

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 8

BEARING THE CROSS, A PART OF SELF-DENIAL

I will begin this article by stating that I disagree with Calvin's views in this chapter. While the theology contained within this chapter is consistent with Calvin's overarching belief structure (meaning God is in charge of everything), I do not believe that the God he describes here is the God of love of which he speaks elsewhere.

Summary: The underlying premise of this chapter is as follows; *"that each (disciple) must bear his own cross"* (pg. 702). This means that, *"...whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil"* (Pg. 702). In and of itself, this statement appears to be no more than an observation of the difficulties that can and often do come into Christian' lives. What makes this statement more than that, however, is that Calvin indicates that it is God who brings these difficulties about. *"It is the heavenly Father's will thus...to put his own children to a definite test"* (pg. 702). Calvin offers his readers several reasons why God will test them/us with incredibly difficult times.

First, we are tested so as to restrain our arrogance. By suffering at the hands of God, Calvin believes that we will discover *"...the great incapacity (and) the frailty under which we labor"* (pg. 703). This will happen when God *"...afflicts us with disgrace or poverty, or bereavement, or disease, or other calamities"* (pg. 703). In other words, God will afflict us with tough times in order that we remain humble.

Second, we are tested in order that we can discover God's faithfulness. *"The saints therefore, through forbearance experience the fact that God, when there is need, provides the assistance that he has promised"* (pg. 704). The cross teaches us *"...thus humbled, to rest upon God alone, with the results that we do not faint or yield"* (pg. 704). In other words, God will afflict us so that we can see that God is always with us through the afflictions which God brings upon us.

Third, we are tested in order that we are trained in patience and obedience. Even though Calvin admits that we cannot show any obedience to God other than the obedience which God has already given us, God still is pleased by the demonstration of *"...the clear graces which he has conferred upon the saints..."* (pg. 704). In other words, Calvin believes that while God knows the patience and obedience we possess, God will afflict us, so God can see those virtues come to life.

Fourth, we are tested as a demonstration of fatherly chastisement. *"Besides this, it is needful that our most merciful Father should not only anticipate our weakness but also often correct past transgressions so that he may keep us in lawful obedience to himself...for he afflicts us not to ruin or destroy us..."* (pg. 706). In other words, God will afflict us as an act of discipline just a parent disciplines a child.

Fifth, we are tested as a means of suffering for righteousness sake. This refers to those who suffer because of their faithfulness to God. Calvin writes, *"Now to suffer persecution for righteousness sake is a singular comfort. For it ought to occur to us how much honor God bestows upon us in thus furnishing us with the special badge of his solidarity"* (pg. 707). He continues, *"Consequently, we are too ungrateful if we do not willingly and cheerfully undergo these things at the Lord's hands"* (pg. 708). In other words God will afflict us with persecution so that we can show our faithfulness to God.

Calvin finishes this chapter by acknowledging that it is acceptable for Christians to be upset and angry over these conditions that God has brought about. *"You see that to patiently bear the cross is not to be utterly dazed and be deprived of all feelings of pain...for Jesus groaned and wept both over his own and other's misfortunes"* (pg. 709). In other words, it is acceptable to be human.

Reflections: Why me? It is one of the questions many of us have asked ourselves. Why did this have to happen to me? Sometimes it is for something inconsequential. At other times, it is a life and death matter. Though Calvin would answer, because God did it to you, I would not. I would argue that there is chaos in life sometimes, stuff happens. Sometimes good stuff happens and other times bad stuff happens. This is what happens in a fallen and imperfect world. As someone once told me, "What kind of a loving parent would harm their child, simply to see if the child would love them more?"

Questions:

1. What do you think of Calvin's view of bearing the cross?
2. Why do you/don't you think that God would afflict us as Calvin claims?
3. Where do you see God in your difficult times?