

God, the Terrifying Author of Nature and the Benevolent Defender of His People

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. Rev. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 478-484, emphasis added, English updated.

Psalm 29:5-8

5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars, Yes, the LORD splinters the cedars of Lebanon. 6 He makes them also skip like a calf, Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild ox. 7 The voice of the LORD divides the flames of fire. 8 The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; The LORD shakes the Wilderness of Kadesh.

5. *The voice of Jehovah breaks the cedars.* We see how **the prophet, in order to subdue the stubbornness of men, shows, by every word, that God is terrible.** He also seems to rebuke, in passing, **the madness of the proud**, and of those who swell with vain presumption, because they hearken not to the voice of God in His thunders, rending the air with His lightnings, shaking the lofty mountains, prostrating and overthrowing the loftiest trees. What a monstrous thing it is, that while all the irrational portion of the creation tremble before God, men alone, who are endued with sense and reason, are not moved! Moreover, though they possess genius and learning, they employ enchantments to shut their ears against God's voice, however powerful, lest it should reach their hearts.

Naturalism is a diabolical science.

Philosophers do not think that they have reasoned skillfully enough about inferior causes, unless they separate God very far from His works. **It is a diabolical science, however, which fixes our contemplations on the works of nature, and turns them away from God.** If any one who wished to know a man should take no notice of his face, but should fix his eyes only on the points of his nails, his folly might justly be derided. But far greater is the folly of those philosophers, who, out of mediate and proximate causes, weave themselves veils, lest they should be compelled to acknowledge the hand of God, which manifestly displays itself in His works.

The Psalmist particularly mentions *the cedars of Lebanon*, because lofty and beautiful cedars were to be found there. He also refers to *Lebanon* and *Mount Hermon*, and to *the wilderness of Kadesh*, because these places were best known to the Jews. He uses, indeed, a highly poetical figure accompanied with a hyperbole, when he says, *that Lebanon skips like a calf at God's voice*, and *Sirion* (which is also called Mount Hermon) *like a unicorn*, which, we know, is one of the swiftest animals.

He also alludes to the terrific noise of thunder, which seems almost to shake the mountains to their foundations. Similar is the figure, when he says, *the Lord strikes out flames of fire*, which is done when the vapors, being struck, as it were, with His hammer, burst forth into lightnings and thunderbolts.

God, the Author of Nature

Aristotle, in his book on Meteors, reasons very shrewdly about these things, insofar as relates to proximate causes, only that he omits the chief point. The investigation of these would, indeed, be both a profitable and pleasant exercise, were we led by it, as we ought, to **the Author of Nature** Himself. But nothing is more preposterous than, when we meet with mediate causes,

however many, to be stopped and retarded by them, as by so many obstacles, from approaching God; for this is the same as if a man were to remain at the very rudiments of things during his whole life, without going farther. In short, this is to learn in such a manner that you can never know any thing.

That shrewdness alone, therefore, is worthy of praise, which elevates us by these means even to heaven, in order that not a confused noise only may strike our ears, but **that the voice of the Lord may penetrate our hearts, and teach us to pray and serve God. . . .**

David appears rather to refer to the common feelings of men; for as wildernesses are dreadful of themselves, they are much more so when they are filled with thunders, hail, and storms. I do not, however, object that the wilderness may be understood, by synecdoche, to mean the wild beasts which lodge in it; and thus the next verse, where deer are mentioned, may be considered as added by way of exposition.

Psalm 29:9-11

9 The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth, And strips the forests bare; And in His temple everyone says, "Glory!" 10 The LORD sat *enthroned* at the Flood, And the LORD sits as King forever. 11 The LORD will give strength to His people; The LORD will bless His people with peace.

9. *The voice of Jehovah maketh the hinds to bring forth.* A tacit comparison, as I have said, is here made. **It is worse than irrational, it is monstrous, that men are not moved at God's voice, when it has such power and influence on wild beasts.** It is base ingratitude, indeed, in men not to perceive His providence and government in the whole course of nature; but it is a detestable insensibility that at least His unusual and extraordinary works, which compel even wild beasts to obey Him, will not teach them wisdom. Some interpreters think that *deer* are mentioned, rather than other beasts, on account of their difficulty in bringing forth their young; which I disapprove not.

The voice of the Lord is also said *to discover or make bare the forests*, either because there is no covering which can prevent it from penetrating into the most secret recesses and caverns; or, because lightnings, rains, and stormy winds, beat off the leaves and make the trees bare. Either sense is appropriate.

In His temple. God's voice fills the whole world, and spreads itself to its farthest limits; but the prophet declares that His glory is celebrated only in His church, because God not only speaks intelligibly and distinctly there, but also there gently allures the faithful to Himself. **His terrible voice**, which thunders in various ways in the air, strikes upon the ears, and causes the hearts of men to beat in such a manner, as to make them shrink from rather than approach Him not to mention that **a considerable portion turn a deaf ear to its sound in storms, rains, thunder, and lightnings**. As men, therefore, profit not so much in this common school as to submit themselves to God, David wisely says especially that the faithful sing the praises of God in His temple, because, being familiarly instructed there by His fatherly voice, they devote and consecrate themselves wholly to His service.

No man proclaims the glory of God aright but he who worships Him willingly. This may be understood likewise as a complaint, in which David reproves the whole world of being silent insofar as the glory of God is concerned, and laments that although His voice resounds through all regions, yet His praises are nowhere sung but in His temple alone.

He appears, however, after the example of all the godly, to exhort the whole of mankind to praise God's name, and designedly to erect a temple as a receptacle for His glory, for the

purpose of teaching us, that in order truly to know God, and praise Him as is His due, we need another voice than that which is heard in thunders, showers, and storms in the air, in the mountains, and in the forests; **for if He teach us not in plain words, and also kindly allure us to Himself, by giving us a taste of His fatherly love, we will continue dumb.**

Scripture alone leads us to true piety and a right view of God.

It is the doctrine of salvation alone, therefore, which cheers our hearts and opens our mouths in His praises, by clearly revealing to us His grace, and the whole of His will. It is from there that we must learn how we ought to praise Him.

We may also unquestionably see that at that time there was nothing of the light of godliness in the whole world, except in Judea. Even philosophers, who appeared to approach nearest to the knowledge of God, contributed nothing whatever that might truly glorify Him. All that they say concerning religion is not only frigid, but for the most part insipid. **It is therefore in His word alone that there shines forth the truth which may lead us to true piety, and to fear and serve God aright.**

God alone governs all things at all times.

10. *The LORD sat enthroned at the flood.* Some think that David here alludes to that memorable instance of God's vengeance, when He drowned the world at once by the flood, and thus testified to all ages that He is the judge of mankind. I agree to this in part, but extend his meaning still farther. In my opinion, he prosecutes the former subject, putting us in mind that those floods, which still threaten destruction to the earth, are controlled by the providence of God in such a way, as to make it evident **that it is He alone who governs all things at all times.** David, therefore, mentions this among other **proofs of God's power**, that even when the elements appear to be mingled and confounded together by the utmost fury of the weather, God controls and moderates these commotions from His throne in heaven. He accordingly adds, for the sake of explanation, *God sits as King forever.*

God upholds, cherishes, and strengthens His elect.

11. *The LORD will give strength to His people.* He returns to his former doctrine, namely, that although God exhibits His visible power to the view of the whole world indiscriminately, yet He exerts it in a peculiar manner in behalf of His elect people. Moreover, he here describes Him in a very different manner from what he did formerly; that is to say, not as one who overwhelms with fear and dread those to whom he speaks, but as **one who upholds, cherishes, and strengthens them.** By the word *strength* is to be understood the whole condition of man. And thus he intimates that **every thing necessary to the preservation of the life of the godly depends entirely upon the grace of God.** He amplifies this by the word *bless*; for God is said *to bless with peace* those whom He treats liberally and kindly, so that nothing is wanting [lacking] to the prosperous course of their life, and to their complete happiness. From this we may learn, that **we ought to stand in awe of the majesty of God, in such a manner as, notwithstanding, to hope from Him all that is necessary to our prosperity; and let us be assuredly persuaded, that since His power is infinite, we are defended by an invincible fortress.**