

JOHN CALVIN: *TAKING PLEASURE IN THE GREATNESS OF GOD*

I. MAKING CALVIN RELEVANT

Some of you are surely wondering about the profitability of this class today. Many of you are thinking that there are so many problems in the world right now that it is silly to be looking back at someone who lived 500 years ago. Many of you probably have a net worth of about 50% of what you had just a few months ago and others of you are worried about instability, job loss, and long-term security. Right now we have international markets crashing and governments moving rapidly to stabilize banks and unfreeze the credit market, and if the credit isn't opened, we might see long term damage, business failures, and personal bankruptcies. What all this means is that we could be (we don't know yet) but we could be living in a time of crisis. So, why is Calvin important right now? Two reasons: 1) he lived in a time of crisis both in the world scene and in his personal life. The medieval system/worldview was collapsing, wars were raging, economies were failing, there were no gov't programs; farms, houses, and businesses were destroyed by armies, and more was threatened. In the midst of the continent-wide chaos, Calvin personally suffered with terrible illnesses, severe kidney stones, the loss of his wife, the death of all three children, and people threatening to kill him. Few of us can estimate what Calvin endured and what it cost him (although he would say it was all joy) to do what he did; 2) He exposes modern day evangelicalism's shallowness about who God is when crises are swirling around us. Personally, I want to know, what made Him this way? B.B. Warfield on Calvin: "No man ever had a profounder sense of God than he." Do we know the power of a profound sense of God?

II. HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

"Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Which was Calvin? Calvin was born in Noyon, France in 1509 and did not come from wealth, prestige, or status. One of his grandfathers was a barrel-maker and boatman, and his other grandfather was an innkeeper. His father, however, became a lawyer which brought him into the society of the local gentry and the Cathedral clergy. These relationships afforded Calvin the opportunity of an aristocratic education, which he began receiving at the University of Paris. Five years into his theology degree, his father had a dispute with the church and demanded that Calvin leave his course of study and begin to study law at the University of Orleans. His father died in 1531 when Calvin was only 21, but this gave him the freedom to turn away from law and to study his first love, the Classics. He published his first book, *A Commentary on Seneca* the following year at the age of 23. Though we don't know much of his conversion, we know that this was the time in his life when he began to hear the ideas of the reformation.

III. THE AWAKENING

In 1533, Calvin's friend Nicholas Cop preached the opening of winter term at the University of Paris, and was soon thereafter indicted by the Parliament for preaching Lutheran-like doctrines. When a persecution of the Lutherans broke out, Cop was forced to flee, and Calvin escaped with him. So, his conversion probably came just before this.

"God drew me from obscure and lowly beginnings and conferred on me that most honorable office of herald and minister of the Gospel...What happened first was that by an unexpected conversion he tamed to teachable a mind too stubborn for its years—for I was strongly devoted to the superstitions of the Papacy that nothing less could draw me from such depths of mire. And so this mere taste of true godliness that I received set me on fire with such a desire to progress that I pursued the rest of my studies more coolly, although I did not give them up altogether. Before a year had slipped by anybody who longed for a purer doctrine kept on coming to learn from me, still a beginner and a raw recruit." By what was he set on fire?

John Piper: "What he saw immediately, and without any intervening chain of human reasoning, were two things, so interwoven that they would determine the rest of his life: the majesty of God and the Word of God. The Word mediated the majesty, and the majesty vindicated the Word. Henceforth, he would be a man utterly devoted to displaying the majesty of God by the exposition of the Word of God.

John Calvin to Cardinal Sadolet: "Your zeal for heavenly life is a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself, and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God." "You touch upon justification by

faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us...Wherever the knowledge of justification is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished.”

At age 30, Calvin described an imaginary scene of himself at the end of his life giving an account to God, he said, “The thing O God at which I chiefly aimed, and for which hi most diligently labored, was, that the glory of thy goodness and justice...might shine forth conspicuous, that the virtue and blessings of thy Christ...might be fully displayed.”

Even as a new convert, Calvin’s teaching and writing became quickly in demand. With his background, skills, abilities, and passions, he knew exactly where God was calling—Calvin knew God wanted him to be a scholar, a writer, an ivory tower theologian. But it was not to be. How fragile are the plans we lay!

IV. A MASTERPIECE IS BORN

After his escape from France, he took up two years in exile in Basel, Switzerland. So, from 1534-1536 “he devoted himself to the study of Hebrew.” He also continued his calling to write, publishing his first edition of his most famous work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Even now, he was not disconnected from his people.

“But lo! While I lay hidden at Basel, and known only to few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France...It appeared to me, that unless I opposed the perpetrators to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery. This was the consideration which induced me to publish my *Institutes of the Christian Religion*...It was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed.” This is how crisis propelled him! Later he writes: “The fact that the devil is everywhere called God’s adversary and ours also ought to fire us to an unceasing struggle against him. For if we have God’s glory at heart, as we should have, we ought, with all our strength to contend against him who is trying to extinguish it. If we are minded to affirm Christ’s Kingdom as we ought, we must wage irreconcilable war with him who is plotting its ruin.”

John Piper comments: “So when you hold the *Institutes* of John Calvin in your hand remember that theology, for John Calvin, was forged in the furnace of burning flesh, and that Calvin could not sit idly by without some effort to vindicate the faithful and the God for whom they suffered. I think we would perhaps, do our theology better today if more were at stake in what we said.”

The *Institutes* began as a six chapter summary of Christian faith and practice and went through 5 subsequent enlargements by the time he finally finished it in 1559. It began as a six chapter treatise and ended as an 80 chapter tome which stands today as the greatest theological work of the reformation.

V. THE GREATNESS OF GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY

In 1536 France offered a brief reprieve which allowed Calvin to return home to put his affairs in order. He would never return home again. When he left, he intended to go to Strasbourg to continue his scholarly endeavor in peace. But a war broke out between Charles V and Francis I. At the last moment, troop movements forced Calvin to turn and go through Geneva, where he staid the night. “I have learned from experience that we cannot see very far before us. When I promised myself an easy, tranquil life, what I least expected was at hand.”

A man named William Farel, the zealous reformed leader of Geneva, heard that Calvin (writer of the *Institutes*) was in town for the night. He met with Calvin, and that meeting changed the course of the world. “Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to my private studies, for which I wished to keep myself free from other pursuits, and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I felt as if God from heaven had laid his mighty hand upon me to stop me in my course...and I was so terror-stricken that I did not continue my journey.”

What plans have you laid that God has uprooted? What place(s) are you in right now that seem to be the opposite of where you’d want to be? What might God be doing here? (financial crisis) James 4.13-16

He soon became the professor of Scripture and then the pastor of St. Peter's church. However, two years later, the city council banished Farel and Calvin and they left in humiliation. Some of the townspeople even began naming their dogs Calvin just to have an excuse to kick them! Instead of sadness, Calvin was relieved thinking that his short sojourn into pastoral ministry was over and that he could now go to the Strasbourg and enjoy the tranquility of scholarship. But the same thing happened to him again, this time from the great reformer Martin Bucer: "That most excellent servant of Christ, Martin Bucer, employing a similar kind of remonstrance and protestation as that to which Farel had recourse, before, drew me back to a new station. Alarmed by the example of Jonah which he set before me, I still continued in the work of teaching." So, for 3 years, he pastored 500 French refugees, taught New Testament, wrote a commentary on Romans, and published the 2nd edition of the *Institutes*. Here he found his wife Idelette, a widow in his congregation with two children from her previous marriage. She and Calvin had three children together but one was stillborn and the other two died as infants, soon followed by Idelette herself. "The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound in the death of our baby son. But He Himself is a Father and knows best what is good for His children."

VI. GOD'S MINISTRY FOR GOD'S MAJESTY

By 1541, the Geneva council realized their mistake and rescinded their ban on Calvin and Farel, inviting them to return promptly. This was not the invitation for which Calvin was looking because he knew how much tougher Geneva would be and how many more trials it would involve. Though he did not initially want to return, he concluded, "yet because I know that I am not my own master, I offer my heart as a true sacrifice to the Lord." Calvin's seal: "My heart I offer to you O Lord, promptly and sincerely."

He conducted his ministry in costly suffering. He complained of colic, spitting blood, ague, gout, and "excruciating sufferings" of hemorrhoids. Even worse were his kidney stones: "They gave me exquisite pain...At length not without the most painful strainings I ejected a calculus which in some degree mitigated my sufferings, but such was its size that it lacerated the urinary canal and a copious discharge of blood followed. This hemorrhage could only be arrested by an injection of milk through a syringe." He was also burdened by mobs shooting off guns outside his house, threats to his life, and the sound of armies only minutes away: "Whence you may conclude that we have not only exile to fear, but that all the most cruel varieties of death are impending over us, for in the cause of religion they will set no bounds to their barbarity."

Through it all he unleashed the power of God's Word as if unleashing a lion from a cage. He imagines Scripture like spectacles to a bleary eyed man—they clarify, illumine, and reveal God Himself. They make Him clear. This is why everything for Calvin centered around the exposition of the Bible. His friend called him a "bow always strung" and it shows. He wrote the *Institutes* (Latin and in French), 22 large volumes of Biblical commentaries, 11 volumes of correspondence, tracts; he lectured constantly in the university, and he was an unstoppable preacher—after 5 years in Acts, he then spent the next 5 with 46 sermons on Thessalonians, 186 on Corinthians, 86 on the pastorals, 43 on Galatians, 48 on Ephesians, a five year harmony of the Gospels, and on the weekdays during that same period, 159 on Job, 200 on Deuteronomy, 353 on Isaiah, and 123 on Genesis. He also taught and trained thousands of other pastors to do the same such as the French refugees who came to him to be trained and then return as church planters. In 1555 there were only 5 reformed churches in all of France, but by 1559 there were 100, and by 1562 the number had swelled to 2150 with 3 million members out of a total population of 20 million. Scotland experienced similar results.

"God's whole purpose in creating us, in adorning the world with such a magnificent variety of beautiful and good things, and in watching over us with such careful providence is that we might be moved continually to render praise to Him." God's love is not Him making much of us but Him enabling us to make much of Him forever.

Leslie Newbigin: "I suddenly saw that someone could use all the language of evangelical Christianity, and yet the center was fundamentally the self, my need of salvation. And God is auxiliary to that....I also saw that quite a lot of evangelical Christianity can easily slip, can become centered in me and my need of salvation, not in God's glory."

Tozer: "To most people God is an inference, not a reality. He is a deduction from evidence which they consider adequate, but He remains personally unknown to the individual...For millions of Christians, God is no more real than He is to the non-Christian. They go through life trying to love an ideal and be loyal to a principle." What else is God doing right now? Not only a crisis but an opportunity to see God and His majesty displayed.