

THE CLOUD

John Calvin
8.14.2022



THE JOURNEY
CHURCH

SCRIPTURE:

Isaiah 48:9-11

RECAP:

We continue in our series "The Cloud." This is our annual look at individuals from church history. They are a part of that great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us in the faith. We can learn from their lives and examples. This year we've looked at Justin Martyr and Thomas Aquinas. Today the Imperial March begins to play as we introduce our next person: John Calvin.

Calvin has a terrible reputation in the eyes of many Christians, most of which know nothing about him and have read nothing from him. His name, particularly his last name, has become a term of derision and scorn for many: Calvinism. I'll get more into what that is and why that is shortly (and if you really want to dive in you need to sign up for our Calvinism seminar coming up Sept. 9th and 10th). But the tragedy is most people don't know who Calvin actually was and don't recognize how influential his teaching has been on the church for the last 500+ years, even in the beliefs of those who think they reject him. Before I get into the details of his life, I want to share that Calvin was a pastor. His writings are incredibly devotional and pastoral. And his passion and zeal in everything he taught was primarily about the glory of God.

Isaiah 48:9-11 Exegesis:

VS 9 -- "For my name's sake I defer my anger; for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. God says it is for His name's sake he defers His anger. It wasn't on their account. They weren't deserving of favor or grace. They hadn't earned His mercy. No, it was on God's account that He defers His anger. It's His commitment to His own covenant faithfulness. It's for His own glory to be seen, savored, and marveled at. It is His glory, not their happiness that is His primary aim.

Jonathan Edwards wrote a short treatise entitled, *The End For Which God Created the World*. Spoiler alert for those who haven't read it: For His glory. Don't be upset I spoiled it,

you've had since 1765 to read it. The glory of God is of more importance to Him than the welfare of any of His creatures. I know that's a hard statement in our man-centered view of the world. But it is vital to grasp this because the welfare and good of created things actually depends on God upholding His honor, His rule, and His perfections. In other words, there is no creaturely good available if God ceases to elevate His glory above all things.

For the sake of His praise He restrains His anger. He will muzzle, tame, and subdue His anger. He won't let it come forth to destroy them. He's not going to cut them off, but it is His name's sake and glory as the decisive factor.

VS 10 -- *Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.* The Lord is speaking here about the afflictions the Jewish people had experienced through their captivity to Babylon. The goal of these afflictions? To purify them. The Lord says, "I" have refined you. This is not simply Babylon's doing. The Lord says, "I" have refined you. Babylon may be the means, but the Lord is the One directing things. This word "refined" actually means "to melt." God uses these afflictions from Babylon in the life of His people to remove their impurities.

The "not as silver" line is debated on meaning. Some believe it means God has refined them in the fire, but they weren't found to be silver. Their repentance isn't complete. They're not refined. Another interpretation is they have not been refined under the heat it requires of silver, meaning, not with the severity they could receive.

VS 11 -- *For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.* The Lord says again, twice, "For my own sake." The repetition is to add emphasis. The affliction and refinement of Israel is for His own sake. That's why He does it. Why? He answers in the form of a question, "How should my name be profaned?" It would be inconsistent for God to see His name profaned without correcting it. They profaned His name by worshiping false gods and rejecting His law. To correct this evil, He brought a judgment on them in the form of Babylonian invasion and captivity. He drops heavy judgments on them for the dishonor of His name. He refuses to give His glory to another.

But watch, God will not leave them there. He will not forget them. He will not abandon them. No, He restrains His anger. He will rescue them, "for His name's sake." Why? Because if He doesn't remove them from Babylon, and it's concluded that God has forsaken His people, then the pagan peoples of the world (and maybe even Israel) would

conclude that the idols of Babylon triumphed over God. And God's glory would be given to another. And God will not give His glory to another.

This is a perfect setup for us to understand what drove the life and theology of John Calvin. In 1539, John Calvin (who was 30 years old at the time) wrote to an Italian cardinal trying to bring Geneva, Switzerland back under the Roman Catholic Church: “[Your] **zeal for heavenly life [is] a zeal which keeps a man entirely devoted to himself, and does not, even by one expression, arouse him to sanctify the name of God.**” He continues by saying the cardinal should “**set before [man], as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to illustrate the glory of God.**” When Calvin was in a debate over justification by faith with someone, he wrote, “**You . . . touch upon justification by faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us. . . . Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished**” Notice that while justification by faith is crucial, there was something more at stake for Calvin: the glory of Christ.

This is the heart of Calvin's work. He was passionate to live with a God-centered view of the world that helped men and women live for the glory of God.

Biographical Sketch: John Calvin

John Calvin was born in France in 1509. He was born into a devout Roman Catholic family. We don't have any records or testimony about his early life. His father was a lawyer whose desire was for John to become a priest. By the time Calvin was a teenager, he was already a fine scholar. He mastered Latin, excelled at philosophy, and planned to move to Paris to study theology (remember, at this time, Paris is the heart of theological study in Europe). At the age of 14, Calvin went to Paris to study at the College de Marche in preparation for university study. His studies consisted of seven subjects: grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. While in Paris, Calvin came across the ideas of Martin Luther which were circulating around. By 1527, at 18 years old, Calvin developed some friendships with individuals who were embracing the Reformation ideas of Luther. It was at this time also that Calvin's father advised him to change his focus from the priesthood to law. So in 1528 (at 19 years old), Calvin moved to Orleans to study law. By 1532, Calvin completed his law studies and published his first book on the Roman philosopher, Seneca. Calvin was just 23 years old.

But Calvin's time in law would be short-lived. The following year, in 1533, Calvin experienced an unexpected and sudden conversion. Through friends who had come to adopt Reformation teachings, Calvin heard the gospel and had his mind opened. He recounts the struggle he had to live out the Catholic faith with zeal when he says, “**God,**

by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame...Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with an intense desire to make progress." Calvin now saw and felt the majesty of God in Scripture. It was also during this year that he not only devoted himself to Christ, but to the cause of furthering the Reformation. So he gave himself to showing people the majesty of God through the teaching of Scripture. Calvin's theology aligned Augustine, with the emphasis on God's sovereignty over all things, including salvation and suffering.

For the next three years, Calvin lived in various places outside of France. He studied the Scriptures, preached, and began work on his first edition of Institutes. The Institutes of the Christian Religion as they are called, were his overview of the Christian faith, written not for scholars, but for everyday Christians. He describes it as **"the whole sum of godliness and whatever it is necessary to know about saving doctrine."** Calvin later wrote, **"I labored at the task especially for our own Frenchmen, for I saw that many were hungering and thirsting after Christ and yet that only a very few had any real knowledge of him."** They were an instant best seller. It's important to understand that Calvin wrote them to shore up the faith of those being persecuted, even to the point of death, by the Roman Catholic Church in response to the Reformation. So he's writing with conviction and to help people know and cling to the truth. They would undergo five enlargements over the next 23 years before they were in the final form they are in today.

By 1536, Calvin had detached from the Roman Catholic Church (and was labeled as a Lutheran -- because he adopted Martin Luther's ideas) and believed his vocation was going to be as a scholar and writer of the Reformation faith or evangelical faith. A war had broken out in France (with the King of Spain and Emperor of Rome), and Calvin sought to leave France and head to Strasbourg to live a quiet scholarly life. But on his way to Strasbourg he stopped one night in Geneva. A man by the name of William Farel, a leader in the Reformation movement in Geneva, heard Calvin was there and went looking for him. His goal: get Calvin to stay and pastor the church in Geneva. Calvin was known at this point for his Institutes and for his strong understanding of the Bible and theological acumen. Farel threatened Calvin that God's anger would fall if he didn't stay to pastor in Geneva. Calvin recalls:

"Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, . . . and finding that he gained nothing by entreaties, he proceeded to utter an imprecation that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By

this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I desisted from the journey which I had undertaken."

At this, Calvin became the pastor of St. Peter's, one of three churches in Geneva. But 18 months into it, he and Farel were banished from the city for disagreeing with the city council. Calvin headed again for Strasbourg (Germany), relieved that God may be cutting him loose from the church. But when Martin Bucer discovered Calvin was in Strasbourg, he did what Farel had done, so he pastored a church of about 500 for three years. He also married Idelle de Bure, a young widow in his congregation who brought with her a son and daughter into the marriage. He was 31 years old. In Strasbourg, Calvin pastored French refugees. He loved it and was truly happy. But in 1541, the Council of Geneva requested he return to the city. He was emotionally torn. He wanted to stay in Strasbourg, but felt an obligation and responsibility to return to Geneva. He told Farel that why he did not prefer to go, **"yet because I know that I am not my own master, I offer my heart as a true sacrifice to the Lord."** So he did. He would remain there the rest of his life. Calvin used the emblem of a set of hands with a heart in it to seal his letters. The meaning being an offer of his heart in sacrifice to the Lord. Two years after his death, the emblem continued in use with the slogan "prompte et sincere" (Promptly and sincerely) added.

Less than a year after returning to Geneva, John and Idelette had their first child together, a son they named Jacques. But he died two weeks after birth. Calvin wrote to a friend, **"The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound in the death of our baby son. But He is Himself a Father and knows best what is good for his children."** Trials and afflictions would mark Calvin's life, but he constantly submitted to the sovereign hand of God. He and Idelette would have two more children, one that died at birth, and another that died shortly after birth. Then in 1549, Idelette fell ill and died. Calvin himself dealt with health issues most of his adult life. Some of it is a result of his work pace. He battled gout, hemorrhoids, kidney stones, and digestive issues. Nothing he tried relieved the pain. Outside the health issues, were the battles and conflicts being waged in the Reformation and local church ministry. He preached twice on Sundays and every day on alternate weeks, trained pastors, lectured the Old Testament three times per week, met with the City Counsel every Thursday, consulted on issues from pastors around Europe, and wrote extensively. But he still had to work on local church issues.

Calvin argued the need for the Reformation was fundamentally this: Rome had "destroyed the glory of Christ in many ways." The reason, according to Calvin, the church

was **“carried about with so many strange doctrines”** was **“because the excellence of Christ is not perceived by us.”** A passion for glory and majesty of God drove him. One of the critiques people like to lay at the feet of Calvin is his role in the death of Michael Servetus in 1553. His role was not an official one. Servetus fled to Geneva to escape Catholic authorities. He had denied the Trinity, a blasphemy that merited death in the 1500s all over Europe. Geneva authorities didn't have any more patience with heresy than did Catholics, and with the full approval of Calvin, they put Servetus to the stake. People struggle with that, but it is a reminder that all people are products of their place and time. This period in history was harsh. It was harsh living conditions. There were harsh punishments for criminals. And Calvin's role in this is a stain that links to him much like the affair with Bathsheeba and killing of Uriah does to David.

On April 25th, 1564, a month before his death. Calvin spoke these words to the civil leaders gathered in his room, **"With my whole soul I embrace the mercy which [God] has exercised towards me through Jesus Christ, atoning for my sins with the merits of his death and passion, that in this way he might satisfy for all my crimes and faults, and blot them from his remembrance. . . . I confess I have failed innumerable times to execute my office properly, and had not He, of His boundless goodness, assisted me, all that zeal had been fleeting and vain. . . . For all these reasons, I testify and declare that I trust to no other security for my salvation than this, and this only, viz., that as God is the Father of mercy, he will show himself such a Father to me, who acknowledge myself to be a miserable sinner."**

John Calvin died in Geneva, Switzerland, in May of 1564. He was 55 years old. He is only behind Martin Luther in rank and importance to the Reformation. While Luther was the zealous populist of the movement, Calvin was its teacher. Calvin's influence on theology goes far beyond Luther's today. Calvin was the primary influence for the English Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon. The first American universities were nearly unanimously Calvinist in their roots: Princeton, Yale, Harvard, Brown University, Penn. His name was revered during his lifetime, and even to this day. Only in recent years has he developed a soured reputation due to the rise of non-Calvinist movements that go against tenets of his theology.

When Calvin was 30 years old, he imagined the day he died and standing before Christ, he wrote, **“The thing [O God] at which I chiefly aimed, and for which I most diligently labored, was, that the glory of thy goodness and justice . . . might shine forth conspicuous, that the virtue and blessings of thy Christ . . . might be fully displayed.”** A month before he actually died, he wrote in his last will and testament, “I have written

nothing out of hatred to anyone, but I have always faithfully propounded what I esteemed to be for the glory of God.”

He was a pastor. His writing is warm and devotional. His love for Christ is evident, and His zeal for the glory of God marks everything he did.

Take-aways/Applications:

1. God's glory is His supreme motivation

This is a radically God-centered statement. And quite honestly, it flies in the face of our man-centered tendencies. While some of you may believe this statement to be true, most of you do not live as if this statement is true. In fact, not only do we not live as if the statement is true, we don't even think it to be true when our thinking is put to the test. None of us ever brought home a Sunday school paper with the lesson title: "God loves himself more than he loves you" nor do any of our children, but it is profoundly true, and so generation after generation of people, Christian and non-Christian, grow up picturing themselves at the center of God's universe.

God does all things for His glory. He won't give it to another. He does it for His name's sake and it is not wrong for God to do this, in fact, He must. If God held anything up above Himself, then that thing would be god and worthy of us to hold it up too. Additionally, it is only in praising the glory of God that our deepest longings of the heart are satisfied. Which means that God seeking

His own glory, and telling us to join Him in that, is actually the most loving thing God commands us. But that's a whole different sermon, and y'all aren't ready for that today.

2. We do not belong to ourselves.

We do not belong to ourselves. We are created beings. God is the Creator. We are accountable to Him and owe Him our devotion, praise, and gratitude. Calvin made decisions in life with this central tenet in mind (remember his emblem). Life and decision-making does not first and foremost depend on what I feel like doing. It must begin with understanding who we belong to.

The Heidelberg Catechism's first question asks this: Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in

heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

We not only belong to God because we are creatures, and He is our Creator, but because we are sinners, and He is our Redeemer. If you are in Christ, then you have double-reason to recognize you've forfeited any rights and illusions to rights that you have here on earth "to do you." You don't belong to yourself. In fact, not only do you not belong to yourself, you belong to God. And your life exists for the glory of the God that created and redeemed you.

3. A belief in the sovereignty of God comforts us in our suffering.

Calvin didn't write from an ivory tower about theology and the sovereignty of God. He pastored real people that dealt with real issues and he himself suffered under great afflictions. This helps us to understand he's not writing in the abstract, but from real life.

From personal experience, belief in the total sovereignty of God has been the difference between sanity and insanity, hope and despair, faith and unbelief. Pain and afflictions are disorienting and hard. Losing a loved one. Being diagnosed with cancer. Losing a job. Experiencing a divorce. Having a wayward child. All of these pains grip our hearts and can assault our minds with all kinds of questions. The key is trusting that God is in control. We are His children. He is a Good Father. He knows what His children need. This is about trusting the One who is God, and not assuming we know what is best or what we need. Tim Keller says, "If we knew what God knows, we would ask exactly for what He gives." We don't know. So we don't ask. But we often receive from His hands things we don't understand, so the battle of our hearts and minds is to trust Him.

May our eyes and hearts become more like Calvin's. May we see and savor the majesty and glory of God. May we see it in the Scriptures. And more than simply seeing it, may we love it, live for it, and proclaim it, recognizing that we are indeed not our own, but belong to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

QUESTIONS:

1. Why is it of the utmost importance that we understand that God's own glory is His supreme motivation?
2. What did you think about John Calvin before hearing the sermon?
3. How do we reconcile a loving God that is sovereign over our suffering? How did this play out in Calvin's life?
4. Why is it important that we understand all of God's attributes and that He acts out of all of them simultaneously?
5. How do you react to the statement that you don't belong to yourself but to God?
6. How does belief in the sovereignty of God comfort us in our suffering?

PRAYER TOPICS:

- TJC Pastor: Erik Reed
- NAMB Church Planter: Benjamin Crow - Park City, KS - *Orchard Community Church*
- International Partner: Jess & Wendy Jennings - Philippines - *Nehemiah Teams*