

**John Calvin for Everyone**  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 2 – Chapter 3

ONLY DAMNABLE THINGS COME FORTH FROM MAN’S CORRUPT NATURE

In this chapter Calvin once again reminds his readers that because their natures were corrupted by sin that they cannot save themselves. He does also, however, allow for the possibility of God working in “unsaved people” in order to help them do what is good.

**Summary:** Calvin begins with series of quotations from the scriptures in order to build his case that there is nothing good left in the inner nature of human beings. He quotes both the Gospel of John “Man must be reborn” and Romans “For to set the mind on flesh is death.” Thus for Calvin the entire being, soul and mind must be reborn and reformed by God. Fortunately he reminds us that “...*the grace of Christ is the sole remedy to free us from that blindness and from evils consequent upon it.*” (pg. 290)

The larger question for Calvin is whether we cooperate with God in this process of rebirth or if it is just something that happens to us. Calvin will argue that there is no cooperation but that our salvation is purely a work of God and God alone in Jesus. He writes, “*Now his (the Psalmists) intention in this passage is not simply to rebuke men that they may repent but rather to teach them that they have all been overwhelmed by an unavoidable calamity from which only God’s mercy can deliver them.*” (pg. 291) He continues, “*He (the Apostle Paul) adds that all have fallen away and have, as it were, become corrupt, that there is no one who does good.*” (pg. 291)

If this is so Calvin realizes that he must address the issue of those good and thoughtful people across the centuries who were not Christians. How were they able to do what appears to be the good? He writes, “*In every age there have been persons who guided by nature, have striven toward virtue throughout life. I have nothing to say against them even if many lapses can be noted in their moral conduct. For they have by the very zeal of their honesty given some proof that there was some purity in their nature...But here it ought to occur to us that amid this corruption of nature there is some place for God’s grace...*” (pg. 292) In other words for Calvin, anything that looks like the good in the world occurs because God’s grace makes it so, even if the transformation of the person is not complete. Yet Calvin cannot push this concept too far. He notes that, “*...however excellent anyone has been, his own ambition always pushes him on – a blemish with which all virtues are so sullied that before God they lose all favor (and their actions) considered worthless.*” (pg. 294)

Calvin then returns to his main theme of God working salvation in us. “*God begins his good work in us, therefore, by arousing love and desire and zeal for righteousness in our hearts...(and)...He completes his work, moreover, by confirming in us to perseverance.*” (pg. 297) He quotes Augustin that “*...grace precedes every good work; while will does not go before as its leader but follows after as its attendant...Therefore the Lord in this way both begins and completes the good work (of salvation) in us.*” (pg. 298, 303)

**Reflection:** Calvin, as we have noted before, has a very high view of God and very low view of human beings. This being the case he is forced to give all glory to God in the process of human beings moving from being sinners to being the saved. The struggle with this is that scripture implies that this movement to salvation is a mystery. Sometimes it is God seeking us and us responding. At other times it is us seeking and God responding. What we can say though is that in the end, our transformation is a work of God, in Jesus Christ, through the Spirit. It is the love of God that gives us the power to become new people, capable of loving as we have been loved.

**Questions:**

1. Was your experience one of seeking God or being sought by God? Or perhaps both?
2. Do you see people as being basically good? Why or why not?
3. Where do you see God at work in the lives of people around you?