

Old and New Testaments (The Covenant)

Before the prayer, let me very briefly review Book II to the point where we are now. Book II tells us that we are not what we were created to be. We are not what we were meant to be. Because of Adam's sin, and because of our own sin, we are radically disabled and depraved. That is the first six chapters. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 tell us that God has provided a Redeemer for us in Christ and answer the question, "Where do we find Christ?" We find Christ, of course, in the Bible. Do we find Him in all of the Bible? Yes, in all of the Bible. That is what Calvin has told us so far. Now in this lesson, in chapters 10 and 11, we will answer the question, "Do we find Christ in all of the Bible equally and in the same way?" Calvin's answer is "Yes and no." That is what we will look at today. We find Christ in the Bible, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, equally and in the same way—and yet not equally and in the same way.

Let us pray using a prayer that comes from Calvin.

"Grant, Almighty God, that since Thou hast deigned in Thy mercy to gather us to Thy church and to close us within the boundaries of Thy Word, by which Thou preservest us in the true and right worship of Thy majesty, O grant that we may continue contented in this obedience to Thee, and though Satan may in many ways attempt to draw us here and there, and we be also ourselves by nature inclined to evil, O grant that being confirmed in faith and united to Thee by that sacred bond, we may yet constantly abide under the restraint of Thy Word and thus cleave to Christ, Thine only begotten Son, who has joined us forever to Him, and that we may never by any means turn aside from Thee, but be, on the contrary, confirmed in the faith of His Gospel until at length He will receive us all into His kingdom. Amen."

What does Calvin say about the Old and New Testaments? This is really one place among a number of places in the *Institutes* where Calvin discusses "covenant theology." So this is a lecture on covenant theology, as well as it is a discussion of the similarities and differences between the Old and New Testaments. I need to say a little bit first about the history of covenant theology. We will use that as a kind of introduction into Calvin's discussion of covenant theology.

There was not really much use of covenant theology until the sixteenth century. We can find some uses, some covenant thought, in Irenaeus and in Mileto of Sardis. Augustine, in the *City of God*, will occasionally use the language of "covenant," but it is sparingly used until sixteenth-century Switzerland with Zwingli and Bullinger. From that beginning, it seems to be, on the Protestant side of things—on the *Reformed* Protestant side of things—just about everywhere.

I remember a seminar that I had at Princeton. Dr. Ed Dowey was the professor, and the question came up, "Why was covenant theology somewhat, or almost totally, unknown until the sixteenth century, and then it became so prevalent?" I ventured an answer to that, and that is that people were reading the Bible in the sixteenth century. You find covenant theology in the Bible, so you find covenant theology everywhere after people start reading the Bible. Dr. Dowey thought that was a very poor answer to that question. He said that people were always reading the Bible. However, I still think my answer was better than he thought, at least, because people were not reading the Bible or hearing the Bible read and preached consecutively before the sixteenth century, like Zwingli in Zurich preaching through the books of the Bible. You will not understand covenant theology by taking bits and pieces of the Bible. However, by a consistent reading of the entire Bible, I think the covenant theme becomes prevalent in one's theological thought.

So Bullinger and Zwingli were the real beginning of what we think of today as covenant theology, and really Bullinger is the pioneer here. You might remember from church history that the occasion for his delving into this subject in great detail was the Anabaptist challenge. When the Anabaptists challenged the validity of infant baptism, Bullinger attempted to answer that, and his answer was a rather detailed and solid exposition of covenant theology, showing the unity of the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Was Calvin a covenant theologian? This question has sometimes been raised and debated. Generally, people have said no, because what they mean by a person being a covenant theologian is that the idea of the covenant is the dominant theme in that person's theology. I do not think we would say that it is dominant in Calvin. We do not see it everywhere through the *Institutes*, and it is not an organizational concept for Calvin. It is not a concept that Calvin used in order to structure his theology. Calvin's theology is simply knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves: the twofold knowledge of God as Creator and Redeemer and the twofold knowledge of ourselves as created and sinful. We could say that is the organizational concept for Calvin, as far as he has one, but covenant does not play that role in Calvin.

As far as the organizational framework for Calvin is concerned, most people think today—and I agree with them—that he does not have any single idea from which everything flows. It is not the decrees of God. It is not covenant theology. He has many themes that he puts together in a very good way, but he does not have a single dominant, controlling theme. Someone has suggested the idea of divine providence, but I do not think we would say that providence is his controlling theme, although it is a very important part of the *Institutes*. Some people would perhaps argue that election is the controlling theme; I do not think that it is. Some might say union with Christ. That may come closer to Calvin's theme, but I do not think we can say that everything flows from that concept, and certainly not from the idea of covenant, even though it is very important to Calvin. Calvin's theology is more like the Bible. What is the theme of the Bible? You could make a good argument that the theme of the Bible is Christ, and perhaps we could explore that in terms of Calvin's theology, too. His theology is very Christocentric, but it is also very trinitarian—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, related to the topics of the first three books. The question of whether there is one dominant, controlling theme in the *Institutes* is an interesting question and an ongoing debate among Calvin scholars. I think most are inclined to say there is not, and I would agree with them.

So I would say that “covenant” is basic, and it is important, but it is not the overarching theme of the *Institutes*. Calvin does not say that we can look at everything under the rubric of covenant—covenant of redemption, covenant of works, covenant of grace—that is absent in Calvin. In fact, he does not really mention the “covenant of redemption” and does not use the language “covenant of works,” although I think an argument could be made that Calvin has a “covenant of works” and that he certainly does talk quite a bit about the covenant of grace. In the *Institutes*, here are the places where we will find a covenant, not scattered throughout, but concentrated in a number of places: Book II, chapters 9 through 11, which we are looking at today, on the Old and New Testaments. We will come back to another treatment of the covenant in Book III, chapter 21, “On Election,” and as you would expect, we will also find the idea of covenant in Book IV, chapter 16, “On Infant Baptism.” Someone has counted up all the places in the 1559 *Institutes* that use the three Latin words that could be translated “covenant”—*pactum*, *foedus*, and *testamentum*—and has come up with 273 times that Calvin uses these words. The Bible uses the covenant language and idea 314 times, so Calvin is pretty close to the Bible in terms of the number of times that covenant language occurs. Another place where you can find significant treatment of the covenant in Calvin is in his sermons on Deuteronomy.

Of course, after Calvin, covenant theology plays a major role in Reformed theology, such as we find in the seventeenth century, especially in the Westminster Confession of Faith. So, was Calvin a covenant theologian? Well, I think we would say yes, in the sense that he makes significant and important use of the covenant, but probably we would want to say no if we are thinking about covenant being an overarching organizational theme of the *Institutes*.

Let us go, then, into what Calvin tells us about the Old and New Testaments. We will begin with chapter 9 of Book II, which is about Christ under the Law and in the Gospel. Calvin will use “law” and “Gospel” in different ways, but here he uses it this way: “law” refers to Christ in the Old Testament, while “Gospel” refers to Christ in the New Testament. If you asked Calvin, “Is there Gospel in the Old Testament?” he would say, “Of course.” Here, however, he is using this language chronologically—law first, then Gospel; Old Testament, then New Testament. The point that he wants to make is that Christ is known in both testaments. “Christ, although He was known to the Jews under the Law”—Christ was known, Christ is there, He is the theme of the Old Testament, the Savior of the Jews in the Old Testament—“was at length clearly revealed only in the Gospel.” Those are the two ideas that you will see throughout chapters 9, 10, and 11. Christ was known under the Law but clearly revealed in the Gospel. In Book II, chapter 9, section 1, Calvin talks about Christ known as a shadowed outline. The outline is there, but in the New Testament, we have far more light. It is always comparative: less, then more; darker, then lighter; but never absent, then present. Christ was present in the Old Testament as a shadowed outline; He now is present in the New Testament with far more light.

As I said, Calvin can use the word “Gospel” in two ways, as he does. You must look for this as you read these chapters, or it will become a little confusing. Sometimes when he uses the word “Gospel” he means the promise in the Law. In that sense, the Gospel is the promise that begins with Genesis 3:15 and is repeated throughout the Old Testament. The Gospel in this sense refers to the promise in the Old Testament, the promise in the Law. Book II, chapter 9, section 2 says, “Those testimonies of His mercy and fatherly favor, which God gave to the patriarchs of old”—in other words, Abraham, Isaac, and the others received the Gospel, the promises of God’s mercy and favor. You can use the word “Gospel” for the good news in the Old Testament that was there from the beginning. But Calvin says that the Gospel in a higher sense is the fulfillment of the promise. The promise is there, but it is still only a promise until the proclamation of the grace manifested in Christ. Christ comes and fulfills the promise of the Old Testament. So “Gospel” can be promise or it can be fulfillment of promise—Old Testament, New Testament—but in both testaments, Christ is present and Christ is known. He is known in the promise, and He is known in the fulfillment of the promise.

In the next two chapters that we will look at now, Calvin really struggles—and I think, succeeds; you will have to decide for yourself whether he does or not, but he tries hard—to preserve both the identity of substance of the Old Testament and the New Testament and the genuine newness of the New Testament. He does not want to put the testaments so tightly together that nothing new happens in the New Testament. He takes, then, two chapters to make these two points, and we will start with chapter 10, “The Similarity Between the Two Testaments.” Calvin has four points there.

You will notice this frequently in the *Institutes*. Calvin will devote a section or a chapter to something like this. He will say “these two testaments are similar.” In fact, he ends up saying they are identical, and you think, “Well, there is no difference.” Then the next chapter says that there are huge differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament. We will see him do the same thing when we come to Book III, “On the Christian Life,” when he spends a whole chapter saying that what we should be doing is meditating on the future life. It is not this life, but the life to come, that is important. When we

come to the end of that chapter, we think there is no significance, then, to this life. However, the next chapter is about how this life is very important and we should be about the business that God has given us to do in this life. This is a kind of way that Calvin will treat different topics. Here he treats the Old and New Testaments that way.

Let us go through these four points. First, the goal: Calvin says that the goal of the Old Testament is the same as the goal of the New Testament, and that is to point people to heaven, to immortality through Christ. "But," you would say, "when I read the Old Testament, so much of it is taken up with earthly promises—the promise of land, the promise of a nation, the promise of earthly descendants, and so on." Calvin says, "Yes, that is true, but the real goal of Old Testament believers was not carnal prosperity and happiness, but the hope of immortality." All those earthly promises were just promises that God used to lead the people on in the childhood of the Christian faith, to lead them on to the greater promise of heavenly reward—the heavenly city, not the earthly city. So, Calvin says, "the Old Testament saints lifted up their hearts to God's sanctuary, in which they found hidden what does not appear in the shadows of the present life." They lived in the shadows of their present lives, but then they lifted up their hearts from that present life to God's salvation, to God's sanctuary, to God's Christ. Much of chapter 10 is what we could call a salvation history from Adam to the prophets, proving that the Old Testament saints sought for everlasting life. These earthly promises were not an end in themselves, but only indications of greater promises that God was making to Old Testament saints of a heavenly life.

Behind all of this is the specter of contemporary people who were denying that. Calvin spent a good bit of time making this point partly because there were people who would deny it, mainly the Anabaptists. A certain group of Anabaptists saw no good in the Old Testament, or at least not very much, and you remember in Book II, chapter 10, section 1, that Calvin says that these people regard the Israelites as nothing but a herd of swine. By contrast, Calvin's point is that they are the children of God, with the same goal—the goal of heaven—that we have. That is the first similarity.

The second similarity is they have the same mediator. How do we get to heaven? We get to heaven because of the mediation of Christ, and the Old Testament saints got to heaven because of the mediation of Christ. "But," you would say, "is not the Old Testament full of priests and sacrifices and all of these things?" Calvin answers, "Yes, but again, not as an end in themselves." The Old Testament believers "had and knew Christ as mediator." (Book II, chapter 10, section 2). It is just not that Christ is some future, promised Messiah. He is there, active on their behalf, as their mediator. It is in this context that Calvin refers to Hebrews 13:8—"Christ remains yesterday and today and forever." Calvin says that refers not only to His everlasting divinity (which is the way, I think we would usually think of that, that He is God forever) but to His power. He is perpetually available to believers. Yesterday, in the Old Testament, He was the mediator, and today He is the mediator, and forever He will be the mediator.

In Book II, chapter 10, section 23, I find Calvin's use of Matthew 27, the resurrection of the saints in Jerusalem at the death of Christ, to be interesting. Do you know that one place in the Bible where we have the account of the tombs breaking open at the death of Christ and people coming forth from the tombs? What is that all about? Why did that happen? Calvin says, "In this, He has given a sure pledge that whatever He did or suffered in acquiring eternal salvation pertains to the believers of the Old Testament as much as to ourselves." So as the tombs burst open and these people came out, it shows that the efficacy of the cross extended to them as it extends to us.

So the Old Testament and New Testament have the same goal and the same Mediator. The third similarity is that they have the same means. "Saved by grace" is an Old Testament message as well as a New Testament message. "But," you say, "the Old Testament was full of works. There were all these

laws and these commands and things that people had to do.” Yes, but again, not as an end in themselves. These commands, these works, pointed not toward salvation by works but toward salvation by grace, Calvin says. “Old Testament believers were saved, not by their own merits, but solely by the mercy of God who called them” (Book II, chapter 10, section 2). It could hardly be expressed more strongly than that, could it? “Old Testament believers were saved, not by their own merits, but solely by the mercy of God who called them.”

Finally, the Old Testament and New Testament have the same signs. These signs of the covenant are the signs of God's grace. In Book II, chapter 10, section 5, Calvin says, “The Lord manifested His grace among them by the same symbols.” What do we have? We have baptism and the Lord's Supper, and so did the people in the Old Testament. All believers have baptism and the Lord's Supper. You will probably say, “Well, where is baptism, and where is the Lord's Supper in the Old Testament?” Calvin's favorite text to answer this question is the first four verses of 1 Corinthians 10, which says, “Our forefathers were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.” Calvin used that text from 1 Corinthians 10 to illustrate that the sacraments of the Old Testament were of real efficacy. Let me just quote a couple of sentences from his commentary on that passage, which, I think, will make that point. He says, “For they”—that is, the Israelites—“have the same benefits which we enjoy today. The church of God was in their midst, as it is in ours today, and they had the same sacraments to be testimonies to them of the grace of God.” The sacraments were not exactly administered in the same way, or in the same form, but they had baptism into Christ, and they were fed through and by Christ. So the meaning of baptism and the meaning of the Lord's Supper would extend to these Old Testament symbols.

In the same commentary passage, Calvin discusses the error of the “schoolmen.” By the way, when Calvin uses the word “schoolmen,” he means the medieval scholastics, whom he generally disagrees with. When he says “sophist,” he generally means the scholastics of the Sorbonne, and he disagrees with them even more. He says, “The schoolmen teach the sacraments of the old law merely figured grace but that ours confer it.” Of course he will oppose that, because it is not true that the sacraments in the Old Testament point to grace but that grace comes through ours. We believe the sacraments are a “means of grace.” According to Calvin, however, the sacraments of the Old Testament were a means of grace also. “This passage”—that is, 1 Corinthians 10:1-4—“proves that the reality of the sacrament was conveyed to the people of the Old Testament just as much as to us.” Now, just when you begin to think that Calvin sees no difference at all between the Old Testament and the New Testament, he always makes the other point, and he does in the commentary here as well as in the *Institutes*. He says in the commentary that he is quite ready to agree that “the efficacy of the signs is at once richer, or more abundant, for us since the incarnation of Christ than it was for the fathers under the Law. So the difference between us and them is only one of degree, or as the common saying goes, one of more or less, because what they had in small measure, we have fully. But it is not the case that they had mere figures while we obtain the reality.” There he makes the same point. There is grace in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, but in terms of fullness and clarity, we understand more and we see more than the saints in the Old Testament.

Those are the four ways in which the Old Testament and New Testament are alike. We can sum that up with the word “similarity” or even “identity.” “Old Testament believers were covenanted to Him by the same law and by the bond of the same doctrine as obtains among us” (Book II, chapter 10, section 1). In Book II, chapter 10, section 2, he says it this way: “The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same.” That is a strong statement of the unity of the covenants. In Book II, chapter 10, section 23, he says, “Christ the Lord promises to His followers today no other kingdom than that at which they may sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob.” That is the promise to us, and that puts us right down at the table with these Old Testament patriarchs. Then, from the commentary on Matthew 5:17—“Do not think I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets”—Calvin says, “God has indeed promised a new covenant at the coming of Christ, but had at the same time showed that it would not be different from the first, and that, on the contrary, its design was to give a perpetual sanction to the covenant which He had made from the beginning with His own people.”

I think that is enough to show Calvin’s purpose in Book II, chapter 10, which is to underscore that the promise of salvation is the same in both testaments. That is a very important chapter in the *Institutes*, especially for anyone who is inclined a bit toward dispensationalism. That is where you would go to see Calvin’s treatment of the unity of the testaments. However, chapter 11 comes in now to show the differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament, and I think this is an important chapter for non-dispensationalists, covenant theologians, who could be tempted to minimize differences. You see, we do not want to smooth out the testaments in such a way that the coming of Christ is kind of a footnote to history, and Calvin does not want to do that, either. The coming of Christ in history makes a great difference. Calvin saw great progress in revelation. Someone, in writing on this issue, has put it this way: “The real state of the question is whether there is progress in unity”—that is the Reformed view, that there is progress in the history of redemption, but it is progress in unity—“or whether there is progress by discontinuity”—which would have been more like what the Anabaptists were teaching in the sixteenth century and what some dispensationalists teach today. We must remember, though, that dispensationalism can be quite varied. Some forms of it are much more like covenant theology than it used to be, so you cannot put all dispensationalists together. Neither can we put all sixteenth-century Anabaptists together. I have a quote in my notes from a writer who says, “Calvin utterly denies the difference between the Old and New Testaments.” Well, that person only read chapter 10 and did not make it on to chapter 11. We will move on to chapter 11 now and look at the differences. There are five.

The first is this: the Old Testament has a great deal to say about temporal blessings. If you read the Old Testament—Job, Proverbs, almost any place in the Old Testament—you will find promise after promise that if you serve God, you will be blessed in this life with long life and many other promises of earthly blessings. Calvin says, “The New Testament speaks about spiritual blessings.” If you serve God, you will know the joy of being in fellowship with Him, which is a spiritual blessing rather than a temporal, earthly blessing. That is the difference, but Calvin does not want to make that difference too absolute. He says, “God conferred earthly blessings and benefits on the Jews”—that is, the Old Testament believers—“as a lower mode of training”—just like you sometimes confer earthly benefits on your children as a lower mode of training. You give them some sort of reward if they will do their homework or help clean up the house. That is like the Old Testament earthly benefits: to encourage, stimulate, and guide. However, the real goal in all of that is not just to give earthly rewards but to develop the character of that child and help that child grow in responsibility and character. So God, at the beginning, working with “children,” you might say, used this lower mode of training. Calvin says that there are carnal, earthly elements in the covenant, but it is not a carnal, earthly covenant. It is a spiritual covenant. Those carnal, earthly promises serve their purpose: to lead us by the hand, so to speak. However, they are not the goal of the covenant, which is spiritual. “God determined to lead them by His own hand to the hope of heavenly things,” he says right away in Book II, chapter 11, section 1. So it is the Lord, not the land, who is the real inheritance, even in the Old Testament. The goal was always “the city which has foundations, whose maker and builder is God.”

The second difference is this: the Old Testament had images and ceremonies while the New Testament had Christ. When Calvin talks about these images and ceremonies, he calls them “accidental properties of the covenant” (Book II, chapter 11, section 4) “due to Israel’s childhood” (Book II, chapter 11,

section 5). In other words, the images and the ceremonies were present for much the same reason as the temporal, earthly blessings were present. We have talked about this already; the illustration that I used was the cloth pictures of Bible stories that my wife was using to teach children down in Grand Cayman. Images and ceremonies helped the children of faith in the Old Testament. But those ceremonies were not an end in themselves but were given to point beyond themselves to Christ. Otherwise they would be meaningless. If those ceremonies were just sacrifices and ceremonies as an end in themselves, they would have no meaning whatsoever. So there were images and ceremonies in the Old Testament, but Christ in the New Testament. Again, however, this is not an absolute. Calvin calls the images and ceremonies “an introduction to the better hope that is manifested in the Gospel”—so these images and ceremonies are an introduction to the better hope that is manifested in the Gospel, in the fuller sense of the Gospel, as it comes in the New Testament.

The next difference is that between the literal and the spiritual. There is language in the Bible that seems to point that way. In fact, how can Calvin explain the difference this way: “the Old Testament is literal and the New Testament is spiritual” and still maintain the continuity of the covenant? The passages that he deals with here, as you would expect, are 2 Corinthians 3 and Jeremiah 31. He simply explains it this way: “By way of comparison, to commend the grace abounding of the Gospel.” So it is not strictly a literal difference. It is a comparative difference. The Old Testament is literal and the New Testament is spiritual, but the Old Testament is spiritual, too. By way of comparison, though, we could say that, compared to the message of the New Testament, which is spiritual, the Old Testament is literal.

The same is true of his fourth difference, bondage and freedom. We could not really say that the Old Testament saints are in bondage and we are free, but there is biblical language that points that way. As Calvin explains it, it simply means that in contrast to us, with the freedom we have in the Gospel, when you look back at the Old Testament, you would say that those people were in bondage. They kept all these laws and had to do all these things, but there was a certain freedom even in the bondage of the Old Testament. There is much greater freedom now, however.

The following quote kind of sums up these first four points in chapter 11, the difference between the Old and New Testaments. Calvin says, “When Old Testament believers were oppressed by their enslaved condition”—that is, Old Testament people, temporal blessings, images and ceremonies, literal, bondage, it is oppressive—“when they were oppressed by their enslaved condition, they fled for refuge to the Gospel.” That is in Book II, chapter 11, section 9, which means that they did not really have to wait for the temporal coming of Christ. They could not wait that long, because they would die first. Generations died before that, but they could flee from the oppression that they felt to the Gospel, which is not only future but present.

From the temporal blessings, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the others could flee to the spiritual blessings. From the images and ceremonies, they could flee to Christ. From the literal, they could flee to the spiritual. From the bondage of the old, they could flee to the freedom of the new. So it is not merely the promise of something coming, but it is also the promise of a present reality. Book II, chapter 11, section 10 says, “The Old Testament saints so lived under the old covenant as not to remain there but ever to aspire to the new and thus embrace a real share in it.” So they were not stuck in the old covenant, even though they lived in the Old Testament. They could aspire to the new and embrace a real share in it.

Then there is one additional difference. This fifth difference is of a different type. It is this: in the Old Testament, God was dealing with one nation, the Jews. He deals with them specifically, although we would say not exclusively, because even in the Old Testament there are indications of God's purpose of

blessing all the nations. Indications of this purpose go all the way back at least to the covenant with Abraham, back to the Garden of Eden, and according to Dr. Alonso Ramirez in his sermons, back to the decrees of God. Missions begin there, but the Old Testament is primarily focused on the Jews and the New Testament on the calling of the Gentiles—so not only the Jews, but all the nations. Calvin sees this as a notable mark of the excellence of the New Testament over the Old Testament. The Old Testament focused primarily on one nation, so the Jews were the church. The New Testament focused on the world and the calling out of people from every nation to be the church.

Let us summarize this now. We used the words “similarity” or “identity” to summarize chapter 10, and we will use the word “difference” to summarize chapter 11. As Calvin says, “the mode of administration” is the real difference. The difference is the mode of administration, and by that he means to assert that the differences that he points out in chapter 11 do not destroy the unity that he has established in chapter 10. The differences are reducible to one, and that is the relative obscurity of the Old Testament and clarity of the New Testament. If you want just one thought, that is it. The Old Testament was relatively obscure, while the New Testament is relatively clear. His commentary on Isaiah 2:3 says, “Though the law of the Lord be now the same as it ever was, yet it came out of Zion with a new garment.” The same law now comes out of Zion with a new garment. He uses that illustration in Isaiah 2:3, but it is the light illustration that is his favorite, and he uses it constantly throughout these chapters: darker and lighter; relatively obscure and much clearer. Calvin says this very clearly in his commentary on Galatians 3:23-24. Let me just read a couple of sentences to you there to make this point: “Faith was not yet revealed”—talking about the Old Testament—“not that the fathers lacked light altogether, but that they had less light than we. For whereas the ceremonies sketched out an absent Christ, to us He is represented as present. Thus what they had in a mirror, we today have in substance. However much darkness there might be under the Law, the fathers were not ignorant of the road they had to take. The dawn may not be as bright as noonday, but it is sufficient for making a journey, and travelers do not wait until the sun is right up. Their portion of light was like the dawn, to keep them safe from all error and guide them to everlasting blessedness.” So the picture there is like a road that is going to the right destination. Some people start at dawn, while there is enough light to see the road, although they cannot see as much as people will see later, those who started at noonday. So the Old Testament is from dawn to noonday, and the New Testament is from noonday on.

To sum up, let me say again that Christ was present in the Old Testament, even though Calvin says in this quotation that “the ceremonies sketched out an absent Christ.” Christ is absent in the sense that the ceremonies point to His coming. The ceremonial law points to the coming of Christ. Christ came and fulfilled that law and did away with the ceremonial law, as we saw, but Calvin does not mean that Christ was absent in the Old Testament, in the sense that He was not the mediator of Old Testament believers. He has already said that earlier, in chapter 10. In his commentary on Galatians 3:19, Calvin says, “Christ was truly presented and imparted to the people through the message of the Old Testament. Christ has always been the mediator of all teaching, because by Him God has always revealed Himself to men.”

In the New Testament, Christ renewed the covenant and extended it to all nations. This is perhaps the most significant difference, although, again it is comparative. It is not that the Old Testament had no message for the nations, but in the New Testament, the message of God’s grace for the nations is much more clearly and universally expressed. Then Calvin answers this question: “Why did God choose to work in this way? Why did He start in the Old Testament and work through the ceremonies and the images and then change things as time moved on? Is this not contradictory?” “No,” Calvin says, “for one thing, God has done everything wisely and justly.” You would expect that answer from Calvin. Whatever God has done is right, and if God chooses to do it this way, then it is right. But Calvin has a further explanation there, and that is that “God has accommodated diverse forms to different ages, as He

knew would be expedient for each.” So the particular shape or form of the message or presentation of the Gospel is made especially for each age. Does that not show some inconsistency? Here is where Calvin has some very nice illustrations. In Book II, chapter 11, sections 13 and 14, he says that we do this all the time. The farmer in the early part of the year will dig up the soil and plant the seed. Later, the farmer does something quite different. He will water the plants and care for the plants, and then later he does something very different again. He will harvest that which has grown on the land. At different times in the cycle of the year, the farmer is doing quite different things. To somebody who knows nothing about farming, it could seem perhaps rather strange and inconsistent, but there is a purpose for everything that is done leading to the harvest.

Another illustration is the householder, who treats children differently than he or she treats teenagers and young adults, accommodating the training and the teaching to each period in life. A final illustration is that of the physician, who uses different approaches depending on the type of disease and the progress of the patient.

Now let us discuss Calvin's thoughts on our use of the Old Testament, reflecting on “Why do we have the Old Testament? Why do we use it now as Christians? If the New Testament gives so much more light and is so much more spiritual compared to the more literal nature of the Old Testament, is the Old Testament not irrelevant?” Calvin's answer, of course, is that it is not irrelevant. It is part of God's Word, and it should not be viewed merely in an auxiliary function, enabling us to better understand the New Testament, although it does that. We will not really understand the New Testament very well unless we have the Old Testament, but the Old Testament is not merely to help us understand the New Testament. The Old Testament, Calvin would say, awakens faith in Christ in us, as does the New Testament. We read the Old Testament not just to get ready for the New Testament, but we read the Old Testament in order to see Christ, to find Christ, to strengthen our faith in Christ. Think of how the book of Psalms functions in this way and how often Christians turn to the Psalms to find Christ, to find help in time of need, to find strength and blessing and provision of God in our trouble.

We are just about finished, but I will close with an illustration that has helped me a little with this, because you still might wonder how the relative obscurity of the Old Testament assists those who live in the full light of the New Testament. If you think of the road illustration that Calvin uses, it is the same road, but it is the road at daybreak, and it is the road in the full light of noon. The same road, but those pioneers, those fathers and mothers of the Old Testament, walked the road in the early dawn, in the shadows. That takes some careful attention to details, because if it is not light, you must really watch to see where you are going. They looked so intently, and accompanying them in their search helps us to appreciate more fully the full revelation of Christ. In other words, as we walk along by their sides at dawn, looking as they look, then that will be of benefit to us, not only in preparation for the New Testament, but also in seeing what they saw in the Old Testament.

A few years ago, I was preaching in a little town, actually down in Sparta, in southern Illinois, for a missions conference. As I was coming back, quite late at night, between Redbud and Waterloo—if any of you have been down to southern Illinois, you will know those towns—my car broke down. It was 11 o'clock or so. Something happened to my car. I had no telephone in my car in those days, and so the only thing I could think to do was to walk and try to find some help. I had to walk three miles. I was right in between those two towns; there were no stores or houses there. I walked three miles, and finally I came to a bar. A couple of men were sitting there. They were very happy and interested in helping me out of my problem, whatever it was, and I was finally able to convince them to let me use the telephone and call for help. But I walked those three miles. It was a moonlit night, so it was not totally dark, but I saw a lot of things along that stretch of roadway. I have driven that stretch often later, in broad daylight,

but I look at all the things I noticed in the semi-obscurity. Driving that same stretch of road now, in the daylight, I see so much that was there that I would have missed just zipping along in the daylight, because I had walked it in the darkness. Maybe that is an illustration that would help you to see how the Old Testament still serves us. It is relative darkness; it is like dawn, not like noonday, but as we walk with the patriarchs through their journey, we see things through their eyes, and that will focus our attention much more carefully on things that we might otherwise miss.

We are coming now to Calvin's treatment of Christ. We are already into that. We have spent some time now in looking at the Old and New Testaments, whether Christ is in both testaments or not. When you read a biography, the introduction and sometimes the first one or two chapters often deal with the background of that person: the person's ancestors, where he or she came from, and all of that. Then you come to the birth of the person. That introduction, that background, helps us to understand the person. We have in the Old Testament the background of Christ, and now we come to the birth of Christ. We will have a lesson on His person and then a lecture on His work. Of course, there is a big difference with Christ, when I say all of this in a biography is background, and then we come to the birth of the person, and that background is illustrative and helpful for us to understand the person. It certainly is in the case of Christ. We want to know who He was, His Jewish heritage and all of that. The difference is that Christ does not begin in His birth, so the Bible is quite different from a biography. He was always there. His birth is a very, very important, necessary, and strategic event in the eternal life of the second person of the Trinity, but it does not begin the second person of the Trinity. He is present in the Old Testament.