

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 1 – Chapter 18

GOD SO USES THE WORK OF THE UNGODLY, AND SO BENDS THEIR MINDS TO CARRY OUT HIS  
JUDGMENTS, THAT HE REMAINS PURE EVEN FROM SATAN

This chapter contains Calvin's defense of God against charges that God is culpable for evil in the world because God controls all people and all things.

**Summary:** Calvin understands the concerns of his critics about the linkage between God and perceived evil, based on Calvin's argument that everything (including what Satan does) is completely under God's direct control. He puts it this way. *"For carnal sense can hardly comprehend how in acting through them (meaning those who do what we would consider evil) he (God) does not contract some defilement from their transgression, and even in a common undertaking can be free from all blame, and indeed can justly condemn his ministers (those who carry out what we would consider evil)." (pg. 228-229)* While it would be easy for Calvin to distinguish between *"doing and permitting"* (pg. 229), meaning that God causes the good and permits the evil, Calvin is not willing to go there. Instead he sums up his views this way, *"...since God's will is said to be the cause of all things, I have made his providence the determinative principle for all human plans and works, not only in order to display its force in the elect (meaning those chosen for salvation), who are ruled by the Holy Spirit, but also to compel the reprobate (including Satan) to obedience."* (pg. 232) His justification for this is found in the wide variety of scriptures which show God controlling not only the good but the evil, including Satan in the book of Job and those who crucified Jesus.

Calvin expands on his defense of God (or a defense of Calvin's understanding of God) by differentiating between God's will and God's precept. God's precept means God's teachings. God's will are the divine plans which God directs persons to accomplish. Calvin states that even though we as human beings have no control over our actions, we do have control over our inner desires (wills). *"There is a great difference between what is fitting for man to will and what is fitting for God, and to what end the will is directed, so that it be either approved or disapproved. For through the bad wills of evil men God fulfills what he righteously wills."* (pg. 234) And, *"...from the point of view of God's omnipotence...while they act against God's will (precept), his will is done through them."* (pg. 235) Thus even though people do what God causes them to do (God's will), the people are doing so because they inwardly choose to break God's precepts. *"...while God accomplishes through the wicked what he 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."* (pg. 235)

Calvin offers the division of the Davidic kingdom after the death of Solomon as a Biblical example. God desired that there be one kingdom (God's precept) but in order to punish Solomon for his evil choices, God directs that a man named Jeroboam take half of the kingdom from Solomon's son (God's will). Thus, even though Jeroboam's desire to take half of the kingdom is against God's precept and is inappropriate for Jeroboam to desire (to will), it is within God's will to cause him to do so.

**Reflection:** Calvin concludes this first book of his Institutes by driving home his point that God has all power and does not share it; that God's providence guides and directs all things. Unfortunately, in the case of evil, this essentially means that there are no evil actions but only evil wills/intentions. That what you or I would consider evil is God's plan at work. In a post-holocaust world (much less a world with AIDS, ISIS and hunger) this is a difficult position to defend. It ignores the horrors of human pain and suffering, making them no more than a sacrifice upon the altar of God's "plan" for the world. As 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians one of our tasks is discern a more realistic understanding of God, power and evil; one that makes sense both of scripture and experience.

**Questions:**

1. How do you explain why there is evil in the world?
2. In your opinion, is God culpable for the problem of evil? Why or why not?
3. Do you think God uses evil to accomplish God's will? Why or why not?