

7. John Calvin (1509 – 1564): Scripture, suffering and sovereignty

Introduction

Some acknowledgements as we begin: in this talk I've drawn particularly on lectures by Garry Williams, and on Williston Walker's biography of Calvin.

Our aim in this session is learn a little of John Calvin's life and draw some big lessons from it. In our next session, God-willing, we're going to look at the spread of Calvinism: where it went, why, and what are the distinctives of Reformed/Calvinistic thinking.

First, let's PRAY using a prayer of John Calvin:

Almighty God,
Thou hast deigned to show Thyself so intimately to us
Also daily deignest to confirm us un Thy truth.
Grant that we may turn aside neither to the right nor to the left,
But depend wholly on Thy Word
And so cleave to Thee
That no errors of the world may lead us astray.
May we stand firm in that faith which we have learned from Thy law
From the prophets and the gospel...
That we may finally enjoy Thy full and perfect glory,
Being transfigured into it,
At last attained that inheritance acquired for us
by the blood of Thine only begotten Son.
Amen.



Listen to God's Word in Romans 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

1. Calvin's conversion and call to Geneva

Like his much older brother-in-Christ, Luther, John Calvin grew up in that world where the most powerful men were not politicians or soldiers, but ministers, priests and popes. It's a world where salvation is the work of men – priests who (as if by magic) re-sacrifice Christ every Sunday in the Mass, a world where the church deliberately keeps the Scriptures *out* of the hands of the people, and where salvation may be bought for a price. That's the world of the Roman Catholic church in 1509.

There are some glimmers of light: there is a spreading of new learning: humanism. A few scholars are reading the Bible in its original languages for the first time in centuries. They are beginning to see the lies of Roman Catholicism. And Martin Luther in 1517 begins what we would come to call the Reformation.

And on 10 July 1509 Jean Cauvin is born – in the old city of Noyon, about 58 miles NE of Paris. He is born and would ever be a proud Frenchman – John Calvin is his Anglicised name.

The most important man in Noyon was the bishop. Gerard Cauvin wanted his children to get on in life. So he cultivated the friendship of the bishop. Aged just 12, Jean Cauvan is appointed to orders in the Roman Church. This is not unusual and it's a financial arrangement: with the orders comes money paid in taxes to the church.

Aged 14, while the plague is raging in Noyon, John is sent to study at the University of Paris. It is one of the greatest universities in Europe. Calvin was a brilliant student: educated in philosophy, Latin, and – at his father's command – in the law. But when Gerard suddenly dies, Jean is free to study anything. He chooses the classics: he learns Hebrew and Greek – which are the original languages of the Bible.

At this stage Calvin is a loyal Catholic. But by the age of 24 Calvin has been transformed. He is no longer a loyal Roman Catholic. He is a Protestant. We do not know the story of his conversion – the story of his regeneration. Calvin was a private man and gave us very few glimpses of his own life and character (mainly, as it happens, in his introduction to his commentary on the psalms, where he felt his own life experience so mirrored the sufferings of the Psalmist that he couldn't hold back some of his own life story). Calvin told us this:

“God, by the secret guidance of his providence, at length gave a different direction to my course... since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame...”

However it happened, Calvin knew that his conversion was the sovereign work of God: God did it – by a sudden conversion. He goes on:

“I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein... [And] I was quite surprised to find that before a year had elapsed, all who had any desire after purer doctrine were continually coming to me to learn, although I myself was as yet but a mere novice...”

Aged only about 24, Calvin was already – reluctantly – becoming a leader among that little group of Frenchman who loved the Bible. But it was not a safe thing to be a Protestant in Catholic France – just as under Bloody Queen Mary (1553-58) it would not be safe to be a Protestant in Catholic England.

Attempts were made to arrest Calvin – but he escaped. In 1534 he resigned his orders in the Catholic Church (and the money that came with it). He was briefly imprisoned at Noyon. Quietly he began to operate as a Protestant minister. But repression followed. Calvin fled from France after the “Affair of the Placards” – Protestant slogans denouncing the Mass were placed around Paris, one even outside the bedroom of the King of France! Calvin arrived at Basel Switzerland in 1535 where he lived under a false name.

Aged only 26 he began writing a book for which he'll ever be known: the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It was a handbook of theology – that he would expand and deepen over the next 23 years. It is a timeless and classic work – full of the God-ness of God. But it's purpose was practical and pastoral: to defend those friends and brethren of his who were being martyred as heretics back in his beloved France.

Calvin returned to Paris to get his brother and half-sister – and planned to bring them with him to safety in Strasburg or Basel. But the providence of God intervened. All through his life, Calvin knew deep in his bones that “the secret guidance of providence” was at work. A war meant he was forced to take a detour to Geneva, arriving in 1536. Recognised by an acquaintance, he was identified to the leader of the evangelicals in the city, William Farel.

Calvin described himself as a timid and shy man – perhaps a bit like Timothy in the New Testament. He wanted a quiet life to study, read and write. Farel had other ideas for the 27 year old John Calvin. He wrote:

“William Farel detained me at Geneva, not so much by counsel and exhortation, as by a dreadful imprecation, which I felt to be as if God had from heaven laid his mighty hand upon me to arrest me... after having learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to 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 tranquillity of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity seas so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken...”

Questionable methods! But undoubtedly the strange providence of God at work in the life of John Calvin. Because it was from Geneva that God, through Calvin, would change the world. Let’s consider Geneva during the life of Calvin.

2. Calvin’s city: the whole of life regulated by Scripture

Calvin’s city – the city of Geneva in Switzerland: from here we learn that the whole of life is to be regulated by the Scriptures.

Geneva was a mess when Calvin arrived. It was a city of about 13,000 people. The Reformation had arrived in Geneva. Lutheran texts had reached the city in 1532. But its leader William Farel was struggling. There was Protestant preaching, but that was about it. Farel knew he needed Calvin’s help.

What Calvin sought to achieve in Geneva was a Christian city – a model Christian community *and* a place of learning that would bring about the Reformation of the whole of Europe. That was Calvin’s aim. Between 1536 and his death in Geneva in 1564 (some 28 years later) that is not far off what (by God’s grace) he achieved.

How did Calvin go about achieving that? Through PREACHING and through CHURCH DISCIPLINE. Let me tell you what that looked like in Calvin’s Geneva

All inhabitants of the city were subjected to a creed test: if you weren’t a Reformed Christian, you had to leave. (That sounds extraordinary to our ears – but don’t judge Calvin by our standards. Remember that in those days you were either a Protestant or a Catholic. If a Catholic, you were the servant of a church which wanted to exterminate Protestantism. The city needed to know whose side you were on).

Calvin drew up regulations known as the *Ordonnances (1541)*, key regulations at the heart of the city’s life. Note that these were *city* regulations – not purely restricted to the church. And they

provided for the offices of pastor, teacher, elder and deacon. And it was the job of those four groups of people to ensure that PREACHING and DISCIPLINE filled not just the churches but the whole city.

Why preaching? Because of Calvin's understanding of the Bible. In his own words: "God bestows the acknowledge knowledge of himself upon us ONLY in the Scriptures." Scripture is a special gift in which God himself "opens his own most hallowed lips." So the beginning of "true understanding" is to "reverently embrace what it pleases God there to witness of himself."

And in this Calvin was merely obeying the commands of Scripture itself. Simply recall 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness..."

So of course there must be vast amounts of Bible preaching... rebuking... correcting... and training up in righteousness. And in Calvin's Geneva there was!

Consider the three churches of Geneva. Typically in each church there would be 3 different Sunday sermons, catechising on a Sunday, plus another three sermons during the week. Calvin and God's people were hungry for the Word of God. This was the main job of the "Pastor", of which Calvin was one, preaching in the church of Saint Pierre (St Peter).

Here's how seriously Calvin took God's word. This was his plan for schooling and the education of children. In Geneva it was the church that appointed School Teachers. Their job was educate God's people in sound Bible doctrine. In order to understand sound bible doctrine, you needed to know "languages and worldly sciences" – what we might think of as the "normal" curriculum. And so Calvin developed the Genevan school system to achieve that end.

In our culture we have *school* over here... and *church* over there. Usually, the two have nothing to do with each other. But in Calvin's mind the whole of life was to be regulated by Scripture. The purpose of education – the reason you sent your kids to school – was that they might acquire tools of learning in order to better understand the Bible and so know the God of the Bible. Education was a function of the church. The senior Teacher was regarded as a minister in God's church.

Don't you think that sounds wonderful! All learning only exists to help us understand the Bible and to know God and glorify Him!

The other key feature of life in Geneva was discipline: calling sinners back to conformity to God's Word. Here Calvin and Geneva have become notorious in some circles – although pretty unfairly.

What did discipline look like in the city of Geneva? Calvin created a body called the Consistory. It was made up of elders and ministers. Its job was to discipline wayward Christians – and that meant disciplining anyone in the city, because everyone had said that they were an evangelical Christian! They examined people for all sorts of things:

- Adultery
- lack of knowledge about the faith
- criticising sermons... being absent from a sermon
- using magic charms
- family quarrels...

In these matters the church had powers of discipline up to and including excommunication: they could bar an unrepentant sinner from the Lord's table, which is to say to them that they have no share in Christ and his blessings. They would then hand that person over to the city government for punishment. This is what we probably find most alien: that it's not just the church whose job it is to encourage people to conform to the Word of God. But it's also the job of the state and of the civil government in its separate sphere also to bring people to conform with the Word of God, because the Word of God is the only ultimate rule and authority. (A side note: Calvin and the city government were often at odds. Calvin believed that church discipline belonged to the church. However, the city permitted the church only to admonish the wayward. Excommunication remained in the power of the City Council. Rightly, Calvin hated this).

The Consistory was the least popular of all Calvin's reforms. And it's probably what seems scariest or weirdest to us today. Sometimes it clearly went over the top. But thousands and thousands of contemporaries agreed with the Scottish reformer John Knox who said of Geneva that it was "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on the earth since the days of the Apostles."

Perhaps we find it weird because we don't believe that the whole of life is ruled by God through his Word. We need to hear God's word speak of the total Lordship of Christ and the total rule of Christ's word. There is no sacred / secular divide. There is no part of life where Christ does not rule by His Holy Word. Christ is Lord of all of life. His Word is authoritative over everything. That's what Calvin saw clearly. That's what he tried to implement in Geneva through preaching of the Word, and through the exercise of discipline.

3. Calvin's suffering: he trusted His sovereign God

John Calvin is one of my greatest heroes. I love him. And sometimes I think how great it would be to get in a Tardis and travel back to Geneva in the 16th century. Imagine:

- a city government publicly and personally committed to seeking the glory of Christ by advancing the evangelical faith.
- A school system which from the primary level upwards was explicitly, openly, evangelical and which its only purpose as to train in the gospel and in godliness.
- Men of the greatest godliness and learning teaching the gospel everywhere.
- The public life of the city being transformed, as the Gospel took hold of people's lives and corruption and immorality subsided.

To which Calvin would say: "Non!" Stay away from Geneva. Don't envy me. Don't envy Geneva.

By the way, the reason John Knox loved Geneva so much was that he was a refugee fleeing for his life (so of course it was a good place to be). Also, Knox was an English speaker who lived with the English Congregation in the City which was a far purer and more zealous church.

Calvin suffered intensely throughout his whole life – but particularly during his 28 years serving Geneva. It was in the fire that he learned to trust the sovereign God.

Let me list some of his many, many hardships:

- Exiled from France – an asylum seeker. He loved France. He cared for it so much. But he could never go home.
- He never wanted to be in Geneva – but Farel made him stay.

- Two years later he was exiled again – thrown out of Geneva: a new government came to power and didn't like him one little bit.
- Three years on with the city in moral and political chaos he reluctantly came back. He was a timid man by nature – and wanted the quiet life in order to study. He never got it.
- His workload: he preached about 280 sermons a year, plus 180 theological lectures. He took about 27 weddings a year. He spoke every week in the disciplinary court. He spoke in a preachers' bible class every Friday. Probably he worked himself to death.
- He had horrendous ill health almost his entire life.
- His sister-in-law committed adultery and brought shame on the family.
- He and Idelette had somewhere between 1 and 4 children, all of whom died in infancy. His wife Idelette died after only 9 years of marriage when Calvin was just 40. He said: "mine is no common grief – I have lost the best companion of my life."
- He lived in poverty for most of his ministry.
- But above all, Calvin experienced the pain of bitter opposition...

He was opposed by the Roman Catholic Church. He was opposed by heretics and radicals who came to the city as refugees. He was opposed by old Genevans who didn't like the strict moral order – they were known as the *libertines*, and it was an apt name. He was constantly threatened, abused, and criticised. The city he served didn't accord him the kind of respect he warranted until the last years of his life. He had been in the city 33 years before they even made him a citizen.

When opposed Calvin always fought back: against heretics who denied the Trinity and incarnation; against the city government when it wanted to allow immoral people to take holy communion. Wherever the battle was, there Calvin went in obedience to the word of God. Calvin illustrates that it is not always wrong to fall-out/fight/disagree – even within the Christian community. Sometimes it is crucial that we do fight to maintain the truth of holy Scripture.

And he kept on going in a life of extraordinary perseverance. As 2 Timothy 4:2 commands he preached the Word in season *and* out of season. He was not ashamed of the gospel – or of the far reaching implications that the gospel has for all of life. Truthfully, for most of his life he was preaching "out of season."

How then did he carry on?

Calvin carried on because Calvin was a Calvinist! More on Calvinism next Sunday. But his deep, deep convictions about the sovereignty of God in all things meant he looked at his sufferings differently to an unbeliever. And he responded to them in godly ways. Listen to a letter he wrote after the death of his son Jacques:

"The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound in the death of our infant son. But he is himself a Father, and knows best what is good for his children." (Calvin to Viret, 1542).

Calvin knew that suffering does not come from an out-of-control Satan who God can barely keep on his leash. The Lord inflicts. He is sovereign. He holds all things in his power: good things and bad things.

But he is not a cruel tyrant. He's a Father – who knows what is best for us. If we want a Bible verse to serve as a text for this point then Romans 8:28 would do us well. It is a verse forged in the fire of suffering: "All things work together for good to those who love God, to those called according to his purpose."

The truth of God's sovereignty and providence had wings in his life – it had power. Listen to these words from the *Institutes* – about God's providence, the truth that God orders all things in our lives:

"Yet, when that light of divine providence has once shone upon a godly man, he is then relieved and set free not only from the extreme anxiety and fear that were pressing him before, but from every care. For as he justly dreads fortune, so he fearlessly dares commit himself to God. 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. Moreover, it comforts him to know that he has been received into God's safekeeping and entrusted to the care of his angels, and that neither water, nor fire, nor iron can harm him, except in so far as it pleases God as governor to give them occasion."

Elsewhere he says: "ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it."

Because this loving and powerful Lord was in charge of his life, Calvin could give himself wholly to the Lord's service – no matter what were the consequences. He died in 1564 and at his request was buried in an unmarked grave.

4. Why is Calvin so controversial?

His theology: in particular his high view of the sovereignty of God is hated by many. Yet it is clearly what the Bible teaches! More on that next week.

His personality: he comes across to us as strict – for example in matters of personal holiness. What would he think of churches in the 21st century, I wonder!

Misunderstandings about Geneva: the city was *not* a theocracy in which the church controlled the levers of power. Actually, Calvin tried very hard to keep temporal powers out of the hands of the church in Geneva. And Calvin was not the city's dictator.

Because of the followers of John Calvin. Herein lies some truth. I love John Calvin and I love Calvinistic doctrine. I'm a 5 point Calvinist through and through. However, it is the case that the heirs of John Calvin have been harsh or unloving in their defence of the doctrines of grace. In the same way that the heirs of the wonderful Puritans have also sometimes been harsh or unloving in defence of their distinctives.

John Calvin, of course, would have hated this talk. He hated attention being on himself. He said: "I speak of myself unwillingly." When died in 1564, not even 55 years old, he was mourned by godly men. He has been vilified ever since by ignorant and ungodly men. But Calvin took pains to ensure he would never be the centre of a cult of personality. He insisted that he was buried in an unmarked grave. He didn't want attention even in death.

Of Calvin was a sinner. He believed in total depravity and was himself sinful through and through. He had a temper on him and when opposed could fly off the handle. He could be bitter and vengeful.

The most notorious incident in his life concerned the burning of a false teacher. Back in the 16th century it was not uncommon for heretics and traitors to be executed. And Calvin was involved in the burning of a notorious Spanish heretic called Michael Servetus – although Calvin did try to get him executed more humanely.

Calvin was a sinner saved by grace. And it's to Calvin's teaching and influence that we're going to turn next week.

Appendix: Calvin on the providence of God

Still must the faithful Christian's mind mount up:
To know whither Christ calls all His own.

His own cross each should bear.
For all whom the Lord has adopted and received
Among His children must equip themselves
For a hard life, toilsome, full of labour
And endless sorts of evil.
The heavenly Father's will is so to exercise
His servants and season them.
This order He began in Christ, His firstborn Son,
And now practices it toward all others.

For though Christ was His beloved Son
In whom He was well please,
We see, however, that in this world
Christ was not pampered.
Not only can one say He was unceasingly afflicted;
His whole life in fact was but a sort
Of endless cross.

How can we be spared this condition
To which even Christ our head had to submit?
Especially since He submitted to it
For our sake, to give us
An example of patience!
Accordingly the apostle announces
That God has set this end
For all His children:
To shape them to His Christ.

Thence comes to us a great consolation.
Enduring all miseries
(Called adverse and evil things),
We cleave to the cross of Christ
So that, as He has passed through an abyss
Of all evils to enter the heavenly glory,
We too, passing through divers tribulations,
Reach that place.

For St. Paul teaches us that
When we feel within ourselves the sharing
Of His sufferings, at the same time
We grasp the power of His resurrection.
And when we become sharers in His death,
This is a preparation to reach His glorious eternity.

How much power that has to soften
All bitterness the cross may hold:
It is that the more affliction, misery we undergo,
The surer is our fellowship with Christ.
When we share with Him, adversities to us
Not only are blessed but also are helps
Greatly to advance our salvation.

Originally from chapter 17 of the 1539 edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Cited in *The Piety of John Calvin: a collection of his spiritual prose, poems, and hymns* (translated and edited by Ford Lewis Battles, pp86-87.