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*Coffee with Calvin*

Daily Devotions



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## PREFACE



I have long wanted to write a Calvin devotional book. To some, this may seem like a strange notion. Or impossible. To think of John Calvin (1509–1564), the “master of Geneva,” is to conjure images of a cold, heartless, rationalistic theologian; an adherent of predestination, which turned God into a tyrant. The common cultural image of Calvin does not lend itself to a book of excerpts from his writings that are meant to nourish Christian faith and devotion.

But those who study Calvin know better. To immerse oneself in Calvin’s writings is to enter a theological field rich with insights into Scripture and Christian theology. It is to explore what these sources can mean for the church and the lives of Christians. Calvin was an eminently practical theologian. He believed theology should be not just a matter of the head, but also of the heart and the hands as well. Our theological understandings of the God revealed in Scripture deepen and strengthen our faith. They call us to give all praise to the God of our salvation and all commitment to the Christ who is our Lord and Savior. All this happens by the power of the Holy Spirit.

My hope is that these short extracts from Calvin and my comments on them will introduce Calvin’s theological insights. But even more, I hope that they will help us find how these insights can strengthen, challenge, and nourish Christian faith. My passion is for Calvin’s thoughts to become valued helps for Christian living among those who

know Calvin now in varying degrees and for those for whom some coffee with Calvin will be their first conversation with this important theologian.

For Calvin, theological insight and piety go hand in hand. One without the other is not complete. So to read Calvin devotionally is also to read Calvin theologically. And vice versa. I hope this volume will serve both purposes.

I have written eighty-four devotions for this book. They are divided into eight sections with seven, or a multiple of seven, devotions in each segment. This is to make it easy to use this book devotionally during a series of weeks.

The titles of the sections indicate the type of topics in each. The first section on “Basics of Christian Belief” looks at major theological ideas in Calvin’s thought and what they mean. Section 2, “Life in the Church,” shows the importance of the church as the place and the way in which our Christian experience takes shape. Section 3, “Following God’s Way,” orients us to the life of faith and its basic elements. Section 4, “Helps for the Christian Life,” considers the meanings of theological topics as ways of assisting us in our lives of faith. The long section 5, “Living as a Christian,” contains a number of topics that are dimensions of the Christian life and form the fiber and core of who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ. The devotions in section 6 are for when times are good, whereas those in section 7 are for when times are bad. The final section focuses our attention on “Anticipating the Future,” with meditations on resurrection and the life to come. The sections are all interrelated and the topics are porous in relation to each other. No matter where we start in Calvin’s theology and in his devotional dimensions, we work our way through the various loci, or places, of theology to circle around the whole of Christian theological beliefs.

This book can be used in a daily fashion, reading through each section, in any order. It can also, of course, be picked up for occasional use at any time. Wherever one dips into Calvin’s thought, there is much to be understood and appropriated for Christian life and service. Given the profound nature of Calvin’s thought, I suggest these devotions be read slowly, taking time to reflect on each sentence.

The selections in this book are all drawn from Calvin's great theological work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Latin, 1559). There are wonderful treasures in this work, as I hope these devotions will show. There are many more treasures to be found in Calvin's exposition of Scripture, his biblical commentaries, and his sermons. Perhaps later volumes can mine the penetrating and nourishing insights that emerged as Calvin faithfully interpreted the Bible.

The selections from the *Institutes* are the focus of each devotion. When quotes are given without a Calvin reference, they are from the selection at the top of the page. Other quotes are cited with reference to the book, chapter, and section of the *Institutes*. There are a number of Calvin quotes in the devotions since I've tried to let Calvin speak for himself as much as possible.

I have used the translation of Calvin's *Institutes* from Ford Lewis Battles, a Calvin scholar without peer. He was my revered teacher at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and through his work he also introduced readers to Calvin's piety (Latin *pietas*), that "reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces" (*Institutes* 1.2.1; see Ford Lewis Battles, *The Piety of John Calvin: A Collection of His Spiritual Prose, Poems, and Hymns* [1978; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009]). Our devotion to God in Christ emerges from the knowledge of God we have in the Gospel in which the benefits of Jesus Christ are given to us. Our devotion, or piety, is a proper reverence and love for this God who has first loved us.

Battles's translation does not reflect today's usage of inclusive language for humans or contemporary concerns about the language used for God. I have retained the original translation as found in the Library of Christian Classics edition of the *Institutes*, but I have used inclusive language in my comments on Calvin's texts and in relation to God.

May these devotions enhance our theological understandings and our piety. If I may paraphrase and make personal Calvin's comment: For not only does piety beget reverence toward God, but the very sweetness and delightfulness of



God's grace so fills us who are cast down in ourselves with fear, and at the same time with admiration, that we depend upon God and humbly submit ourselves to God's power (*Institutes* 3.2.23).

Donald K. McKim

*Germantown, Tennessee*  
*Easter tide 2012*

# 1. Basics of Christian Belief

# 1. Scripture: Our Spectacles

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. (*Institutes* 1.6.1)



The Bible is a pair of eyeglasses, spectacles to snap into clarity the “confused knowledge of God in our minds.” We may not think of the Bible with this image, but it is an important one.

Calvin believed that humans are born with an innate knowledge of God. We know intuitively within ourselves that there is a God who exists and stands behind all things, including us ourselves (1.3–4).

But this knowledge of God is not something we gravitate toward and love. The Scriptures teach that we reject this knowledge of God, rebel against it. Instead of helping us know God, this knowledge of God leads to our being inexcusable in God’s sight (1.4–5; Rom. 1). We deserve God’s judgment for rejecting our Creator in our lives. This is the power of sin. Sin destroys our ability to know God through nature or the things around us.

But God has given us the Bible to show us who God is and what God does. The Bible enables us to see the creation around us as the work of God. So to come to know God truly, we need “another and better help” (1.6.1).

The Bible is the spectacles that give us the “pure and clear knowledge of God” that we cannot gain from any other place (1.5.15). The Bible “clearly shows us the true God,” for in Scripture God “opens his own most hallowed lips” (1.6.1).

## 2. Trinity

Furthermore, this distinction is so far from contravening the utterly simple unity of God as to permit us to prove from it that the Son is one God with the Father because he shares with the Father one and the same Spirit; and that the Spirit is not something other than the Father and different from the Son, because he is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. (*Institutes* 1.13.19)



Calvin wrote much about the Trinity. God is one God who is at the same time three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is a core of Christian belief, distinguishing Christian faith from other religions that believe in many gods, or simply in one god as a single, solitary unit. For Calvin, the doctrine is taught in Scripture, though the term *Trinity* does not occur in Scripture (1.13.3).

Recognizing the unity and the diversities in the Trinity is helpful and meaningful for us. When we are baptized, says Calvin, we are baptized into the name of the one God, as Christ commanded (1.13.16; Matt. 28:16–20). There is one God, one Lord who claims our lives. It is to this God that all worship and honor and obedience is due.

Yet this one God is also three distinct persons, each fully God and each with work to perform. Calvin wrote “to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity” (1.13.18).

While we do not fully understand the Trinity, we worship the triune God, the “great one in three,” as the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy” puts it. But we can know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within our lives. Thanks be to God!

### 3. Creation: Theater of God's Glory

Let us not be ashamed to take pious delight in the works of God open and manifest in this most beautiful theater.  
(*Institutes* 1.14.20)



Calvin often referred to the heavens and the earth, the works of God, as a theater in which the creator's glory can be seen (1.5.8; 1.6.2; 2.6.2). This most beautiful theater enables faith to see that "wherever we cast our eyes, all things they meet are works of God" (1.14.20).

The eyes of faith can see this. Calvin recognizes that because of sin, our "whole knowledge of God the Creator" turns out to be "useless unless faith also followed, setting forth for us God our Father in Christ." While the "universe should be the school in which we were to learn piety, and from it pass over to eternal life," sin has ruined this scenario (2.6.1).

But to those who have faith and know that God the Creator is also God the Redeemer in Jesus Christ, the "heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). We can take the "pious delight in the works of God" of which Calvin speaks.

We can find such joys in nature! We know God the Creator is the source of it all, for "the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it" (Ps. 24:1). So praise and thanksgiving for the wonderful theater of nature is a Christian impulse, always.

But humans who enjoy this "dazzling theater" (1.5.8) also have responsibilities to care for the good creation. Our concerns for the environment and ecology are grounded in gratitude to the good Creator and are for the purposes for which all things are created.

Praise God! Preserve the earth!

## 4. Providence

Gratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future all necessarily follow upon this knowledge. (*Institutes* 1.17.7)



God's providence is God's carrying out what God has eternally decided to do in all things, according to Calvin (see 1.16.8). Calvin has a very robust view of this doctrine, seeing it applied to the whole of nature and life, to human decisions, and to the ultimate course of history. He wants to leave no role for fortune or chance, but to see that all things are ordained by God.

Calvin's views on the comprehensiveness of providence have not been persuasive to all people. But Calvin sees belief in God's providence as sustaining us in both good times and bad. He wrote "ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it" (1.17.11).

Providence makes us grateful. All we have and are comes from God. God cares for us and loves us. We experience God's "beneficence," says Calvin, as we recognize the ways God blesses us (1.17.7).

In adversity we can be patient, trusting God's will and purposes to work for good (see Rom. 8:28). When we suffer injustice or miseries, or even destruction, our faith remains.

Most practically, providence frees us from worry about the future. Calvin enumerated a number of calamities common in his day. We can create our own list. But no fears are fatal if we believe that even when "the world appears to be aimlessly tumbled about, the Lord is everywhere at work" (1.17.11). We can trust that God's work will be for our welfare. This is the great comfort and hope of God's providence for us and for our world.