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PREPARATION

The first time I read this chapter I found it left me wondering if I knew anything at all about living the Christian life. Prayer that we might grasp the lessons this chapter contains seems to me to be the most appropriate way to prepare.

High-level section headings:

1-5: Interpretation of divine providence with reference to the past and the future.

6-11: Meditating on the ways of God in providence: the happiness of recognising acts of providence.

12-14: Answers to objections

I found an interesting paper at <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/papers/freedom%20and%20God.pdf> that briefly summarises a long-standing debate between Jesuits and Dominicans on the subject of God's providence. It contains the following helpful phrase, attributing the thought it expresses to Thomas Aquinas (a theologian not frequently quoted in Grace Baptist circles): *God's knowledge is a cause of things, and not vice versa.*

EXPLORATORY

1. Why do we need to grasp, clearly and fully, the doctrine of Providence as Calvin has outlined it? (210, 17ff)

- a. *...men's dispositions are inclined to vain subtleties...*
- b. *...any who do not hold fast to a good and right use of this doctrine can hardly avoid entangling themselves in inscrutable difficulties.*

What is another meaning of *...to what end*, in 210, 20?

- a. *'...with what purpose,' or, 'why'*

We note from this Calvin's determination to be practical – he is not content just to note what the Scripture teaches on this subject – he wants to help us to see to what use the Bible's teaching should be put in our lives.

What three thoughts should provide a boundary to our own meditations on providence? (210, 22ff)

- a. *God's providence:*
 - a. *...must be considered with regard to the future as well as the past*
 - b. *...is the determinative principle of all things in such a way that sometimes it works through an intermediary, sometimes without an intermediary, sometimes contrary to every intermediary*
 - c. *...strives to the end that God may reveal his concern for the whole human race, but especially his vigilance in ruling the church, which he deigns to watch more closely.*

...although either fatherly favour and beneficence or severity of judgment often shine forth in the whole course of providence, nevertheless sometimes the causes of the events are hidden. To what temptation does this hiddenness of the causes lead? (211, 3ff)

- a. *...the thought creeps in that human affairs turn and whirl at the blind urge of fortune, or the flesh incites us to contradiction, as if God were making sport of men by throwing them about like balls.*

If we had quiet and composed minds and were ready to await the final outcome of events, what sort of purposes would we learn that they had? (211, 9ff)

- a. *...to instruct his own people*
 - a. *... in patience*
 - b. *...to correct their wicked affections and to take their lust*
 - c. *...to subjugate them to self-denial*
 - d. *...to arouse them from sluggishness*
- b. *...to bring low the proud*
- c. *...to shatter the cunning of the impious*
- d. *...to overthrow their devices*

Calvin quotes from Ps 40:5 in support of – what? (211,13ff)

- a. *...however hidden and fugitive from our point of view the causes may be...they are surely laid up with him (ie God)*

What profitable use should we always make of events that turn out as we do not wish them to? (211, 19f)

- a. *...in our miseries our sins ought always to come to mind, that punishment itself may incite us to repentance*

Is this recollection of our own sinfulness the whole story? (211, 18ff)

- a. *...even though...our sins ought always to come to mind...yet we see how Christ claims for the Father's secret plan a broader justice than simply punishing each one as he deserves. For concerning the man born blind he says: "Neither he nor his parents sinned, but that God's glory may be manifested in him" {John 9:3 p.]*

Do we readily understand and accept conditions such as being born blind? (211, 24ff)

- a. *...our nature cries out, when calamity comes before birth itself, as if God with so little mercy thus punished the undeserving.*

How was Christ able to accept the condition of the man born blind without accusing God of injustice? (211, 26ff)

- a. *Christ testifies that in this miracle the glory of his Father shines, provided our eyes be pure*

How will holding fast to a good a right use of the doctrine of providence (210, 18) help us to resist the temptation to question God and suspect him of injustice? (211, 28)

- a. *It will keep our eyes, pure*

In what way does a consciousness of our limitations help us to submit to God in the appropriate way? (211, 29ff)

- a. *It supports us in our quest to ...so cherish moderation that we do not try to make God render account to us, and to ...so reverence his secret judgments as to consider his will the truly just cause of all things.*

When dense clouds darken the sky, and a violent tempest arises...thunder strikes our ears and all our senses are benumbed with fright, everything seems to us to be confused and mixed up... Why is this? (211, 32f)

- a. *...because a gloomy mist is cast over our eyes*

What truths does this, *gloomy mist*, hide from our consciousness? (211,35f)

- a. *...all the while a constant quiet and serenity ever remain in heaven.*
- b. *...while the disturbances in the world deprive us of judgment, God out of the pure light of his justice and wisdom tempers and directs these very movements in the best-conceived order to a right end*

When trying to understand God's ways, what must we bear in mind that we are not dealing with? (212, 3)

- a. *...the deeds of mortal men.*

How should our reluctance to pass judgment on other people's motives restrain us from passing judgment on God's actions? (212, 3ff)

- a. *...toward our equals...we prefer to suspend judgment rather than be charged with rashness; yet (we) haughtily revile the hidden judgments of God, which we ought to hold in reverence.*

2. Possibly, it would be better if the first paragraph in this section was made the concluding paragraph of the previous section and if this section began at the opening of the second paragraph.

In order for us to weigh God's providence properly, what do we need to constantly remind ourselves of? (212, 9f)

- a. Our business in this matter *...is with (our) maker and the Framer of the universe* (Remember the point with which Calvin opened I.xvi – the relationship between providence and creation.)

What quality will remembering this engender in us? (212, 10f)

- a. *...becoming humility*

How does, *becoming humility*, show itself? (212, 11)

- a. *We, submit (ourselves) to fear and reverence*

What is at the root of all objections to the doctrine of God's providence, as Calvin has set it forth? (212, 13ff)

- a. *Objectors, wish nothing to be lawful for God beyond what their own reason prescribes for themselves*

What aspect of Calvin's doctrine do those who disagree with him particularly aim their attacks at? (212, 16ff)

- a. *...we, not content with the precepts of the law, which comprise God's will, say also that the universe is ruled by his secret plan.* (NB. Calvin does not defend himself against this charge, it fairly states his position.)

With whom are Calvin's detractors really contending? (212, 22f)

- a. *God. ...they feign it is with us they are contending*

(Note from IJ: The point at issue is whether there are depths to God's will that we can know nothing about. Calvin is going to go on in the remainder of this section to show that this is exactly what the Scriptures teach. Those with whom Calvin disagrees do not accept that, as well as his commands, God has a secret will that sometimes appears to run counter to those commands. This cannot be the case of course because it would make God inconsistent with himself but it often appears to be the case to us. The important thing to remember is that this is only how things *appear* to us, not how they really are.)

The second paragraph (212, 24ff) brings out two things that are not entirely reconcilable in our own minds. Psalm 36:6 speaks of God's judgments as, *a great deep* (NKJV). Yet Moses, in Deuteronomy 30:11-14 tells us that God's commandment, *is not too mysterious for you, nor is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear and do it?' But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heard, that you may do it.* How does Calvin seek to do both of these statements justice? (212, 29ff)

- a. *...it follows that he has another hidden will which may be compared to a deep abyss.*

How does Paul in Romans 11:33 teach us the same thing about God's judgments as David does in Ps 36:6? What word and phrase does he use?

- a. He tells us that God's judgments are, *unsearchable...and his ways past finding out.*

...in the law and in the gospel are comprehended mysteries which tower far above the reach of our senses. Does that mean that God is a complete mystery to his people? (213, 7ff)

- a. *...God illumines the minds of his own with the spirit of discernment [Job 20:3 or Is 11:2]*

What does this gift enable us to discern? (213, 9f)

- a. *...those mysteries which he has deigned to reveal by his Word.*

As far as, *the mysteries which he has deigned to reveal by his word*, are concerned, how should we regard them? (213, 10ff)

- a. *...no abyss is here*
- b. *...a way in which we ought to walk in safety*
- c. *...a lamp to guide our feet*
- d. *...the light of life*
- e. *...the school of sure and clear truth*

What, then, is an abyss (a great deep)? (213, 13f)

- a. *...his wonderful method of governing the universe, the details of which and the reasons are, hidden from us.*

What attitude should we adopt towards these matters that lie beyond our understanding? (213, 15f)

- a. *...we ought reverently to adore it*

Into what two categories does Moses divide God's activity? (213, 18f)

- a. *...the secret things*
- b. *...what is here written*

Out of these two things, what are we to study? (213, 21)

- a. ...*the law*

What about the things we cannot understand, let alone study, things that Calvin designates, *God's secret providence*? (213, 21f)

- a. ...*look up...with awe*

How does the book of Job teach the same thing as Moses teaches in Deuteronomy 29:29? (213, 23ff)

- a. ...*after, the author, in surveying above and below the frame of the universe, has magnificently discoursed concerning God's works, he finally adds: "Behold! These are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a thing is heard therein!" [Job 26:14].*
- b. ...*when he has discoursed on the secrets of nature, he says that wisdom is known to God alone, but "eludes the eyes of all the living" [Job 28:21]*
- c. ...*he adds a little later that His wisdom has been published to be searched out, because it is said to man: "Behold, the fear of the Lord in wisdom" [Job 28:28].*

(Note from IJ: In the concluding lines of this section, 213, 35ff, Calvin again asserts God's, *right (unknown to us) to rule the universe...his supreme authority*, and identifies his will as, *the sole rule of righteousness, and the truly just cause of all things*. Providence is, *the determinative principle of all things, from which flows nothing but right*. However, in 214, 4f he distinguishes this supreme authority from, *that absolute will of which the Sophists babble*. What is Calvin's problem with the term, *absolute will*, or, *absolute power*?

You might find it helpful to follow [this link](#). An explanation that became popular with some for the problem created by the view that God's control is the ultimate cause of all things (*ie*, the Biblical view, expounded in this book by Calvin and by others before him) was that God had *absolute* power. *Absolute*, in this context, meant that the exercise of his power was not constrained by any ethical considerations. This was the problem that Job grappled with and in his commentary on the book of Job in particular, Calvin grapples with it as well.

Calvin emphatically rejects the notion that any of God's actions can be inconsistent with his holy character. God's power is not absolute, in the sense meant by those who described it as such. There are things that God cannot do, so he does not do them, although it appears to us that he seems to do them. We must guard against the temptation to think this thought because it is an injustice to God and it will lead to us justifying actions that we know to be wrong.)

What fundamental error with regard to God do the Sophists commit? (214,6)

- a. They separate, *God's justice from his power*

What does Calvin assert contrary to the Sophists? (214, 6ff)

- a. ...*providence, that determinative principle of all things, from which flows nothing but right*

3. What three errors will a right response to providence protect us from and how do the three mythical characters that Calvin refers to exemplify these wrong tendencies? (214, 9ff)

- a. Agamemnon asserted that the gods were the cause of his own wickedness
- b. Plautus despaired of there being any meaning and purpose in events and felt that suicide was the only rational response

- c. Lyconides ascribed his own wickedness to the gods' will and permission

Rather than think these fatalistic thoughts, under whose guidance should we place ourselves? (215, 1)

- a. *...under the Spirit's guidance*

If we place ourselves under the Spirit's guidance, how will this show itself? (214, 22ff)

- a. We will, *inquire and learn from Scripture*
- b. We will be, *ready to follow God wherever he calls*

(We should never forget that these had been very real issues for Calvin, particularly in connection with his initial decision to stay and minister in Geneva and his decision to return there in from Strasbourg in 1541)

As the footnote explains, the, *Profane men*, referred to in 215, 4, went by the name 'Libertines'. What faults of theirs does Calvin list in this paragraph? (215, 4ff)

- a. *...it is vain for anyone to busy himself in taking precautions*
- b. They think and behave in a way that implies that, *there is no fixed decree of God that determines life and death, health and disease, peace and war, and other things that men, as they desire or hate them, so earnestly try by thir own toil either to obtain or to avoid.*
- c. *...they conclude that believers' prayers, by which the Lord is asked to provide for things that he has already decreed from eternity, are perverse, not to say superfluous.*

What two aspects of the Libertines' views does Calvin bring to the fore in his summary? (215, 22ff)

- a. *...they cancel all those plans which have to do with the future, as militating against God's providence..., which had decreed what he would have happen.*
- b. *...whatever does happen now, they so impute to God's providence that they close their eyes to the man who clearly has done it...Thus all crimes, because subject to God's ordinance, they call virtues.*

4. Still disputing with the Libertines, what two-fold interpretation of Proverbs 16:9 does Calvin offer? (216, 3ff)

- a. *...we are not at all hindered by God's eternal decrees either from looking ahead for ourselves or from putting all our affairs in order*

With what attitude ought we to put all our affairs in order? (216, 5)

- a. *...always in submission to his will.*

The reason is obvious. Is it? What is it? (216, 6f)

- a. *...he who has set the limits to our life has at the same time entrusted to us its care.*

What examples does Calvin produce of the way that God has entrusted to us the care of our lives? (216, 7ff)

- a. *...he has provided means and helps to preserve it*
- b. *...he has also made us able to foresee dangers; that they may not overwhelm us unaware, he has offered precautions and remedies.*

What duties arise from...

...the fact that God has committed to us the protection of our life? (216, 12)

a. *...to protect it*

...the helps that he offers? (216, 12)

a. *...to use them*

...the forewarnings that he gives us of danger? (216, 13)

a. *...not to plunge headlong*

...the remedies that he makes available? (216, 14)

a. *...not to neglect them*

How do the Libertines respond? (216, 14f)

a. *But no danger will hurt us unless it is fatal.*

How does Calvin, applying the principles outlined above, respond to them? (216, 16f)

a. *But what if the dangers are not fatal, because the Lord has provided you with remedies for repulsing and overcoming them?*

What is God's hiding of all future events from us meant to encourage in us? (216, 30)

a. *...prudence*

To what are means likened? (216, 37)

a. *...clothing*

What are we meant to understand by: *God's providence does not always meet us in its naked form, but God in a sense clothes it with the means employed?* (216, 35ff)

a. God very often reveals his will through the use he makes of means, not by what happens if we neglect them.

5. This section continues Calvin's controversy with the Libertines. What do we learn about them from these two paragraphs? (216, 38ff)

a. *Why...should a thief be punished...Why shall a murdered be punished...If all such men are serving God's will, why shall they be punished? ...they would have transgressors go unpunished, on the ground that their misdeeds are committed solely by God's dispensation*

Why does Calvin confidently deny that such people are serving God's will? (217, 5ff)

a. *...we shall not say that one who is motivated by an evil inclination, by only obeying his own wicked desire, renders service to God at his bidding.*

How are we to seek to serve God? (217, 7ff)

a. *A man, having learned of his will, obeys God in striving toward the goal to which he is called by that same will.*

What does God require of us? (217, 12)

a. *...only what he commands*

What concessions does Calvin make to the thoughts advanced by the Libertines? (217, 12ff, 24ff)

a. *If we contrive anything against his commandment, it is not obedience but obstinacy and transgression. Yet, unless he willed it, we would not do it.*

- b. *I grant more: thieves and murderers and other evildoers are the instruments of divine providence, and the Lord himself uses these to carry out the judgments that he has determined with himself.*

If the claim of evildoers to be doing God's will is accepted what does this imply about God? (217, 28f)

- a. *Will they...involve God in the same iniquity with themselves...?*

What is implied if the claim of evildoers to be doing God's will is accepted but God is not involved in their iniquity? (217, 29f)

- a. *...will they cloak their own depravity with his justice?*

What does Calvin turn to to illustrate the point that he is making? (217, 35)

- a. *...the stench of a corpse*

What does he observe about the stench of a corpse, that he goes on to apply to God's relationship to the sin that he uses in the carrying out of his purposes? (217, 36ff)

- a. *All men see that it is stirred up by the sun's rays; yet no one for this reason says that the rays stink.*

How does Calvin apply this observation? (217, 37ff)

- a. *Thus, since the matter and guilt of evil repose in a wicked man, what reason is there to think that God contracts any defilement, if he uses his (ie, the wicked man's) service for his own purpose?*

How does Calvin in conclusion characterise the use made by Libertines of the providence of God? (217, 41)

- a. *...doglike impudence*

6. We now embark on a new subject: *Meditating on the ways of God in providence: the happiness of recognising acts of providence*

What will, *the Christian heart*, do as it meditates on God's dealings with itself? (218, 4ff)

- a. *...the Christian heart...will ever look to him as the principal cause of all things, yet will give attention to the secondary causes in their proper place.*

Why will the Christian heart look at life in this way? (218, 5f)

- a. *...it has been thoroughly persuaded that all things happen by God's plan, and that nothing takes place by chance*

How many proof texts does Calvin produce in support of the view that, *God's singular providence watches over the welfare of believers?*

- a. Nine

How many of our hairs can fall out of our heads without God's permission? (219, 6f)

- a. *...not even one*

7. What three things, **necessarily** follow, from the knowledge of God's sovereignty? (219, 35ff)

- a. *Gratitude of mind for the favourable outcome of things;*
- b. *Patience in adversity;*

c. *Incredible freedom from worry about the future.*

8. God is described as the one *...whose hand can best impress patience and peaceful moderation of mind upon us*, when we encounter adversity. Calvin produces three Biblical examples of this in action. To which three Old Testament characters does he refer? (220, 15ff)

- a. Joseph
- b. Job
- c. David

Recalling to our minds the fact that God's providence governs everything is the most effective remedy for – what? (220, 37)

a. *...anger and impatience*

What is it about God that makes a recollection of providence the source of the power to overcome anger and impatience? (220, 41f)

a. *...he wills nothing but what is just and expedient.*

How is this to be practically applied by us? (220, 42ff)

a. *...when we are unjustly wounded by men, let us overlook their wickedness..., remember to mount up to God, and learn to believe for certain that whatever our enemy has wickedly committed against us was permitted and sent by God's just dispensation.*

If we fail to apply what we have learned about God's providence in this way, what will be the outcome? (221, 2f)

a. Our pain would be worsened and our minds sharpened for revenge

Calvin now turns to Paul's admonition in Ephesians 6:10-12, stating that it was given to restrain us from retaliation for injuries. What is it about the context that leads him to that conclusion?

How does it help us to recognise that Paul's purpose was to restrain us from retaliation for injuries? (221, 8f)

a. *...in order that we may prepare ourselves for the combat*

Calvin adds, *a most useful admonition*, of his own. What is it?

a. *...God arms both the devil and all the wicked for the conflict, and sits as a judge of the games to exercise our patience*

What if the destruction and misery that press upon us happen without human agency? (221, 14ff)

- a. *...let us recall the teaching of the law: "Whatever is prosperous flows from the fountain of God's blessing, and all adversities are his curses" [Deut 28:2ff., 15ff]*
- b. *Let this dreadful warning terrify us: "If you happen to walk contrary to me, I will also happen to walk contrary to you" [Lev 26:23-24, cf (Calvin's) Commentary on Leviticus]*

What is the import of the words quoted and the passages referred to? (221, 19ff)

a. *In these words our sluggishness is rebuked as a crime;*

What is the source of our sluggishness? (221, 20ff)

- a. *...after the common sense of our flesh we regard as fortuitous whatever happens either way, whether good or evil, and so are neither aroused by God's benefits to worship him, nor stimulated by lashes to repentance.*

Why did Jeremiah and Amos bitterly expostulate with the Jews? (221, 25f)

- a. *...they thought both good and evil happened without God's command [Lam 3:38; Amos 3:6]*

9. Why does someone who correctly understands the doctrine of providence **not** pass over those by whom kind deeds are performed just because recognises that they are ministers of the divine goodness? (221, 37ff)

- a. *...for benefits received he will reverence and praise the Lord as their principal author, but will honour men as his ministers; and will know what is in fact true: it is by God's will that he is beholden to those through whose hand God willed to be beneficent.*

What if we suffer any loss because of negligence or imprudence? (221, 42f)

- a. *...he will conclude that it came about by the Lord's will, but also impute it to himself.*

How do we recognise God's providence when confronted with an evil deed, such as murder or theft? (222, 9ff)

- a. *...he will even less excuse such a crime on the pretext of divine providence; but in this same evil deed he will clearly contemplate God's righteousness and man's wickedness, as each clearly shows itself.*

With reference to what events in particular will the Christian take secondary causes into consideration? (222, 13)

- a. *...future events*

As far as the things he/she undertakes are concerned, how will the godly person regard, *human helps which he may use for his safety*? (222, 14f, 20f)

- a. *...he will count it among the blessings of the Lord*
- b. *...he will put them to use as lawful instruments of divine providence*

What two forms of human help are there for us to employ? (222, 17)

- a. *...counsel*
- b. *...assistance*

When the godly person takes counsel what does he/she seek to uncover? (222, 28)

- a. *God's wisdom*

To what outcome(s) should our zeal be directed? (222, 24f)

- a. *...that which (we) deem expedient for (our)selves*

How do we know that we place the right value on the counsel and assistance that is available to us from others? (222, 29ff)

- a. *...his confidence will not so rely upon outward supports as to repose with assurance in them if they are present, or, if they are lacking, to tremble as if left destitute...he will always hold his mind fixed upon God's providence alone, and not let preoccupation with present matters draw him away from steadfast contemplation of it...This same*

knowledge will drive us to put off rashness and over-confidence, and will impel us continually to call upon God.

10. The godly mind possesses immeasurable felicity. What obstacles to that condition does Calvin list? (223, 2ff)

- a. *...the evils that beset human life*
- b. *...the deaths that threaten it*
- c. *...our body is the receptacle of a thousand diseases...holds within itself and fosters the cause of diseases – a man cannot go about unburdened by many forms of his own destruction, and without drawing out a life, enveloped, as it were, with death.*
- d. *...he neither freezes nor sweats without danger*
- e. *...all things around you not only are hardly to be trusted but almost openly menace, and seem to threaten immediate death:*
 - i. *Embark upon a ship*
 - ii. *Mount a horse (= drive a car?)*
 - iii. *Go through the city streets*
 - iv. *If there is a weapon...harm awaits*
 - v. *...fierce animals*
 - vi. *...your house...threatens to impoverish you*
 - vii. *Your field...threatens you with barrenness, and hence, famine*

What mood must the presence of such hazards induce in us if we face them alone? (223, 24)

- a. *Amid these tribulations must not man be most miserable?*

With what thoughts do we usually sustain ourselves psychologically? (223, 28f)

- a. *...these events rarely happen, or at least not all the time, nor to all men, and never all at once.*

What do we need to bear in mind to counter the comfort we derive from such a way of thinking? (223, 30ff)

- a. *...we are warned by the examples of others that these can also happen to ourselves, and that our life ought not to be excepted any more than theirs*

What must we never think about the events that come our way? (223, 35f)

- a. *God has exposed man, the noblest of creatures, to all sorts of blind and heedless blows of fortune*

Why must we not think that thought? (223, 35f)

- a. *We would not be, guiltless of reproaching God*

11. Of what practical value to a Christian is a right understanding of providence? (224, 1ff)

- a. *...when that light of divine providence has once shone upon a godly man, he is then relieved and set free not only from the setreme anxiety and fear that were pressing him before, but from every care.*
- b. *...as he justly dreads fortune, so he fearlessly does commit himself to God.*

What does the Christian derive from knowing, *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?* (224, 5)

- a. *...solace*

What determines the limits placed on those things that can harm us? (224, 11f, 33ff, 41ff)

- a. *...in so far as it pleases God as governor to give them occasion.*
- b. *...let them (ie, us) recall that the devil and the whole cohort of the wicked are completely restrained by God's hand as by a bridle, so that they are unable either to hatch any plot against us or, having hatched it, to make preparations or, if they have fully planned it, to stir a finger toward carrying it out, except so far as he has permitted, indeed commanded.*
- c. *...as it belongs to the Lord to arouse their (ie, our enemies') fury and turn and direct it whither he pleases; so, also, is it his to set a measure and limit*

Having mentioned solace and comfort (*ie* strengthening) in line 20 Calvin takes the benefits we derive from understanding and trusting God's sovereignty to another level. What do we also derive? (224, 19f)

- a. *From this, also, arises in the saints the assurance that they may **glory**.*

What do Christians know – that those who are not Christians can never know – from which they derive, *never-failing assurance?* (224, 28f)

- a. *...when the world appears to be aimlessly tumbled about, the Lord is everywhere at work*

Why is this a strengthening thought? (224, 29f)

- a. *We trust, that his work will be for (our) welfare.*

What must those people do who have no understanding of providence when, *their welfare is assailed either by the devil or by wicked men?* (224, 32f)

- a. *...they must needs quickly faint away*

Even though Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:18 ascribes the hindering of his journey to Satan, he tells the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:7) that he will stay with them, *if God permits*. What does this amount to? (225, 10f)

- a. *...he declares God the Ruler upon whose permission all his journeys depend*

In what way, therefore, did he view the obstructions that Satan put in his way? (225, 11ff)

- a. *Satan cannot carry out anything that he may contrive except with God's assent.*

What does David's use of the plural, *times*, indicate to us that other singular alternatives would not have done? (225, 18ff)

- a. *...however unstable the condition of men may be, whatever changes take place from time to time, they are governed by God.*

What value does Calvin place on the ignorance and the knowledge of providence, in conclusion? (225, 31f)

- a. *...ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it.*

I suggest pausing and assimilating the lessons of sections 6 to 11 before proceeding to 12 to 14, which call for a change of gear.

In the closing sections of this chapter, 12 -14, Calvin turns his attention to the objection that could arise to the doctrine of providence as he has been outlining it from the scripture passages that speak of God repenting. Do such statements imply that God is sometimes frustrated in his designs and has to subsequently acknowledge that he hasn't been able to carry out his full intentions?

12. Why does Calvin give attention to this particular objection, whereas he acknowledges that he is not trying to satisfy, *the curiosity of vain men*?

- a. Because this objection appears to have scriptural support. *...certain passages...stand in the way*

What do the passages that Calvin has in mind, *seem to suggest*? (225, 38f)

- a. *...the plan of God does not stand firm and sure, but is subject to change in response to the disposition of things below.*

How do these passages do this? (225, 40; 226, 4f; 228, 32ff; the latter, which is of a different character to the first two in that it is not derived directly from the words of scripture, will be dealt with in the Q&A on ch 18, but your attention is drawn to it here so that we have a complete picture of the objections Calvin addresses)

- a. *First, God's repenting is several times mentioned*
- b. *Next, some abrogations of his decrees are referred to.*
- c. *From other passages, where God is said to bend or draw Satan himself and all the wicked to his will, there emerges a more difficult question. For carnal sense can hardly comprehend how in acting through them he does not contract some defilement from their transgression, and even in a common undertaking can be free of all blame, and indeed can justly condemn his ministers.*

What conclusion do many people draw from those passages that refer to God's repentance or the apparent abrogation of his decree? (226, 12ff)

- a. *...many contend that God has not determined the affairs of men by an eternal decree, but that, according to each man's deserts or according as he deems him fair and just, he decrees this or that each year, each day, and each hour.*

Calvin first of all (this section and the next) turns his attention to the passages in which God is said to repent.

If we understand repentance when it is used of God in exactly the same way as we understand it when it is used of us, what would we be charging God with? (226, 17)

- a. *...ignorance, or error, or powerlessness.*

Why would we be doing this? (226, 18f)

- a. *...no one wittingly and willingly puts himself under the necessity of repentance*

Where and how does the Holy Spirit contradict such thoughts about God? (226, 23ff)

- a. *1 Samuel 15. Vv11 & 35 tell us that God, regretted, that he had made Saul king over Israel (repenteth in the AV and RV). V29 of the same chapter tells us that such a thing is*

not possible, because God is not a man. Although modern versions tend to use, *regret*, in vv 11&35 and, *change his mind*, in v29, the Hebrew has the same word in each, (pronounced *nāh-‘gham*) which is commonly translated, *repent*.

How are we to understand repent/regret in vv 11&35? (226, 29)

a. ...*figuratively*

How do we know that repentance, when used of God, is to be understood figuratively? (226, 29ff, 35ff)

- a. *A little later there is added: "The strength of Israel will not lie, nor be turned aside by repentance; for he is not a man, that he may repent" [1 Sam 15:29]. By these words openly and unfiguratively God's unchangeableness is declared.*
- a. *...lest there be any doubt as to his constancy, even his adversaries are compelled to render testimony to this. For Balaam, even against his will, had to break forth into these words: "God is not like man that he should lie, nor as the son of man that he should change. It cannot be that he will not do what he has said or not fulfill what he has spoken" [Num 23:19].*

What do these passages enable us to be confident of? (226, 33ff)

- a. *God's ordinance in the managing of human affairs is both everlasting and above all repentance.*

13. Having established what, 'Repent' cannot mean when God is the one doing the repenting, Calvin is free to turn to what it does mean.

Why does the Holy Spirit use, 'Repent', when it is open to misunderstanding? (227, 3ff)

- a. *...because our weakness does not attain to his exalted state, the description of him that is given to us must be accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it. Now the mode of accommodation is for him to represent himself to us not as he is in himself, but as he **seems** to us.*

What other example does Calvin give of the way the Holy Spirit accommodates himself to our understanding? (227, 9f)

- a. *...whenever we hear that God is angered*

Something that is always present in our anger is never present in God's. What is it? (227, 10)

- a. *...we ought not to imagine any emotion in him*

Why, then, does the Holy Spirit speak of God's anger when describing him acting in judgment? (227, 11ff)

- a. *...this expression has been taken from our own human experience; because God, whenever he is exercising judgment, exhibits **the appearance of one kindled and angered.***

This mode of reasoning on Calvin's part brings out a major difference between us and God. With us, emotion comes first, then action. God's actions do not arise from the same sorts of emotions as ours do. He does what is right. Always. What he does has the *appearance* to us of arising from emotions or such actions as repentance and the Holy Spirit, in accommodating his modes of expression to our ability to understand, uses terms that we would, if we were doing what God is

doing, associate with the actions God is taking. But really, he is describing by these terms the appearance to us of God's behaviour, not the real reasons for it.

'So we ought not to understand anything else under the word 'repentance' than – what? (227, 14)

- a. *...change of action.*

Why does the Holy Spirit describe this change of action on God's part as repentance? (227, 15ff)

- a. *...because **men** are wont by changing their action to testify that they are displeased with themselves.*

What are the implications of this change of action on God's part for our understanding of his eternal decree? (227, 20ff)

- a. *...neither God's plan nor his will is reversed, nor his volition altered; but what he had from eternity foreseen, approved, and decreed, he pursues in uninterrupted tenor, however sudden the variation may appear in men's eyes.*

14. In this section Calvin turns to the second problem, passages in which, *some abrogations of his decrees are referred to.*

How can Calvin affirm confidently that, *The sacred history does not show that God's decrees were abrogated when it relates that the destruction which had once been pronounced on the Ninevites was remitted [Jonah 3:10]; and that Hezekiah's life, after his death had been intimated, had been prolonged [Isa 38:5]? (227, 30ff; 228, 8ff)*

- a. *...it is to be understood from the outcome that these (prophecies) nonetheless contain a tacit condition*
- b. *...the nature of the circumstances leads us to recognize a tacit condition in the simple intimation*

How do we know this is true? (226, 34ff)

- a. *God, could have destroyed both the Ninevites and Hezekiah without any messenger of destruction. Therefore he had in view something other than that*

Why was, *Jonah's prophecy that after forty days Nineveh would be destroyed, made? (228, 3f)*

- a. *...so it might not fall*

Why was, *Hezekiah's hope for longer life, cut off? (228, 5)*

- a. *...that he would obtain longer life*

Why did God send his messengers to Nineveh and to Hezekiah with messages of destruction? (228, 6ff)

- a. *...it pleased the Lord by such threats to arouse to repentance those whom he was terrifying, **that they might escape** the judgment they deserved for their sins*

After referring also to Abraham and Abimelech, Calvin draws general conclusions.

What must we **not** infer from passages that seem to imply a change to God's will? (228, 22ff)

- a. *...do not infer from them that there was any derogation from the Lord's first purpose because he had made void what he had proclaimed.*

Rather than viewing these incidences as examples of God revising his intentions how should we understand them – and even see his grace in them? (228, 24ff)

- a. *...the Lord, when by warning of punishment he admonishes to repentance those whom he wills to spare, **paves the way for his eternal ordinance**, rather than varies anything of his will, or even of his Word, although he does not express syllable by syllable what is nevertheless easy to understand.*

With what triumphant and emphatic statement does Calvin conclude this section and this chapter? (228, 29ff)

- a. *The Lord of Hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back? [Isa 14:27]*

FOR REFLECTION

1. What sort of behaviour and attitudes would indicate to us that we recognise that our business is with our maker and the framer of the universe?
2. In section 4 Calvin argues that the effects of folly and prudence prove that these very characteristics are *...instruments of the divine dispensation*. He adds *...God's providence does not always meet us in its naked form, but God in a sense clothes it with the means employed*. In section 1 he had stated as the second characteristic of providence to be noted *...it sometimes works through an intermediary, sometimes without an intermediary, sometimes contrary to every intermediary*. How do we reconcile these two statements?
3. As an exercise, update Calvin's lists in section 10, paragraph 1.