

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 2 – Chapter 6

FALLEN MAN OUGHT TO SEEK REDEMPTION IN CHRIST

In this chapter Calvin turns his attention to the need for Jesus Christ as the promised redeemer of humanity.

Summary: Calvin begins by once again reiterating his belief that *“The whole human race perished in the person of Adam.”* (pg. 340) What he means by this is that sin (meaning for Calvin the corruption of human beings making them incapable of knowing and doing what is right) once unleashed on the world in and through Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden continued to infect all of humanity, throughout all of time. He further argues that this fall meant that we were so corrupted that not even God could recognize us as God’s own handiwork. This reality ought then to *“overwhelm our souls with despair.”* (pg. 341)

Even so, Calvin asserts that renewal and salvation is possible through Christ though this reality is not always helpful because for many people it *“appears foolish.”* (pg. 341) Nonetheless, *“...although the preaching of the cross does not agree with our human inclination, if we desire to return to God our Author and Maker, from whom we have been estranged, in order that he may again be our Father, we ought nevertheless to embrace it humbly.”* (pg. 341)

Calvin bolsters this thought, that even though the good news of Jesus as redeemer/mediator appears to be foolishness, it ought not to because all of scripture points to Jesus as redeemer. In order to prove this, Calvin links Christ to every part of the Old Testament. He begins with the sacrificial system in the Torah. *“Accordingly, apart from the Mediator, God never showed favor toward the ancient people, nor ever gave hope of grace to them. I pass over the sacrifices of the law, which plainly and openly taught believers to seek salvation nowhere else than in the atonement that Christ alone carries out.”* (pg. 342-3) He continues by stating that even Abraham (through whom, the Bible says, all of the nations will be blessed) could not bless the people until his descendant Jesus, the Mediator did so.

Next he turns to the prophets as witnesses to the need for the messiah. This leads him to state that *“God willed that the Jews should be so instructed by those prophecies that they might turn their eyes directly to Christ in order to seek deliverance...(because)...God would be through the hand of Christ the deliverer...”* (pg. 346) Calvin’s demonstration that this knowledge was present within Judaism includes a series of messianic quotations from the Old Testament followed by a recounting of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where the people acknowledged Jesus as messiah.

The bottom line then is this. *“Hence what we have recently said becomes clear, that apart from Christ the saving knowledge of God does not stand. From the beginning of the world he had consequently been set before all the elect that they should look unto him and put their trust in him.”* (pg. 347)

Reflection: in this chapter, Calvin, follows a particular Christian tradition of Biblical interpretation, which is that the Old Testament is no more than a prelude for the coming of Jesus. By so doing however, he fails to see the ongoing grace and mercy of God which is shown to God’s people. This grace and mercy can be seen in God’s clothing of Adam and Eve, to the Exodus event, to God’s bringing God’s people home from exile in Babylon. In addition, God’s everlasting love and mercy are major themes in the Old Testament. While Jesus is the fulfillment of both the Mosaic Law and the Abrahamic promises we gain a deeper insight into God’s love when we do not look for Jesus in every Bible verse.

Questions:

1. Why do you think that people are hesitant to believe in Jesus as messiah?
2. What does it mean for you that Jesus is the one who renews us?
3. What roles does Jesus play in your life?