

God's Glory in Life – According to Calvin

God's Fatherliness didn't stop at shaping Calvin's understanding of creation (see Post 3). His vision of God's glory shaped his understanding of the Christian life. God's goodness in creation spilled out into all of life, and what our response should be to all of God's goodness.

[God] was pleased to display His providence and paternal care towards us in this, that before He formed man, He provided whatever He foresaw would be useful and [beneficial] to him. How ungrateful, then, [would it be] to doubt whether we are cared for by this most excellent Parent, who we see cared for us even before we were born! How [ungodly would it be] to tremble in distrust, [fearing that] we should one day be abandoned in our necessity by that kindness which [before] our existence, displayed itself in a complete supply of all good things! ... as often as we call God the Creator of heaven and earth, let us remember that the distribution of all the things which He created are in His hand and power, but that we are His sons, whom He has undertaken to nourish and bring up in allegiance to Him, that we may expect the substance of all good from Him alone, and have full hope that He will never suffer us to be in want of things necessary to salvation, so as to leave us dependent on some other source. [We should remember] that in everything we desire we may address our prayers to Him, and, in every benefit we receive, acknowledge His hand, and give Him thanks. [In this way, having our hearts drawn out] by His great goodness and beneficence, we may study with our whole heart to love and serve Him.¹

¹ John Calvin (1845). *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 117.

To Calvin, God's goodnesses spilled over onto one another in a glorious cascade. God's goodness to His children filled the stream that they are to live their lives in.

In the quote above, Calvin gives his essential understanding of the Christian life. It is a life of full dependence upon the Father in His Son by His Spirit. The joy of the Christian life is to be one of being delighted by His goodness. This would cause the Christian to become so overwhelmed by His goodness as to overflow in adoration and thanksgiving, that the Christian would desire to love and serve Him.

It was this paternal glory that Christians were to see and respond to. To know and love God in His goodness was man's end. Contemplating this light of God's superabundant goodness, Calvin wrote that "The world was no doubt made, that it might be the theater of the divine glory."² It was this glory, and this understanding of creation, that shaped Calvin's understanding of the Christian life.

To Calvin, the heart of obedience was joyful thankfulness. Human beings, having been placed in the world God had created, "as in a theater... beholding above [them] and beneath the wonderful works of God,"³ being "thus allured by His great goodness and beneficence, ...may study with our whole heart to love and serve Him."

This was not obscure in Calvin's writings, or secondary in his mind. Calvin grounded this at the very introduction of humanity into the world:

"...Adam was, by Divine appointment, an inhabitant of the earth, in order that he might, in passing through his earthly life, meditate on heavenly glory; and that he had been

² John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Hebrews*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 234.

³ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Genesis - Volume 1*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 28.

bountifully enriched by the Lord with innumerable benefits, from the enjoyment of which he might infer the paternal benevolence of God.”⁴

The true God was not empty and inward focused. This God did not create in order to obtain. This God created in order to share His goodness:

...if it be asked what cause induced Him to create all things at first, and now inclines Him to preserve them, we shall find that there could be no other cause than *His own goodness*. But if this is the only cause, nothing more should be required to draw forth our love towards Him; every creature, as the Psalmist reminds us, participating in His mercy. ‘His tender mercies are over all His works,’ (Psalm 145:9).⁵

When it came to the Christian life, Calvin began with the merciful goodness and vast provision of God. Obedience wasn’t the prime objective in the Christian life. Obedience, for the godly Christian is not motivated by fear of a ruler or appeasement of a creator. Rather, obedience in the Christian is born out of love and a fidelity to the One who loves and gave Himself to them.

Only a view of God the Creator *as Father* could produce adoration to Him *as Lord*. Only His goodness in grace, as He truly is, could be the motive for true Christian living.

For, to begin with, the pious⁶ mind does not dream up for itself any god it pleases, but contemplates the One and only true God. And it does not attach to Him whatever it pleases, but is content to hold to Him to be as He manifests Himself. . . It thus recognizes

⁴ John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Genesis – Volume 1*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 70.

⁵ John Calvin (1845). *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 44. Emphasis mine.

Calvin says the same in his comments on Romans 1:21, “...His goodness, for there is no other cause [other] than Himself [for] why He created all things, and no other reason, why He should be induced to preserve them...” [John Calvin (n.d.). *Commentary on Romans*. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Grand Rapids, MI. p. 50].

⁶ As will shortly be quoted, Calvin understands *piety* to be “that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of His benefits induces.” Therefore, I keep the word and do not supplement it with godly.

God because it knows that He governs all things; and trusts that He is its guide and protector, therefore giving itself over completely to trust in Him. Because it understands Him to be the Author of every good, if anything oppresses, if anything is lacking, immediately it [runs] to His protection, waiting for help from Him. Because it is persuaded that He is good and merciful, it [rests] in Him with perfect trust, and doubts not that in His loving-kindness a remedy will be provided for all its ills. Because it acknowledges Him as Lord and Father, the pious mind also [considers it fit] and right to observe His authority in all things, reverence His majesty, take care to advance His glory, and obey His commandments. . . Besides, this mind restrains itself from sinning, not out of dread of punishment alone; but, because it loves and [reveres] God as Father, it worships and adores Him as Lord. Even if there were no hell, it would still shudder at offending Him alone.⁷

To Calvin, then, the heart of obedience to God lay not in performance, but in dependence upon God as the fountain of all goodness.⁸ Calvin saw this as the only right course of communion with God. It is only by comprehending God in communicative glory, as He has revealed Himself in God the Son, that people will long to belong to Him or come to Him to find life. This was the only fit soil for growing obedience.

...it will not suffice simply to hold that there is One whom all ought to honor and adore, unless we are also persuaded that He is the fountain of every good, and that we must seek

⁷ John Calvin (1960). *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume One* (John T. McNeill, Ed.). Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville KY. p. 42-43.

⁸ Rolston makes a similar case: “[Calvin’s] outworking of man’s duty is essentially in terms of four elements: faith, obedience, love, and gratitude.” Rolston then cites Calvin’s Geneva Catechism of 1541: “[Question]. What is the way to honor God aright? [Answer]. To honor God aright is to put our whole trust in him, to study to serve him in obeying his will, to invoke him in all our necessities, seeking our salvation and all good things at his hand, and finally to acknowledge both with heart and mouth that he is the lively fountain of all goodness” [Holmes Rolston III. (1972). *John Calvin Versus The Westminster Confession*. John Knox Press. Richmond, Virginia. p. 39].

nothing elsewhere than in Him. This I take to mean that not only does He sustain this universe (as He once founded it) by His boundless might, regulate it by His wisdom, preserve it by His goodness, and especially rule mankind by His righteousness and judgement, bear with it in mercy, watch over it by His protection; but also that no drop will be found either of wisdom and light, or of righteousness or power of [moral character], or of genuine truth, which does not flow from Him, and of which He is not the cause. Thus we may learn to await and seek all these things from Him, and thankfully to ascribe them, once received, to Him. For this sense of the powers of God is for us a fit teacher of piety, from which religion is born. I call 'piety' that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of His benefits induces. *For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by His fatherly care, that He is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond Him – they will never yield Him willing service.* Nay, unless they establish their complete happiness in Him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to Him.⁹

⁹ John Calvin (1960). *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume One* (John T. McNeill, Ed.). Westminster John Know Press. Louisville KY. p. 40-41. Emphasis mine.