

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 17 - Part 2
HOW WE MAY APPLY THIS DOCTRINE TO OUR GREATEST BENEFIT

In the first half of this chapter Calvin defends his belief that while everything that happens, happens according to God's direct will, God is not responsible for sin or evil. This is possible according to Calvin, because God's motivations (always for the good) are not human motivations (often for sinful purposes). Calvin expands on his view of providence in the second half of the chapter.

Summary: Calvin now begins to offer reasons why his view of providence is not only right but ought to be welcomed by Christians. The first is that providence teaches us that God cares for Christians. *"Then the heart (of Christians) will not doubt God's singular providence keeps watch to preserve it (the heart), and will not suffer anything to happen but what may turn out to its good and salvation."* (pg. 218) He then offers a series of Biblical verse that show that *"There are many and very clear promises that testify that God's singular providence watches over the welfare of believers...indeed, the principle purpose of Biblical history is to teach that the Lord watches over the ways of the saints with such diligence that they do not even stumble over a stone (Psalm 91:12)."* (pg. 218)

Calvin believed that this recognition of God's providential care, should give believers *"patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future..."* (pg. 219) Believers can find this patience by remembering that *"...when we are unjustly wounded by men ...(we should)...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."* In other words, even when bad things happen, God is still in charge and all that happens, happens because it is part of God's will and plan. Thus we can be sustained through any adversity.

At the same time, this belief does not discharge human beings from doing their best in life. Calvin's example is of a person who is responsible for caring for another individual. Even though the person being cared for might be close to the end of their life, and thus is ready for God to take them home, the person doing the caring must still do their duty in caring for their charge. (pg. 222) In addition when someone is offered help that is needed, they are to take it. *"Therefore he (an individual) will neither cease to take counsel, nor be sluggish in beseeching the assistance of those whom he sees have the means to help him; but considering that whatever creatures are capable of furnishing anything to him are offered by the Lord into his hand, he will put them to use as lawful instruments of divine providence."* (pg. 222)

For Calvin, a life without this belief in providence would be unbearable. In a world filled with *"the evils that beset human life;"* we as human beings are in need of some assurance that life is more than a series of random events. (pg. 223) Thus *"when the light of divine providence has once shown 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 fears fortune, so he fearlessly dares commit himself to God."* (pg. 224)

Reflection: The struggle with being human is that we live in a world we cannot control. Whether it is natural forces (earthquakes, tornados, etc.) or merely our own emotions, there are factors which control us rather than us controlling them. This can, as Calvin pointed out, cause us to despair. In order to deal with this despair we often turn to the language of, "God has a plan"; meaning that all of life is under God's control (just as did Calvin). The problem with this view is that it negates human agency, meaning we have no real freedom of choice in our lives. Our challenge then is finding a meaningful balance of God's loving care and our human freedom.

Questions:

1. How do you balance God's care with your freedom?
2. Where have you seen God at work in your life?
3. What gives you comfort in the face of all of the "evils that beset human life"?