

**John Calvin for Everyone**  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 1 – Chapter 3

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD HAS BEEN NATURALLY IMPLANTED IN THE MINDS OF MEN

In this chapter, Calvin defends his view that the knowledge of God has been implanted in human's minds and that unfortunately such knowledge is smothered by a combination of ignorance and malice. Calvin writes a bit more about this in his commentary on John 1:5 where he states that *"There are two main parts in that light which yet remains in corrupt nature. Some seed of religion is sown in all: and also the distinction between good and evil is engraved in their conscience."* In other words the fall has merely corrupted our human nature rather than having extinguished it. (The Gospel According to St. John; translated by T.H.L. Parker; Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, p.12)

**Summary:** Calvin opens with the assertion that the awareness of God is an instinct within every human being. This is so because God has *"implanted"* in all people a *"certain"* awareness of God's divine majesty. To support this contention, Calvin references Cicero, who believed that the people of every nation, regardless of their savagery or barbarity, believe in some concept of God, as demonstrated by the fact that human beings will place over themselves images made of wood or stone, rather than have no God at all. The upshot of this is that all human beings may be justifiably condemned by God because they have not responded appropriately to this awareness of God within them.

Calvin then argues against those who would claim that there is no God at all and that religion was invented in order to control others. While Calvin would agree that people add many elements to religion in order to control people, religion itself is a natural response to God's having planted a seed of God's existence in people's minds. Even when people strive to deny God's existence, Calvin claims that this will be futile, because they are *"entrapped"* by the seed God planted. Even atheists, he asserts, *"feel an inkling of what they desire not to believe."* (p.45) In addition, Calvin believes that God deliberately strikes their conscience as they attempt to flee from him. Calvin compares those who profess not to believe in God to a person who has consumed too much alcohol and cannot find rest in sleep because *"they are continually troubled with dire and dreadful dreams."* (p. 45)

The next section opens with Calvin arguing that those who claim not to believe in God still struggle to extricate themselves from the fear of God, thus proving that the seed of God's presence is within them. Calvin continues by stating that a sense of God is not something that is learned in school but is instead learned in our mother's wombs. And even though many people try and forget God, nature will not allow the seed to vanish. The shame of all of this is that as people push religion farther and farther away they become even more miserable than *"brute beasts"* (p. 47)

**Reflection:** What we have in this section is Calvin's foundational belief that all people can be held accountable for their lack of faithfulness to God. They can be held accountable because they have within them an innate knowledge of God. While this belief is disputed by many who argue that we only know about God when God reveals God's self to us, or when we choose to open ourselves to God, it can bring with it a comforting thought; which is that every human being carries within them the image of God. Thus, no human being is totally evil and beyond redemption because the image of God, even though perhaps dimmed, is always present.

**Questions:**

1. What do you think of Calvin's argument that a seed of divinity resides in every human being?
2. Do you think that those who do not believe in God struggle with this idea? Why or why not?
3. Do you think that people who don't believe in God are worse than those who do?