

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 9
MEDITATION ON THE FUTURE LIFE

In this article Calvin offers his reasons as to why believers ought to be looking toward heaven. In so doing we see that his descriptions of the present life tended to be dark. This makes sense when we consider Calvin's life. He did not marry until he was thirty and his wife succumbed to illness nine years later. All of their children (one son and several daughters) died in infancy. Add to this the constant threat of plague, disease and war, and it becomes apparent why Calvin encouraged people to look to the joy of heaven above their current existence on earth.

Summary: Calvin begins by laying out his premise: *"Whatever kind of tribulation presses upon us, we must ever look to this end; to accustom ourselves to contempt for the present life and to be aroused thereby to meditate upon the future life"* (pg. 712). He also wants us to know that the tribulations we suffer are part of God's plan to draw us back to considering eternal life, lest we cling too much to this life (pg. 712). We will cling to this life, Calvin writes, because *"...our minds, stunned by the...dazzlement of riches, power and honors, become so deadened that they can see no farther (than this life)"* (pg. 712). To prevent this from happening God *"...permits them (us) often to be troubled and plagued either with wars or tumults, or robberies, or other injuries..."* (pg. 713). Calvin even uses marriage to make the same argument. *"That people may not too complacently take delight in the goods of marriage, he either causes them to be troubled by the depravity of their wives (husbands?) or humbles them by evil offspring, or afflicts them with bereavement"* (pg. 713). In other words, according to Calvin, God does not want any part of our lives to be so good that we want to stay here, rather than head to heaven.

Having read these remarks, we might assume then that Calvin has nothing good to say about life on earth. Yet that is not true. Calvin wants to remind us that though life, if we cling too closely to it, can lead us away from looking toward heaven, he also wants us to see that life is a gift of God to be enjoyed. *"Since, therefore, this life serves us in understanding God's goodness (because God provides for us) ...we must...count it among those gifts of divine generosity..."* (pg. 715). Calvin continues, *"...we begin in the present life...to taste the sweetness of the divine generosity in order to whet our hope and desire to seek after the full revelation of (heaven)"* (pg. 715). In these seemingly opposing views of life (that it can be both evil and good), Calvin strives to find a balance between appreciating life (as God's gift) and yet not appreciating it too much (such that we want it more than eternal life).

Calvin then reiterates his rather dim view of life which again, he believes, ought to cause us to look to the next life. *"Let the aim of believers in judging mortal life then be that while they understand it to be of itself nothing but misery, they may with greater eagerness...betake themselves to wholly meditate upon the eternal life to come...for if heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile"* (pg. 716)? A few sentences later he once again tries to find some balance when he tells us that the mortal life is not to be hated (pg. 716).

Calvin concludes this chapter by reminding believers that they should not fear death, but should instead see it as a gift. He writes, *"For if we deem this unstable, defective, corruptible, fleeting, wasting, rotting tabernacle of our body to be so dissolved, (so) that it is soon renewed into a firm, perfect, incorruptible, and finally heavenly glory, will not faith compel us ardently to seek what nature dreads (death). If we should think that through death, we are recalled from exile to dwell in the...heavenly fatherland, would we get no comfort from this fact...To conclude in a word: if believers' eyes are turned to the power of the resurrection, in their hearts the cross of Christ will triumph over the devil, flesh, sin and wicked men"* (pg. 719).

Reflections: I am ready to go, why won't God just take me. I have heard this from many people during my time in ministry. Their bodies are worn out. They are in pain. They want to leave this life and move to the next. Their families however, often do not feel the same way. They want the one they love to stick around as long as possible. I can understand both sides, yet if we believe that there is a life beyond this one; a life with God. Then perhaps this will make it easier for us to say good bye to those that we love, knowing that we will see them again one day, in a place free from the suffering of this life.

Questions:

1. What if anything in this life causes you to think about heaven?
2. What do you think about Calvin's view of life? Is yours different, and if so how?
3. In your life, what hope is generated by the resurrection of Jesus?