

Please note, direct quotations (in italics) and page and line references are from *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin. Edited by John T McNeill. Used by permission of Westminster John Knox Press. www.wjkbooks.com

PREPARATION

Briefly recap 1.i-iv

CONTENTS

1. Calvin opens this section by pointing to the fact that, though we suppress the natural knowledge of God in order to avoid its consequences, God does not give up on us. What reason does he give for this persistence on God's part? (51, 29ff)

- a. *Lest anyone...be excluded from access to happiness*

Why does ignorance of God exclude us from happiness? (51, 28f)

- a. *The final goal of the blessed life rests in the knowledge of God [cf Jn 17:3].*

In order to prevent this loss on our part, what has God done? (51, 30ff)

- a. *...he not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken, but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe.*

What we see in nature about God is limited - to what? (52, 6f)

- a. *...unmistakeable marks of his glory*

What does the physical universe not show us? (52, 4f)

- a. *...his essence is incomprehensible*

How clear are the marks of his glory? (52, 7f)

- a. *...so clear and so prominent that even unlettered folk and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance*

2. What two phenomena does Calvin refer to in this section, that speak of God's existence even to those who do not have specialist and expert knowledge of them? (53, 29f; 54, 3ff)

- b. *...this innumerable and yet distinct and well-ordered variety of the heavenly host*

- c. *...the human body shows itself to be a composition so ingenious that its Artificer is rightly judged a wonder-worker.*

3. When Paul, in Acts 17:27 says that God is, 'not far from each one of us', where is he directing us to look for evidence of God? (54, 13)

- d. *...within*

Why is this appropriate? (54, 7ff)

- a. *...man...is a rare example of God's power, goodness, and wisdom, and contains within himself enough miracles to occupy our minds, if only we are not irked at paying attention to them.*

What do we need to be convinced of before we give ourselves freely and willingly to God's service? (55, 16ff)

- a. *...no one gives himself freely and willingly to God's service unless, having tasted **his fatherly love**, he is drawn to love and worship him in return.*

How do even the observations of unbelievers show us that our human nature should convince us that God is our loving heavenly father? (55, 11ff)

- a. *Paul quotes from Aratus, that we are God's offspring*
- b. *...the secular poets...called him "the Father of men".*

4. How do those who desire to, *destroy God's name*, **misdirect** all the seed of divinity spread abroad in human nature? (56, 2ff)
 - c. *They will not say it is by chance that they are distinct from brute creatures. Yet they set God aside, the while using "nature," which is for them the artificer of all things, as a cloak.*
5. In this section's first paragraph, Calvin takes issue with those who see only a difference of degree, not of kind, between the soul and the body.

If we adopt the position Calvin contends with in this section, what will be the two outcomes? (56,19f)

- d. We will:
 - i. *...destroy the immortality of the soul*
 - ii. *...deprive God of his right.*

What line of argument does Calvin principally employ in combatting this position? (56, 23f)

- a. *...the powers of the soul are far from being confined to functions that serve the body.*

What example does Calvin give to support his contention? (57, 1-9)

- a. *...astronomy...here is an activity of the soul distinct from the body.*

From this and the fact that there are many similar examples (cf the list given in 57, 10ff) what conclusion does Calvin draw? (57, 15f)

- a. *These are unfailing signs of divinity in man.*

Calvin produces four further phenomena that each show us something of God's nature. What are they and what conclusion does he assert that we should draw from each one? (57, 16ff)

- a. Phenomenon: *...the soul not only vaguely roves about but conceives many useful things, ponders concerning many, even divines the future - all while man sleeps.*
- b. Conclusion: *...the signs of immortality which have been implanted in man cannot be effaced.*
- c. Phenomenon: *...Shall we, indeed, distinguish between right and wrong by that judgment that has been imparted to us*
- d. Conclusion: *...yet will there be no judge in heaven?*
- e. Phenomenon: *...Will there remain for us even in sleep some remnant of intelligence*
- f. Conclusion: *...yet will no God keep watch in governing the world?*
- g. Phenomenon: *...so many arts and useful things*
- h. Conclusion: *Shall we think ourselves the inventors...even though experience sufficiently teaches us that what we have has been unequally distributed among us from another source?*

In the 2nd, 3rd & 4th paragraphs (beginning 57, 31, 58, 6 & 58, 18) Calvin turns his attention to those who ascribe the existence of the physical universe to - what? (57,31, 36; 58, 6, 23)

- a. *...a secret inspiration*
- b. *...an inner spirit*

- c. *As if the universe...were its own creator!*
- d. *...a shadow deity*

(58, 18f) Why does Calvin question the value of this view, *to beget and nourish godliness in men's hearts?* (58, 14ff)

- a. *...yea, unto him all things / Do then return; unmade, are then restored; / Death has no place; but still alive they fly / Unto the starry ranks, to heaven's height.*

Why have people made this shadow deity? (58, 23)

- a. *...to drive away the true God, whom we should fear and adore.*

What is the problem with using the phrase, 'nature is God' when we are dealing with the creation and sustaining of the universe? (58, 26ff)

- a. *...it is a harsh and improper saying, since nature is rather the order prescribed by God*
- b. *...it is harmful in such weighty matters, in which special devotion is due, to involve God confusedly in the inferior course of his works.*

6. What caused God to be, *led once to create all these things, and now (to be)moved to preserve them?* (59, 27)

- a. *...his goodness alone*

What effect on us should this have? (59, 27f)

- a. *...this being the sole cause, it ought still to be more than sufficient to draw us to his love*

7. What does Calvin intend by, *the second kind of works?* (60, 2ff)

- a. *...in administering human society he so tempers his providence that, although kindly and beneficent toward all in numberless ways, he still by open and daily indications declares his clemency to the godly and his severity to the wicked and criminal.*

What is this administration characterised by? (60, 7f,

- a. *...he clearly shows himself the protector and vindicator of innocence*
- b. *...he prospers the life of good men with his blessing, relieves their need, soothes and mitigates their pain, and alleviates their calamities*

What may cause us to doubt, *the unfailing rule of his righteousness?* (60, 13ff)

- a. *...he frequently allows the wicked and malefactors to exult unpunished for some time, while he permits the upright and deserving to be tossed about by many adversities, and even to be oppressed by the malice and iniquity of the impious.*

What thought should we think when confronted by such circumstances? (60, 16ff)

- a. *...a far different consideration ought, rather, to enter our minds: that, when with a manifest show of his anger he punishes one sin, he hates all sins; that, when he leaves many sins unpunished, there will be another judgment to which have been deferred the sins yet to be punished.*

As well as instances of his judgment, what great occasion does God, *give us for contemplating his mercy?* (60, 22ff)

- a. *...he often pursues miserable sinners with unwearied kindness, until he shatters their wickedness by imparting benefits and by recalling them to him with more than fatherly kindness!*

8. This section draws on the instances of providence listed in Psalm 107.

What does the Psalmist show to us by the particular type of instances given? (60, 37ff)

- a. *By setting forth examples of this sort, the prophet shows that what are thought to be chance occurrences are just so many proofs of heavenly providence, especially of fatherly kindness.*

What illustration does Calvin use for the effect of so many works of providence on unbelievers' understanding? (61, 2ff)

- a. *...most people, immersed in their own errors, are struck blind in such a dazzling theatre*

Having spoken of the administration of God's providence, what two characteristics does Calvin turn to in this section's final paragraph? (61, 9)

- a. *...his power...his wisdom*

What does Calvin assert with respect to these two things?

- a. They are not, *hidden in darkness*

In what phenomenon does God's power show itself clearly? (61, 10ff)

- a. *...when the ferocity of the impious, in everyone's opinion unconquerable, is overcome in a moment...*

How does his wisdom manifest his excellence? (61, 25f)

- a. *...there is nothing that he does not temper in the best possible way.*

9. In this section Calvin turns to the practical application of all that has been said in this chapter so far, firstly with an assertion of what is not necessary, which is - what? (61, 27f)

- a. *...no long or toilsome proof is needed to elicit evidences that serve to illuminate and affirm the divine majesty*

Why is no long or toilsome proof required? (61, 29ff)

- a. *...whithersoever you turn, it is clear that they (ie, evidences that serve to illuminate and affirm the divine majesty) are so very manifest and obvious that they can easily be observed with the eyes and pointed out with the finger.*

Being confronted by so much evidence, what is our responsibility? (61, 32ff)

- a. *...we are called to a knowledge of God*

To what kind of knowledge of God are we called? (61, 33ff)

- a. *...not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but that which will be sound and fruitful*

What is necessary for this knowledge to be, *sound and fruitful*? (61, 35f)

- a. We must, *duly perceive it*, and
- b. it must take root, *in the heart*.

What right has God to require this of us? (62, 1ff)

- a. *...the Lord manifests himself by his powers, the force of which we feel within ourselves and the benefits of which we enjoy.*
- b. *We must therefore be much more profoundly affected by this knowledge than if we were to imagine a God of whom no perception came through to us.*

Given the abundant testimony that God *has* provided us with, what should we not waste our time on and towards what should we direct our efforts? (62, 6ff)

- a. *...the most perfect way of seeking God...is not for us to attempt with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of his essence...but for us to contemplate him in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself.*

What, according to Augustine, will be the effect of trying to grasp God's essence? (62, 21)

- a. We will be, *disheartened by his greatness*

What is the remedy for this? (62, 21ff)

- a. *...we ought to gaze upon his works, that we may be restored by his goodness.*

10. In addition to arousing us to worship God, what other truth should the manifestations of God's existence and character, that we see around us and within, impress upon us? (62, 24ff)

- a. *Knowledge of this sort, then, ought not only to arouse us to the worship of God **but also to awaken and encourage us to the hope of the future life.***

What three lines of argument does Calvin deploy in support of this assertion? (62, 26ff)

- a. *...we notice that the examples that the Lord shows us both of his clemency and of his severity are inchoate and incomplete, doubtless we must consider this to presage even greater things, the manifestation and full exhibition of which are deferred to another life.*
- b. *...we see the pious laden with afflictions by the impious...while the wicked on the contrary flourish - we must straightway conclude that there will be another life in which iniquity is to have its punishment, and righteousness is to be given its reward.*
- c. *...believers are often chastened by the Lord's rods, we may with full assurance believe that one day the wicked must no less suffer his lash.*

What image does Calvin use for way God's works present his person to us? (63, 11)

- a. *...a painting*

Why has God set his person forth in such a clear and graphic manner? (63, 11f)

- a. *Thereby the whole of mankind is invited and attracted to recognition of him*

What benefit is associated with recognising God as he shows himself in his works? (63, 13)

- a. *...true and complete happiness*

Even though God, by displaying his powers to us as in a painting, invites and attracts us to him, many do not see them. What is necessary before our eyes are opened to see and understand God from his works in the way that we need to in order to benefit from this display? (63, 14ff)

- a. *...we comprehend their (ie, God's powers') chief purpose, their value, and the reason why we should ponder them, only when we descend into ourselves and contemplate by what means the Lord shows in us his life, wisdom and power; and exercises in our behalf his righteousness, goodness, and mercy.*

In the remaining sections of this chapter, Calvin ponders our failure to profit from the display of God's person in nature.

Section 10 ends with footnote 33, which refers the reader to I.xvi.6-9. We will cover this in detail when we get there but what Calvin says in those sections is very important, not to say thrilling. Please read them now.

11. Faced with creation, which is a continual testimony to God's existence and to many aspects of his character, Calvin makes a regrettable observation. What is it?? (63, 30ff)

- a. *...how many of us are there who, when we lift up our eyes to heaven or cast them about through the various regions of earth, recall our minds to a remembrance of the creator...?*

What do we do instead? (63, 34ff)

- a. *...rather, disregarding their Author (we) sit idly in contemplation of his works.*
- b. *...with regard to those events which daily take place outside the ordinary course of nature, how many of us do not reckon that men are whirled and twisted about by blindly indiscriminate fortune, rather than governed by God's providence?*

64, 1ff: Sometimes we are driven by the leading and direction of these things to contemplate God. What happens then? (64, 3ff)

- a. *...after we rashly grasp a conception of some sort of divinity, straightway we fall back into the ravings or evil imaginings of our flesh*

With what result? (64, 5f)

- a. *We, corrupt by our vanity the pure truth of God.*

What shows us clearly the inevitability of widespread error about God? (64, 16ff)

- a. *And what might not happen to others when the leading minds, whose task it is to light the pathway for the rest, wander and stumble?*

12. As footnote 36 says, One of the illustrations Calvin frequently uses is the labyrinth. If you're not entirely sure what a labyrinth is there is a helpful article on Wikipedia. Basically it is a maze-like structure appearing to offer many paths but in fact only containing one that leads to freedom.

After surveying the inventiveness of the human mind with regard to Gods and religions, what is Calvin's conclusion? (65, 29f)

- a. *...no mortal ever contrived anything that did not basely corrupt religion*

What is the inevitable outcome if people are guided purely by their own interpretation of natural phenomena? (66, 22ff)

- a. *...if men were taught only by nature, they would hold to nothing certain or solid or clear cut, but would be so tied to confused principles as to worship an unknown God.*

13. What is the inevitable outcome of adopting false religion? (66,26ff)

- a. *...all who corrupt pure religion...separate themselves from the one and only God.*

What about those who adopt error but with sincerity, because they know no better? Does their sincerity mitigate their error? (66, 28ff)

- a. *...they will boast that they have something else in mind; but what they intend...has not much bearing on the matter, seeing that the Holy Spirit pronounces them all to be apostates who in the blindness of their own minds substitute demons in place of God [cf. 1 Cor 10:20].*

What teachings of Christ, derived from Jn 4:22, show that we must be instructed from God's word in order to know him and please him? (67, 18f & 34ff)

- a. *...we hear from Christ's mouth that they knew not what they worshipped.*
- b. *...all who have not been taught from the law what God they ought to worship are guilty in this matter.*

What fact does Calvin note, which we still see operating today? (67, 36ff)

- a. *...they who were the best legislators did not progress further than to hold that religion was founded upon public agreement.*

Why are the custom of the city or the agreement of tradition an insufficient basis for forming definite and reliable views of God? (67, 42ff)

- a. *...whence comes this law to mortals that they may by their own authority define what far surpasses the world?*

Who or what can be the only source for true and reliable knowledge of God? (68, 7f)

- a. *...it remains for God himself to give witness of himself from heaven.*

14. How does Calvin in this section describe the individual pointers to God's existence that we see in creation? (68, 9)

- a. *...so many burning lamps*

What do these, 'burning lamps,' do? (68, 9ff)

- a. *...shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its author...bathe us wholly in their radiance...strike some sparks*

What do they fail to do? (68, 12)

- a. *...they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path.*

What does the author of the letter to the Hebrews tell us is necessary if we are to draw the correct conclusions from what we see all around us? (68, 16)

- a. *...faith*

Why is it noteworthy that the author of Hebrews writes **in this particular verse** of the essential role played by faith in the correct interpretation of creation? (68, 14ff)

- a. *...in that very passage...he calls the worlds the images of things invisible*

What limitation does Paul, in Rom 1:19&20, place on what creation can achieve ? (68, 20ff)

- a. *Paul teaches that what is to be known of God is made plain from the creation of the universe, he does not signify such a manifestation as men's discernment can comprehend; but, rather, shows it to **go no further than to render them inexcusable.***

How does Acts 17:27 tell us the nations reacted to the fact that God *did not leave himself without witness*? (68, 28f)

- a. *By following, their own ways*

15. 68, 36f: *...we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God.* Is our ignorance of him in some way excusable because we are incapable of using rightly the evidence he has provided of his own existence and character? (68, 36ff)

- a. *...although we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God, **all excuse is cut off because the fault of dullness is within us.***

What will be at work in people and what will it be doing if we ignore the witness of creation to the existence of God? (68, 38ff)

- a. ...*conscience*, will be at work in us
- b. It will be, *always convicting us of both baseness and ingratitude*.

Why is it not an admissible defence for our unbelief to pretend that we lack *ears to hear the truth*? (69, 4f)

- a. ...*there are mute creatures with more than melodious voices to declare it*;

Why is it not an admissible defence for our unbelief to claim that we cannot see with our eyes? (69, 6)

- a. ...*eyeless creatures* point out to us that there is a God;

Why is it not an admissible defence for our unbelief to plead, *feebleness of mind*? (69, 8f)

- a. ...*even irrational creatures give instruction*.

What is the outcome when, *a slight taste of the divine* [arising] *from contemplation of the universe*, is joined with our neglect of the true God? (69, 19ff & 22ff)

- a. ...*we raise up in his stead dreams and spectres of our own brains, and attribute to anything else than the true source the praise of righteousness, wisdom, goodness, and power*.
- b. ...*we so obscure or overturn his daily acts by wickedly judging them that we snatch away from them their glory and from their Author his due praise*.

What conclusion does Calvin draw from this observation about what God's witness to himself in creation will achieve? (69, 14ff)

- a. ...*it is very true that we are not at all sufficiently instructed by this bare and simple testimony which the creatures render splendidly to the glory of God*.

FOR REFLECTION

2. 58, 24f: *I confess, of course, that it can be said reverently, provided that it proceeds from a reverent mind, that nature is God*. When would a reverent mind make such a statement and what would be meant by it?
3. 61, 10f: Can you think of a recent example of the ferocity of the impious, in everyone's opinion unconquerable, being overcome in a moment.