

## A SPRINT THROUGH CALVIN'S INSTITUTES

### The Knowledge of God the Creator

#### I. Review from Book I, Chapters 13-15

- A. The one God of heaven and earth is also triune, exist in three Persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit).
- B. The triune God is also Creator, who spoke into being all things out of nothing.
- C. God's abundant, immeasurable creative work should lead us to *"feel his power and grace in ourselves and in the great benefits he has conferred upon us, and so bestir ourselves to trust, invoke, praise, and love him"* (1.14.22)

#### II. God's Providence – *"...nothing is more profitable than the knowledge of this doctrine"* (Calvin, 1.17.3)

*It would be cold and lifeless to represent God as a momentary Creator, who completed his work once for all, and then left it. Here, especially, we must dissent from profane men, and maintain that the presence of the divine power is shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception... [W]ithout proceeding to [God's] Providence, we cannot understand the full force of what is meant by God being the Creator... But faith must penetrate deeper. After learning that there is a Creator, it must forthwith conclude that he is also a Governor and Preserver—not only in that he produces a kind of general motion in the machine of the globe as well as in each of its parts, but by a special providence sustains, cherishes, superintends, all the things which he has made, to the very minutest, even to a sparrow... Indeed, those who confine the providence of God within narrow limits deprive God of his glory and themselves of a most profitable doctrine... Hence we maintain that not only heaven and earth and inanimate creatures, but also the plans and intentions of men are so governed by his providence as to move exactly in the course which he has destined... (1.16.1,3, 8)*

1. According to Calvin, what thoughts about God must "round out" our view of Him as Creator? Will "deism" (i.e., God as detached clockmaker) do the job? Will mere foreknowledge do the job? Will "fate" do the job?

*"...[P]rovidence means not that by which God sits idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events. Thus it pertains no less to the hands than to his eyes." (1.16.4)*

2. Has Calvin left anything outside of God's control? What questions begin to form our minds at this point?

#### III. How Providence "Works"

*[I]n overruling all things, [God's Providence] works at one time with means, at another without means, and at another against means... [N]evertheless sometimes the causes of the events are hidden... So the thought creeps in that human affairs are whirled about by the blind impulse of Fortune, or our carnal nature incites us to speak as if God were amusing himself by tossing men up and down like balls. It is true, indeed, that if we had quiet and composed minds ready to learn, the final outcome would show that God always has the best reason for his plan: either to instruct his own people in patience, or to correct their wicked affections and tame their lust, or to subjugate them to self-denial... Profane men with their absurdities foolishly raise an uproar... If the Lord has indicated the point of our death, they say, we cannot escape it. Therefore it is vain for anyone to busy himself in taking precautions... But with respect to future events, Solomon easily reconciles human deliberation with divine providence... "A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps," (Pro 16: 9). This means that the eternal decrees of God by no means prevent us from proceeding, under his will, to provide for ourselves, and arrange all our affairs. And the reason is obvious. For he who has fixed the boundaries of our life, has at the same time entrusted us with the care of it, provided us with the means of preserving it, forewarned us of the dangers to which we are exposed, and supplied cautions and remedies, that we may not be overwhelmed unawares. Now, our duty is clear, namely, since the Lord has committed to us the defense of our life, - to defend it; since he offers assistance, - to use it; since he forewarns us of danger, - not to rush on heedless; since he supplies remedies, - not to neglect them... Therefore the Christian heart, since it has been thoroughly persuaded that all things happen by God's plan, and that nothing takes place by chance, will ever look to him as the principal cause of all things, yet will give attention to the secondary causes in their proper place. (1.17.1, 3-4, 6)*

1. According to Calvin, what are the three ways God can execute His perfect providence? What are examples of each?

*“So the king did not listen to the people, for it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word, which the LORD spoke by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam the son of Nebat.” (1 Kings 12:15)*

*“When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’” (John 11:43)*

2. According to Calvin, to what degree can we understand the purposes behind God's providence? What about when we look at the big picture versus particular events? Which is clearer to us?
3. What serious error does a “hyper-Calvinistic” view of providence produce? Are we ever at fault in this way? How can we be “Calvinists who sweat”?

#### IV. What About Evil?

*Innumerable are the evils which beset human life; innumerable, too, are the deaths that threaten it. We need not go beyond ourselves: since our body is a receptacle, nay the nurse, of a thousand diseases, a man cannot move without carrying along with him many forms of destruction. His life is in a manner interwoven with death... Go on board a ship, you are but a plank's breadth from death. Mount a horse, the stumbling of a foot endangers your life. Walk along the streets, every tile upon the roofs is a source of danger... Even within a high walled garden, seemingly delightful, a serpent will sometimes lurk... I say nothing of poison, treachery, robbery, some of which beset us at home, others follow us abroad... Here, however, we were only referring to the misery which man should feel, were he placed under the dominion of chance... Yet, when that light of divine providence has once shone upon a godly man, he is then relieved and set free... His solace, I say, is to know that his Heavenly Father so holds all things in his power, so rules by his authority and will, so governs by his wisdom, that nothing can befall except he determine it... [I]f you pay attention, you will easily perceive that ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it... [Yet] a more difficult question arises. For carnal sense can hardly comprehend how in acting through [Satan and all the wicked] [God] does not contract some defilement... [W]hen we do not grasp how God wills to take place what he forbids to be done, let us recall our mental incapacity, and at the same time consider that the light in which God dwells is not without reason called unapproachable... so that in a wonderful and ineffable manner nothing is done without God's will, not even that which is against his will... (1.17.10-11; 1.18.1, 3)*

1. Does the doctrine of providence mean that we ought to have a casual optimism about us (e.g., “God is in heaven and all is right in the world”)? Why or why not?
2. Does it help to believe, with Calvin (and Scripture!), that evil exists “not by a bare permission” (Westminster Confession of Faith 5.4), but that God actually brings about / causes / controls / decrees / ordains / plans evil?

*“Let those for whom this seems harsh consider for a little while how bearable their squeamishness is in refusing a thing attested by clear Scriptural proofs because it exceeds their mental capacity... For our wisdom ought to be nothing else than to embrace with humble teachableness, and at least without finding fault, whatever is taught in Sacred Scripture.” (1.18.4)*

3. How might the following questions help clear up some confusion related to the problem of evil?
  - **Using terms like “good” and “evil”:** How is the “problem of evil” really a problem of unbelievers (though it is still an emotional one for us)? How do we know something is “evil”?
  - **The Length of God's Plan:** How does the consummation of God's Kingdom resolve much of the tension we feel when we witness evil? Would there be a “problem of evil” if God immediately dealt with it in the next 5 minutes? 5 years? 500 years?
  - **Limited Perspective and Human Pride:** In light of God's sovereign purpose with evil (Rom 8:28, Gen 50:20), what are we demanding when we charge God with wrongdoing?
4. How should Christians apply the gospel to the intellectual and emotional problems of evil?