

SERMON VII

from

A Selection of the Most Celebrated Sermons of John Calvin
(New York: S. & D. A. Forbes Printers, 1830)

"1 Timothy, Chap. ii, Verses 3, 4, and 5"

***"For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour:
Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.
For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men,
the man Christ Jesus."***

When we despise those whom God would have honored, it is as much as if we should despise him; so it is, if we make no account of the salvation of those whom God calls to himself. For it seems thereby that we would stay him from showing his mercy to poor sinners who are in the way to ruin. The reason why St. Paul uses this argument, *that God will have all the world to be saved*, is that we may, as much as lies in us, also seek the salvation of those who seem to be banished from the kingdom of God, especially while they are unbelievers.

We must always observe what the condition of the world was in the days of St. Paul. It was something new and strange to have the gospel published to the world in those days; for it appeared that God had chosen the stock of Abraham and that the rest of the world would be deprived of all hope of salvation. And indeed we see how holy writ sets forth the adoption of this people. But St. Paul commands us to pray for all the world, and not without cause; for he adds the reason, which is here mentioned: to wit, because *God will have all men to be saved*. As if he should say, "My friends, it is reasonable that we should observe what the will of God is and at what he aims, that everyone of us may employ himself to serve him aright."

Therefore, seeing it is the will of God that all men should be partakers of that salvation which he has sent in the person of his only begotten Son, we must endeavor to draw poor, silly, ignorant creatures to us that we may all come together to this inheritance of the kingdom of heaven, which has been promised us. But we must observe that St. Paul speaks not of every particular man but of all sorts of men, and of all people. Therefore, when he says that God will have all men to be saved, we must not think that he speaks of them individually; but his meaning is this--that whereas in times past he chose a certain people to himself, he means now to show mercy to all the world, yea, even to them that seemed to be shut out from the hope of salvation.

He says in another place, the heathens were without God and void of all promise because they were not as yet brought to the fellowship of the Jews. This was a special privilege that God had given to the descendants of Abraham. Therefore St. Paul's meaning is not that God will save every man, but that the promises which were given to but one people are now extended to all the world; for as he says in this same epistle, the wall was broken down at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. God had separated the Jews from all other nations, but when Jesus Christ appeared for the salvation of the world, then was this difference which existed between them and the Gentiles taken away.

Therefore God will now embrace us all; and this is the entrance into our salvation. For if that had always continued, which God ordained but for a season, then should we be all accursed, and the gospel would not have been preached to us. We should have had no sign or token of the love and goodness of God. But now we have become his children. We are no more strangers to the promises, as were our fathers, for Jesus Christ came to be a Saviour to all in general. He offered the grace of God the Father that all might receive it.

As St. Paul speaks of all nations, so he likewise speaks of all conditions. As if he should say, God will save kings and magistrates as well as others; we must not restrain his fatherly goodness to ourselves alone nor to any certain number of people. And why so? For he shows that he will be favorable to all. Thus we have St. Paul's meaning. To confirm this matter he adds, it is God's will that all should come to the knowledge of the truth. We must mark well why St. Paul uses this argument; for we cannot know the will of God unless it be made known to us, unless we have some sign or token whereby we may perceive it. It is too high a matter for us to know what God's counsel is. But as far as he shows it to us by effect, so far we comprehend it.

The gospel is called the mighty power of God and salvation to all them that believe. Yea, it is the gate of paradise. It follows then, if through the will of God the gospel be preached to all the world, there is a token that salvation is common to all. Thus St. Paul proves that God's will is that all men should be saved. He has not appointed his apostles to proclaim his name only among the Jews. For we know that the commission was given them to preach to all creatures, to be witnesses of Jesus Christ from Jerusalem to Samaria and from thence throughout all the world.

Are the apostles sent to publish the truth of God to all people, and to all conditions of men? It follows then that God presents himself to all the world, that the promise belongs to both great and small, as well to the Gentiles now as to the Jews before. But before we go any farther it is necessary to beat down the folly, or rather the beastliness, of those who abuse this passage of St. Paul, who endeavor to make the election of God of no effect and to utterly take it away. They say, if God will have all men to be saved, it follows that he has not chosen a certain number of mankind and cast the rest away, but that his will remains indifferent.

They pretend that it is left to the choice of men to save themselves or not, that God lets us alone and waits to see whether we will come to him or not, and so receives them that come unto him. But in the meantime they destroy the groundwork of our salvation. For we know that we are so accursed that the inheritance of salvation is far from us. If we say that Jesus Christ has come to remedy that, then must we examine the nature of mankind. We are so contrary in our nature and such enemies to God that we cannot but resist him. We are so given to evil and wickedness that we cannot so much as conceive a good thought. How then can it be that we may become partakers of that salvation which is offered in the gospel unless God draws us to it by his holy spirit? Let us now see whether God draws all the world to it or not. No, no; for then had our Lord Jesus Christ said in vain, "No man can come to me except the Father, which has sent me, draw him" (John 6:44). So then we must needs conclude that it is a special grace that God bestows upon such as pleases him, to draw them and teach them in such a manner that they believe the gospel and receive it with true faith.

And now, why does God choose one and leave another? We know that men cannot come to God by their own deserts. Neither are those who have been chosen deserving [of] any such thing as to be

preferred to their companions, as though there were some worthiness in them. It follows then that before the world was made (as St. Paul says in the first to the Ephesians), God chose such as pleased him; and we know not why this man was chosen in preference to that [one]. And still we must confess that whatsoever God does, is done justly, although we cannot comprehend it. Therefore let us receive that whereof we are so thoroughly certified in holy writ, and not suffer ourselves to be lead astray under a shadow of vain reason used by men who are ignorant of the word of God.

At the first sight there appears to be some weight in their argument. *God will have all men to be saved*; therefore, say they, it is left to the free choice of every man to become enlightened in the faith and to partake of salvation. If a man will read but three lines, he will easily perceive that St. Paul here speaks not of every particular man (as we have already shown), but that he speaks of all people and of all conditions of men. He shows that the case stands not as it did before the coming of Christ when there was but one chosen people, but that God now shows himself a Saviour to all the world, as it is said, *thine inheritance shall be even to the ends of the earth*.

Moreover, that no man may abuse himself or be deceived by the vain and foolish talk of those who pervert holy writ, let us examine how the doctrine of these enemies of God, and all godliness, stands. *God will have all men to be saved*; that is, as they imagine, everyone. If it be the will of God at present, no doubt it was the same from the beginning of the world, for we know that his mind changes not. So then, if at this day God will have all men to be saved, his mind was so always.

And [but] if his mind was so always, what shall we make of what St. Paul says, that he wills that all men come to the knowledge of the truth? He chose but one people to himself, as it is said (Acts 14), and left the poor Gentiles to walk in their own ignorance. There were likewise some countries where he would not suffer St. Paul to preach, as in Bithynia and Phrygia (Acts 16:7). And so we see that God would not have the knowledge of the gospel to come to everyone at first. Thus we may easily see the error of those who abuse this text. St. Paul speaks not in this place of the counsel of God, neither does he mean to lead us to his everlasting election which was before the beginning of the world, but only shows what his will and pleasure is as far as we ought to know it.

It is true that God changes not, neither has he two wills, nor does he use any counterfeit dealing. And yet the scripture speaks unto us in two ways concerning his will. And how can that be? How comes it to pass that his will is spoken of in two different ways? It is because of our grossness and want [lack] of understanding. Why does he make himself to have eyes, to have ears, and to have a nose? Why does he take upon him men's affections? Why is it that he says he is angry, he is sorry? Is it not because we cannot comprehend him in his incomprehensible majesty? Therefore, it is not absurd that holy writ should speak unto us of the will of God after two sorts; not because his will is double, but in order that he may apply himself to our weakness, knowing that our understanding is gross and heavy.

When the scripture informs us that God has chosen such as pleased him before the world began, we behold a counsel into which we cannot enter. Why then does holy writ inform us that this election and choice of God is everlasting? It is not without cause, for it is a very profitable doctrine if it be received as it ought to be. For thereby we are reminded that we are not called to the knowledge of the gospel by reason of our own worthiness. We are no better than others, for we all sprung from the cursed root of Adam, we are all subject to the same condemnation, and we

are all shut up under the slavery of sin and death.

When it pleased God to draw us out of the darkness of unbelief and give us the light of the gospel, he looked not at any service which we might have performed or at any virtue we might have possessed; but he called us, having chosen us before. This is the order in which St. Paul makes mention in Romans viii, that knowing God we must not take the glory to ourselves. Thus, the calling of the faithful rests upon this counsel of God, and we see how far the Lord makes known to us that which he had decreed before we were born. He touches us with his holy spirit, and we are ingrafted, as it were, into the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the true *earnest* of our adoption. This is the pledge given us to put us out of all doubt, that God takes and holds us for his children when by faith we are made one with Jesus Christ, who is the only begotten Son of God, unto whom belongs the inheritance of life.

God gives us such a sure testimony of his will, that notwithstanding our ignorance he puts us out of doubt of our election. He gives us a hope of which we should be entirely void if Jesus Christ did not call us to be members of his body. Thus we see how profitable this doctrine of election is to us. It serves to humble us, knowing that our salvation hangs not upon our deserts, neither upon the virtue which God might have found in us, but upon the election that was made before we were born, before we could do either good or evil.

When we know that according to his unchangeable election God has called us to himself, we are so much the more put out of doubt of our salvation. Jesus Christ says, no man takes from me that which the Father has given me (John 10). What is it that the Father has given Jesus Christ? They whom he has chosen, and whom he knows to be his. Seeing the case stands thus, that God has given us to his Son to be kept and defended by him, and that Jesus Christ promises that none of us shall be lost but that he will exercise all the might and power of the Godhead to save and defend us, is not this a comfort surpassing all the treasures of the world? Is not this the true ground upon which all the assurance and certainty of our salvation is settled?

We are as birds upon the boughs and set forth as a prey to Satan. What assurance then could we have of tomorrow and of all our life--yea, and after death--were it not that God who has called us will end his work as he has begun it? How has he gathered us together in the faith of his gospel? Is it grounded upon us? Nay, entirely to the contrary it proceeds from his free election. Therefore we may be so much the more freed from doubt. We must not strive to know any more of God's counsel than what is revealed in holy writ.

The will of God is opened to us as often as we hear his word preached, whereby he calls and exhorts us all to repentance. After he has once shown us that we are all damned in his sight and that there is nothing but condemnation in us, he shows us that we must renounce ourselves and get out of this bottomless pit. In that which God exhorts all men, we may judge that it is his will that all men should be saved. As he says by the prophet Ezekiel (18:23), "Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?" And again, chap. 33:11: "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live."

How will God have sinners turn themselves and how shall we know it, seeing he will have repentance preached to all the world? When it is said that God will have mercy upon sinners, upon such as will come to him and ask forgiveness in Christ's name, it is a general doctrine. So

then, it is said, that God will have all men to be saved; not having respect to what we devise or imagine, that is, as far as our knowledge can comprehend it. When the scripture speaks of the love and will of God, let us see if men can have repentance by their own actions, being self taught, or whether it is God that gives it.

God says by his prophet, I will that all men turn and live. Can a man by his own works turn himself? No; for if that were in our power, it were more than to make us. It is an undoubted doctrine throughout the whole scripture that our Lord Jesus Christ gives himself the praise of turning us. He says, "I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 11:19). To be short [concise], there is nothing that the faithful ought so much to do as to give God the glory, confessing that it is he alone that can turn us, and that he has adopted us in such a manner that he must needs draw us by the grace of his holy spirit.

Have men such knowledge that they are able to attain this faith, this wonderful wisdom which is contained in the gospel such as the very angels themselves reverence? Let us mark what God says to us in his word--that he will open our eyes and unstop our ears, because the natural man understands no part of the secrets of God, for it is the Holy Ghost that reveals them to us. It is hardly possible to read a single passage in holy writ without finding some sentence which informs us that men are utterly blind by nature until God opens their eyes. They can in no wise come to him until he draw them and enlighten them by his holy spirit.

Seeing that God alone turns men from their wickedness, experience teaches us, and so does the holy scripture, that he gives not his grace to all men. It is said, "The Lord has not given you a heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day" (Deut. 29:4). It is plainly shown that God does not cast forth his grace without direction, but that it is only for those whom he has chosen, for those that are of the body of his church and of his flock. Thus we see what St. Paul means when he says, "*God will have all men to be saved.*" That is, he will have some of all nations and all conditions.

It is said that he offers his gospel to all, which is the means of drawing us to salvation. And does this profit all men? No; of this our own eyes are witnesses. For when we hear the truth of God, if we rebel against it, it proves a great condemnation to us. Yet so it is that there are many who do not profit by the gospel but rather become worse, even those to whom it is preached. Therefore, they are not all saved. God must go farther in order to bring us to salvation. He must not only appoint men and send them to teach us faithfully, but he must operate upon our hearts, he must touch us to the quick, he must draw us to him, he must make his work profitable to us and cause it to take root in our hearts.

It is evident that we have to consider the will of God in two ways. Not that it is double of itself (as we before observed), but we must consider it as adapted to our weakness. He forms his speech to us in his word according to our capacity. If God should speak according to his majesty, his speech would be beyond our comprehension. It would utterly confound us! For if our eyes be not able to abide the brightness of the sun, would our minds be able to comprehend the infinite majesty of God? These silly men who would destroy God's election ought not to abuse this passage nor say that we make God to have two wills, for therein do they impudently misrepresent us. We say, as far as we can perceive God would have all men to be saved, whensoever and how oft soever he appoints his gospel to be preached to us.

As we said before, the gate of paradise is opened to us when we are called to be partakers of that redemption which was purchased for us by our Lord Jesus Christ. And this is the will of God, as far as we can comprehend it, that when he exhorts us to repentance he is ready to receive us if we will come to him. Although we have answered the doubts which might have been raised upon this subject, we will bring a similitude to make this doctrine more easy. (I call a similitude, that agreement and similarity which God makes between the children of Israel and us.) God says that he chose the children of Abraham for his inheritance and dedicated them to himself; he loved them and took them for his own household (Deut. 7).

This is true, for he made his covenant with all those that were circumcised. Was circumcision a vain figure and of no importance? Nay, it was a sure and undoubted sign that God had chosen that people for his own, accounting all for his flock that came of that race. And yet was there not a special grace for some of that people? Surely there was, as St. Paul sets forth: "For they are not all Israel which are of Israel: neither because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children" (Romans 9:6, 7); for God deprived some of this benefit that his grace and goodness might seem greater to those whom he called to himself. Behold therefore the will of God which was made manifest to the children of Israel, is at this day made manifest to us.

It is said in Amos 4:7, "God caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city." So the Lord sends his gospel wheresoever it pleases him. His grace is poured out upon all the world, yet it cannot be but he works otherwise with those whom he draws to himself, for all of us have our ears stopped and our eyes hoodwinked. We are deaf and blind unless he prepares us to receive his word. When the gospel is preached to us, it is as much as if God reached out his hand (as he says in Isa. 65:2) and said to us, come unto me. It is a matter which ought to touch us to the heart when we perceive that God comes to seek us. He does not wait till we come to him, but he shows us that he is ready to receive us, although we were his deadly enemies. He wipes away all our faults and makes us partakers of that salvation which was purchased for us by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus we see how worthy the gospel is to be esteemed and what a treasure it is! As St. Paul says to the Romans, "It is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes." It is the kingdom of heaven, and God opens the door that we, being taken out of the bottomless pit wherein we were sunk by nature, may enter into his glory. We must remember that it is not enough for us to receive the word that is preached to us by the mouth of man; but after we have heard it, God must speak to us inwardly by his holy spirit, for this is the only means to bring us to the knowledge of the truth. Therefore, when God has dealt so mercifully with us as to give us the light of faith, let us hold it fast and pray him to continue it and bring his work to perfection.

Let us not lift ourselves proudly above other men as though we were more worthy than they are, for we know that it is our God that has chosen us and sets us apart from others by his mere goodness and free mercy. We must know, moreover, that men are very faulty when God offers them his word and they receive it not. This is spoken that unbelievers and rebels might have their mouths stopped, that they might not blaspheme the name of God as though he had been wanting on his part, and to the end that all the faithful should in humbleness of heart glorify God for his grace and mercy toward them; for we see how he calls all those to whom his word is preached to salvation.

If men reply by saying they cannot come to God, we cannot stand to plead here; for we shall always find ourselves in fault. If a man say, it rests only in the hands of God; and if he would give me repentance could he not do it! If I remain stiff-necked in my hardness and malice, what can I do in this case seeing God will not give me repentance to turn to him? This is not in any wise to be allowed, for God calls us sufficiently to him, and we cannot accuse him of cruelty. Even if we had not his word, we must needs confess that he is just, although we know not the cause that moved him to deprive us of it.

When we are called to come to God and know that he is ready to receive us, if we do not come can we deny that we are unthankful? Let us not separate salvation from the knowledge of the truth. For God does not mean to lie, nor deceive men, when he says [that] when they come to the knowledge of the truth they shall be saved. *God will have all men to be saved.* But how? *If they will come to the knowledge of the truth.* Every man would be saved, but no man will draw nigh to God. The scripture informs us that if we desire salvation we must attend to the means which God has appointed. That is, we must receive his word with obedience and faith.

The scripture says this is everlasting life--to wit, to know God the Father and to receive Christ as our only Saviour. Therefore let us learn, as it is here set forth, not to doubt of the certainty of our salvation, for the kingdom of God is within us. If we wish God to receive us, we must receive the doctrine given us by St. Paul. How are we called to the hope of salvation? By the influence of the grace of God, which makes known to us his love and favor. Thus we may see what St. Paul's meaning is when he says [that] God will have his grace made known to all the world and his gospel preached to all creatures. Therefore, we must endeavor as much as possible to persuade those who are strangers to the faith, and seem to be utterly deprived of the goodness of God, to accept of salvation.

Jesus Christ is not only a Saviour of few, but he offers himself to all. As often as the gospel is preached to us, we ought to consider that God calls us to him. And if we attend to this call it shall not be in vain, neither shall it be lost labor. But can we come to him without any assistance, except what we derive from our own nature? Alas, we cannot! "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7). When God deals so graciously with us, as to touch our hearts with his holy spirit, then he causes his gospel to work profitably to our salvation. Then he makes a display of the virtue spoken of by St. Paul.

Again, we must remember when the gospel is preached to us, that it is to make us more void of excuse. Seeing God has already shown us that he was ready to receive us to mercy if we would come unto him, our condemnation will no doubt be increased if we be so wicked as to draw back when he calls so mildly and lovingly. Notwithstanding (as we are here exhorted), let us not leave off praying for all men in general, for St. Paul shows that God will have all men to be saved--that is to say, men of all people and nations.

Although we see a great diversity among men, yet we must not forget that God has made us all in his own image and likeness, and that we are the workmanship of his hand. Therefore he extends his goodness to those who are afar off, of which we have had sufficient proof; for when he drew us unto him, were we not his enemies? How then comes it to pass that we are now of the household of faith, the children of God and members of our Lord Jesus Christ? Is it not because he has gathered us to himself? And is he not the Saviour of the whole world as well as of us? Did Jesus Christ come to be the mediator of two or three men only? No, no; but he is the *mediator between*

God and men.

Therefore, we may be so much the more assured that God takes and holds us for his children if we endeavor to bring those to him who are afar off. Let us comfort ourselves and take courage in this our calling. Although there be at this day a great forlornness, though we seem to be miserable creatures utterly cast away and condemned, yet we must labor as much as possible to draw those to salvation who seem to be afar off. And above all things, let us pray to God for them, waiting patiently till it pleases him to show his good will toward them as he has shown it to us.