

The Christian Life

I recently discovered a diagram that is helpful to summarize the first 10 chapters of Book III, which is Calvin's view of repentance. This chart puts it all under the rubric of union with Christ, which is one way to view these chapters. Calvin begins with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the bond who unites us to Christ. So we have union with Christ through the work of the Spirit. The chart then has justification by faith, which is not Calvin's order. He puts repentance before justification, but the chart is following a logical order. I explained the reason why Calvin reversed that order. The principle work of the Holy Spirit is faith, and we are justified by God's grace through faith. That will be the topic in our next lesson. We have considered Calvin's doctrine of repentance, which is his word for sanctification. It is a race of repentance that we are engaged in throughout our lives. Calvin defined repentance as "a true turning to God which includes mortification of the flesh and vivification of the Spirit."

In this lesson, we will consider chapters 6-10, which includes Calvin's practical application of all of this in this section on the life of the Christian. The topics we will consider today are self-denial, which is an inward look; cross-bearing, which is an outward phenomenon; and meditation on the future life, which is forward and upward focused. The person who created the chart viewed self-denial and cross-bearing as amplifying the mortification of the flesh. In some way, meditation on the future life is also involved in mortification of the flesh. Vivification of the spirit is amplified and illustrated primarily through meditation on the future life. That is a useful way to consider the first 10 chapters that begin Book III.

We will look to the Lord in prayer, again using a prayer from John Calvin. Then we will look to our work for today, which is Book III, chapters 6-10. Let us pray.

"Grant, Almighty God, that as You constantly remind us in Your Word, and that You have taught us by so many examples that there is nothing permanent in this world, but that the things which seem the firmest tend to ruin and instantly fall and, of themselves, vanish away when by Your breath You shake that strength in which men trust; O grant that we, being really subdued and humble, may not rely on earthly things, but raise up our hearts and our thoughts to heaven, and there fix the anchor of our hope, and may all our thoughts abide there until, at length, when You have led us through our course on earth, we shall be gathered into that heavenly kingdom which has been obtained for us by the blood of Your only begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

This is one of the most beloved sections of the *Institutes*. The chapter on the Christian life, which begins this material, was added in 1539. There was nothing comparable to this material in 1536, in the first edition of the *Institutes*. In 1539, however, there was a chapter on the Christian life. Then in 1559, that chapter was divided into five chapters. The 1539 chapter was the last of the 17 chapters of the 1539 edition of the *Institutes*. When Calvin divided that chapter into 5 chapters in 1559, he then moved them from last and placed them after his treatment of repentance. It was a kind of further application of the doctrine of repentance.

This material, these chapters, has a separate publishing history. They are often among the earliest part of the *Institutes* to be published. There was a French publication of the 1539 chapter on the Christian life as a separate publication in 1545. Then there was an English publication, translated into English, in 1549. It was the first English translation of any part of the *Institutes*. The first translation of the entire 1559 edition of the *Institutes* into English was in 1561. So it did not take too long for the 1559 edition to be translated into English. For 10 or 12 years prior to that, however, a little bit of Calvin was available in English in these chapters on the Christian life. Sometimes these chapters are published separately. They

are often given the title "Golden Booklet of the Christian Life." If you see that little book, you can buy it, but you will not be buying anything you do not already have in the *Institutes*. It was taken directly from the *Institutes*.

When we consider the 1536 edition, there is nothing similar to what begins to emerge in 1539 and finds much fuller amplification in 1559. It is interesting to speculate on this progression. Remember that Calvin was in Geneva from 1536 to 1538. He spent a little over two years in Geneva working with William Farel. His first edition of the *Institutes* had already come out when Farel, in that dramatic encounter in Geneva, urged Calvin to stay and help him in the work of reform there. Calvin did that. Calvin's plan, along with Farel, was to transform the city, which had become technically Reformed, or Protestant, but still had a long way to go. They wanted to transform that city into a truly Christian community. Calvin was perhaps a bit idealistic. He was a young man, and this was his first church. He believed that if things could be organized and people could be taught and a confession and a catechism could be produced, those things would accomplish the task of making Geneva into a truly Christian city. Yet he failed in that. It was not ultimately his fault, but he and Farel were expelled. The 1539 edition of the *Institutes* was then written in Strasburg, just after Calvin had left Geneva.

It is possible to see and understand this material on the Christian life as being developed as Calvin realized that teaching, preaching, and catechetical instruction are not sufficient in themselves. There must be something very practical and personal that is used. You cannot simply expect to tell people to do right and then expect them to do it. They must be led, taught, and mentored. Calvin's section on the life of the Christian is a deep reflection on the practical aspects of Christian living and the basis for that Christian life.

In Book III, chapter 6, section 4, Calvin says, "It is a doctrine [that is, the Christian life] not of the tongue, but of the life. It is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart." It is those words from the *Institutes* that prompted my biographical speculation on Calvin's life in connection with this material. Calvin seemed to be saying that you can teach other things, such as mathematics or other subjects, simply by inculcating cognitive knowledge, but Christian theology is not like that. There must be more than that, because "it is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul."

These chapters certainly are important. They form a great classic of devotional literature. John T. McNeill, in the introduction to the *Institutes*, says, "This material is balanced, penetrating, and practical." Another writer has said, "These chapters have an influence on people of the Reformed faith more living, more direct, and more lasting than any other part of Calvin's writings." With that introduction, we will turn to the life of the Christian as Calvin sets it before us in these four chapters, beginning with chapter 6, which he calls "The Life of the Christian."

What Calvin does in chapter 6 is to set before us the fact that Scripture provides a pattern of conduct for life. We turn to the Bible in order to know how we should live the Christian life. Calvin said in Book III, chapter 6, section 1 that we do that in order to prevent a "wandering about in our zeal for righteousness." We know from the Bible where we should go. In other words, without the Scripture, we might have as renewed people a zeal for righteousness, but we would not know the direction that righteousness should take. Sometimes we refer to this as Calvin's third use of the Law. We considered that earlier in studying Book II when Calvin discussed the Law. Calvin did say that the chief purpose of the moral law is to form a pattern for the Christian life. Thus the Law, as contained in the Bible, is an important part of the

Bible. It not only has the first use, which is to show us that we cannot measure up so that in humiliation and failure we turn to God, and it also has the second use, which is to structure society and make possible human community, but Calvin also said that the principle use of the Law is to give us a pattern of righteousness.

In this chapter, chapter 6, Calvin does not talk much about the Law. In this chapter, the pattern is more aptly described as the example of Christ, but there is no conflict there. Whether you talk about the Law or the example of Christ, you are talking about the same thing as far as Calvin was concerned. In Book III, chapter 6, Calvin focused on Christ as the One who perfectly kept the Law and the One who sets our pattern and example. In Book III, chapter 6, section 3, Calvin said, "Christ has been set before us as an example whose pattern we are to express in our life." So Calvin did not hesitate to think of Christ not only as Savior but also as an example and to urge us to imitate Christ in our actions, words, and all the aspects of our lives.

There is another image that is used in these chapters, which is the journey image. It is the idea that we are on a journey. It is the idea that as Christians we are pilgrims, going from one place to another place. One thing that can be noted all the way through these chapters is said explicitly in Book III, chapter 6, section 5 when Calvin says, "Let each one of us then proceed according to the measure of his puny capacity." Calvin did not congratulate us on what great progress we are going to make in the Christian life. We have a rather puny capacity, yet let us proceed. Calvin goes on to say that we should "set out upon the journey which we have begun." In Book III, chapter 7, section 3, Calvin also says, "Paul teaches us to travel as pilgrims in this world that our celestial heritage may not perish or pass away." It is not possible to know how much John Bunyan knew of the *Institutes*. He certainly knew of the theology of the *Institutes*, because he was a Puritan Calvinist. Yet he never mentioned reading the *Institutes*. Bunyan actually had very few books. He did read Luther and a few others, and of course he read his Bible. So he could have found his journey image in the Bible. Yet this sentence has images that are also found in Bunyan, when Calvin wrote, "Paul teaches us to travel as pilgrims in this world, that our celestial heritage [Bunyan liked to call heaven the "celestial city] may not perish or pass away." Whether or not Bunyan directly read Calvin, he certainly embraced the idea that the Bible and Calvin set forth of the Christian life as a journey. I have written a book on John Bunyan called *Grace Abounding: John Bunyan and His Books*. In Book III, chapter 10, section 1 there is another illustration of the same theme in which Calvin wrote, "The present life is for His people as a pilgrimage." So we can think of these chapters as telling us how we should engage in our pilgrim life, following the example of the Lord who, in His own life, set forth for us what we should do.

Calvin called chapter 7 "The Sum of the Christian Life." He wanted to introduce a theme that he believed was important, necessary, and even essential as a kind of summing up of the Christian life. When we first consider this theme, it is rather startling, because we might wonder how Calvin will sum up the Christian life. He said the first thing we must consider is self-denial. That is not the way most people sum up the Christian life today. If you go to a bookstore and look in the section on Christianity and look at the section on Christian life, self-denial is not a theme that immediately appears to you. There are many books on how to be joyful, happy, successful, or how to do many things in the Christian life. There are not many books, however, that are a manual for self-denial. That sounds more like a Puritan title than a twenty-first century title. For Calvin, however, it is essential that we begin with self-denial.

We need to realize what Calvin meant by self-denial. He was not talking about self-hatred or denigration of self. He recognized that God made us what we are. He will tell us that we are to be grateful to Him for giving us what He has given us. We are not to despise it, nor are we to hurt it. We are certainly not to

kill it in anger, frustration, weariness, or anything else. We are to be grateful for the life that God has given to us. So this is not a chapter on self-hatred. There is an emphasis that Calvin wanted to make. A person with a healthy self-image, which Calvin would probably encourage, although he did not go into that issue much as modern psychologists would, can also be someone who has embraced the ideal of self-denial. It is not an issue of self-image versus self-denial. It is self-denial as a practice of the Christian life.

Calvin said that when we talk about self-denial, we must consider it in two ways. First, we must consider it in relation to other people. Second, we must consider it in relation to God. When we think of other people, Calvin said in Book III, chapter 7, section 5, "Now in seeking to benefit one's neighbor"—which is another way of talking about self-denial in relation to other people—"how difficult it is to do one's duty. Unless you give up all thought of self and, so to speak, get out of yourselves, you will accomplish nothing here." As we think of the other, the neighbor, other people, Calvin said it is not easy for us to put other people before ourselves.

Self-denial, as we practice it in relation to other people, or what we could call true love of neighbor, rests on a number of points. One is that Calvin said we should remember that we are stewards. That means that everything that we have God has given to us. We are not owners of what we have. We are stewards of what we have. In Book III, chapter 7, section 5 Calvin said, "Whatever benefits we obtain from the Lord have been entrusted to us on this condition: that they be applied to the common good of the church." God has given us what we have in terms of possession, talents, abilities, time, and whatever we have, not so that we can use all of it for ourselves, but so that we can share them with the church. Calvin also recognized that our self-denial goes beyond the church. It goes to all people, Christians and non-Christians. He was specifically thinking of the church in that quotation. That helps us to think of how we can practice self-denial. We must remember that what we have is not ours anyway. Thus we have no cause to hoard it or keep it for ourselves. When we remember that we are stewards, it should move our hearts to generosity and to helpfulness to others.

The other point that Calvin made about how we can love our neighbor is to remember that our neighbor is made in the image of God. Every person we see is created in God's image. One of the most powerful sections of the *Institutes* is in Book III, chapter 7, section 6, in which Calvin made the point that when you look at another person, you first of all see yourself. Then beyond that and greater than that, when you look at that person, you see God. You see the image of God in that person. Calvin said in Book III, chapter 7, section 6, "Therefore whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him..." Then he offers a list of excuses that one might give. "Say, 'He is a stranger,' but the Lord has given him a mark that ought to be familiar to you by virtue of the fact that He forbids you to despise your own flesh." Calvin means that the person is a stranger but he is a human being just like you are. Calvin then continues with another excuse, "Say, 'He is contemptible and worthless,' but the Lord shows him to be one to whom He has deigned to give the beauty of His image." Thus the person is made in the image of God even if he is contemptible and worthless.

I was teaching the Saint Louis men's Bible study one morning, and in connection with that class I was reminded of a story about Francis Schaeffer. When my wife was a high school student, she and some friends went to Switzerland and stayed at L'Abri. Those were the early days of L'Abri, so Dr. Schaeffer had some time to take those five or six high school students on a trip to Rome. My wife remembers that trip and remembers seeing the Sistine Chapel, Saint Peter's, the Spanish Steps, and the sights of Rome. The thing she remembers most, however, is that one day when they were in Rome and the traffic was rushing by, as it does at one of those busy intersections in Rome, there was an old man with a cart that he was pulling with a kind of harness he had made. So he was like a donkey pulling that cart across the

piazza with the horns blowing and people screaming at him. He was not making very good progress, and everyone from my wife's group was horrified that he might not make it across the street. My wife said that all of a sudden Dr. Schaeffer took off his coat, threw it to the high school students who were with him, rushed out into the street, moved the old man out of the way, took the harness himself, and then began to slowly make his way across the street as the horns continued to blow and people cursed and shouted at this man who was holding up traffic. Schaeffer often talked about the fact that nobody is junk. Nobody is trash. Everybody is made in the image of God. Schaeffer was putting into practice there exactly what Calvin was talking about.

Calvin continues to provide possible excuses against loving one's neighbor. He wrote,

Say you owe nothing for any service of his; but God, as it were, has put him in his own place, in order that you may recognize toward him the many and great benefits with which God has bound you to himself. Say that he does not deserve even your least effort for his sake; but the image of God, which recommends him to you, is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions. Now if he has not only deserved no good at your hand, but has also provoked you by unjust acts and curses, not even this is just reason why you should cease to embrace him in love and to perform the duties of love on his behalf. You will say, 'He has deserved something far different of me.' Yet what has the Lord deserved? While He bids you forgive this man for all sins he has committed against you, He would truly have them charged against Himself.

A little further on Calvin concludes the section, saying, "It is that we remember not to consider men's evil intention but to look upon the image of God in them, which cancels and effaces their transgressions with, and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them." By the time we have read through that paragraph, we cannot exclude anyone. Calvin has shut off all avenues of escape. Our neighbor is our neighbor, whoever that neighbor is and whatever that neighbor has done or not done to us. Calvin also wrote in Book III, chapter 7, section 4, "So that whatever man we deal with, we shall treat him not only moderately, but also cordially and as a friend."

That is one part of self-denial, in relation to other people. The second part is in relation to God. Calvin said that our self-denial is chiefly in relation to God. He did not mean that self-denial in relation to other people is unimportant. As we have seen, it is extremely important to Calvin. Yet our self-denial is chiefly in relation to God. Sometimes that point gets omitted today when the church, usually the liberal church, subsumes the love of God under the love of neighbor. In that view, the love of neighbor is very prominent and the love of God is somehow lost. That happens to such an extent that faith has come to mean little more than seeking justice in the world. We can get unbalanced either way. We can forget our neighbor and just think about God. Or we can forget God and just think about our neighbor. Calvin insists, however, that both are there and that chiefly it is before God that we must practice self-denial. Calvin says in Book III, chapter 7, section 10, "He alone has truly denied himself who has so totally resigned himself to the Lord that he permits every part of his life to be governed by God's will."

There is another passage in Book III, chapter 7, section 1 that I think is one of the greatest passages in the *Institutes*. I think it is really one of the greatest passages in Christian literature. Calvin says, "We are not our own. Let not our reason nor our will therefore sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own. Let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own. Insofar as we can, let us forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God's. Let us therefore live for Him and die for Him. We are God's. Let His wisdom and will therefore direct all our actions. We are God's. Let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward Him as our only lawful

goal.” Some years ago, when Ligon Duncan was a student at Covenant Seminary—he is now pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi—he had those lines from Calvin printed. His family operates a publishing house and printing press in Greenville, South Carolina called A Press. Those lines from Calvin were printed in beautiful gold and blue letters. He produced a few of those pages, beautifully done, with Calvin’s words there, and he gave one of them to me. So ever since then I have had those words framed, and I treasure those very much.

Of course, it sets a very high goal for any Christian to even think that we are not our own, but we are God’s, and to consider what that means for our lives. I believe Calvin attempted to put that into practice. He did not do it perfectly, as no one could. Yet as Calvin said in Book III, chapter 7, section 2, “It is with God that the Christian has to deal throughout his life.” That expression comes up often in the *Institutes* and in other writings of Calvin—“business with God,” *negotium cum deo*. It is with God that we have to deal throughout our lives.

This idea can be illustrated by one point in Calvin’s biography. When he was expelled from Geneva he went to Strasburg, and he was glad to leave Geneva. He called Geneva “that cross on which one had to perish a thousand times daily.” He remembered that people there had named their dogs Calvin so they could kick those dogs. When the invitation came to go back to Geneva, understandably, Calvin was not too enthusiastic to go back to that church and those people and that place. So he was reluctant to do that. Yet in a letter he wrote to Farel, Calvin said, “As to my intended course of proceeding, this is my present feeling. Had I the choice at my own disposal, nothing would be less agreeable to me than to follow your advice.” What Farel had said was that Calvin should go back to Geneva. Farel was the person who had made Calvin stay in the first place, and now Farel was urging him to go back. Calvin was saying that if he had the choice at his disposal, he certainly would not go back.

Notice in the next sentence, however, that Calvin reflected the words he had written in 1539, although this letter was written in 1541, showing he remembered what he had written. Calvin wrote, “But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord.” That was Calvin’s symbol—a heart with an extended hand and the words “My heart I offer to You, O Lord, promptly and sincerely.” Calvin was putting his motto into practice. It was more than just a motto to him. Then Calvin continued by saying to Farel, “Therefore there is no ground for your apprehension that you will only get fine words. Our friends are in earnest and promised sincerely. And for myself I protest that I have no other desire than that setting aside all other consideration of me they may look only to what is most for the glory of God and the advantage of the church. Although I am not very ingenious, I would not lack pretext by which I might adroitly slip away so that I should easily excuse myself in the sight of men and show that it was no fault of mine.” In other words, Calvin was saying that he could create plenty of excuses for not going back to Geneva and everybody would understand. Then Calvin said, “I am well aware, however, that it is God with whom I have to do [that is, business with God], from whose sight such crafty imaginations cannot be withheld. Therefore I submit my will and my affections, subdued and held fast to the obedience of God, and whenever I am at a loss for counsel of my own, I submit myself to those by whom I hope the Lord Himself will speak to me.” We see Calvin in this letter putting into practice what he had been preaching.

Thus the sum of the Christian life is denial of our selves. Calvin explained another aspect of the Christian life, which he called bearing the cross. That is a part of self-denial. There is inward self-denial and there is outward cross-bearing. Let us determine what Calvin meant by cross-bearing. Not only is there inward self-denial, but there are also the troubles, afflictions, and the trials of life that are placed on us. We are members of Christ’s body, we are in union with Him, and we cannot expect to be united with Christ and not to suffer, because Christ suffered. Calvin said, “The members of His body, being in

union with Him, are made to undergo a pattern of humiliation, suffering, and persecution similar to that which our Lord experienced.” Calvin called these troubles and afflictions “the cross.”

Bearing the cross is part of self-denial. Calvin introduced Book III, chapter 8 by saying, “Beginning with Christ, His Firstborn, He follows this plan with all His children.” If He treated His Firstborn this way, then He will treat the rest of us this way as well. The fact of cross-bearing is thus established. Calvin also said, “We must pass our lives under a continual cross.” Calvin wrote about the Christian life being a “hard, toilsome, and unquiet life.” Again, these are themes that are not emphasized today in books on the Christian life. A “hard, toilsome, and unquiet life” is the life of a Christian. It is a life that could be described as a continual cross.

I read a book about some islands in The Minch, which is the sea between the Isle of Sky and Lewis and Harris in the Outer Hebrides. The author, who is the owner of those small islands, wrote about life on the islands. The book is about his life, because he is the only person who lives on those islands. He comes and goes from his home in England, and he also visits the churches, families, and people that are on Harris and Lewis. That is a very strongly Presbyterian area, mainly from the Free Church of Scotland. They are very strict Presbyterians. I was there some years ago, and I got into some trouble because I wanted to take a walk on the Sabbath. It seemed to me that it was an appropriate thing to do, but my host and hostess at the bed and breakfast where I was staying were rather displeased at the idea that I would be walking for pleasure outside on the Sabbath. They finally acquiesced by saying, “We would not do that, but our children do it.” They did not expect too much of me as an American, even though I was a minister. My sanctification would not have advanced to a place where I could properly keep the Sabbath in their estimation. Back to my story about the book I was reading, the author once went to one of those Free Churches. The minister there began his sermon this way, “Some of you think that you are in this world to enjoy yourselves. You are not in this world to enjoy yourselves. You are in this world to suffer.” That was the beginning of the sermon, and of course the author of my book did not think much of that sermon. I am not saying that is how we ought to preach. We certainly should not introduce our sermons like that, even though it did get some attention, at least from this man who remembered it and wrote about it.

What that preacher said, however, was not altogether wrong, as far as Calvin was concerned. Calvin did not depict the Christian life as just a life of suffering, but it is certainly part of our experience as human beings. Part of our experience particularly as Christians will be bearing the cross. J. I. Packer made a good point when he said, “It is noteworthy that, whereas for modern church people, it is experiences of suffering and affliction that present a problem. In the New Testament, however, the only thing that would confront the professing Christian with a problem would be the absence of such experiences.” For modern people, the big problem is “Why does God let me suffer, and why do all these terrible things happen to me?” There are many books that address that problem. Yet the Bible says that, because Christ suffered, we are going to suffer. The Bible says that we are to take up our cross and follow Him. Christians in the New Testament would wonder where the suffering was if everything was too easy. So the theological problem for them would have been the absence of suffering. The theological problem for us, on the other hand, is often the presence of suffering.

We should not overemphasize this point. I do not want to give the impression that Calvin views the Christian life as only suffering and tribulation. There is also joy, peace, confidence, and hope. Suffering and affliction, however, are not absent from the Christian life. We should not expect that we are not going to have to undergo trials as Christians.

There is the fact of cross-bearing, and there is also the importance of cross-bearing. Calvin said that the cross can be borne only by faith. Therefore it can only be borne by believers. In a sense, suffering, problems, and affliction come upon everybody, but it is only the Christian who bears the cross. Bearing the cross is not simply that something bad has happened to me. Bearing the cross is my response to that in the way I handle it and what I do with it. I can either bear the cross or I can not bear the cross. It is therefore not passive, but rather it is active cross-bearing. It is taking up the cross and following Jesus, even though, in a lesser sense, all people experience the afflictions of life and can be said to bear the cross. It is really only the Christian who truly bears the cross. Matthew 16:24 says, "Then said Jesus unto the disciples, 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.'" In his commentary on that verse, Calvin wrote, "And although God burdens with the cross both bad and good, yet only they are said to bear the cross who freely take it on their shoulders. For, although a fierce and unruly horse will carry a rider, yet he will not endure him. The patience of believers, therefore, consists in willingly bearing the cross laid on them." Cross-bearing is freely and willingly taking up the cross.

Even the believer may suffer in various ways, being disciplined for his or her sins, but that is not bearing the cross. When something comes to us because we deserve it, because of our sin and we are being disciplined for our sin, that is not bearing the cross. In a sense, however, as we respond to that discipline and profit by it, we can see that then as bearing the cross. We cannot always judge this. Job could not, and his friends could not. What is judgment and what is not? I am not sure that we have a good way of knowing when God is disciplining us for something we have done and when He is laying a cross upon us in order to strengthen us, bless us, and help us in our Christian lives. We can say that a burden may become a cross. We all have burdens, and those burdens can become a cross when we willingly accept them and use them with trust and patience and obedience.

Sometimes people have tried to discuss this point by using the question of whether Calvin and the Bible are using the term "cross" to mean those afflictions and sufferings that come upon me because of my testimony as a Christian. In other words, is it only bearing the cross when I stand up for Christ and bear witness for Him and persecution comes? Such persecution is not usually overt in America. There are subtle forms of persecution that come to a person who is truly bearing witness to Christ. That certainly is a cross. Yet, what are we to think about other things that happen to us? What are we to think about sickness, tragedy in our families or among our friends, and the misfortunes of daily life? I read in a sermon once that a minister said, "Courage in the face of cancer is one thing, bearing the cross is another thing." I am not too sure that Calvin makes that distinction, or that the Bible does. As we suffer as Christians, because of our Christian testimony, that is bearing the cross. I also believe, however, that, as we bear the problems and afflictions of life that God in His wisdom and mercy places upon us, that too is bearing the cross. I do not see much of a difference in responding spiritually and positively to whatever happens to us.

Calvin did say that God does not put a cross on us just to make us miserable. He uses the cross to bring us into closer fellowship with Christ. That is not automatic. It is not the case that the more we suffer the more spiritual we are going to be. A natural response, even on the part of Christians, can be to become dreadful, worried, disturbed, and perhaps even alienated from God and hardened in our spirit as a result of suffering. When God blesses suffering, however, by His Spirit, then true patience and Christ-likeness is produced in us. We might say that, for the cross to be successful in recreating us in Christ's image, we must not only be stricken outwardly, but also renewed inwardly. There has to be that response by which we learn to trust in God. We must learn to call on His power, which alone makes us stand fast under the weight of afflictions. We must also learn patience and obedience. We learn trust in God, and we learn patience and obedience.

It is at this point that Calvin wanted to be sure that we would not confuse what He was talking about with Stoicism. Stoicism was the old Roman philosophy in the classical period that attempted to eliminate the feelings and emotions. The goal was that whatever happened could not affect us. If you have no feelings or emotions, if those have been deadened or eliminated, then joy, sorrow, or suffering are going to be the same. The Stoic ideal was to be so impervious to the slings and arrows of fortune that whether good came or bad came it would not produce a response. Someone characterized Stoicism this way: "The Stoic turned his heart into a stone and called it peace. It was magnificent, but it was not peace." That is not a definition of peace, even if it is rather magnificent to think of the Stoics in their grim determination to free themselves from earthly experiences. That is not peace, and Calvin said that is not what God requires. When we practice self-denial, when we take up our cross, we are not doing it with the attitude of the Stoics. Calvin said in Book III, chapter 8, section 9, "We have nothing to do with this iron philosophy." The feelings are very much present for a Christian. The pain, suffering, tears, and emotions are all very much present. We do not rule those out. We do not eliminate those. Yet we submit to God by saying, "We are not our own. We are the Lord's." Thus with a quiet and thankful mind, in the suffering, pain, and tears, we accept what He has sent for us.

The next two chapters are chapter 9, "Meditation on the Future Life" and chapter 10, "How We Must Use the Present Life and Its Helps." Self-denial, cross-bearing, meditation on the future life, and uses of this present life are all parts of Calvin's definition of repentance. In Book III, chapter 9, Calvin had a very precise focus. Then in chapter 10 he had another very precise focus. It is almost like his discussion of the Old Testament and the New Testament. In one chapter he said those two are really the same. Then in the next chapter he said there is a great deal of difference between the two. Calvin liked to do things that way. He also did it in Book III, chapter 9, "Meditation on the Future Life." Calvin said that the Christian life is a life of hope. When we think of our crown, we are to raise our eyes to heaven. Cross-bearing helps us to do this. It creates within us an eschatological perspective. It creates within us a taste for heaven, a longing for heaven. The attitude that Calvin sets forth in Book III, chapter 9 keeps us from putting too much value on this world. Calvin said, "If heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile?"

Some people have described that view as similar to a kind of self-denying medieval monastic spirit. Calvin's perspective, however, was not world-denying. It was other-worldly, in a sense. But it did not deny the world, as Calvinist history has so amply illustrated. Calvinists have been activists in this world in many ways. Even in chapter 9, Calvin balanced things by saying what we experience here, which he called contempt for this present life that must be balanced by the warning that we must not hate this life and we must be grateful to God for it.

We must use this present life, which is what Book III, chapter 10 is about. Chapters 9 and 10 are linked. The hope of the life to come, the fact that we can keep our eyes on heaven, gives meaning and purpose to our lives here on earth. It is not that these chapters are contradictory, or that they do not have any connection. The hope of the life to come gives meaning and purpose to the life that we now live on earth. Chapter 10 is entitled "How We Must use the Present Life and its Helps." The world is not only our place of exile, but it is also a sentry post. There are two images. Chapter 9 gives the image of a place of exile. Chapter 10 gives the image of a sentry post. It is a sentry post in which the Lord has posted us and which we must hold until He recalls us. A soldier does not have a right to decide how long he is going to stay at his sentry post. The commander has put him there, and he is required to stay there no matter how distasteful it might be and no matter how long and hard the watch. He is to stay there until the commander has recalled him. Calvin had no use for a person abandoning the place that God has set for him by suicide or in a less permanent way. I picked up a book at a bookstore the other day called

Final Exit. It is about assisted suicide. It was a rather famous book when it was released, and it was on the bestseller list for many weeks. In the introduction, the author said, "If you believe that God is the Master of your fate, read no further." So I closed the book and put it back down. Calvin taught that God has put you in your place, and you are to stay there until He recalls you.

The Christian life, in chapter 9, is a life of hope. The Christian life, in chapter 10, is a life of responsibility. There is a song we sometimes sing called "This World is not My Home"; that describes chapter 9. That song says, "This world is not my home / I am just traveling through / My treasures are laid up / Somewhere beyond the blue." That is the view of chapter 9. There is no verse in that song, however, that matches what Calvin says in chapter 10. So I wrote a verse, which is not great poetry, but neither is what I just read. A verse with the view of chapter 10 might say, "This world is now my home / God gives me much to do / My sentry post is set / Down here beneath the blue." Chapter 9 describes this world as a place of exile, and chapter 10 describes the world as a place of responsibility, a sentry post.

There is a double danger. We can be too strict. As we think about the things of this life, we can think about necessity only. Calvin goes to great length in the *Institutes*, and especially in his sermons, to say that God has created many things for us for pure delight and joy. Calvin said that God could have made the world without color. Yet for our enjoyment, He gave us color. It is not necessary for us to have color to live. God could have made all the shades of green the same color, but we have many subtle varieties of green. They say that in Ireland there are 20 different shades of green. If you look at an Irish landscape, you can believe that is true. The Scots say that there are 20 different shades of gray, because of all the clouds, and those shades of gray are pretty too. God has created wonderful things for us. So we do not have necessity only. We have necessity plus delight.

People can be too strict, or they can be too loose. People can be too free in what they set out to do. They can fall into the trap of the lust of the flesh. Calvin said that on the one hand, those who are too strict "rob a man of all his senses," but on the other hand, those who are too loose "have no limitations, and they fall into the sin of the lust of the flesh."

Calvin gave some principles for how we can use this present life and its helps. Use God's gifts according to the ends for which He created them for us. That means use them according to both necessity and delight. You can find these suggestions in his sermons and commentaries if you are interested in following up on this topic. You can also read the classic article by Emile Doumergue called "Calvin: Epigone or Creator?" The word epigone means "imitator." The question in that article is whether Calvin was a medieval person, reflecting the asceticism of the monastery, or if he was a person who created something new, an appreciation for the creation of God. Calvin's second principle was to recognize that God is the source of all good things and to give Him thanks. The third principle is to learn how to go without things patiently. Fourth, remember that we must one day render account of all those things that were so given to us by the kindness of God. Fifth, each person is to look to his own calling.

Calvin taught that God gives each of us a calling. Calvin was not medieval in the sense that he thought that we could never change that calling. The former notion was that if my father was a farmer, then I have to be a farmer, and my son and grandson have to be farmers. That was not even true in Calvin's own experience. His grandfather was a boatman. His father was a notary working for the bishop in their hometown of Noyon, in France. Then Calvin was a scholar and a pastor. We must stick by our trade in the sense that we should not change abruptly and with improper motives. Calvin said that we should remember the dignity of work and the importance of diligence in work.