

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Section 1 - Chapter 5

"THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD SHINES FORTH IN THE FASHIONING OF THE UNIVERSE
AND THE CONTINUING GOVERNMENT OF IT"

A quick recap and reminder of where we have been; Calvin is continuing his discussion of the various ways in which human beings should have some knowledge of God. He has argued that the knowledge of God has been implanted in our minds but that knowledge has been corrupted by ignorance and malice. Calvin now proposes that we can know about God through the world around us.

Summary: The purpose for Calvin's argument, that we ought to have knowledge of God through looking at the universe, is that no human being can claim that there is no god. He writes that God, "...daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him." (pg.52) Even though Calvin admits that God's divinity far outstrips all human perception he still insists that "even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead ignorance." (pg.52) The evidences, he claims are all around us. They can be discovered in astronomy, medicine and all of the natural sciences. An example is that by charting the motion of the stars and charting their courses and assigned stations we can see the providential hand of God at work. The best example however is the human body and our place as those made in the image of God.

Unfortunately, as Calvin has noted in a previous section, human beings do their best to hide these marks of God's presence. "Indeed, there is no need to go outside themselves, provided they do not, by claiming for themselves what has been given them from heaven, bury in the earth that which enlightens their minds to see God clearly." (pg.55) In other words people really have to work at hiding the knowledge of God in order not to see it. Calvin then takes a few paragraphs to refute those who claim that our souls are tied to our bodies. Rather he argues, the soul is that inner portion of our selves enlivened by God which perceives immortality and gives rise to human inventiveness. For Calvin this means that God is ultimately the one to whom all credit for human progress ought to be given.

Calvin continues by asserting that we can see evidence of God in the fact that the universe holds together, in thunderbolts, in wind and waves, and in the calm that follows. As an aside he notes that all of these things were created out of God's goodness. Next Calvin states that we can see God at work in human communities. "Thus God clearly shows himself the protector and vindicator of innocence...and in all these things provides for their salvation." (pg.60) Calvin, being the realist that he is, does note that often the innocent do suffer. However he believes that God will ultimately punish wickedness and reward faithfulness. Even though all of this evidence ought to cause us to seek after God, our humanity smothers this knowledge and causes us to confuse creator (God) with creature (us).

Reflection: Calvin is walking a fine line with all of these arguments. On the one hand he claims that there are evidences of God's divinity and glory all around us. On the other hand he claims that our sinfulness does not allow us to see God clearly. The two-fold conclusion is that God is just in judging all humanity, because everyone ought to know about God. These arguments have lost much of their power since we can explain most of the physical properties of the universe without needing God to "hold everything together." Nonetheless many of us still sense God's presence in the beauty of the world around us and in the wonder of the human body.

Questions:

1. Where in the created world have you sensed God's presence and creative work?
2. Why do or don't you believe it is right for God to judge all of humanity?
3. How do people confuse the creator with the creature?