

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 16
GOD BY HIS POWER, NOURISHES AND MAINTAINS THE WORLD CREATED BY HIM, AND RULES
ITS SEVERAL PARTS BY HIS PROVIDENCE

We now enter into a discussion of the providence of God. This doctrine forms the foundation for the concept of pre-destination. It is, interestingly enough, at the heart of much of modern theology...both formal and informal.

Summary: Calvin begins with the understanding that the God of the universe is a hands on and not a hands off God. *"Moreover to make God a momentary Creator, who once for all finished his work, would be cold and barren, and...we see the presence of the divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as at its inception."* (pg. 197) What this means is that Calvin does not want to see God has having set the universe in motion and then stepped away. He rejects the idea that *"there is an energy divinely bestowed from the beginning, sufficient to sustain all things."* (pg. 197) Instead we are to see God as Governor and Preserver who *"sustains, nourishes and cares for everything he has made, even to the least sparrow."* (pg. 197-198)

This view of God rules out both chance and fortune. Providence means that *"all events are governed by God's secret plan"* and that even *"inanimate objects (do) not exercise its own power except in so far as it is directed by God's ever present hand."* (pg. 199) Everything in the universe then acts only according to God's will and God bends them to God's purpose. Calvin offers a variety of Biblical passages to make his point, including the marvelous story of God causing the sun to stand still (Joshua 10:13).

As the chapter continues, Calvin drives home his point. *"For he (God) is deemed omnipotent, not because he can act, yet sometimes ceases and sits in idleness, or continues by a general impulse that order of nature which he previously appointed; but because...he so regulates all things that nothing takes place without his deliberation."* (pg. 200) This sense of God as the one who governs and directs all things does not allow for a *"universal law of nature."* (pg. 200) For Calvin the idea that human beings could be subjected to forces of nature not directly moved by God is not only unthinkable but would in fact make for a miserable life.

This Godly' governance extends to all events in the universe. *"Indeed, scripture, to express more plainly that nothing at all in the world is undertaken without his determination, shows that things seemingly most fortuitous are subject to him. For what can you attribute more to chance that when a branch breaking off from a tree kills a passing traveler? But the Lord speaks far differently, acknowledging that he has delivered him into the hand of the slayer. (Exodus 21:13)"* (pg. 205) Calvin continues, *"...that nothing is more absurd than that anything should happen without God's ordaining it, because it would then happen without any cause."* (pg. 208) The bottom line then is that God rules everything and everything happens because it is part of God's providential plan, which God carries out.

Reflection: For Calvin power is not something that can be shared if God is going to be God. For God to be omnipotent not only does God have to hold all power, God has to use it. For if God allowed someone or something to share power, then God would not be "in charge." The issue of how much power God possesses and how much power God shares is one which still confronts us today. It does so especially in the event of a tragedy. While some people will speak of a tragedy as an "accident" others will use the language of "God must have a plan." This statement, that whatever happens must be part of God's plan, is in alignment with Calvin's views. What we need to consider then are the broader implications of such a statement. Does it mean that God causes both good and ill; sin and salvation?

Questions:

1. How "in charge" do you think God is?
2. How "in charge" do you think we as human beings are?
3. Why do you/do you not think that God has a specific plan for your life?