

## God Protects His People Ezekiel 9:3-6

From John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. I, 302-310, 315-316, emphasis added; updated to modern American English.

In the last book of the Bible, Revelation, the apostle John contrasts unbelievers, who bear the mark of the beast, with the faithful, who bear the mark of God:

Revelation 13:16-17: "He [the beast] causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name."

Revelation 3:12: "He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And *I will write on him My new name.*"

The old covenant prophet Ezekiel likewise prophesied regarding the mark that God writes on the foreheads of true believers. Figuratively speaking, believers are sealed with the mark of God.

***In the midst of the general destruction coming upon the Jews, God protected the faithful, His elect people.***

### **EZEKIEL 9:3-4**

"Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub, where it had been, to the threshold of the temple. And He called to the man clothed with linen, who had the writer's inkhorn by his side; and the Lord said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done in its midst.""

Now the Prophet Ezekiel shows why the angel was added to the Chaldeans [Babylonians], namely, to put a bridle on them, lest they should rage promiscuously and without selection against the elect and the reprobate.

This is a remarkable passage, because from it we learn, **first**, that God effectually threatens the impious, so that He may have attendants always at hand to obey Him; **then**, that even unbelievers make war under the direction of God, and are governed by His rod, and do nothing except at His will. Nor are the Chaldeans said to have come to the temple in vain, and to have placed themselves before the altar of God. This is not related to their praise, as if they obeyed God spontaneously, or as if they had purposed to themselves to carry out His commands, but **the secret providence of God** is here treated. Although, therefore, the Chaldeans gave the rein to their selfwill, and did not think themselves divinely governed; yet God here pronounces that they were under His hand just as if God had them as hired soldiers. As Satan is said to have joined himself to the sons of God: this was not a voluntary obedience, but because his machinations could not attack the holy Job, unless by God's command (Job 1:6). God's

sons appear in a very different way, since they offer a free obedience, and desire Him only to reign. But how great soever is the difference between the sons of God and Satan, and all the reprobate, yet it is equally true that Satan and the wicked obey God. This, therefore, we must learn in the second place.

But, **thirdly**, we are taught that **God never rashly executes His vengeance without sparing His elect**. For this reason in the slaughter of Jerusalem He has an angel, who opposes a shield, as it were, to the Chaldeans, lest their cruelty should injure them beyond God's pleasure, as we shall by and by see.

Therefore I said that the place was remarkable, because when God puts forth the signs of His wrath, the sky is, as it were, overclouded, and the faithful no less than the unbelieving are frightened, no, they are terrified with fear. For as to outward condition, there was no difference between them. Because therefore the sons of God are subject to that terror which obscures all sense of God's favor in adversity, so this doctrine must be held diligently, namely, when God gives the rein to furious men, so that they dissipate, overthrow, and destroy all things, then **the angels are always united, who restrain their intemperance with a hidden bridle**, since otherwise they would never be moderate.

***God's departure from the temple is foreshadowed by Ezekiel.***

He says, therefore, *that the glory of the God of Israel ascended from the cherub to the threshold*. He takes the glory of God for God Himself, as we may readily collect from the next verse; for he says that the LORD had spoken. But this speech agrees very well, because **God cannot be comprehended by us, unless as far as He accommodates Himself to our standard**. Because therefore **God is incomprehensible in Himself**, nor did He appear to His Prophet as He really is (since not angels even bear the immense magnitude of His glory, much less a mortal man), but He knew how far it was expedient to discover Himself, therefore the Prophet here takes His glory for Himself; that is, the vision, which was a sign or symbol of the *presence* of God.

But he says *that it ascended from the cherub*. Here also is a change of number, because **God is said everywhere to sit between the cherubim** (2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Isaiah 37:16). But here only one cherub is put, but this figure of speech is well understood, as it is so common, for God resided between the cherubim: it is said *that He went from there to the threshold of the temple*. This was a prelude to departure, as we shall afterwards see. And this testimony was needful to the Jews, because they thought that God was bounded by the visible temple.

Hence the Prophet shows that God was not fixed to a place, so as to be compelled to remain there. This is the reason why it is said *that He came from His seat to the threshold of the temple*. Now, he adds, *that He cried out to the man clad in the linen garment, and whose inkhorn was by his side*, though others translate it writing-tablets: but as he afterwards says, *write on their foreheads*, it is very probable that the ink was in his girdle, that he might mark the elect of God, that the Chaldeans should not touch them. Again he calls the angel a man, but on account of the form which he put on, as I said before. I cannot proceed further.

## PRAYER

Grant, Almighty God, since You have condescended to approach us so familiarly, that in return we may also desire to approach You, and remain in firm and holy union; so that while we persevere in that lawful course which You prescribe for us in Your word, Your blessings may increase towards us, until You lead us to fullness, when You shall gather us into Your celestial kingdom, by Christ our Lord.—Amen.

## LECTURE TWENTY-FOUR

We began to explain the precept given to the angel before God sent forth the Chaldeans to cut off the city, and destroy the people. **The angel is at length commanded to sign the foreheads of all the pious.**

. . . we may be content with the simple and genuine sense of the Prophet. . . . God orders their foreheads to be signed. We yesterday explained the cause, and said that a most useful doctrine could be collected from this place, namely, when all things seem mingled on the earth, and turned upwards and downwards, yet that **God never casts away the care of His own, but protects them from all harm.** God therefore always restrains His judgments, so that **He really proves that the safety of His people is dear and precious to Himself.**

***God's angels guard and watch over the safety of the faithful.***

We gather also that **angels** are ministers of this grace, because they **watch over the safety of the faithful**, as Scripture everywhere testifies (Psalm 91:11, 12, and elsewhere often).

Now, if any one asks what this sign was, it must be simply answered, that this vision was presented to the Prophet for the common perception of all; for if we wish to single out a few in a crowd, we need some sign. God therefore here borrows what we read concerning a sign from the customs of men. For the faithful could not otherwise understand that they were beyond the reach of weapons, when mixed with the unbelieving. Because therefore it seems the common condition of all, they might be frightened just as if God should raise His hand to chastise their sins. Therefore He says here, that they were signed in some way.

It is true then that we daily bear a sign by which God distinguishes us from the reprobate. For the blood of Christ reconciles us to the Father, as is sufficiently known; but perhaps that also may be too far-fetched. It is also true that **when God struck the land of Egypt, the Israelites were passed over by the angel, since the blood of a lamb was sprinkled on the doorposts** (Exodus 12:22, 23). **Every house which had the mark of blood was secure and safe, when God's vengeance was inflicted upon all the Egyptians.**

But as to this passage, I interpret it thus: when God gives liberty to unbelievers, so that they seem to be able to overturn the whole world, the angels are at the same time sent forth, who hinder their lust that they should not touch the sons of God. This then is sufficient for us.

***True Christians are grieved by sin and evil.***

Now the Prophet adorns the faithful with various titles, when he says, *upon the foreheads of men who groan and cry. . . .* He says then, *that the faithful groan over the abominations:* and then, *that they cry out:* for thus they translate the latter clause, although it may also be taken for bewailing, if we only understand outward sorrow, and that which openly appears. Hence we gather how **God receives us under His guardianship, and sends us His angels as protectors, so that if mixed with the impious, we may yet keep ourselves undefiled by their pollutions, and then when we cannot correct their wickedness, yet we bear testimony by grief and sorrow that they displease us.**

***Lot's example***

When the Apostle [Peter] commends to us the patience of **Lot**, he says, that he tormented his heart while he dwelt in Sodom. A single stranger could not recall those abandoned ones to a sound mind, who had given themselves over to all wickedness (2 Peter 2:7). But **he did not grow hardened to the foulness of so much sin, but continually groaned before God, and was in perpetual grief.** The Prophet now bears the same witness *concerning* other believers. Whatever it is, God here shows what He wishes His sons to be.

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***The sin of affirming, applauding, condoning, or celebrating evil.***

The apostle Paul concludes Romans, chapter 1, with a condemnation of those “who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things [as described in Romans 1] are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them” (Romans 1:32).

Therefore if we allow ourselves to approve the sins of the impious, and take pleasure in them and applaud them, we boast ourselves in vain to be God's sons, because He does not reckon any among His own who do not groan at abominations. And truly this is the sign of too much sloth, when we see the sacred name of God made the subject of ridicule, and all order overthrown, and yet are not affected with grief.

Nor is it surprising if we are involved in the punishment of sins which our own connivance has fostered, instead of their being a torment to us. For that exhortation must be remembered, that the zeal of God's house may eat us up, and the reproaches of those who reproach God may fall upon us (Psalm 69:10), as it is said elsewhere, “May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I am unmindful of you, O Jerusalem, above my chief joy” (Psalm 137:6).

Therefore when we see on one side **the name of God trodden as it were under foot, and all justice violated**, and we see on the other side the Church of God miserably and cruelly afflicted, if we smile in security, by this very thing we sufficiently show that we have nothing in common with God, and in vain we call Him Father.

Hence these titles must be marked, by which the Prophet marks all God's elect, when he says, *whosoever groan over the abominations:* then he adds the word, *crying out*, the

better to express the ardor and vehemence of their zeal —just as if he said that groaning was not sufficient, as many groan in a corner, when they see **the whole order of God so perverted**, but when they *come* to the light and the sight of men, they dare not give any sign of the least suspicion, because they are unwilling to incur hatred and ill-will.

The Prophet therefore here exacts more from the sons of God than secret groaning, when he wishes them to groan openly and vociferate [cry out loudly and vehemently]; so that they bear witness that they abominate those things which God has condemned in His law. Now it follows —

***In the midst of the general destruction, the elect are generally protected.***

#### **EZEKIEL 9:5-6**

“And to the others He said in my hearing, “Go ye after him through the city and kill; do not let your eye spare, nor have ye pity. Utterly slay old *and* young men, both maiden and little children, and women; but do not come near any man on whom *is* the mark, and begin at My sanctuary.” So they began with the elders who were before the temple.”

Now the Prophet adds, that the Chaldeans were sent to destroy the city and its inhabitants, but the order must be observed, because they are ordered to go *behind the angel*. **The grace of God therefore precedes to the safety of all the pious.** Then He opened the gate, and made a way open for His wrath, long and wide, after He had removed the faithful from all danger. For this reason it is said, *that He went through the city yet after him*. And Paul also signifies this, when he says, after your obedience has been fulfilled, then wrath is at hand against all rebels and proud ones (2 Corinthians 10:6).

**God therefore first cares for His own; but after He has received them into His keeping, and hid them as it were under His wings, then He permits the flame of His wrath to burn against all the wicked.** In fine, we see that as often as God revenges man’s wickedness, He regards His Church, and treats all as worthy of peculiar care who are endued with true and serious piety.

Then *He orders them to strike, so that their eye should not spare*; what God had taken to Himself He transfers to the Chaldees, because there ought to be an agreement between God and all His servants, even those who are not voluntary agents, but whom He bends every way by His secret instinct.

Then he expresses more clearly, *that they should not spare either old men or young men or boys or girls*; as if he said, that he must rage against all promiscuously, without any choice of age or sex. He here opposes women to men, because that sex bends even the most cruel to pity, and we know that when men are slain, women are preserved. Now girls seem to hold a better position and boys also: and decrepit old men, because nothing is to be feared from them, are *preserved* safe. But God wishes the Chaldeans so to attack the whole city, that they respect neither age nor sex.

***Were all the good people preserved free from death?***

Meanwhile He excepts the faithful of whom He had spoken, *upon whomsoever the mark shall be, do not approach him*. Here it is asked, were all the good preserved free from slaughter? for we know that Jeremiah was drawn into Egypt, to whom Chaldea

would have been a preferable place of banishment. Already Daniel and his companions had been snatched away before him; many were faithful in that multitude. On the other hand, we see many despisers of God either escaped or left in the land, as Nebuchadnezzar wished the dregs of the people to remain there. But we saw of what sort they were in Jeremiah. **It follows therefore that God neither spared all the elect, nor made a difference in consequence of the mark, because the wicked obtained safety as well as the faithful** (Jeremiah 39:10; Jeremiah 43:2, 3, 4; Jeremiah 44:15, 16).

**But we must observe, although God apparently afflicts His people with the ungodly, yet they are so separated, that nothing happens which does not tend to the safety of the righteous.** When therefore God forbids the Chaldeans to approach them, he does not mean them to be free from all injury or disadvantage, but He promises that they should be so separated from the ungodly, that they should acknowledge by sure experience that God was never forgetful of His faith and promise.

Now therefore we see how that difficulty must be solved, since **God does not so spare His own as not to exercise their faith and patience, but He does spare them so that no destruction happens to them, while He is always their protector.** But when He seems to give license to the impious, He grants this to their destruction, because they are rendered more and more inexcusable.

And this daily *experience teaches* us. For we see that the very best are so afflicted, that God's judgment begins with them. We see meanwhile that many reprobate exult with joy, even when they wantonly rage against God. **But God has the care of His own as if they had been sealed, and separates them from the ungodly; but their own destruction remains for the ungodly, and they are already held within its folds, although it is not yet perceptible by the eye.**

It follows, *begin at my sanctuary.* By the word "sanctuary" the priests and Levites are doubtless intended, and their fault was clearly greater. **There was indeed a small number who worshipped God purely, and stood firm in their duty, but the greater part had revolted from the worship of God.** Hence this passage ought to be understood of those impious priests who had despised God and His servants. Nor is it surprising that God's wrath should begin with them. For they sin doubly; because if any private man fall away, his example is not so injurious as that of the eminent, who thus draw all men into the same ruin. For we know that the eyes of the multitude are turned towards their superiors. Since therefore the priests sinned more severely than all the rest, it is not surprising if God should punish them in the first place. . . .

## PRAYER

Grant, Almighty God, since You did formerly chastise Your people so harshly, that we may profit by their example; and may we be so restrained by fear of Your name and obedience to Your law, that You may not pour forth Your wrath against us: then if You chastise us, grant that it may all turn out to our good. And may we so feel ourselves to have been sealed by You, and to be acknowledged in the number of Your sons, until at length You shall gather us into that blessed inheritance which has been obtained for us by the blood of Your only-begotten Son. — Amen.