

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 2 – Chapter 4
HOW GOD WORKS IN MEN'S HEARTS

In this section Calvin shows how God directs all that happens including those actions which are supposedly directed by Satan (who was for Calvin a very real presence in the world).

Summary: Calvin begins with a summary of his previous arguments, which sets the stage for what is to follow. *"Unless I am mistaken, we have sufficiently proved that man is so held captive by the yoke of sin that he can of his own nature neither aspire to the good through resolved nor struggle after it through effort."* (pg. 309)

In terms of the will of man, Calvin, referencing St. Augustine, who says that we can compare *"...man's will to a horse awaiting its master's command, and God and the devil to its riders."* (pg. 309) What he means by this is that the human will is pliable and that only an outside force can direct it. It is either directed by Satan or by God, but not by ourselves; that we as human beings do not have the capacity to make our will choose as we wish. Later in the chapter he will write, *"God, whenever he wills to make way for his providence, bends and turns men's will even in external things; nor are they so free to choose that God's will does not rule over their freedom."* (pg. 315)

Calvin then explains how God, Satan and man can all be active in the same event (and this is important because for Calvin, even Satan is under God's control). The example that he uses is that of the opening of the book of Job when the Chaldeans inflict great harm on Job's flocks. In this story Calvin sees God testing Job, Satan endeavoring to make Job curse God and the Chaldeans desiring gain by taking Job's sheep. God begins by giving the Chaldeans over to Satan's power, Satan arouses the minds of the Chaldeans to carry out the raid and the Chaldeans happily oblige. Even so, Calvin argues, God is not to blame. *"...but the distinction in purpose and manner causes God's righteousness to shine forth blameless there, while the wickedness of Satan and of man betrays itself by its own disgrace."* (pg. 311)

The next issue which Calvin raises is what it means that God hardens hearts. (One of the great examples of this is God hardening Pharaoh's heart in the book of Exodus.) Calvin writes that God hardens hearts in two ways. The first is by simply withdrawing, or not giving God's Spirit to individuals. This leaves the people with nothing but "darkness." The second is by directly causing people to make choices which will allow God's plans and purposes to come about. As he puts it, *"The fact that men sin is their own doing; that they by sinning do this or that comes from the power of God, who divides the darkness as he pleases."* (PG. 313)

Reflection: One of the great question before humanity has always been why do some people choose to be cruel or kind, compassionate or unfeeling, loving or hating? The answers have ranged from culture, to family dynamics to genetic predispositions. In addition scientists and philosophers have argued over the amount of free will (if any) people possess which would make them capable of choosing good or ill. While some people may still hold to Calvin's view of God directing all things, most people I meet want to believe that we have some say in the matter; that we possess at least some limited free will which allows us to make our own choices. With that being said however, I would still argue that a relationship with God can significantly impact our choices for the good, not only because we have Christ's teaching guiding us, but also because God is playing an active role in our lives.

Questions:

1. Using Calvin's image of horse and rider, who is the rider (director) of your will?
2. What influences do you see impacting your choices?
3. How do you see God enabling you to make better choices in your life?