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PREPARATION

This short chapter is really part of Calvin's treatment of Divine Providence. In this chapter he deals with, *a more difficult question*. In other words, he is continuing to deal with the objections to the doctrine of divine providence as he understands it.

EXPLORATORY

1. What is the more difficult question to which Calvin turns his attention in this chapter? (228, 32ff)
 - a. *God is said to bend or draw Satan himself and all the wicked to his will...how in acting through them (does he) not contract some defilement from their transgression, and even in a common undertaking (how can he) be free of all blame, and indeed (how can he) justly condemn his ministers...?*

What distinction was devised in response to the problem posed by this seemingly inexplicable paradox, *that Satan and all the impious are so under God's hand and power that he directs their malice to whatever end seems good to him, and uses their wicked deeds to carry out his judgments?* (229, 4)

- a. *...the distinction...between doing and permitting*

What is Calvin's estimation of this distinction? (229, 11)

- a. *...a falsehood.*

Why are some (many?) attracted to this distinction? (229, 11ff)

- a. *It seems absurd to them for man, who will soon be punished for his blindness, to be blinded by God's will and command. Therefore they escape by the shift that this is done only with God's permission, not also by his will*

How does God in his word respond to this view? (229, 15f)

- a. *...but he, openly declaring that he is the doer repudiates that evasion*

What, in Calvin's opinion, do the, *innumerable and clear testimonies*, of scripture prove, as far as this question is concerned? (229, 16ff)

- a. *...men can accomplish nothing except by God's secret command, that they cannot by deliberating accomplish anything except what he has already decreed with himself and determines by his secret direction.*

In view of the problem this creates, how can Calvin assert this so confidently? (229, 19f)

- a. In his view, it is, *proved by innumerable and clear testimonies*

Which is the first scripture reference and testimony to be cited in support of this statement? (229, 21ff)

- a. *Psalms 115:3*, which says that, *God does whatever he wills*

Calvin continues in a way that implies that Ps 115 describes God as, *the arbiter of war and peace, and this without any exception*. I think he's thinking of other Psalms when he says this, such as Psalm 46.

From 229, 27 Calvin turns to, *particular examples*. What particular examples does he present? (229, 27ff)

- a. *Satan*
- b. *Job*
- c. *King Ahab*
- d. *The Jews of Christ's generation*
- e. *Absalom*
- f. *The Chaldeans, especially Nebuchadnezzar*
- g. *The Assyrians*
- h. *Shimei*
- i. *...the defection of the ten tribes*
- j. *...the death of Eli's sons*

Let's concentrate firstly on what we are told about those who turned against and crucified Christ.

What motivated Christ's contemporaries? (230, 16f)

- a. *The Jews intended to destroy Christ; Pilate and his soldiers complied with their mad desire*

Did the disciples speak of the Jews' and the Romans' actions as though God had merely permitted them? (230, 17ff)

- a. *...in solemn prayer the disciples confess that all the impious ones had done nothing except what "the hand and plan" of God had decreed [Acts 2:48, cf Vg.]. In the Douai-Rheims Bible (English translation of the Vulgate) Acts 4:27f reads: ²⁷ For of a truth there assembled together in this city against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, ²⁸ To do what thy hand and thy counsel decreed to be done.*
- b. *Peter had already preached that "by the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, Christ had been given over" to be killed [Acts 2:23, cf. Vg].*
- c. *It is as if he were to say that God, to whom from the beginning nothing was hidden, wittingly and willingly determined what the Jews carried out.*

Turning now to Absalom, how did God show that what Absalom did (engaging in sexual intercourse with his father David's concubines, 2 Samuel 16:22) was something that God did to David? (230, 29f)

- a. By saying to David, when he prophesied what Absalom would do, *I will do this thing*

And so on, throughout the remainder of this section.

In the paragraphs that make up section 1 Calvin has established the problem. It has not been his purpose to do anything more thus far than to establish that for us a problem exists that cannot be overcome by the suggestion that God merely permits acts that are evil but that he has no part in them.

2. What are we discussing? (231,10)

- a. *...secret promptings*

What is it about, *Solomon's statement that the heart of a king is turned about hither and thither at God's pleasure [Prov 21:1]* that means it, *certainly extends to all the human race, and carries as much weight as if he has said: "Whatever we conceive of in our minds is directed to his own end by God's secret inspiration"*?

- a. It was made by a king

What other things that God is said to do requires that he works in the minds of all, both believers and unbelievers? (231, 15ff)

- a. *...unless he worked inwardly in men's minds, it would not rightly have been said that he:*
 - a. *...removes speech from the truthful, and prudence from the old men {Ezek 7:26}*
 - b. *...takes away the heart of the princes of the earth so they may wander in trackless wastes [Job 12:24; cf. Ps. 107:40]*

What additional data are we given in the Bible that shows that God controls all things by giving people specific inward impulses? (231, 21ff)

- a. *...men are fearful according as dread of him takes possession of their minds [Lev 26:36]*
- b. *David went forth from Saul's camp without anyone's knowing it, because the sleep of God had overtaken them all. [1 Sam 26:12]*
- c. *...he:*
 - a. *...blinds men's minds {Is 29:14}*
 - b. *...smites them with dizziness [cf. Deut 28:28; Zech 12:4]*
 - c. *...makes them drunk with the spirit of drowsiness [Is 29:10]*
 - d. *...casts madness upon them [Rom 1:28]*
 - e. *...hardens their hearts {Ex 14:17}*

The expressions cited could mean mere permission. How do we know that this is not what they mean? (231, 31ff)

- a. *...since the Spirit clearly expresses the fact that blindness and insanity are inflicted by God's just judgment [Rom 1:20-24], such a solution is too absurd.*

By what, *foolish cavil*, do, *certain ones* get around the expressions: *he hardened Pharaoh's heart [Ex 9:12] ...he made it heavy [ch 10:1] and stiffened it [chs 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:8]*? (231, 30f)

- a. *...by forsaking the wicked he allowed them to be blinded by Satan*

Two persons are mentioned in Scripture as being involved in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, Pharaoh and God. What part did each of them play in the process? (231, 37ff)

- a. *Pharaoh himself made heavy his own heart [Ex 8:15, 32; 9:34]*
- b. *God's will is posited as the cause of hardening*

How does Calvin conceive of these two elements working together? (231, 40f)

- a. *...man, while he is acted upon by God, yet at the same time himself acts!*

Calvin makes the point that those who adopt the position that Pharaoh's hardening was not *caused* by God go too far. In what way do they do this? (231, 42ff)

- a. *...if "to harden" denotes bare permission, the very prompting to obstinacy will not properly exist in Pharaoh*
- b. *It would mean we had to interpret these statements, as if Pharaoh only suffered (allowed) himself to be hardened! (What Calvin is saying here is that if, to harden, simply means to give permission for hardening to take place and we are told that Pharaoh*

hardened his own heart, he would have done no more himself than have given permission for the hardening to take place. As Calvin says, this would be a, *weak and foolish*, interpretation because it would make harden mean one thing when God is said to harden (*ie* to give permission but not to actually and actively cause the hardening) and another when Pharaoh is said to harden (*ie* to stiffen his resistance).

Calvin quotes one more scripture to show that God was active in Pharaoh's hardening. What does it say? (232, 4f)

- a. *"I will restrain," says God, "his heart." [Ex 4:21]*

In the remainder of this paragraph Calvin gives two more examples of peoples whose motivation was wrong and to do evil but who nonetheless did God's will. Which two peoples are referred to? (232, 5f, 10)

- a. *...the dwellers in the land of Canaan*
- b. *...the Assyrians*

What are we told about the Canaanites? (232, 6f)

- a. *...they had come forth to do battle because God had stiffened their hearts [Josh 11:20; cf. Deut 2:30]*

What are we told about the Assyrians? (232, 9ff)

- a. *...he will send the Assyrians against the deceitful nation (ie, the Jews) and will command them "to take spoil and seize plunder" [Is 10:6]*

What can we say about why God did this? (232, 12ff)

- a. *...not because he would teach impious and obstinate men to obey him willingly, but because he will **bend them** to execute his judgments, as if they bore his commandments graven upon their hearts.*

What can we conclude about all the behaviour cited by Calvin in this section thus far? (232, 15f)

- a. *...they had been impelled by God's sure determination.*

In the concluding paragraph, Calvin turns to the *means* often employed by God in getting unbelievers to carry out his purposes, which is – what? (232, 17)

- a. *Satan's intervention*

Is Satan in control of his own interventions in human affairs? (232, 18ff)

- a. *Satan performs his part by God's impulsion and advances as far as he is allowed.*

Why is the evil spirit that troubled Saul, said to have come from God [1 Sam 16:14]? (232, 21f)

- a. *...that we may know that Saul's madness proceeds from God's just vengeance*

Calvin uses 2 Thessalonians 2:11 to expound 2 Corinthians 4:4, showing that Satan's blinding of the minds of unbelievers is an outworking of God's will and judgment. He backs this up with further quotations from scripture.

Which verse supports his assertion that, *the working of error flows from God himself*? (232, 26ff)

- a. *If any prophet should speak in lies, I, God, have deceived him [Ezek 14:9]*

Which passages support his assertion that God does this to people because they, *refuse to obey the truth*? (232, 28ff)

- a. *...he himself is indeed said to "give men up to an evil mind" [Rom 1:28, cf Vg (which reads: And as they liked not to have God in their knowledge, God delivered them up to a reprobate sense, to do those things which are not convenient.))] and cast them into base desires [cf. Rom 1:29]*

What do these passages tell us about the relationship between God and Satan? (232, 30ff)

- a. *...he is the chief author of his own just vengeance, while Satan is but the minister of it*

What is, the determinative principle for all human plans and works, not only...in the elect, who are ruled by the Holy Spirit, but also...the reprobate? (232, 36)

- a. *...his providence*

3. What forms do opposition to the doctrine of providence as outlined by Calvin take? (233, 2f, 6)

- a. *...they seek from pretending ignorance to be praised for moderation*
- b. *...they openly curse*

How does the pretence of ignorance show itself? (233, 4ff)

- a. *...with one little word such as "To me it seems otherwise," or, "I do not want to touch upon this"*

As far as those who openly curse are concerned, what do they achieve? (233, 16ff)

- a. *...the blasphemies they spew out against heaven do not reach God...he, dispelling their clouds of calumnies, makes his own righteousness shine forth. Even our faith...despises these clouds.*

Turning to the second paragraph: what is a common way that people seek to reconcile the apparent contradiction between God's decree and God's commands? (233, 23)

- a. *...there are in him two contrary wills, because by his secret plan he decrees what he has openly forbidden by his law*

After warning that this, *cavil*, is directed not against him but against the Holy Spirit, supporting this with quotations from Job, 1 Samuel 2:25 (re Eli's sons), Psalm 115:3. He concludes by saying that by quoting these scriptures he has, *shown plainly enough that* – what? (233, 35ff)

- a. *God is called the Author of all the things that these faultfinders would have happen only by his indolent permission.*

What, in particular, shows that, *God's will is not at war with itself, nor does it change, nor does it pretend not to will what he wills?* (234, 2f)

- a. *...unless Christ had been crucified **according to God's will**, whence would we have redemption?*

Why does God's will, which is, *one and simple in him*, appear manifold (ie multiform) to us? (234, 6ff)

- a. *...it appears manifold to us because, on account of our mental incapacity, we do not grasp how in divers ways it wills and does not will something to take place.*

How do we know that even the apostle Paul could not grasp the simplicity and unity of God's will? (234, 9ff)

- a. *When Paul said that the calling of the Gentiles was "a mystery hidden" [Eph 5:9], he added shortly thereafter that in it was shown forth "God's manifold wisdom" [Eph 3:10].*

What would we need to believe about God if it were truly the case that God's will is multiform? (234, 14f)

- a. *We would have to believe (or at least allow the possibility) that, there is variation in God himself, as he either may change his plan or disagree with himself.*

When we do not grasp how God wills to take place what he forbids to be done, how should we react? (234, 17ff)

- a. *...let us recall our mental incapacity, and...*
- b. *...let us...consider that the light in which God dwells is not without reason called unapproachable [1 Tim 6:16], because it is overspread with darkness.*

Please note the lengthy quotation from Augustine, which runs from lines 22 to 35. It is very helpful and needs no explanation from me.

Why is it that, from the point of view of God's omnipotence, nobody can do what God does not will? (235, 3f)

- a. *...while they act against God's will, his will is done upon them.*

How can it be said that. *Nothing is done without God's will, not even that which is against his will?* (235, 8f)

- a. *...it would not be done if he did not permit it; yet he does not unwillingly permit it, but willingly.*

How does the presence of evil prove God to be omnipotent? (235, 9ff)

- a. *...nor would be, being good, allow evil to be done, unless being also almighty he could make good even out of evil.*

(NB. The closing quotation marks at the end of this paragraph should not be there.)

4. How does Calvin restate the third objection to his understanding of divine providence? (235, 13ff)

- a. *...if God not only uses the work of the ungodly, but also governs their plans and intentions, he is the author of all wickednesses; and therefore men are undeservedly damned if they carry out what God had decreed because they obey his will.*

What confusion lies behind this way of reasoning? (235, 17)

- a. *His will is wrongly confused with his precept.*

How does Absalom's behaviour, clearly show how utterly different these two are? (235, 19ff)

- a. *...even though, when Absalom committed adultery with his father's wives [2 Sam 26:22], God willed to punish David's adultery with this shameful act, yet he did not for this reason bid the wicked son commit incest*

Calvin continues the sentence quoted above: *unless perhaps with regard to David, as he (ie David) speaks concerning Shimei's railings.* What did David's submission to Shimei's behaviour not imply and what did it imply? (235, 23ff)

- a. *...when he confesses that Shimei curses him at God's command [2 Sam 16:10-11], he does not at all commend his obedience, as if that impudent dog were obeying God's authority*
- b. *But recognizing (Shimei's) tongue be a scourge of God, he patiently bears the chastisement.*

What conclusion are we warranted to draw from the evidence presented thus far? (235, 28ff)

- a. *...while God accomplishes through the wicked what he has decreed by his secret judgment, **they are not excusable**, as if they had obeyed his precept which out of their own lust they deliberately break.*

What do we learn about the will(s) of God from the statements cited about the breaking away of the Northern kingdom and the anointing of Jeroboam as king? (236, 10ff)

- a. *...we see how God does not will a breach of faith, yet with another end in view, justly wills defection.*

Hosea's statements about the establishment of the Northern kingdom and the anointing of Jeroboam contain? (235, 38f)

- a. *...a certain appearance of contradiction.*

What was God's objective in bringing this situation about? (236, 15)

- a. *...to divest Solomon's son of part of his kingdom*

What two things do we need to weigh with care if we are to advance in our understanding of how God's will is expressed in all events? (236, 16ff)

- a. *Because it had pleased God that his people be governed under the hand of one king, when the nation is split into two parts, it is done against his will.*
- b. *And yet the beginning of the separation came from the will of the same God.*

How do we know that the beginning of the separation came from the will of God? (236, 20ff)

- a. *...surely when the prophet both by word of mouth and by the token of anointing stirred Jeroboam, who was thinking of no such thing, to the expectation of the kingdom, this was not done without the knowledge or against the will of God, who so commanded it to be done.*

How do we know, therefore, that the dividing of the kingdom was, *done against his will*? (236, 24ff)

- a. *...the rebellion of the people is rightly condemned because against God's will they revolted from David's descendants.*

How does Calvin summarise these thoughts? (236, 30ff)

- a. *Note how it is against God's will that the sacred unity is broken, and yet how by his same will the ten tribes are estranged from Solomon's son.*

What, *similar example*, does Calvin find? (236, 33ff)

- a. *...with the people's consent – indeed with them lending a hand – the sons of King Ahab are murdered, and all his posterity exterminated [2 Kings 10:7]*

What makes this a similar example to the dividing of the kingdom and the anointing of Jeroboam? (236, 36ff)

- a. *Jehu rightly reports that "nothing of God's words has fallen to the ground, but he has done what he said by the hand of his servant Elijah" [2 Kings 10:10]*
- b. *And yet now without cause did he rebuke the citizens of Samaria because they had given assistance. "Are you righteous?" he asks; "if I conspired against my master, who killed all these?" [2 Kings 10:9]*

Calvin sees this as one more example of – what? (236, 43f)

- a. *...in the same act as man's evil deed shows itself, so God's justice shines forth.*

Augustine observes that various participants each contributed to the crucifixion of Christ in different ways: *...the Father delivered up the Son, and Christ his body, and Judas his Lord. How is it that, in the one thing they have done...God (is) just and man guilty?* (237, 5)

- a. *...the cause of their doing it is not one*

If God and man bring the same event about, are they necessarily co-operating? (237, 6ff)

- a. *...there is no agreement between God and man, where man does by God's just impulsion what he ought not to do*

Rather than spend our time questioning what the Bible teaches what should we do? (237, 10)

- a. *...tremble at these judgments*

Why should we tremble at them? (237, 10ff)

- a. *God works even in evil men's hearts whatever he wills, yet renders to them according to their deserts*

Turning to the death of Jesus, what would be the equivalent to ascribing the guilt of the crime to God? (237, 15)

- a. *...to transfer the credit for redemption to Judas.*

...in this examination God does not inquire into what men have been able to do, or what they have done, but – what? (237, 18f)

- a. *...what they have willed to do, so that purpose and will may be taken into account.*

Given the difficulty of comprehending this subject, would it not be better for us not to think about it? (237, 23ff)

- a. *... if God had not judged (these things) useful for men to know, he would never have bidden his prophets and apostles to teach (them).*

In what does, *our wisdom*, consist? (237, 26ff)

- a. *...nothing else than to embrace with humble teachableness, and at least without finding fault, whatever is taught in Sacred Scripture.*

FOR REFLECTION

There is much to reflect on in this section. The chief practical point for us to consider and to respond to with thankfulness is that Christ has borne the punishment for our sins and that even when God was working in us prior to our conversion that which merited judgment, it was the judgment that he, in the person of his son, would take upon himself.