corpus Christi and multiple images of the crucified Saviour would have been thoroughly familiar. While omitting none of the details of Matthew’s narrative, the Reformer says no more than needs to be said about Christ’s vigil in Gethsemane, his trial before Caiaphas and Pilate, his scourg- ing and humiliation on the long road to Golgotha. His attention throughout is directed less to what the eye sees than to Christ’s inner agony. What did it cost God’s Son to bear the sins of the world and thus to forfeit the Father’s fellowship? This is the question he raises in his opening address and which he does not cease
to pose in each succeeding sermon. That Jesus feels his solitude in Gethsemane is of course true. That, as man, he shrinks from the suffering to come, is no less true. But neither idea does justice to the dire distress he feels, and which finds expression in the prayer, ‘Father, if it be possible …’. Similarly on the cross, the plaintive question, ‘Why have you forsaken me?’, speaks less of physical pain than of the curse pronounced on sins and thus visited on the sin-bearer. Calvin’s belief is that what the Gospel text describes is no less than what the Creed means by Christ’s ‘descent into hell’. Gethsemane was the first step on that downward path; the cry of dereliction from the cross was the last. ‘Not only was his body offered up as the price for our redemption,’ writes Calvin, ‘but he paid a greater and more excellent price, in suffering the awful torments felt by the lost and the condemned.’

Although the preacher’s focus is always on the Christ who endured the cross and who despised its shame, he does not forget the other protagonists in Matthew’s narrative. He is alive to the bitterness of Peter’s betrayal in the courtyard of Caiaphas’ house, a bitterness made all the more poignant by the fact that it is recorded in all four Gospels, and that it is to Peter himself that we owe knowledge of the event. The preacher understands the catastrophe which overtakes Judas, the callous indifference of his priestly allies and the unutterable despair which drives him to suicide. And when the dying thief appeals to Jesus, ‘Lord, remember me’, how much greater does this miracle of grace appear when, with Calvin, we recall the circumstances in which that plea was made! ‘Consider his plight. He is close to death, and suffers awful torment as he waits for someone to come and break his legs and dismember him – torture so bitter and terrifying as to make him lose both mind and memory. He sees our Lord Jesus Christ hanging there, like him, and suffering the greater disgrace. Yet what does he say? He not only acknowledges his faults humbly before God,

1 Inst. II.16.10.
not only assumes the role of teacher so as to bring his companion back to the right path, but makes a confession which, when we look at the facts closely, deserves to surpass all others.¹

Basic as the facts of Christ’s passion and death are to an understanding of the gospel, to ask ‘What?’ without also asking ‘Why?’ is, in Calvin’s view, to miss the essentials. It is to come cold to the gospel and to leave it scarcely any warmer. It is no surprise to find that in explaining the significance of the cross, Calvin does not go beyond biblical categories of thought. Why did Christ die? He died, says the preacher, to show the gravity of man’s sin and God’s abhorrence of it. He gave his life as a ransom, to deliver transgressors from the guilt and power of sin and to relieve them of the curse which the law pronounced upon them. His blood was shed as a sacrificial offering, perfect and complete, to atone for sin, and by washing of the Holy Spirit to sanctify the sinner. He died in our stead, the just for the unjust, that we might be counted righteous in God’s sight and fully reconciled to him. He died to demonstrate God’s love and pity for the lost, and to destroy the works of the devil.

The preacher’s task is not, however, done, once he has answered the questions ‘What?’ and ‘Why?’ It remains for him to press the message home, to demonstrate that doctrine is good only as it engages heart and will, moving us to confess the debt of gratitude we owe to God and our desire to please him. Thus Calvin is at pains to stress what he calls ‘the fruit and power of Christ’s death’ – its efficacy. What then, in practical terms, is the import of the Easter message for the life of faith? How do we benefit from Christ’s passion and death? How, to use one of Calvin’s favourite metaphors, do we show that we have been profitable scholars in God’s school?

We show it by coming to God in repentance, freely confessing our sins and claiming no merit of our own, but seeking to

¹ Sermon 6.
be purged of a guilty conscience and to be forgiven for Christ’s sake. We show it by coming in thankfulness to the Father who by grace has saved us, and from whose love nothing can separate us. We show it by coming to him in our weakness, asking to be strengthened by his Holy Spirit so that we may resist temptation, mortify the sin within us and suffer affliction patiently. We show it when we come to him in prayer, relying totally on the Son who knows our nature through and through and who, as our Mediator and Advocate, pleads for us. We show it as we gather in worship to hear the word which feeds our souls, and to share in the sacraments which seal God’s promises to us and which witness to our fellowship with Jesus Christ.

There is no less fruit and power in the resurrection than in the cross. Both belong to God’s redemptive plan. ‘It is not,’ says Calvin, ‘that Jesus Christ did not cleanse us from defilement by his death and passion, but he could not be left in such a state of weakness. He had to display the power of his Holy Spirit and to show by rising that he was the Son of God.’ He who was crucified for our sins was raised for our justification. Because Christ lives, those who through the Spirit are united to him by faith will live also, having already passed from death to life. Moreover the risen Saviour counts us as brethren, and since we are brethren we are, in him, children of God. ‘For although he was God’s own Son, and although we are only children by adoption and by grace, this commonality remains, namely that he who is Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is, at the same time and through him, our Father.’ And since Christ our Head is in heaven, that too is where our life is, hidden with him in God. We live in the light of eternity, anticipating the glory which is to come.

The present translation has been made from the text prepared by the nineteenth-century editors of Calvin’s collected works, G.

1 Sermon 9.
2 Sermon 9.
Baum, E. Cunitz and E. Reuss. Careful comparison has, however, been made with the original Badius edition held by the Bibliothèque de Genève. Punctuation has been modernized and paragraph divisions introduced. Scripture references have been moved from the margins to the body of the text; they have on occasion been corrected and further references supplied. Sermon headings are my own. The extempore prayers with which Calvin concluded his sermons and which the *CO* editors omitted, have been reinstated. The preacher frequently cites Bible texts from memory; they are translated in the form in which they appear. Some explanatory notes have also been provided.

Annexed to these sermons is a sermon on the ascension (Acts 1:9-11). It is among the earliest of Calvin’s sermons whose text has been preserved; it allows another Evangelist, Luke, to continue and, in a sense, to conclude Matthew’s narrative of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. ‘By his ascension,’ says Calvin, ‘he has made for us an opening which had been closed through Adam. For since he entered heaven in our flesh and, as it were, in our name, it follows, as the apostle says, that we are now in a sense seated with him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). Ours is no bare hope: we already possess it in our Head.’

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ROBERT WHITE
Sydney, November 2019

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2 It is one of four sermons on Acts 1:9-11 which are included in the *Plusieurs sermons* collection (*CO* 48: 577-622).

3 *Inst.* II.16.16.
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Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go yonder and pray.' And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to grieve and to be sorrowful. Then he said to them, 'My soul is sad, even to death. Remain here and watch with me.' And going a little further on he fell on his face to the ground, and prayed, saying, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless not as I will, but as you will.' And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, 'Could you not watch with me one hour?'

(Matthew 26:36-40)

When it is a question of our salvation, Scripture sets three objectives before us. The first is that we should know the inestimable love that God has for us, so that we may glorify him as he deserves. Next, that we should come to hate our sins, as is only proper, and should rightly feel such shame that we humble ourselves before the majesty of our God. Third, that we should place such value on our salvation that we are led to forsake this world and all that belongs to this fleeting life, and are drawn instead to that inheritance which has been so dearly won for us.
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is to this that we should turn our eyes and apply our minds when we are told how the Son of God redeemed us from everlasting death and obtained for us the heavenly life.

We must learn, then, in the first place, to give God the praise which is his due. He might in fact have snatched us from the pit of death in a different way: nevertheless he chose to display the infinite treasures of his goodness by not sparing his only-begotten Son. Accordingly the Lord Jesus wished to give us an exceptional pledge of his concern for us in willingly surrendering himself to death. For we will never be touched to the quick nor aroused enough to praise our God, unless we examine our condition and are cast, so to speak, into the depths of hell, conscious of what it means to have provoked God's wrath, to have him as our deadly enemy, and as so terrible and awful a judge that it would be much better for heaven, earth and all creation to conspire against us, than to approach God's majesty while it was irrevocably against us. Sinners, therefore, must be stung with an understanding and awareness of their faults, and must recognize that they are worse than wretched. They must feel horror at their plight if they are to know how indebted and bound to God they are for the compassion he shows them, since he sees their hopelessness, and since he resolved to help them even though he saw no merit in them. He thought only of their misery.

Furthermore, because, as I earlier suggested, we are much too wrapped up in the things of earth, and because, when God calls us, our wants and cravings hold us back, we can only properly appreciate the life of heaven if we know at what cost it was won for us. That is why we are told here that not only did our Lord Jesus Christ choose to suffer death and offered himself as a sacrifice to appease the wrath of God his Father, but he stood true and complete surety for us when he did not shrink from facing the anguish awaiting those whose conscience reproves them, and
who know that they are guilty, before God, of everlasting death
and condemnation.

Observe, then, that God’s Son was not content to offer up
his flesh and blood and to yield to death; he was also willing to
appear before the judgment seat of God his Father for the sake of
all sinners and as their representative, ready there to suffer con-
demnation since it was our burden that he bore. Nor should we
feel embarrassed that he subjected himself to such infirmity, for
Paul rightly uses his example to urge us not to be ashamed of the
preaching of the cross, however foolish it is to some and however
offensive to many (1 Cor. 1:23; 2 Tim. 1:8). The lower our Lord
Jesus Christ stooped, the more we see that the sins for which we
were accountable to God could not be blotted out until he had
gone to the bitter end. We know indeed that he became weak so
that we might be strengthened by his power, and that he chose to
share all our sufferings, except for sin, so that today he might be
quick to help us (Heb. 4:15). For if he had not, in his own person,
felt the fears, doubts and torments which we endure, he would
not be ready, as he now is, to show us pity.

We say that anyone who does not know what hunger or thirst is
will never be moved by pity or kindness toward those who suffer,
because he has always lived a life of ease and pleasure. Now it is
ture that although God in his nature does not experience feelings
as we do, he does not fail to show us kindness. This is because he
is the fount of all goodness and mercy. However, so that we might
have assurance that our Lord Jesus knows our weaknesses and
can help us bear them, and so that we might come all the more
boldly to him and by a more direct route, the apostle declares that
he was tempted just as we are (Heb. 2:18). So when the text which
we have read says that our Lord Jesus came to a place called Geth-
semane, and later to the Mount of Olives, we must understand
that it was to offer himself as a willing sacrifice, and to show that
he meant to fulfil the duty and responsibility entrusted to him. For why did he take our flesh and nature upon himself if not to make up for our rebelliousness by his obedience, so that we might obtain full and perfect righteousness before God his Father?

Thus he offered himself up to death because we could not be reconciled by any other means, nor could we appease God’s wrath which our sin had provoked except by his obedience alone. That is why God’s Son came freely to the place where he knew Judas was to find him. Know, then, that since our father Adam had brought destruction on us by his rebellion, it was necessary for God’s Son, who reigns supreme over every creature, to submit, taking the role of a slave. Hence he is called the servant both of God and of all his people (Isa. 42:1). In the same way Paul, in order to show how reliant we must be on God when we call upon him, fully trusting him to answer the prayers of us, his children, declares that through the obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ we are counted righteous (Rom. 5:19). It is like a cloak which serves to cover all our sins and transgressions, so that God takes no account of what might hinder us from obtaining grace.

On the other hand we see that our redemption came at a very high price: our Lord Jesus Christ experiences such deep distress and suffers the terrors of death – to the point indeed that he sweats drops of blood. He is, so to speak, quite carried away, asking that, if it be possible, he might escape such anguish. To see these things ought to make us conscious of our sins. There is no place here for dreamy self-indulgence when we see the Son of God so utterly overwhelmed that he seems to be in the deepest of pits. If this had happened to a righteous man we should certainly feel moved since, in order to ransom us, he would have suffered what befell the Son of God. Yet here we have one who is the source of life surrendering himself to death! He who upholds the world by his power is made weak! He who keeps all creatures safe from fear
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has himself to endure such terror! When, therefore, these things are made known to us, we would have to be more than senseless if we did not look within and, being reproved for our faults and iniquities, did not feel shame before God, sighing and groaning, especially if, as a result, we were not led to God with true repentance. Men cannot rightly turn to God unless in themselves they stand condemned, and feel both fear and anguish at the prospect of the curse prepared for them if they are not restored to God’s grace.

To give us a better understanding of all these things, we are told that our Lord Jesus took only three of his disciples, leaving the rest of the company far off. Even so he does not take the three with him, but prays to God his Father in secret. So we notice that our Lord Jesus has no companion with him when he offers himself as a sacrifice for us. He alone accomplished and fulfilled all that was necessary for our salvation. This is made even clearer to us when we read that the disciples fell asleep. They could not be woken up, although they had been warned many times that the hour was coming in which our Lord Jesus was to suffer for the redemption of the human race, and although for three or four hours he had not stopped exhorting them and telling them of his approaching death. In the face of all this they nevertheless fell asleep. Here we see, as in a real-life portrait, that the Son of God had to bear our burdens by himself: no help could be expected from anyone else.

This was meant to give us food for thought, so that we did not speculate wildly as poor unbelievers do who cannot be content with our Lord Jesus Christ, but who imagine that they need protectors and advocates, as if there were any number of redeemers. So we see the cursed blasphemies which prevail in popery, where meritorious deeds serve to enhance the death and passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, and which thus allow us to go free, relieved of the debt we owe to God. Although they insist that a general
remission was obtained from the guilt of original sin, and also from the sins we presently commit, nevertheless all of necessity remains confused. The blood of Jesus Christ is not enough, unless the merits of the martyrs are further added. To these, they say, we must also look for refuge, if God is to be favourable to us.¹

Seeing that the devil has gone to such extremes, we ought to cling all the more to our Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that only in him is perfect salvation to be found. Accordingly the prophet Isaiah says that God wondered when he saw that there was no one else to help (Isa. 63:5). Admittedly God well knew that he himself must accomplish our salvation, but this was so that we should feel ashamed and not be deceived by our hypocrisy, proving that we had contributed nothing to the forgiveness of our sins, so that he might receive us in his grace and love. We were not meant to run this way or that in order to find mediators for ourselves. To settle the point, then, Scripture says that God looked to his own arm for help, and accomplished everything by his own righteousness, finding no one to be his partner.

This is demonstrated visibly to us when we read that three of the disciples, the cream of them all, fell asleep like miserable beasts. There was only brutish mindlessness in them, which was, we might say, monstrous and unnatural, given that they went to sleep at so critical a time. To help us turn our trust away from every creature and place it wholly in our Lord Jesus Christ, it is said that he himself went forth to the fight.

For the rest, in looking to God his Father, he clearly shows us the remedy we need to relieve our distress, to temper our sadness

¹The Roman Catholic Church held that baptism effaced the guilt of original sin and of sins committed prior to baptism. Sins committed after baptism could be remitted through contrition, confession, the sacrament of penance and priestly absolution. The notion of a treasury of merits, stored up by Christ, Mary and the saints, both living and dead, on which the penitent might draw, received papal sanction in 1343. The invocation of the saints was a practice which the church had long observed, and was reaffirmed as ‘good and beneficial’ by the Council of Trent in its final session of 1563.
and even to rise above it when we feel depressed. For if we are grieving and in distress, we know that God is not called ‘the father of all comfort’ in vain (2 Cor. 1:3). If we are separated from him, where else will we find strength if not in him? So we see that, in time of need, God’s Son did not hold back. He therefore leads us by his example to our true refuge whenever we are sad and in distress.

Observe, however, the form he uses when he prays: ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup be taken from me’ – or, instead of ‘cup’, ‘drink’, for in speaking of a goblet, cup or glass, he is using a metaphor. Scripture thus calls afflictions ‘bitter drink’, so that we might know that nothing happens by chance, but that God, like any good family head, apportions to each as he pleases. As, then, a father will give to each of his children his share, or a master to each of his servants, so God shows that it is by him and his hand that they are beaten and afflicted. So too, when good befalls us, it comes from his unmerited kindness, and he gives as much of it to us as he chooses. According, therefore, to this natural way of speaking, our Lord Jesus describes his death as a drink so bitter that he wishes it were taken from him – ‘if it were possible’.

Of course we might raise many questions here, for at first glance Jesus Christ would seem to have forgotten our salvation, or else by shunning battle to have given us up as lost because of the fear he felt. That, however, would be at odds with what we said before: it would greatly obscure the love he showed us. We do not need to enter into such involved arguments, since we know that very often intense feeling so grips a man’s mind that he ceases to think of one thing or another. Hard pressed by the affliction of the moment, he breaks out, dismissing all thoughts of moderation from his head. When, therefore, we find ourselves quite overwhelmed, it does not mean that everything else is banished from our hearts and that we cease to be concerned.
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Someone, for example, who is thinking of some trouble in the church – some very specific trouble – will pray to God as though he cared nothing for the rest of the world. Does this mean that he has lost all kindliness, and is indifferent to his brethren who also need prayer on their behalf? Not at all! The fact is that his concern so powerfully impels him that all else is, as it were, set aside for a time. Moses asks to be blotted out of the book of life (Exod. 32:32). If we wanted to examine every detail of the story, we might say that Moses blasphemed against God by suggesting that God might change his mind, for those whom God has chosen for eternal life can never perish. Moses thus seems to be fighting against God, and trying to make out that God is just like us who change our purposes and plans. How can Moses be said to honour God when, knowing that God had marked him out from childhood and given him the splendid task of leading his people, he nevertheless asks God to end his life and wipe him out? What should we say to that? We could, then, argue at length, but there is a simple solution. Moses was so zealous and passionate for his people that, learning of the terrible threats which God’s lips had uttered, he briefly forgets himself and thinks only of what will help his people.

This is how it was with our Lord Jesus Christ. If he had had to endure a hundred – no, a million! – deaths, he would most certainly have prepared himself beforehand. Even so he chose, not so much for his sake as for ours, to suffer the anguish which, as we see, closes in upon him. That is one point.

A second point is this. We may wonder how Jesus Christ, who is absolutely just, the Lamb without spot, the standard and mirror of all righteousness, holiness and perfection, should have willed something different from God’s will. The answer is that while God has in himself the very fullness of righteousness, the angels, although conforming to God’s will and wholly obedient
to it, have a will distinct from his. Inasmuch as they are created beings, they may have feelings which do not belong to God. As for us, who are beset by this mass of sin, we are so confused that we are a long way from God's will. There is something excessive in all our passions, and often indeed there is open rebellion. Even if we think of man in his integrity, that is, uncorrupted by sin, it is certain that he would have had wishes which were very far from God, yet which were not on that account bad or wrong. Supposing Adam had not become corrupt and had continued in the state in which he had been created, he would nevertheless have felt heat and cold, and would have suffered worry, fear and so on. It was the same with our Lord Jesus Christ. We learn that in everything he felt there was neither spot nor stain, all being patterned on obedience to God. Nevertheless, since he had taken our nature on himself, he was inevitably subject both to fear and to the terror we are talking about; subject too to worry and to things of that kind.¹

This may not be clear to us, since in muddied water we cannot make anything out! Our human feelings toss us this way and that on a sea of emotions; with the result that we need God to steady us. Our passions are like a quagmire which reeks of every infection imaginable, so that we cannot contemplate the kind of suffering felt by our Lord Jesus Christ, if we judge it by our own experience. Even supposing our purposes were good and our

¹ In expounding Christ's prayer in Matt. 26:39, Calvin seeks in part to answer unnamed critics who accuse him of attributing unworthy motives to the Saviour. He therefore argues (i) that we cannot judge Christ's state of mind by our own, chaotic, emotional experiences; (2) that Christ, as man and as our unique sin-bearer, experienced real anguish in Gethsemane, but anguish consonant with faith. Cf. Inst. II.16.12: 'These detractors … do not recognize that such weakness in Jesus Christ was innocent of every fault and blemish, since it was held within the bounds of obedience to God. Because we cannot perceive any proper moderation in our own corrupt nature, and because all our passions are, by their impulsiveness, troubled and excessive, they measure the Son of God by the common standard. There is, however, a great difference, for he, being blameless and without any stain of imperfection, had feelings so well tempered that no excess was to be found in him.'
wishes upright and approved by God, we would still fall short. For example, is it not a good and holy thing for a father to love his children? Yet even here we sin, for the balance and moderation required are lacking. There are faults in whatever virtues we possess. God makes us conscious of them, the better to cast down all pride, to give us cause to hang our heads and to be overcome by shame, since even the good is corrupted by indwelling sin, of which we are chock-full.

As for our Lord Jesus Christ, we must not, I repeat, be surprised if, as man, he wished for something different from the will of God his Father. We must not, however, consider him to be at fault or guilty of transgression. In fact, as we said earlier, we see in these things the inestimable love he bore us, when, faced with such a dreadful death, he willingly yielded to it. But supposing he felt no repugnance, and without a word of protest sipped the cup and found no bitterness in it, what would it mean to have redeemed us like that? It would have seemed merely a game! The fact, however, that our Lord Jesus Christ suffered such distress shows that he so loved us that he forgot himself, allowing the entire storm to break over his head and so free us from God’s wrath.

It remains for us to note that the Son of God did not endure all this anguish simply because he had to leave this world. For if that meant only the parting of the body from the soul and the experience of bodily pain, it would not have distressed him so. We must rather notice the quality of his death and consider what lies at its heart. For death does not only dissolve man but makes him feel the curse of God. Not only does God remove us from this world, not only are we lost to this present life, death ushers us as it were into the pit of hell. Where death is concerned we must be estranged from God and cut off from all hope of salvation – unless, that is, we have this remedy: our Lord Jesus Christ suffered for us, so that the wound in us should not prove fatal. For
without him we were pierced by death, having no longer any hope of salvation. Now, however, death's sharp point is broken, and its poison so purged that though death brings us low, it now serves as medicine. It is no longer fatal, because Jesus Christ has swallowed all the evil that it contained.

This, then, is what we must remember when God’s Son cries: ‘Father, if it be possible, let this cup be taken from me.’ He had in view not merely the sufferings he was to endure in his body, or the calumnies of men, or his departure from the earth. That would have been easy for him. Rather he sees himself before God and before God’s judgment seat, called to account for all our sins, and God’s curse already prepared.

Even if there were but one sinner, what would God’s wrath be like? But when we learn that God is against us, and wills to put forth his power to destroy us, alas, what can we do? Now Jesus Christ had not only to battle against such fears, but against all the brutality which men might muster. So when God summons before him all who merit everlasting condemnation and who are guilty of sin, and when we see him ready to pronounce the sentence they deserve, who will not at once imagine all the deaths, fears and terrors that each may feel? What a chasm lies before him! Now it was necessary for our Lord Jesus Christ, for him alone and with no other aid, to bear this burden. Let us judge, then, the sorrow of God’s Son by its real cause.

Now let us return to our earlier point, which is that we should first know how dearly our salvation cost him, and how precious our souls were to him when he chose to go to the utmost end for our sake. Let us acknowledge also what it was that we deserved; let us think of what our plight would have been if he had not come to our aid. Let us therefore rejoice, seeing that death has no longer any power to harm us. True, we will have a natural fear of death and will shun it, but this is to remind us of the priceless
blessing obtained for us by the death of God’s Son. It also serves to help us recall what death is in itself, being as it were the pit of hell, expressive of God’s wrath.

Moreover, since we have to struggle with such dread, we need to know that our Lord Jesus Christ made provision for all our fears, and that even in the midst of death we can still come before God with our heads held high. Of course we must above all humble ourselves, as we said before. If we are to hate our sins and to have no liking for them we must be moved by God’s judgment and terrified by the thought of it. Nevertheless we must lift our heads when God calls us to him. This also is how believers receive encouragement, since Paul writes that Jesus Christ has a crown prepared for all who await his coming (2 Tim. 4:8).

If, then, we have no hope of life when we come before the heavenly Judge, we are sure to be rejected by him. He will not acknowledge us but will disown us, even though we make profession of the Christian faith. We can only await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ if we are persuaded and convinced that he so battled with the terrors of death as to free us from them and to win for us the victory. And although we will always struggle to be conscious of our weaknesses, to turn to God for help and to be continually made to confess our sins so that God alone is seen to be righteous, we can nevertheless be sure that Jesus Christ has fought for us and gained the victory, not for himself but for us. We cannot doubt that through him we may now surmount all worry, fear and dread, and call upon God, certain that he will always receive us with outstretched arm.

It is important that we remember this. We should be clear that there is nothing speculative about the message that our Lord Jesus suffered the awful terrors of death, and that he deliberately stood surety for us before our Judge, so that, because of the battle he fought, we today may triumph over all our infirmities and may
persistently call upon God’s name, never doubting that he will answer us and will always be ready in his goodness to receive us to himself. Thus we will pass through life and death, through fire and water, knowing that our Lord Jesus Christ did not fight in vain but gives victory to all who come to him in faith. That, in sum, is what we need to bear in mind.

It is also clear that we must struggle against our own feelings, and that, failing this, it is impossible for us to move a finger without at the same time provoking God’s wrath. For here we see our Lord Jesus Christ who, as we said, is pure and blameless. If we ask what his will was, it was admittedly weak, like any human will. But he was not at fault, as is the case with those who are corrupt in Adam. There was no spot of sin in him. Here, then, is a man innocent of any wrong. Nevertheless he must strain every nerve, must struggle and finally deny himself, trampling all else down in order to make himself obedient to God his Father.

Now think of how it might have been with us. What are our feelings like? Our thoughts? Every one of them is the enemy of God; they are at war with him, as Paul says (Rom. 8:7). God, then, declares that we are completely sinful, and that everything we conceive in our heads is vanity and lies. Indeed from childhood on we are steeped in sin’s infection. Although when infants come into the world their evil is not apparent, they cannot fail to be small serpents full of poison, malice and contempt. These things, we recognize, are in our nature – yes, from the very beginning. And what are we like once we come of age? We are, as I said, so evil that we cannot frame a single thought which is not in rebellion against God. We can never commit ourselves to one thing or another without straying from the rule of goodness, and without hitting out at God as if we meant to spite him.

What a fight we need to put up, then, in order to obey what is right! When we see that our Lord Jesus, who was entirely inno-
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cent and just, could only submit to God his Father by denying himself, we are required to exert ourselves to the full. Let us learn to fight more valiantly. This we cannot do in ourselves: instead all our talents and energies tend toward evil, and we have not one drop of goodness in our nature. We are so feeble that we are defeated every single moment of the day. Since this is so, let us come to him who became weak so that we might be filled with his strength, as Paul says (2 Cor. 12:10, 13:4). Because our Lord Jesus Christ thus denied himself, if we would be his disciples let us learn to do the same. And as we cannot succeed in our own strength, but tend rather to go backwards, let us pray that by the power of his Holy Spirit he may master us and give us strength. As Scripture says, he suffered in the weakness of his flesh, but was raised in the power of his Spirit, so that we should share in the fight he fought, and should feel the fruit and excellence of his power (2 Cor. 13:4; Eph. 1:19). This is what we must remember when we read that Jesus Christ wholly resigned his will in order fully to obey God his Father.

We should always be mindful that here the Son of God not only presents himself as an example and mirror, but desires us to know how high a price he paid for our salvation. For the devil, seeking to veil God's infinite grace displayed in our redemption, insists that Jesus Christ was simply a model of all goodness. This is the way those canting hypocrites in popery twitter on, for although they cannot explain what obedience and denial of self are all about, they hold that what the Evangelist says about Jesus Christ is meant to make us follow his example and to pattern ourselves on him.

Now that is good as far as it goes, but it is not the whole or even the principal thing. An angel could have been sent to us to provide an example for us to follow. Jesus Christ, however, was the Redeemer of the world; he willingly yielded and surrendered
himself to the wretched condition in which we see him here. Bear this in mind: we, who can find nothing in ourselves to give us hope of salvation, must look to him for what we lack. We can never obtain God’s grace nor draw near to him, unless we come as miserable beggars to Jesus Christ. This is impossible until we acknowledge our poverty and our need – in a word, our utter destitution. Remember this. We have heard that to be perfect we must live in obedience to God, must renounce our thoughts and wants and all that our nature contains if we are to be made like him. We have heard too that we must ask God for what we do not have. Knowing this, let us be assured that our Lord Jesus Christ is not only given to us as an example, but has also shown that, if separated from him, our life can only be accursed. In death we will see the curse as a chasm and God’s wrath opening as a pit to swallow us, while we ourselves are gripped with not one fear but a million, as every creature cries vengeance against us.

We should feel this, then, and groan inwardly with shame, wishing with all our heart to come to God with true humility and repentance. We should also pray for God’s goodness and pity according as we see them here. May our lips be opened to offer him the sacrifice of praise, and may we turn away from Satan’s enticements, for his nets are spread to keep us captive to this world. May we also give up our comforts and our ease, and long instead for the heavenly inheritance which has been so dearly purchased for us. And since next Sunday we are to receive the holy Supper of our Lord, and since God, having opened the kingdom of heaven to us, provides for us a spiritual banquet there, may we be all the more moved by the teaching we have heard.¹

When we daily eat and drink for our refreshment, God bears ample witness that he is our Father and that he is concerned for

¹ The Lord’s Supper was celebrated in Geneva four times yearly: at Easter, Pentecost, the first Sunday in September and the Sunday nearest Christmas day. Prior notice of the sacrament was required to be given, as here.
these earthly and perishable bodies of ours. We cannot eat a piece of bread without having proof of God’s care for us. The Supper, however, exists for a special reason. In it God does not fill our bellies but draws us up to the kingdom of heaven. He sets before us the Lord Jesus, his Son, to be our food and drink. And Jesus Christ is not content merely to welcome us to his table; he desires at the same time to be our food. He allows us to experience in actual fact that his flesh is truly food and his blood, drink. Seeing, then, that our Lord Jesus invites us so sweetly to come to him, would we not be utterly vile if we did not withdraw from all that turns us away from him? And although we may come dragging our feet, let us not fail to hate our faults, so that we yield ourselves to him and do all we can to break free of this world and to yearn for the kingdom of heaven.

Consider, therefore, how useful the Lord’s Supper can be to each of us. Since our Lord Jesus calls us to share in his death and passion, let us enjoy the fruit he has won for us, and let us be fully assured that God reckons us as his children, and that with full voice we may call upon him as our Father. Let us come with true faith, knowing why our Lord Jesus was sent to us by God his Father, what his office is, and how he is still today the Mediator that he has been from all eternity. And let us seek to be so united to him that what we are told is not for us only as individuals, but is for all in every age. So let there be mutual harmony and brotherhood among us, since Jesus Christ bore the condemnation passed by God his Father upon us all. Let that be our aim, and let each of us not only come for himself but, as I said, let him try to draw his friends in also. May we thus encourage each other to walk steadfastly, always considering our life to be a kind of path which we must tread to the very end. May we not grow weary half-way through, but may we make progress every day and strive to bring closer those who are far off, so that this may be our joy,
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our life, our boast, our satisfaction. And let us aid and assist each other, until God fully gathers us to himself.

Now let us cast ourselves down before the majesty of our good God, acknowledging our faults and praying that he may so make us feel them that we may not only cease to like them but may more and more be rid and cleansed of them. May we do battle with ourselves, so that he alone may have mastery over us, and may we heartily consent to do his holy will. May he also be pleased to look with merciful eye upon his poor world, and since he wills that his only Son should be the Redeemer for all in general, and that the gospel should be preached to all, let him not allow men today to harden their hearts and to turn from so good a gift, but may they be attentive, and may we draw each other in, until he brings us to himself in all perfection.