

LESSON 3:

Rediscovering Redeeming Love

Who Is God?

Getting Started

Like many of the reformers, John Calvin longed for freedom. His life was wrought with difficulties, although his family was upwardly mobile. His devout mother, who took him on pilgrimages, died when he was six. His demanding father, who was the bishop's notary, insisted he be trained for a church career. After a dispute with the church over a financial matter, his father was excommunicated, and then insisted his son study law. The family was forced to endure humiliating negotiations with the church in order for his father to receive a proper church burial. After his father died, Calvin gained freedom from his family, but was persecuted for his reformed beliefs as he continued to break away from a demanding and insensitive church.

Around the age of twenty (1529-30), Calvin experienced a rather sudden conversion that prepared him to accept God's will whatever it may be. In May of 1534, he was imprisoned in his native France for an unknown reason. The severe persecution of the reform movement in France caused him to flee to Strassburg and later Basel. In 1536, at the age of 27, the first edition of his famous work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, was published. In August of 1540, in Strassburg, Calvin married Idelette de Bure, a widow with two children. Their only child, a son, died within a few days after birth. Idelette never fully recovered and died in 1549.

Calvin, who seldom slept more than four hours a night, was plagued with bad health from his twenties. Many believe his poor physical condition began during his years at College de Montaigua, a boarding school in Paris that he attended in his teens, where parasites, poor hygiene, and spoiled food were the order of the day. By the age of 30, his health was failing. In the closing years of his life (he died at 54), he was constantly ill with indigestion, headaches, gallstones, hemorrhoids, gout, and fever; all superimposed upon chronic asthma and probably pulmonary tuberculosis. Even more distressing to Calvin was his desire to live a quiet scholarly life; and yet, he was continually pulled into the theological conflicts of his time.

Calvin came to view life as a labyrinth or maze ridden with danger and uncertainty. He stated in *Institutes*: "If you step onto a ship, you are only one step away from death. If you climb onto a horse, your foot only needs to slip and your life is in danger. Just walk through the city streets some time, and there are as many dangers there as roof tiles on the houses. If you or your friend are carrying a weapon, injury lies in wait."

Not only was Calvin tortured by outward circumstances, but, as a result of growing up under the Catholic Church of the early 16th century, he was tormented internally as well. His sins were ever before him and his salvation was never certain. There was always the real possibility of eternity in hell.

*Calvin's system of doctrine, as set out in the **Institutes**, began with the sovereignty of God and, following the general order of all the creeds, discussed Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the church.*

—Richard Baker &
John M. Landers,
*A Summary of
Christian History*

Being of a disposition somewhat unpolished and bashful, which led me always to love the shade and retirement, I then began to seek some secluded corner where I might be withdrawn from the public view... In short, while my one great object was to live in seclusion without being known, God led me about through different turnings and change, that He never permitted me to rest in any place, until, in spite of my natural disposition, He brought me forth to public notice.

—John Calvin

Selderhuis says of Calvin: “For Calvin the conscience is not a second God, but God himself speaking to human beings, and it is virtually impossible to count the number of times he writes about the conscience and its need to be at rest...‘There were always those torments of conscience which made you feel as if you were in hell...I experienced it myself that way.’ Over against this strain on the conscience is the freedom of the Christian...For Calvin, conversion meant freedom, liberation from the torment of the conscience, from the feeling that whatever he did was sinful and wrong. Calvin experienced freedom from all of this and found peace in his conscience. According to him, ‘there is no greater good one can inherit on this earth.’”

Calvin’s life circumstances could have robbed him of his freedom. His mind could have been in continual turmoil; but, the more he studied the Scriptures, the better he came to know His God. The belief system he formed brought him peace and freedom. Calvin saw God’s sovereignty as the theme throughout his entire Bible. He believed that if God was in control of the lives of men like Joseph, then He was also in control of his life. The sovereignty of God was the foundation on which he built his entire theology. He knew his life appeared to be chaos, but His God brought order out of chaos. His biographer Seiderhuis explains by mingling his words with Calvin’s: “refers to the abhorrent disorder that overshadows the order of God’s providence. God himself, however, is hard at work in the midst of the disorder, ‘since God everywhere lays traps for us, digs pits, throws all kinds of obstacles in our way, and finally encloses us in the abyss.’ ... God puts us on a track and gives us a small obstacle course to run. It is a short race; he soon takes us back to himself again.”

What circumstances or mental anguish are you living in today which could rob you of your freedom and your joy in Christ? Your belief system about God will determine how you handle what comes to you in life.

The thoughts for this week are:

The Incomprehensibility of God

The Providence of God

The Holiness of God

The Incomprehensibility of God

A study of theology normally begins with the doctrine of God. Until the doctrine of God is established there is nothing on which to build. There are many aspects to God's character, but the characteristic with which most theologians begin is His incomprehensibility.



1. What does Deuteronomy 29:29 say about what we can and cannot know about God?

God's incomprehensibility highlights the chasm between God and man—the Creator and the created. John Calvin expressed this distance with the Latin phrase *Finitum non capax infinitum*, “the finite cannot grasp (or contain) the infinite.” Because God is infinite and eternal, and we are finite and bound by both space and time, our knowledge of Him can never be complete.

2. What are some things about God that you believe you can never understand while you remain on this earth?

While much of God remains incomprehensible, He has gone to great effort to *reveal* many things about Himself to us. There is a lot we can and should comprehend about God. The characteristics of God are often referred to as His *attributes*. These attributes fall into two distinct categories:

Incommunicable—God's *incommunicable* attributes are like *incommunicable* diseases. They cannot be imparted to man. Twelve of these characteristics are generally listed by theologians: eternal, immutable (unchangeable), incomprehensible, infinite, omnipotent (all knowing), omnipresent (present everywhere), omniscient (all powerful), self-existent, self-sufficient, and sovereign.

Communicable—God's *communicable* attributes are like *communicable* diseases. They can to some degree or another, be imparted to man. They are sometimes referred to as the *moral* characteristics because they are the way that God relates to His creation. Fourteen communicable characteristics are: faithful, good, gracious, holy, jealous, just, long-suffering, loving, merciful, forgiving, righteous, truthful, wise, and wrathful.

Calvin believed we should learn as much as possible about God, but also believed we do a poor job: He said: “...but we are all alike in this, that we substitute monstrous fictions for the one living and true God....almost every man has had his own god. To the darkness of ignorance have been added presumption and wantonness, and hence there is scarcely an individual to be found without some idol or phantom as a substitute for Deity. Like water gushing forth from a large and copious spring, immense crowds of gods have issued from the human mind, every man giving himself full license, and devising some peculiar form of divinity, to meet his own views.”

(John Calvin) said that God speaks to us in a kind of lisping. As parents engage in “baby talk” when addressing their infant children, so God, in order to communicate with us lowly mortals, must condescend to speak to us in lisps.

—R.C. Sproul,
Essential Truths of the Christian Faith

3. Read Jeremiah 9:23-24. What does it say about the benefit of knowing and understanding God?

4. Look at the list of God's *incommunicable* characteristics. Choose one you could cling to this week and describe how it might change the way you live your life.

5. Look over the list of God's *communicable* characteristics. These are the attributes that God can impart to us to some degree. In which of those areas do you find it is most difficult to be *like* God and why?

- No one can fully know and understand God, but there are many things we can know.
- God's *incommunicable* attributes belong only to God and cannot be imparted to us.
- God's *communicable* attributes can, to some degree, be imparted to us.

Truth for Today: *The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.*
Deuteronomy 29:29

The Providence of God

Today we are going to look further into some of God's *incommunicable* characteristics—His self-existence, omnipotence, and sovereignty.

Two of the first questions even children ask about God are: “Who made God?” and “Where did He come from?” The answer to the first question is “No one made God.”

1. Read Job 36:26 and Revelation 1:8. What do these passages say about God?

The answer to the second question is “God has *always* been there.”

2. What do Psalm 90:1-2 and Psalm 93:2 say about God?

Not only has God *always been there*, but He brought everything else into existence.

3. What does Psalm 33:6-9 say God did?

4. (a) List several things that you believe you *can* know about God.

- (b) List several things you believe you *cannot* know about God.

God is omnipotent. He not only had the power to bring it into being He uses that power everyday to keep it going. He is *sovereign* over all He has made. A *sovereign* is a *king*. God is *King* over His creation. He rules over it. He keeps it going. That is what is meant by the *providence of God*.

5. What is said about Jesus in Colossians 1:15-17?

6. Review the *Getting Started* for this lesson. John Calvin had many problems in his life, but he truly believed that God was in control. How did what he learned about God affect the way he lived his life?

We may define God's providence as follows: God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill his purposes.

—Wayne Grudem,
Systematic Theology

God's omnipotence means that God is able to do all his holy will. The word omnipotence is derived from two Latin words, *omni*, 'all,' and *potens*, 'powerful,' and means 'all powerful'... God's exercise of power over his creation is also called God's sovereignty. God's sovereignty is his exercise of rule (as 'sovereign' or 'king') over his creation.

–Wayne Grudem,
Systematic Theology

(a) In what way can your beliefs about God's sovereignty affect the way you live your life?

7. If someone were to ask you what is meant by the *providence of God*, how would you explain it?

Calvin saw God's sovereignty as a theme running through the Bible. He believed that the Bible was the story of God carrying out His plan for the world as a whole, and at the same time, His plan for each individual man. One example was the life of Joseph.

8. (a) Joseph is just one example of God's providence at work in the life of a Bible character. Read the following verses and briefly summarize these events in Joseph's life below. (Gen.37:17-28; Gen. 39:11-23; Gen. 40:1-23; Gen. 41:1-25,41-43; Gen. 42:1-7.

(b) Read Genesis 50:19-20. What did Joseph tell his brothers, who contributed to his times of difficulty, concerning God's plan for him? (Also see Romans 8: 28.)

(c) What is a difficult circumstance in your life, either past or present, where you have seen Godworking?

(d) If possible, name other Bible characters who endured difficulty as part of God's providential plan.

- No one made God. He pre-existed everything else.
- God created all that is created.
- God is the sovereign ruler over all that He has created. This is known as the *providence* of God.

Truth for Today: *In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praises of his glory.*
Ephesians 1:11

The Holiness of God

During the Dark Ages, the pomp and circumstance of the church became more the focus than the majesty of the God they said they worshiped. This was in part due to all the opulent trappings in the church—the ornate robes of the church leadership and the extravagant basilicas. The reformers knew this emphasis was misplaced.

We saw in the *Introduction* that there were five basic cries of the reformers. Each one began with a *sola* (*sola* means *alone*.) We will look at the first one in this lesson: *Sola Deo Gloria*, which means *For the glory of God alone*. God is the sovereign ruler and all the plans He puts into place are for His glory and His glory *alone*. The glory of God is central to Reformed Theology.

B.B. Warfield said: “The Calvinist is the man who has seen God, and who, having seen God in His glory, is filled on the one hand with a sense of his own unworthiness to stand in God’s sight as a creature, and much more as a sinner; and on the other hand, with adoring wonder that nevertheless this God is a God who receives sinners.”

Throughout the Bible one finds references to the holiness of God. But what does the Bible mean by holiness? The biblical word for *holy* has two distinct meanings:

- The primary meaning of *holy* is *apartness* or *otherness*. It calls attention to the fact that God is different from, and higher than, we are. It stresses God’s majesty and His worthiness of honor and worship. This is often referred to as God’s *internal* righteousness or His *nature*.
- The secondary meaning of *holy* refers to God’s pure and righteous actions. God does what is right and is never wrong. This is often referred to as God’s *external* righteous or His *actions*.

Only when the believer truly begins to understand the character and holiness of God does he begin to see himself as he really is.

1. (a) Read Isaiah 6:1-4. List six things Isaiah saw when he saw the Lord.

- (b) Read Isaiah 6:5-8. What are two things that Isaiah recognized about himself when he saw the Lord?

- (c) There is a saying that “the closer we get to God’s light, the dirtier we look.” Drawing closer to God begins with seeing our own sin. As you have drawn closer to God this week, what sins have you seen come to light?

Remember that God’s holiness is one of His *communicable* characteristics that He imparts to us. We are intended to reflect God’s glory and the closer we become to Him the more we reflect that glory (Isaiah 43:7).

Hence that dread and amazement with which, as Scripture uniformly relates, holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God. When we see those who previously stood firm and secure so quaking with terror, that the fear of death takes hold of them, nay, they are, in a manner, swallowed up and annihilated, the inference to be drawn is, that men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance, until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God.”

–John Calvin

God’s holiness means that he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor.

–Wayne Grudem,
Systematic Theology

