

# INSTITV

TION DE LA RELI  
GION CHRESTIENNE : EN LA  
quelle est comprisene somme de pieté,  
& quasi tout ce qui est nécessaire a congoi-  
stre en la doctrine de salut.

Composée en latin par JEAN CALVIN, &  
translatée en francois, par luymesme.

AVEC LA PREFACE ADDRES-  
sée au Treschrestien Roy de France, Françoy  
premier de ce nom: par laquelle ce présent liure  
luy est offert pour confession de Foy.

Habac. 1.

I V S Q V E S A Q V A N D  
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Title page of the first French edition of  
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# INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

John Calvin

*Translated from the first  
French edition of 1541  
by Robert White*



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

## THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

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**I**N seeking to present an outline of the Christian life, I am aware that I am entering on a large and varied subject which, if I wished to pursue it in detail, could fill a very big book. We know how wordy the early Fathers of the church were in their exhortations, even when discussing a single virtue! It is not because they loved to chatter: whatever virtue we mean to praise or commend, so ample is the subject matter that any argument which uses too few words seems quite inadequate.

Now I do not intend my teaching on the Christian life to go so far as to explain each and every virtue, or to offer lengthy advice. Such things can be readily found in the books of other men, and chiefly in the homilies of the early Fathers—in, that is, their public sermons. It will be enough if I describe a model which will direct Christians toward the goal of a well-ordered life. I will thus be content to outline briefly a general rule to which a person may refer all his actions. We may sometimes perhaps take the opportunity to discourse as the Fathers do in their sermons; but the present work requires our teaching to be simple and direct, and as brief as possible.

Just as the philosophers have among their goals respectability and probity, from which they derive specific duties and the many overt acts of virtue, so Scripture here has its own methods which are much better and sounder than those of the philosophers. The only difference is that the philosophers, whenever they were full of ambition, aspired to the utmost sharpness of detail, so as to draw attention to the order and logic which they employed and to show how clever they were. By contrast the Holy Spirit, who taught in a plain, unadorned way, did not always

follow the neatest order and strictest plans. Nevertheless, since he sometimes does just that, he warns us not to despise such a method. The method we refer to is employed by Scripture in two ways. The first is to impress on our hearts the love of righteousness, which is entirely foreign to our nature. The second is to provide us with a safe rule which, as we seek to order our lives, keeps us from straying or losing our way.

#### *God's holiness and Christ's saving work our incentive*

As to the first point, Scripture supplies many very sound reasons for inclining our hearts to love what is good. We have already noted many of them in various places, and we will mention others here. What better foundation could Scripture lay, as a first step, than to urge us to be holy, even as our God is holy (*Lev. 19:1-2; 1 Pet. 1:16*)? It goes on to tell us why: when we were as sheep lost and scattered in the labyrinth of this world, God gathered us together, bringing us to himself. The news that God is now joined to us should remind us that holiness is the bond which unites us. Not that we are worthy by our own holiness to have fellowship with God, since to be holy we must first cling to him that he might pour out his holiness upon us. But because his glory is such that he can have no dealings with iniquity and uncleanness, we must be like him for we are his.

Accordingly Scripture teaches that holiness is the purpose of our calling, which we must constantly keep in view if we would truly respond to God. For why would we need to be delivered from the filth and corruption where we once lay, if for ever after we meant to wallow in them? Furthermore Scripture urges us, if we wish to be part of God's people, to dwell in Jerusalem, his holy city (*Psa. 24:3*). Since he has consecrated and dedicated it to his honour, it is not right for it to be corrupted and polluted by any within it who are impure or ungodly. Hence this is said: 'The one who walks without blemish and who strives to do well will live in the Lord's tabernacle' (*Psa. 15:1-2; Isa. 35:8*). To motivate us still more, Scripture reminds us also that, as God has been reconciled to us in his Christ, so he has established us in him that he may be an example and model to which we must conform (*Rom. 8:29*).

Let those who think that none but the philosophers have made a good and proper study of morality, show me in their books a better form

of argument than the one which I have just described. When they do their best to exhort us to virtue, they give no other reason than that we should live according to nature.<sup>1</sup> Scripture, however, leads us to a much better source of encouragement: not only does it bid us refer our whole life to God as its author, it tells us that we have fallen from our original creation and that Christ, in reconciling us to God his Father, is given to us as a model of innocence whose image is to be reflected in our lives. Could anything be said more forcefully or to better effect? Indeed, what more could we possibly look for? For if God adopts us as his children on the understanding that our lives should reflect Christ's image, and if we refuse to follow righteousness and holiness, not only do we basely and faithlessly abandon our Creator, we also disown him as our Saviour.

That is why Scripture makes a point of urging us to remember all of God's benefits and the many facets of our salvation, as when it says: 'Since God has given himself to us as our Father, we are guilty of gross ingratitude if we do not behave as his children' (*Mal. 1:6; Eph. 5:1; 1 John 3:1*). 'Since Christ has cleansed us by the washing of his blood and has granted us his cleansing through baptism, we would be wrong to sully ourselves again with filth' (*Eph. 5:26; Heb. 10:10; 1 Cor. 6:11, 15; 1 Pet. 1:15, 19*). 'Since he has joined us to himself and grafted us into his body, we must beware of polluting ourselves in any way, seeing that we are his members' (*1 Cor. 6:15; John 15:3; Eph. 5:23*). 'Since he who is our Head has ascended into heaven, we must free ourselves of all earthly desires, and yearn with all our heart for the life above' (*Col. 3:1-2*). 'Since the Holy Spirit has consecrated us as God's temples, we must strive to see God glorified in us, and to keep ourselves from uncleanness' (*1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16*). 'Since our soul and body are destined for immortality in the kingdom of God, and for the incorruptible crown of his glory, we must endeavour to preserve soul and body pure and spotless until the day of the Lord' (*1 Thess. 5:23*).

These are sound and proper foundations on which we may truly build our lives. Nothing like them will be found in any of the philosophers, who in their reasoning never rise higher than the natural dignity of man whenever their theme is human duty.

<sup>1</sup> The injunction to live according to nature is recorded by Cicero (*On Duties*, III.3.13; *De finibus*, II.11.34, III.7.26, IV.15.41) and by Seneca (*On the Happy Life*, 8.2).

*A timely reminder: life is more than lip-service*

Something should be said at this point to those who, having only the name of Christ, wish nevertheless to be known as Christians. How bold they are to glory in his holy name, seeing that none enjoy his friendship save those who rightly know him through the gospel! Paul, for his part, declares that a right knowledge of Christ is given only to those who have learned to put off the old man, consumed as he is by unruly appetites, and who instead have put on Christ (*Eph. 4:20-24*). Clearly, when such people claim to know Christ, their claim is false. In the process they do him much wrong, however persuasively they prattle on about him. For the gospel is teaching intended not for the tongue but for life. Unlike other disciplines it involves more than just the mind and memory: it must take full possession of the soul and must have its seat and home deep in the heart. Otherwise it is not really taken in. So let these people cease to shame God by boasting of what they are not, or else let them prove themselves to be disciples of Christ.

In the matter of religion, we have so far given priority to what is taught, since that is the beginning of our salvation. But to bear fruit and to be profitable, what is taught must lodge in the heart and demonstrate its power in our lives. More than that, it must transform us so that its nature becomes ours. If the philosophers are right to be angry with those who claim to practise their art—which they call ‘the mistress of life’—and who nevertheless turn it into verbose sophistry, how much more should we detest those babblers whose mouth is full of gospel talk, but who spurn it in their lives! For its influence ought to penetrate our inmost heart and take root in our soul a hundred thousand times more powerfully than all the philosophers’ admonitions, which in comparison are so very weak.

I do not require the Christian’s conduct to match the gospel standard of purity and perfection. Although that is something we should desire and should try hard to achieve, I do not insist so strictly and severely that evangelical perfection be attained before I acknowledge a man to be a Christian. On that basis every soul on earth would be excluded from the church, for there is no one, whatever progress he has made, who does not come well short of the mark. Most people indeed have hardly advanced one step, yet they are not to be rejected on that account.

What then? Our sights should naturally be set on the goal of aiming for the perfection which God commands. All our actions should be directed to that end. That, I say, should be our steadfast aim, for it is quite wrong of us to pick and choose where God is concerned, accepting part of what his word commands and omitting all the rest just as we please. What he invariably commends as of first importance is integrity, by which he means absolute simplicity of heart which must be free of all pretence and with no hint of double-mindedness. But as long as we live in this earthly prison none of us is strong or keen enough to hurry on as briskly as we ought. And since most of us are so weak and feeble that we shuffle and stumble along, making little headway as we go, let us each proceed as our limited power allows, and let us keep to the path we have begun. However haltingly we travel, each day will see us gaining a little ground. So let us continue on, making diligent progress in the way of the Lord, and let us not lose heart if we have only a little to show for it. For although our success might be less than we would wish, all is not lost when today surpasses yesterday. Only let us fix our gaze clearly and directly on our goal, trying hard to reach our objective, not fooling ourselves with vain flattery or excusing our own vices. We should always strive to improve from day to day, until we attain that supreme goodness which we should seek as long as we live and which we will finally gain when, freed from the weakness of our flesh, we are made fully to share in it—that is, when God receives us into fellowship with himself.

*A golden rule: we are not our own*

Let us come now to our second point. Although God’s law provides a sound and methodical guide for ordering our life, nevertheless our good Master in heaven has seen fit by even choicer teaching to train his people to observe the rule which he has laid down in his law.

This is how God proceeds. He begins by urging believers to offer their bodies to him as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him, for that is the lawful service we owe him (*Rom. 12:1*). Next, they are exhorted not to be conformed to the pattern of the present age, but to be transformed by the renewing of their mind, that they may seek and know God’s will. It is no small thing—for the sacred should not be made to serve the profane—that we should be consecrated to God,

and that from now on all we think, speak, plan and do should be for his glory!

If, then, we are not our own, but belong instead to the Lord, it is clear what we must do to avoid going astray, and what our goal must be in every department of life. We are not our own: let not reason and will therefore determine our plans or the things we need to do. We are not our own: let us not therefore choose as our goal whatever might suit the flesh. We are not our own: let us therefore forget ourselves as much as we can—ourselves and everything around us. Again, we are the Lord's: let us then live and die for him. We are the Lord's: let his will and wisdom govern all we do. We are the Lord's: let every part of our lives be directed to him as to their sole end. What progress that man has made who, knowing that he is not his own, denies his reason lordship and dominion over him and surrenders it instead to God! For just as there is nothing which leads to ruin and destruction more surely than self-satisfaction, so also the only haven of salvation is to cease to be wise in oneself, and to want nothing on one's own account, but simply to follow the Lord.

Let our first move thus be to step back from ourselves, so as to focus all our thoughts on the service of God. By 'service' I mean not only attentive obedience to his word, but the cultivation of a mind which, forsaking its own understanding, turns right round and submits to God's Spirit. This transformation is what Paul calls 'the renewal of the mind' (*Eph. 4:23*). Such a thing was quite unknown to the philosophers, even though it marks the very entrance to life. They teach that man should be ruled and controlled exclusively by reason, and they hold that we should heed and follow it alone. To reason, then, they concede mastery over the affairs of life. Christian philosophy, on the other hand, insists that reason should yield, that it should fall back in order to make way for the Holy Spirit, and should so submit to his guidance that the Christian lives no longer for himself, but has Christ living and reigning in him.

### *Seeking God's will and his glory*

The corollary of this is, as we have said, that instead of seeking the things which suit us, we should seek the things which please God and which serve to exalt his glory. It is a fine virtue if, having more or less forgotten self, or at least caring less about ourselves, we loyally study and strive

to follow God and his commands. For when Scripture bids us take no special thought for ourselves, it not only empties our heart of greed, of lust for power and the desire for great honours and alliances, it also aims to root out all ambition, the longing for fame and other hidden plagues. Every Christian, to be sure, should so train himself as to think that, as long as he lives, it is with God that he must deal. Knowing this, he will be ready to account to God for all his actions; his purposes will comply with God's will and will be rooted in it. For whoever looks to God in all that he does will soon rid his mind of every idle thought.

This is the meaning of the self-denial which Christ so carefully requires of all his disciples at the start of their apprenticeship (*Matt. 16:24*). Once self-denial possesses the human heart, arrogance, pride and empty show are the first things to go; then also greed, intemperance, extravagance and sensual pleasure, with all the other vices which are born of self-love. Conversely, when self-denial is not uppermost, either men will shamelessly throw themselves into every kind of villainy, or else, if the appearance of virtue is preserved, it is defiled by a wicked thirst for glory. Can anyone show me a man who treats other men with unmerited kindness, and who has not first denied himself according to the Lord's command? For those who were not thus minded at the very least in pursuing virtue sought men's praise. Even the philosophers, who fought strenuously to prove that virtue is desirable for its own sake, were so puffed up with vanity and presumption that they clearly sought virtue only to pander to their pride. Now ambitious people who look for worldly fame, and others like them who are bursting with hidden conceit, are so far from pleasing God that he claims that the first have received their reward in this world, and that the second are further from the kingdom of God than tax-collectors and prostitutes (*Matt. 6:2; 21:31*).

We have not yet, however, clearly explained how many obstacles prevent someone from doing good unless he has first denied himself. In earlier times it was truly said that a world of evil is hidden in the soul of man. There exists no other remedy than self-denial so that, with no thought for what we ourselves like, we set our minds on the things which God requires of us, straining after them only because they are pleasing to him.

### ***Denying self for the sake of others: humility and forgiveness***

We should note that self-denial refers partly to men, and partly—and principally—to God. When Scripture commands us in our dealings with men to prefer them in honour to ourselves, and to strive faithfully to advance their welfare (*Rom.* 12:10; *Phil.* 2:3), it lays down requirements which our heart cannot possibly fulfil unless first freed from its natural inclination. For we are so blinded and engrossed by self-love that we all believe we are entitled to rise higher than everyone else and to despise them in comparison. If we receive some valuable gift from God we immediately use it as an excuse to exult. Not only do we swell with pride, we almost burst with it! We make sure we hide from others the vices that beset us, and we pass them off as minor and trifling. Sometimes, indeed, we admire them as virtues. As for our own gifts, we hold them in such high regard that they are a source of wonder to us. If, however, the same, or even better, gifts are found in other people, to avoid having to defer to them we either cloak or else belittle them as much as we can. On the other hand, if a few faults are found in our neighbours, we are not content merely to take severe note of them: we odiously exaggerate them.

Hence the arrogant assumption we all make that we are exempt from the normal human lot. We look for ways of asserting our supremacy over all others and we despise them all, without exception, as our inferiors. So it is that the poor defer to the rich, the common-born to noblemen, servants to their masters and the ignorant to the educated. Yet there is no one who in his heart of hearts does not imagine he deserves to outrank everyone else. Thus each person, in his own way, fondly nurses an entire kingdom in his heart. While draping himself in the qualities which appeal to him, he censures the minds and morals of others. If conflict flares up, out comes the poison: there is no hiding it. There are many, it is true, who maintain the appearance of mildness and moderation as long as things go their way. But how few there are who can remain gentle and even-tempered once they are nettled and irritated!

This is bound to be the case until the mortal plague of self-love and self-promotion is plucked out from deep within the heart. Now Scripture does just that. If we heed its teaching, we are reminded that none

of the favours which God bestows is our personal possession; all are his free and generous gift. Anyone who makes them an occasion for pride is thus patently ungrateful. Then too, always acknowledging our faults, we should resign ourselves to humility. That way we will have nothing left to puff us up: instead we will have ample reason to back down and to abase ourselves.

Moreover we are commanded to honour and respect all of God's gifts which we observe in our neighbours, and thus to esteem the people in whom they are found. It would be the basest of acts to want to rob someone of the honour God has done him. By the same token we are commanded not to take note of other people's failings, but to draw a veil over them—not in order to encourage them by flattery, but to avoid offending those who are at fault, given that we owe them love and respect. Therefore, whenever we have dealings with someone, whoever it be, we will act not only with discretion and forbearance, but also in a spirit of gentleness and friendship. Conversely, we will never attain true mildness of manner in any other way without having a heart which is ready to humble itself and to honour others.

### ***Serving our neighbour: love and mutual help***

As regards duty to neighbour, it is no easy thing for us to serve his interests. Unless we abandon all thought of ourselves and cast aside every selfish desire, we will achieve nothing. Who can fulfil the tasks which Paul assigns to love except the person who has denied self and who is now wholly devoted to his neighbour? 'Love,' writes Paul, 'is patient and good-natured; it is not irritable or insolent; it is without pride or envy, and it is not self-seeking', etc. (*1 Cor.* 13:4-5). Merely to obey the injunction not to be self-seeking would require us to do great violence to our nature, which spawns such self-love in us that it does not easily allow us to put our neighbour's welfare ahead of our own, nor indeed to forsake our rights and yield them to our neighbour.

Now Scripture seeks to impress this truth on us by insisting that every gift we have received from the Lord has been committed to us on this condition—that we use it for the church's common good. Such gifts are properly employed when they are freely and lovingly shared with our

neighbour. To ensure that we share, no better or safer rule exists than when Scripture declares that God has given us his blessings on trust, so that they may be used for the welfare of others (*1 Cor. 12:4-11*). Scripture goes further, however, when it compares the gifts we all have to the properties of each limb in the human body. No limb functions solely for itself or for its own benefit. It works for the sake of the others, and receives no particular advantage except that which derives from the healthy functioning of the whole body. In the same way the believer should employ all his powers for his brethren's sake, making no special provision for himself but always taking thought for the general good of the church.

Consequently, let this be the rule we observe when we seek to do good and to act compassionately: we are stewards of all that the Lord has given us and that makes it possible for us to help our neighbour. One day we will have to account for how we have discharged our duties. Now there is no better or more appropriate way of exercising stewardship than that prescribed by the rule of love. Accordingly, not only will we combine concern for our neighbour's interests with concern for our own, we will also subordinate our interests to those of others.

To illustrate that this is how his gifts are to be rightly and duly managed, the Lord in former times bade the Israelites observe it even in the smallest blessings conferred on them. Thus he ordered them to offer the first of the new fruits to him (*Exod. 22:29-30; 23:19*), so that the people should testify that they could not lawfully enjoy any good gift which had not been consecrated to him. Now if God's gifts are finally sanctified to us only when our hand has consecrated them to him, it is clear that failure to consecrate is an offence greatly to be condemned. On the other hand, it would be madness to think that we could enrich God by giving him whatever we happen to own. Since, as the prophet says, none of our good deeds can ever reach to where he is (*Psa. 16:2-3*), we must direct them instead to his servants who are here on earth.

### ***Love to the unlovely***

So that we do not grow weary in well-doing—as might otherwise happen at any time—we should also remember what Paul goes on to say: ‘love is patient, and is not easily irritated’ (*1 Cor. 13:4-5*). The Lord demands

that we do good to all, without exception, even though most people are unworthy if we judge them on their merits. Scripture, however, forestalls us, warning us to pay no attention to human worth in itself, but rather to consider the image of God which is in all of us, and which deserves all our respect and affection. Especially should we acknowledge it among God's servants in the faith (*Gal. 6:10*), because it is being renewed and restored in them by the Spirit of Christ.

If someone, then, turns up who needs our help, we have no reason to refuse him. What if we claim that he is a stranger? We are reminded that the Lord has stamped him with a mark which should be familiar to us. What if we say that the man is worthless and beneath contempt? The Lord replies that he has honoured him by causing his own image to shine within him. What if we say we owe him nothing? The Lord tells us that he has put him as a substitute in his own place: we are to think of him as the one for whose sake God has bestowed his blessings on us.<sup>2</sup> What if we think he is not worth lifting a finger for? We should hazard our lives and goods on account of God's image which we are meant to see in him. Even supposing the man deserved nothing from us, but instead had grossly abused and injured us, that would not be sufficient reason to stop loving him or doing him a favour. For if we argue that he has deserved nothing of the kind from us, God might well ask what he himself has deserved. For when he commands us to forgive men their sins against us (*Matt. 6:12*), he lays those sins to his own charge.

This is the only way we can attain what is not only difficult for human nature but totally abhorrent to it—namely, loving those who hate us, repaying evil with good, and praying for those who speak ill of us (*Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27-28*). This, I repeat, we can attain, if we are careful not to dwell on the evil which men do, but rather to look upon the image of God which they bear, and whose worth and dignity can—and should—move us to love them and to bury their faults which might otherwise repel us.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin's meaning is that God's image, placed by him in every human person, makes that person a spiritual being, a proxy, as it were, of God himself, 'put in God's own place'.

*Real love comes from the heart*

This kind of mortification is only possible when our love is complete. It does not consist merely in the performance of all the duties which love requires, but is accompanied by a spirit of friendship and genuine affection. Someone may fully discharge his duty to his neighbour outwardly, yet be far from fulfilling his proper obligations to him. We see many people, for example, who are keen to be known for their liberality, but who give their largesse resentfully, with either haughty looks or condescending words. Nowadays things are so bad that most people bestow charity in a quite insulting way. Such wilfulness would be utterly intolerable even among the heathen!

Now if the good we do is to be kindly done with pity and tenderness, the Lord demands more of us than a happy, cheerful face. Christians must first feel burdened for the person who is in need of help: they should pity his misfortune as if they themselves were suffering and experiencing it; they should be moved to aid him by the same feeling of compassion which they would have for themselves. Whoever acts in this spirit will, in seeking to please his brothers, avoid the taint of arrogance or resentment when he does good, and will also keep from scorning the people he helps because of their poverty. Nor will he try to lord it over them because they are in his debt, any more than we would disparage one of our members when the rest of the body is labouring to sustain it. Let us not think that a member is especially beholden to the others simply because it made them work harder than it worked for them. There is nothing arbitrary about the way the various members of the body relate to each other: it is simply a question of payment or compensation required by the law of nature.

This consideration allows me to make another which is equally convincing. We should never think we are free and exempt once we have fulfilled a particular duty, as is commonly thought. Thus a rich man who parts with some of his wealth will forget and ignore all his other responsibilities, as if they were no longer his concern. The opposite is true. Everyone should recognize that whatever he has and is capable of doing is owed to his neighbour. There is no limit to his obligation to do good, except his lack of capacity. However far his capacity may extend, it should always answer to the rule of love.

*Life yielded to God: his generosity should suffice*

Let us now discuss the other aspect of self-denial, which relates to God. Some points have already been made, and it would be superfluous to repeat all that has been said. It will be enough if we explain how denial of self will help us learn patience and meekness.

First of all, then, if we would know how to live tranquilly and to be at rest, Scripture insists that we should resign ourselves and all we have to God, surrendering to him our dearest desires that he might tame and master them. We are quite unbridled in our fierce craving for recognition and honours, in our thirst for power, for wealth and for anything which we think will confer prestige and grandeur. On the other hand we have a prodigious hatred and fear of poverty, obscurity and disgrace, which is why we do our best to run from them. The result is that people who live according to their own counsel are dogged by constant anxiety; whatever efforts they make and whatever torments they endure, their aim is to go wherever ambition and greed lead them and to escape poverty and loss of status.

There is a path which believers must therefore follow if they would avoid falling into this trap. First, they must cease to wish, hope or imagine they can prosper apart from the blessing of God. That is the only thing on which they can safely lean and rely. Although the flesh may sometimes seem to manage, unaided, to achieve its goals, as when it strives in its own strength after honours and wealth, or spares no effort in its endeavours, or is helped by the favours of men, nevertheless these things amount to nothing, and our own cleverness and hard work get us nowhere, unless the Lord gives each of them success. On the contrary, when obstacles abound only God's blessing will find a way through and ensure a good outcome in all we do. Besides, even supposing we could obtain fame or affluence without God's blessing—as is daily the case with the wicked, who acquire great riches and important offices—none of us when subject to God's curse would have an ounce of happiness. Whatever we gained would be to our misfortune if God's blessing did not rest on us. It would be utter lunacy to want what can only make us miserable.

If, therefore, we believe that the only way to prosper lies solely in God's blessing, and that without it we can expect only misery and

disaster, we are duty-bound not to yearn greedily for wealth and honours, trusting in our cleverness or hard work, in the favour of men or in luck. We should instead look always to God so that, as we are led by him, we come to accept whatever situation in life seems good to him. Hence we will not try to rake in wealth, or to snatch at honours by fair means or foul, by violence, craft or other underhand means. The only good things we seek will be those which allow us to keep to the path of innocence. Who could possibly expect God's blessing to aid them if they were committing fraud, theft or other crimes? For since it assists only those who are upright in thought and deed, anyone who seeks it must be free of iniquity and evil intent. What is more, God's blessing will work as a curb to rein us in and to stop us avidly coveting riches and itching to get ahead. Only the most impudent would think that God should help us obtain what we want in defiance of his word. Heaven forbid that he should favour with his gracious blessing something his own lips condemn! Finally, supposing we fail to realize our hopes and dreams, the thought of God's blessing will stop us bursting with impatience and hating our lot in life. For we know that if we did that we would be reproaching God, who apportions as he wills both poverty and wealth, dishonour and esteem.

To sum up, whoever relies on God's blessing will not resort to base and crooked means to obtain the things which men madly crave, because he knows that such methods will never work to his advantage. If he enjoys a measure of success, he will not attribute it to his diligence, to his hard work or to good luck, but will acknowledge that it comes from God. On the other hand, if he makes little progress while others forge ahead, if, indeed, he even drops behind, he will bear his poverty with greater patience and forbearance than an unbeliever would who, blessed with moderate wealth, was always wanting more. For the believer has something to console him which means much more to him than if he were to gather all earth's riches in a single pile: he understands that all things are ordained by God as is expedient for his salvation.

### *Grace in time of trouble*

It is not only here, however, that believers will show patience and restraint; they will also display them in every chance occurrence which affects our present life. No one, therefore, has properly denied himself unless, having resigned himself to God, he gladly allows him throughout his life to rule him as he wills. Whoever feels this way will never think that he is badly off, whatever happens to him, nor will he complain about his lot in life as if he meant somehow to blame God.

How important this attitude is will be clear if we think about the many accidents to which we are prey. There are a thousand illnesses which constantly assail us, one after another. At one time the plague torments us, at another, war. Frost or hail may bring barrenness, and as a result threaten to impoverish us. Death may deprive us of wife, children or other kin. Or again, our house may go up in flames. Such things cause men to curse their life and to hate the day they were born; they rail against heaven and the light itself, insult God and, in a stream of blasphemies, accuse him of being cruel and unjust. By contrast the believer should, in the midst of these things, be conscious of God's mercy and of his fatherly goodwill. Although he may experience the distress of seeing his nearest and dearest die, and his house, as it were, abandoned, he will not cease to bless God and will cherish the thought that, because God's grace dwells in his house, it will not leave it desolate. Though his crops and vines may be spoiled and wiped out by frost, hail or other storm, and though as a result he faces the risk of famine, he will nevertheless not lose heart, nor will he come to resent God, but will keep on firmly trusting him, saying in his heart: 'Even so, we are under God's protection; we are the sheep of his pasture' (*Psa. 79:13*). However barren the land, God will always give us enough to live on. Though a man may endure sickness, he will not give way to anguish, nor will he seethe with impatience and grumble at God. Instead, mindful that his heavenly Father is both just and kind in the chastisements he sends, he will learn to be patient. In short, whatever happens, he knows that everything comes from the Lord's hand, and he will accept it calmly and not ungratefully, so as not to resist the command of him in whom he has forever put his trust.

Above all, let the Christian entirely dismiss that absurd and wretched consolation dear to the heathen—that adversities are a matter of fate, and thus to be borne with greater patience. For the philosophers reason that it would be foolish to get angry with fate, which is both blind and reckless, hurling its darts at random and wounding the guilty and the innocent indiscriminately. Real piety, by contrast, holds to the rule that it is God's hand alone that governs fate, both good and bad; and since his hand is neither hasty nor unthinking, it dispenses prosperity and adversity in a just and orderly way.

### *Living under Christ's cross*

Believers must, however, lift their minds still higher, to where Christ himself calls all who are his, and where he bids each of us bear his own cross (*Matt. 16:24*). For all whom the Lord has adopted and received among the number of his children must prepare themselves for a tough, difficult life, full of toils and countless troubles. It is our heavenly Father's good pleasure to test his servants in this way and thus to train them.

This was the pattern which he began in Christ, his first-born Son, and which he continues in all his other children. For although Christ was his beloved Son in whom he was always well pleased (*Matt. 3:17; 17:5*), we know that he was not treated softly or leniently in this world. Indeed, it can be said not only that he was continually afflicted but that his entire life was a kind of perpetual cross. How, then, will we escape the condition to which Christ our Head had to submit, since he submitted for our sake, to set us an example in patience? The apostle accordingly explains that this is the end which God has in view for all his children, that they may be made like his Christ (*Rom. 8:29*).

Here we have a remarkable source of comfort, for in suffering the misery of what we call adversity or misfortune, we share in Christ's cross, so that, just as he passed through an abyss of trials of every sort to enter into heavenly glory, we too, through various tribulations, should also enter in (*Acts 14:22*). For Paul teaches us that when inwardly we participate in his sufferings, we at the same time experience the power of his resurrection, and when we are made to share in his death, it is to prepare us to attain the glory of his eternity (*Phil. 3:10-11*). How powerfully

this sweetens any bitterness which we might find in the cross! The fact is, the more we endure misery and affliction, the stronger and surer is our fellowship with Christ. And because of our fellowship with him, adversities not only become a blessing to us but also greatly help to further our salvation.

### *The cross humbles our pride and produces hope*

Again, the Lord Jesus had no need to bear the cross and to suffer tribulation except to attest and prove his obedience to God his Father. There are many reasons, however, why it is necessary for us constantly to bear affliction in this life.

The first reason is that, by nature, we are only too ready to exalt ourselves and to claim sufficiency in everything. Unless we have tangible proof of our weaknesses, we immediately get inflated ideas of our own abilities, and readily imagine that they can prevail over every conceivable difficulty. So it is that we develop an empty, foolish confidence in the flesh, which then produces a supercilious attitude toward God, as if our own resources were sufficient without his grace. God has no better way of humbling such arrogance than by showing us by hard experience how weak and feeble we are. So he brings disgrace, poverty or sickness upon us, or loss of kin or other calamities which, try as we may, at once overwhelm us, because we are not strong enough to bear them. Hence, being humbled, we learn to plead for his power, which alone allows us to stand firm and to hold up under the weight of such burdens.

Even the holiest of people, who know that their steadfastness depends on God's grace and not on themselves, would still trust too much in their own strength and resilience if the Lord did not give them a better understanding of themselves by testing them through the cross. That is why, when all is calm, they fondly think of themselves as firm and solid; but once trouble strikes they realize that it has all been a sham. That, then, is how believers should be alerted to their frailties, so that they may be helped to grow in humility, to abandon all sinful confidence in the flesh, and to submit wholly to God's grace. With submission comes the discovery that God's power is now available to them: there they have a fortress sufficient for their needs.

Paul makes much the same point, when he writes that 'from tribulation comes patience, and from patience, test of character' (*Rom. 5:3-4*). Believers experience the truth of the Lord's promise of help in time of trial when they endure patiently, upheld by his hand—something they could never do in their own strength. Patience thus provides the saints with proof that God supplies his promised help whenever it is needed. By this means, too, they are encouraged to hope, because it would be gross ingratitude to doubt God's faithfulness in the future, when in the past they have found him firm and immutable.

Already we see how many benefits flow to us, as in an unbroken stream, from the cross. By overturning the false ideas which we naturally have about our own powers, and by unmasking the hypocrisy which charms and flatters us with its deceptions, the cross beats down the arrogance of our flesh which did us untold harm. And once it has humbled us it teaches us to rest in God who, since he is our foundation, does not let us go under or lose heart. Victory in turn gives rise to hope, inasmuch as the Lord by fulfilling his promises establishes his faithfulness for all future time. These considerations alone surely show how important it is that the cross should train us. For it is no small gain to be free of the self-love which blinds us, in order rightly to appreciate our weaknesses; to keenly feel them, in order to learn how to distrust ourselves; to distrust ourselves, in order to transfer our trust to God; to lean on God with heartfelt trust, in order to continue, with his help, victorious to the end; to stand firm in his grace, in order to know that he is true and faithful to his promises; to rely on the certainty of his promises, in order that our hope may be made strong.

#### *The cross teaches us obedience*

The Lord has yet another reason for sending his servants affliction. He means to test their patience and to train them in obedience. Not that they are capable of any other obedience than that which God has given them, but this is the way he chooses to reveal and confirm the gifts he has given believers, so that no gift is allowed to lie idle and hidden within them. When, therefore, he displays how great is the patience with which he has endowed his servants, he is said to put their patience to the test. Scripture expresses this idea in various ways, declaring for example

that God tested Abraham and took note of his devotion, since to please him Abraham did not refuse to sacrifice his son (*Gen. 22:1, 12*). So too Peter writes that our faith is tried by tribulation in the same way as gold is tested in the furnace (*1 Pet. 1:7*).

Who, then, would think it out of place if so splendid a gift bestowed by the Lord on his servants were exercised openly, for all to see? Otherwise it would never have the recognition it deserved. Now if the Lord is right to give concrete proof of the powers which he has granted believers, and to stir them up so that they are not hidden or left unused, we can see that the afflictions he sends are not without purpose, for without them their patience would be meaningless. I believe, too, that this is how God trains his servants to obey: they learn not to live as they choose, but in a way which pleases him. If, indeed, everything turned out according to their wishes, they would never know what it means to follow God. Seneca, the pagan philosopher, records an old adage by which men were encouraged to bear misfortune patiently: 'We must follow God,' they were told.<sup>3</sup> By that was meant that we finally submit to the Lord's yoke when we allow him to chasten us, and when we willingly yield our hands and backs to his rod. Now if it is reasonable for us to obey the heavenly Father in all things, we cannot deny him the right to train us in every possible way in obedience.

We still do not appreciate, however, the necessity for obedience, unless we recognize how fiercely our flesh refuses the Lord's yoke as soon as it is indulged a little. It is the same with horses which for a time have been left inactive and well fed in the stable: they cannot afterwards be tamed and do not acknowledge the master to whom they once willingly submitted. In short, what God laments happened to Israel is something which normally occurs among all men: 'fattened on the richest food, they kick out at the hand that has fed them' (*Deut. 32:15*). Without question, God's generosity was meant to make us value and love his goodness. But such is our ingratitude that instead of being provoked to virtue, we are spoiled by his lenient treatment. He must therefore keep an especially tight rein on us and impose a certain discipline, in case we grow wilful beyond measure. Consequently, to make sure that excessive

<sup>3</sup> The adage appears in Cicero (*De finibus*, III.22.73) and also in Seneca (*On the Happy Life*, 15.5), who represents it as the ideal to be followed by steadfast virtue.

abundance of good things does not fill us with pride, or worldly honours with vanity, and to keep us from the arrogance which endowments of body or soul might spawn, the Lord acts to set things right, taming and mastering the folly of our flesh by the remedy of the cross. This he does in different ways, since he knows what is suitable and beneficial for each of us. For not all of us are equally sick, nor do we suffer from the same illness. Thus the same treatment is not required in every case. That is why God tries some by one sort of cross and others by another. And although, in caring for the health of everyone, he prescribes milder medicine for some, and stronger and harsher medicine for others, no one is left untouched, for he knows that all, without exception, are sick.

### *The cross keeps us in God's love*

Besides this, our kindly Father must not only guard against future acts of weakness, but often sees fit to chasten us for past faults, in order to keep us obedient to himself. That is why every experience of affliction should at once set us thinking about our past. If we do so we will doubtless find that some past transgression deserves the punishment we are now suffering. We should beware, however, of making recognition of former sin the main reason why we are urged to be patient. Scripture offers us a far weightier reason when it says that the Lord chastises us through adversity so as not to condemn us along with the world (*1 Cor. 11:32*).

So in the midst of the bitterest experience of suffering we should recognize our Father's mercy and goodwill, since he continues by this means to further our salvation. He afflicts us, not to ruin or destroy us, but to rescue us from the world's condemnation. This thought leads to a further scriptural injunction: 'My child, do not reject the Lord's chastisement, and do not be angry when he reproves you. God chastises those he loves and cares for them as his children' (*Prov. 3:11-12*). So when we hear that his chastisements are rods applied by a fatherly hand, should we not be teachable as children, instead of digging in our heels and following the lead of reckless men who have grown hard in their sins? The Lord would make short work of us if, through chastisements, he did not bring us back to himself when we had done wrong. As the apostle says, 'If he did not discipline us, we would not be sons, but illegitimate children' (*Heb. 12:8*).

We are therefore exceedingly perverse if we do not suffer the Lord to act, seeing that he clearly demonstrates his goodwill and his concern for our salvation. Scripture establishes this difference between unbelievers and believers: the former, like the slaves of old who were naturally wilful, become worse and grow hard under the whip; the latter, like well-born children, make the most of the opportunity to repent and to amend their lives. So let us now choose which we would rather be. But because this topic has been treated elsewhere, the present discussion, though brief, must suffice.<sup>4</sup>

### *The cross as an emblem of innocent suffering*

Our supreme comfort, however, is when we suffer persecution for righteousness' sake. For it is then that we should remember the honour which the Lord does us by presenting us with the badge of his militia. By persecution for righteousness' sake, I mean suffering incurred in the defence not only of the gospel but of all just causes. So if, in defending God's truth against Satan's lies, or in protecting the innocent against the wicked and preventing others harming and injuring them, we suffer the world's hatred and indignation, and thus place our honour, fate or life in jeopardy, we should not regret doing our utmost for God, nor should we think of ourselves as miserable when with his own lips God calls us blessed (*Matt. 5:10*). It is quite true that poverty, when considered in itself, is wretched. So too is exile, contempt, disgrace and prison. And death is the extreme calamity. But wherever we enjoy the breath of God's favour, there is nothing in any of these things which does not contribute to our welfare and happiness.

Let us content ourselves, therefore, with the testimony of Christ, and not with the false judgments of our flesh. Then, like the apostles, we too will rejoice whenever he counts us worthy to suffer shame for his name's sake (*Acts 5:41*). For if, though blameless and with a clear conscience, we are stripped of all we have by the evil deeds of the unrighteous, we will be poor indeed in men's eyes, but our true wealth will be increased with God in heaven. If we are driven out and banished from our country, we will be welcomed even further into the Lord's family. If we are troubled

<sup>4</sup> See above, Chapter 5, pp. 336-341, and Chapter 8, pp. 507-509.

and harassed, we will be strengthened still more in our Lord, because we have turned to him for help. If we endure disgrace and dishonour, we will be raised even higher in God's kingdom. If we die, the way will be opened to the life of blessedness. Would it not be truly shameful if the things God so much values meant less to us than worldly pleasures, which straight away vanish like smoke? Because Scripture comforts us when, in defending righteousness, we suffer calamity and disgrace, it would be most ungrateful of us not to bear them patiently and with cheerful hearts, especially since this sort of cross is, more than any other, appropriate to believers, and the one through which Christ wills to be glorified in them, as Peter says (*1 Pet. 4:12-14*).

Even so God does not ask us to demonstrate the kind of joy which excludes all bitterness and grief. Otherwise the saints would never learn patience under the cross if they were not assailed by pain or suffered no distress when others did them harm. Likewise if, when poor, they felt no hurt or sting, when sick, no anguish, when disgraced, no sorrow, or when facing death, no dread, where would be the strength or restraint in scorning all these things? Since, however, all such afflictions bring with them a bitterness which naturally gnaws at our hearts, believers are able to demonstrate their strength if, when tested by the feeling of pain which sorely troubles them, they resist and overcome it. Here too their patience is revealed if, provoked by such a feeling, they are nevertheless held back by the fear of God as by a rein, so that they do not give way to intemperate outbursts. They thus display their joy and gladness when, burdened by sorrow and distress, they nevertheless find rest in God's spiritual consolation.

#### *The cross does not mean Stoic indifference*

In pursuing patience and forbearance, believers struggle against the natural feeling of pain. Paul aptly describes their struggle in this way: 'We suffer tribulation in all things, but we are not distressed; we endure poverty, but we are not desolate; we face persecution, but we are not abandoned; we are cast down, but we do not perish' (*2 Cor. 4:8-9*). We perceive, then, that to bear the cross patiently does not mean that we become entirely senseless, feeling no pain. That was how the Stoics of

old foolishly described the high-minded man who, having shed his humanity, was moved no more by adversity than by prosperity, no more by sadness than by joy—who, in fact, had no more feeling than a stone. Now what good did all that lofty wisdom do them? All they did was portray a phantom patience which was never found among men, nor ever can be. Indeed, in setting out to attain so rare a form of patience, they denied men the chance to practise it! Among Christians, too, there are now men similarly minded. They believe it wrong not only to groan and weep, but even to be downcast and anxious. Such outlandish ideas are the work of lazy individuals, who spend their time in speculation rather than in honest work, and who produce nothing but fantasies like these.

We, for our part, have no use for so stern and severe a philosophy, which our Lord Jesus condemned not only by precept but also by example. He groaned and wept, out of sorrow for himself and pity for others, and he taught his disciples to do the same, saying: 'The world will rejoice, but you will be sad; it will laugh, but you will cry' (*John 16:20*). And to stop anyone regarding it as wrong, he calls those who weep 'blessed' (*Matt. 5:4*). This should come as no surprise, for if we disapprove of tears in every form, what shall we make of the Lord Jesus, from whose body fell drops of blood (*Luke 22:44*)? If we condemn all fear as unbelief, what shall we say about the extraordinary dread which came upon him (*Matt. 26:37*)? If we find all sadness unacceptable, how can we commend his statement that his soul was sad unto death (*Matt. 26:38*)?

#### *The cross reconciles us to God's will*

In writing as I have, my aim has been to guard all good souls from the perils of despair, so that, while still experiencing natural feelings of pain, they may continue to practise patience. Now those who equate patience with insensibility, and who picture the strong, steadfast person as a block of wood, are bound to lose heart and to despair when they try to make patience their aim. Scripture, on the other hand, praises the saints for their endurance when, though suffering grievous pain, they neither faint nor are broken; though bitterly tried, they know spiritual joy; though burdened by distress they nevertheless breathe freely, rejoicing in God's comfort.

Yet all the while conflicting forces are at work in their heart. Our natural instinct is to dread and run from whatever is opposed to it. The impulse to godliness, on the other hand, inclines believers to obey God's will in the midst of all such difficulties. This conflict is what Jesus Christ referred to when speaking to Peter: 'When you were young, you girded yourself just as you chose, and you went wherever you wished. But when you are old, another will gird you and will take you where you do not want to go' (*John 21:18*). It is of course unlikely that Peter, who was to glorify God by his death, had to be dragged off unwillingly by force, otherwise his martyrdom would deserve scant praise. Nevertheless, although he obeyed God's decision freely and gladly, he had not cast aside his humanity and was thus in two different minds. For when he considered how cruel a death he was to suffer, he was seized with dread and would have happily escaped it. But when he reflected that this was the end to which God was now calling him, he offered himself willingly and even joyfully, putting all fear behind him.

If, therefore, we would be disciples of Christ, we must strive to have hearts which are full of the kind of reverence and obedience toward God which can tame and overrule every desire which is contrary to his will. The result will be that whatever trial we may be facing, and however unimaginable our distress, we will not fail to exercise patience at all times.

For adversity will always make us feel its sting and bite. So when afflicted by illness, we will groan, lament and long to get better; when hard pressed by poverty, we will experience in some way perplexity and worry. Likewise disgrace, contempt and other evils will weigh heavily on our hearts. When one of our family dies, we will pay nature the debt of tears we owe. Always, however, we will be led to this conclusion: 'God has willed it so; let us follow his will.' This should be our thought when all around are the pangs of sorrow, tears and groans. Only so will we train our heart to bear joyfully the things which cause it grief.

#### ***Patience knows God to be just and fair***

Since we have supposed that the main motive for cross-bearing comes from a consideration of God's will, we must briefly contrast the Christian understanding of patience with the views of the philosophers.

Very few of the philosophers have risen to such heights that they comprehend that it is God's hand which tests men by affliction, and that, here as elsewhere, we must obey his will. Even those who do comprehend it explain it simply by saying that it must be so. What else do they mean except that we should submit to God because it would be pointless to resist? For if we obey God only because necessity compels us, supposing we could escape we would stop obeying him! That is why Scripture invites us to consider other aspects of God's will: first, his justice and fairness; second, his concern for our salvation.

Hence the various encouragements addressed to Christians. It is said that whether we are troubled by poverty, exile, prison, dishonour, sickness, loss of kin or any other misfortune, we must reflect that all these things come by the Lord's will and providence. Again, we read that he does nothing except in well-ordered equity. So then, in sinning as we do each day, do we not deserve a punishment a hundred thousand times sharper and harsher than that which God applies? Is he not right to discipline our flesh and to accustom it as it were to the yoke, so as to curb its natural instinct for self-indulgence? Are not God's justice and truth worth suffering for? If God's fairness is clearly to be seen in all our afflictions, it would be sinful of us to object and rebel. This is not to repeat the philosophers' cold refrain that we must submit because necessity requires it. It is rather to issue a lively and powerful appeal, urging us to obey because it is wrong to resist, and to exercise patience, because to be impatient is to be contemptuous of God's justice.

Now since we really like only what we think is good and beneficial for us, the Father of mercy comforts us here also, for he assures us that when he sends affliction through the cross he is acting for our salvation. If trials are beneficial for us, why should we not accept them calmly and with thankful hearts? Therefore when we bear them patiently we are not surrendering to necessity; instead, we are accepting what is good for us. These ideas, I believe, explain why the more our hearts are gripped by the natural bitterness of the cross, the more they are filled with spiritual joy. Thanksgiving, too, will follow: it cannot exist without joy. If praise and thanksgiving to the Lord can only come from a glad and cheerful heart, and cannot be stopped by any power on earth, it is obvious how

important it is for the bitterness of the cross to be tempered by spiritual joy.

### *The vanity of this present life*

There is, however, something we should always have in view whatever kind of tribulation we may suffer. We must learn contempt for the present life, and so be encouraged to meditate on the life to come. Because the Lord well knows our readiness to embrace the world with blind and even brutish love, he uses the very best motive to detach us from it and to rouse us from our lethargy, so as to free our hearts from so foolish an attachment.

All of us, in the course of our lives, like to be seen as people who long for immortality in heaven, and who are trying very hard to attain it. The thought that we are no better than the brute beasts, and that their lot is in no way inferior to ours, would be humiliating were we not left with some hope of eternity after death. If, however, we think hard about the schemes we all devise, the plans we lay, the things we do and undertake, we will find them to be mere dust! Our folly comes from the fact that our mind is more or less dazzled by the false glitter of wealth, distinctions and power, which are superficially attractive and which stop us looking further ahead. By the same token our heart, which is full of greed, ambition and other evil desires, is held so fast by them that it cannot look heavenwards. Lastly, our entire soul seeks its happiness here on earth because it is wrapped and entangled in the pleasures of the flesh.

Consequently, to remedy this evil, the Lord teaches his servants to recognize the vanity of this present life, continually training them by means of various misfortunes. Lest they look forward in this life to peace and tranquillity, he allows war, turmoil, theft and other evils to upset and trouble them. Lest they thirst too much for ephemeral wealth or trust too fondly in the wealth they have, he reduces them to poverty, sometimes by sending barrenness upon the earth, sometimes by fire, sometimes by other means; or else he condemns them to a bare sufficiency. Lest they delight too much in marriage, he gives them difficult or headstrong wives who torment them, or wayward children to humble them, or else afflicts them with the loss of spouse and children. If,

however, in all these things he treats them kindly, to stop them becoming proud in their conceit and complacent through excessive confidence, he warns them by means of sickness or peril, and gives them as it were visible proof of how fragile and fleeting are all good things, subject as they are to decay.

Thus the discipline of the cross is of great benefit to us when we understand that the present life, judged in itself, is full of worry, trouble and much wretchedness. It is never completely happy at any time, and all its blessings which we hold dear are transitory and uncertain, trifling and tinged with endless misery. The conclusion which we draw, then, is that here we must expect nothing but conflict. So far as our crown is concerned, it is to heaven that we must look. We may be sure that our heart will never consciously learn to desire the life to come and to meditate on it, without first feeling disdain for this earthly life.

### *How not to love the world*

There is no middle way between these two extremes: either we hold the world in contempt, or else it will hold us fast in its fierce embrace. If, then, we have any concern for immortality, we must try hard to see that we break free of these evil bonds.

Now because this present life has plenty of delights which attract us, and because it allures us with its show of loveliness, elegance and sweetness, we must be held back every single hour, in case we are deceived and, one might say, bewitched by such false charms. For what, I ask you, would happen if we enjoyed perpetual bliss on earth, given that we are not awake to our own misery, even though it continually pricks and goads us? It is not only the educated who know that human life is like a shadow or a puff of smoke: it is a saying familiar to ordinary folk. And because it was regarded as a truth worth knowing, many fine maxims have been penned in its praise.<sup>5</sup> Yet, for all that, there is nothing on earth which has been more readily ignored or remembered less! For everything we undertake is done as if to establish our immortality on earth. If we were at a burial, or found ourselves among graves in a cemetery, I wager

<sup>5</sup> Classical as well as biblical sources provided Calvin with a rich array of appropriate proverbs. The proverb which he goes on to cite ('Man is a creature of a single day') is, in Erasmus' *Adages* (II.3.8), attributed to Plato.

we would philosophize splendidly about the frailty of this life, because then the image of death would be before our very eyes. Not that that always happens, for there are times when these things scarcely affect us at all. But when it does happen, our philosophizing is a brief affair which vanishes the minute we turn our backs, so that we lose all memory of it. For then, forgetting not only death but our own mortality, as if the idea were unknown to us, we slip back into a foolish and inflated trust in our earthly immortality. To be sure, if someone were to quote the old proverb, ‘Man is a creature of a single day’, we might readily agree, but with so very little thought that nothing could shake our belief that here is where we were always meant to live.

Who, then, will deny that we all need to be—I do not simply say warned, but convinced—by every possible proof that man’s lot on earth is an unhappy one? Even when we are convinced, we barely cease to marvel at it, so besotted are we by its promises of bliss. Now if the Lord has to go to such lengths to instruct us, we are duty-bound to heed the warnings by which he rouses us from our indifference, so that, learning to despise the world, we may long with all our heart to meditate on the life to come.

### **To scorn this life is not to hate it**

Believers, however, should not develop such contempt for the present life that it produces hatred of it or ingratitude toward God. For although this life is full of untold miseries, it is rightly counted as one of God’s blessings which should never be despised. Thus, if we fail to recognize it as a favour from God, we are guilty of great ingratitude. Christians in particular should see it as a token of the Lord’s goodwill, since it is wholly intended to further their salvation. For before he fully shows us our inheritance of eternal glory, the Lord chooses to make himself known to us as Father in the lesser things, that is, in the benefits which we daily receive from his hand. Since, therefore, this present life helps us understand something of God’s goodness, should we ignore it as if there were nothing good about it? That is why we must always be disposed to see it as a gift of God’s kindness which should not be refused. Even if there were no testimony from Scripture—and of course there is!—nature itself urges us to give God thanks, because he has created us

and placed us in this world, preserves us and provides us with all that we need to exist.

We have, moreover, an even better reason, if we reflect that here is where he prepares us for the glory of his kingdom. For he has forever willed that all who are to receive the heavenly crown should first do battle on earth, and that they should triumph only when war’s hardships are past and victory has been won. There is another reason which is also worth weighing. Here is where we begin to taste how sweet is his goodness in the blessings he bestows, and where we are roused by the hope and the desire to see them fulfilled in heaven. Once we are convinced that our earthly life is a generous gift of God’s mercy, a debt, as it were, which we owe him, and something for which we should be thankful, then is the time to direct our attention downward, and to think about our unhappy lot, so as to rid ourselves of that passion for life to which, as we have said, we are naturally inclined.

### **Desiring the life to come**

Whatever we take from our misplaced love of this life must be transferred to our desire for life in heaven. I admit that those who believe that our supreme good is never to have been born or, next best, to die at a very early age, have judged well by human standards.<sup>6</sup> Since they were heathen, without the light of God and true religion, what else could they have seen in earthly existence except deprivation and dread? Thus the Scythians, not unreasonably, wept whenever their children were born, but when a kinsman died, they rejoiced and held a solemn feast. Yet much good did it do them. Lacking the true teaching which comes from faith, they could not understand how what is neither happy nor pleasant in itself should work for the salvation of believers. Accordingly their belief led only to despair.

Let God’s servants then, in weighing up this mortal life, make this their aim: in view of life’s many miseries, they should be freer and readier to meditate on the life to come, which is life without end. Once they have compared one with the other, they will be able not only to pass swiftly over the first, but also to scorn it, having no regard for it in com-

<sup>6</sup> The phrase occurs in a number of writers, including Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations*, I.48.II4). Calvin’s account of Scythian customs is also found there.

parison with the second. For if heaven is our home, what else is earth but a place of exile and banishment? If leaving this world means entering into life, what else is this world but a tomb? And is not remaining in this world the same as languishing in death? If freedom means being rid of this body, what else is the body but a prison? And if our ultimate happiness is being able to enjoy God's presence, is it not misery not to enjoy it? Now until we go out of this world we will be, in a sense, separated from God (*2 Cor. 5:6*).

If, therefore, we compare life on earth with life in heaven, we can undoubtedly despise it and regard it more or less as rubbish. Yet we should certainly never hate it, except insofar as it keeps us captive to sin—although, strictly speaking, that is not its fault.

Whatever the case, we are bound to find life so wearying and frustrating that, in wishing it to end, we should nevertheless be ready to remain for as long as God chooses, so that our aversion never gives rise to protest and impatience. This life is like a staging post in which the Lord has placed us, and where we must dwell until he calls us away. Paul, for example, greatly laments his lot, declaring that he is like a prisoner bound in his body longer than he would like, and he sighs fervently to be delivered (*Rom. 7:24*). Yet out of obedience to God's will he affirms that he is prepared for either, because he knows that he owes it to God to glorify his name, whether by life or by death (*Phil. 1:23-24*). Now it is for the Lord to decide what most serves his glory. Thus if it is right that we should live and die for him, let us leave him to choose both life and death for us, but in such a way that we always desire death and continually meditate on it, scorning this mortal life in comparison with future immortality, and being willing to quit it whenever the Lord decides, because it keeps us in bondage to sin.

#### *Beyond death, resurrection*

It is truly appalling to think that many who boast they are Christians, instead of desiring death, dread it so much that they quake as soon as there is talk of it, as if it were the worst misfortune that could befall them. It is not surprising if we naturally feel unsettled and distraught when we hear that our body must be parted from our soul. However, it

is unthinkable that a Christian heart should be so lacking in light that it cannot overcome such fear by turning to a higher source of comfort. If we reflect that this bodily tabernacle which is weak, flawed, corruptible, ephemeral and subject to decay is dissolved and somehow done away with in order to be restored to a perfect, assured, incorruptible and heavenly glory, will not faith compel us fervently to crave what nature shuns and abhors? When we remember that, through death, we are called away from a miserable exile to inhabit our real home—that is, our home in heaven—how can we not find a precious consolation in that?

Someone perhaps will object that the aim of all things is to persevere in their being. I agree, which is why I assert that we must long for future immortality. There our standing will be secure, which is nowhere true of life on earth. Is it right that the brute beasts and even insensate creatures, including wood and stones, knowing somehow their own futility and corruption, await deliverance on judgment day (*Rom. 8:19*), while we, endowed first with some natural light and further illuminated by God's Spirit, should fail to lift our eyes above earth's decay whenever we think of our essential being?

It is not my purpose, however, to spend time debating so wilful an error. At the outset, indeed, I warned that I would not treat every topic in the form of a personal appeal. If there are timid souls who need encouragement, my advice would be to read Cyprian's work entitled *On Mortality*—though in truth they deserve to be sent back to the philosophers, whose contempt of death would put them to shame.<sup>7</sup>

At any rate this is an adage worth observing: no one has truly profited in the school of Christ who does not gladly and joyfully await the day of death and of final resurrection. For that is the mark by which Paul identifies all believers (*Titus 2:13*). Scripture, too, commonly reminds us of this when it suggests reasons for rejoicing. 'Rejoice,' says the Lord, 'and look up, for your redemption is drawing near' (*Luke 21:28*). How, tell me, can what Jesus describes as a cause of rejoicing produce in us only sorrow and dread? If that is how we feel, why do we still boast of being his disciples? So let us come to our senses, and however much

<sup>7</sup> The treatise *On Mortality* was written by Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, in A.D. 252, to reassure Christians at a time of devastating plague.

our greedy, blind and stupid flesh may protest, let us steadfastly look to our Lord's coming as a truly happy event, one which we do not merely desire but for which we even groan and sigh. For he will come as our Redeemer, and having rescued us from this pit of all woe and misery, he will bring us to his glorious inheritance.

### ***When Christ comes: vindication and victory***

All believers, as long as they live in this world, will inevitably be as sheep for the slaughter, that they may be made like Jesus Christ their Head (*Rom. 8:36*). They would therefore be desperately unhappy if they did not lift their minds above all that is in the world and look beyond the present. Once, however, they ponder the things which lie beyond this earth, even though they see the wicked loaded with wealth and honours, enjoying sweet rest and living to their heart's content in luxury and pleasure—all that, while they themselves are cruelly mistreated by them, suffering contempt, loss of goods and injury of every sort—nevertheless, amid such evils, they will readily take heart. For before them is the prospect of that last day when, they know, the Lord will gather his faithful people into the peace of his kingdom, will wipe the tears from their eyes, will crown them with glory, clothe them with gladness, satisfy them with the endless sweetness of his favours and raise them to where he is on high. In short, he will cause them to share in his blessedness (*Isa. 25:8; Rev. 7:17*). Conversely he will bring utter shame upon the wicked who have exalted themselves on earth. He will change their delights into awful torments and their laughter and joy into tears and the gnashing of teeth; he will disturb their rest with dire pangs of conscience. In a word, he will cast them into everlasting fire and will make them subject to the believers whom they have so evilly misused.

There, to be sure, is our unique consolation. If it were taken from us, we would without fail lose heart, or else we would seek false relief in vain illusions which might allure and flatter, but which would ultimately destroy us. For the prophet himself admits that he staggered and that his feet almost slipped when he thought too long about the bliss which the wicked now enjoy; he found firm ground only when he turned to contemplate the sanctuary of God—that is, when he considered the final end of the innocent and the guilty (*Psa. 73:2-3, 16-20*).

To sum up, this is my conclusion. Christ's cross will finally triumph in believers' hearts over the devil, the flesh, sin, death and all wickedness, if at the same time their eyes are also turned to behold the power of his resurrection.

### ***Earthly blessings: two errors to avoid***

Scripture also teaches a similar lesson regarding the proper use of earthly goods—a subject we should not neglect when it is a question of a well-ordered life. For if we are to live, we must also use the helps which are necessary to life. Nor is it possible to abstain even from things which are not necessities but which seem to exist more for our pleasure than for our needs. We ought, then, to preserve a sense of balance, making sure that we use everything with a clear, sound conscience, whether it is for our necessity or for our delight.

God demonstrates the need for balance when he teaches his servants that their present life is like a pilgrimage by which they are led toward the heavenly kingdom. If we are meant simply to pass through this world, we must undoubtedly use its blessings so that they speed our progress rather than slow it down. But because this is a rather thorny issue, where we risk falling into one extreme or another, we will try to provide some definite instruction which should put everyone's mind at rest.

In time past there were certain good, saintly individuals who, knowing to what wild excesses men will go unless they are tightly restrained, sought to correct so great an evil by forbidding the use of material goods except those that were absolute necessities. This they did because they could see no other remedy. Their advice was certainly well meant, but their approach was much too severe. Their method was highly dangerous: they bound men's consciences more strictly than God's word does. On the other hand there are many today who, looking for an excuse to justify all immoderate use of external things and to allow the flesh free rein—it is only too ready to break loose!—take for granted a point I cannot concede. They maintain that human freedom should not be subject to any constraint, and that the individual conscience should be left to decide what it believes is permissible. I agree, of course, that in such matters we should not and cannot bind consciences by means of precise formulas and precepts. Since, however, Scripture provides us with

general rules about the proper use of things, why should they not define and circumscribe that use?

### ***God's purpose our guide, his creation our delight***

The first point on which we must agree is this: our use of God's gifts is never immoderate when it respects the purpose for which God made and intended them, since he made them to do us good, not harm. Therefore no one can walk a straighter path than the person who pays due regard to 'the question of purpose.'

Now if we reflect on God's purpose in creating food, we will see that he sought to provide not only for our needs but also for our pleasure and refreshment. So in the case of clothing, in addition to our need, he had in mind suitability and decency. With plants, trees and fruits, apart from the various uses which he allows us to enjoy, he sought to delight our eyes by their beauty and to please us in another way by their scent. If that were not so, the prophet would not have listed, among God's blessings, wine which gladdens man's heart and oil which makes his face shine (*Psa. 104:15*). Nor would Scripture at different times commend God's kindness in bestowing all these good gifts on men. Indeed, the fine properties inherent in all natural things show how we are to enjoy them, to what end, and in what degree.

Do we think that our Lord would have endowed flowers with such beauty for the eye to see, if it was wrong to experience pleasure when we saw them? Do we think he would have given them such a lovely scent if he had not meant us to enjoy their smell? Has he not, moreover, created such distinctive colours that some are more attractive than others? Has he not conferred a certain elegance on gold, silver, ivory and marble, so as to make them grander and more precious than other stones and metals? Has he not, finally, blessed us with many things which we ought to prize, even though they are not necessary to us?

Let us have nothing to do, then, with that soulless philosophy which forbids men all use of God's creation except in cases of necessity, and which thus arbitrarily deprives us of the lawful fruit of God's generosity. Worse, it cannot work, since it strips man of all feeling and makes him no better than a block of wood! Yet on the other hand, we must be equally careful to head off the cravings of our flesh which is quite

ungovernable unless kept in check. For, as I have said before, there are individuals who, in the name of freedom, allow it to do anything at all.

The flesh must first of all, therefore, be reined in by means of this rule: all the good things which we have were created for us so that we might acknowledge the one who is their author, and might celebrate his kindness with thanksgiving.<sup>8</sup> Now how can there be thanksgiving if, through greed, you are so replete with food and wine that you become senseless, useless in God's service and unable to fulfil your calling? How can there be gratitude to God if the flesh, provoked by affluence to evil lusts, so infects the mind with its filth that it blinds it to the distinction between right and wrong? How can we thank God for providing us with the clothes we wear, if their magnificence boosts our pride and makes us despise others? Or if they are so glamorous that they pander to our immorality? How, I ask you, can we acknowledge our God, if we have eyes only for the splendour of our attire? The same is true of every other blessing. From such considerations it is clear that our freedom to misuse God's gifts is already to some extent curtailed.

### ***Detachment is the best antidote to self-indulgence***

However, the surest and shortest way of curbing our appetites is when we are brought to scorn the present life and to meditate on immortality in heaven. From this there comes a second rule which, first, requires those who use the things of this world to use them sparingly as if they did not use them at all: those who marry as if they did not marry, and those who buy as if they owned nothing. That is Paul's injunction (*1 Cor. 7:29-31*). Second, we should learn to bear poverty with the same patience and tranquillity of heart as when we soberly enjoy the fruits of plenty.

Now he who commands us to use this world as if we did not use it, sets strict limits to all excess in drink and food, the pursuit of pleasure, grasping ambition, pride, the restless search for better homes, for dress and lifestyle. But he also corrects every care and feeling which prevent

<sup>8</sup> This is the first of three rules which Calvin lists as necessary to restrain our greed. They are: (1) gratitude to God as the author of all good things; (2) detachment with regard to this world's goods and, as a corollary, moderation in prosperity and adversity; (3) recognition that we are simply stewards of God's bounty.

or which stop us contemplating the heavenly life and adorning our soul with its true finery. What Cato once said in this connection is very true: 'To care too much for glamour is to care too little for virtue.'<sup>9</sup> Or as the old proverb goes, 'Those too busy pampering and adorning their body have scant respect for their soul.' So although the freedom which believers enjoy in external things must never be reduced to a handful of formulas, it is nevertheless subject to this principle: they should allow themselves as few things as possible. They ought, in fact, to be careful to curb every excess and the vain trappings of affluence. To be self-indulgent should be the last thing on their mind. Let them always beware of allowing what should be helps to become hindrances.

The second part of this rule urges all who suffer poverty to learn patience in putting up with want, lest they be afflicted by excessive worry. Those who manage to maintain this kind of restraint demonstrate that they have made no small progress in the Lord's school. On the other hand, the person who has not learned this lesson has very little to prove that he is a follower of Christ. For not only is greed for earthly things the source of many other vices, it almost always happens that those who cannot patiently endure loss display the opposite failing in time of prosperity. What I mean is that someone who is ashamed of his shabby clothes is sure to brag if he is dressed more expensively; someone who grumbles when there is little to eat and who longs for better fare will never contain his appetite when he finds himself amply supplied; and the person who hates being a humble, ordinary member of society and who frets and chafes about it, cannot avoid being proud and arrogant if he acquires an honour or two.

That, then, is why all who seek to serve God unreservedly must endeavour to follow the apostle's example by bearing both prosperity and want (*Phil. 4:12*). That is, they must learn to live soberly in time of prosperity and patiently in time of poverty.

Scripture has yet a third rule to help us restrain our use of earthly goods. Brief mention has been made of it in our discussion of the duty of

<sup>9</sup>Cato the Elder, Roman politician and tireless critic of vice. The statement attributed to him appears, in slightly different form, in Ammianus Marcellinus, *Book of Deeds*, XVI.5.2.

love.<sup>10</sup> This rule teaches us that everything comes to us from God's kindness and is intended for our use, being a type of deposit for which we must one day account. We are meant, therefore, in handling God's gifts, to remember always the principle that we are answerable for whatever the Lord has entrusted to us. Moreover we must be mindful of who it is who calls us to account—God, no less! Just as he so strongly urges us to abstinence, sobriety, self-control and moderation, so too he loathes all intemperance, pride, ostentation and vanity. In his eyes no stewardship is valid unless it conforms to the standard of love. And with his own lips he has condemned all those earthly pleasures which turn man's heart from chastity and purity, or which befuddle his mind.

#### *The tasks appropriate to our calling*

There is something else which demands our close attention. God commands each one of us to consider his calling in every act of life. For he knows how easily our minds are inflamed by worry, how readily they shift this way and that, and how greatly greed and ambition drive them to grasp at many different things at once. Thus, to stop us upsetting everything by our folly and temerity, God distinguishes between our various situations and our modes of living, and lays down the tasks each of us is to fulfil. And so that no one should lightly go beyond his limits, he has termed such modes of living 'callings'. Thus we should all regard our particular situation as a post assigned to us by God, lest in the course of our lives we flit to and fro and drift aimlessly about.

This distinction is quite vital because God uses it to judge everything we do, and he often judges differently from the standards of human or philosophic reason. For example, not only ordinary people but philosophers too consider that the noblest and most outstanding act which anyone can do is to free his country from tyranny. By contrast, God's voice openly condemns any private person who lays hands on a tyrant. However, I will not stop to detail all the cases which might be cited here. It is enough to know that God's calling serves us as a guiding principle and as a sound basis for all our conduct, and that whoever refuses to be guided by his calling will never keep to the right path and properly

<sup>10</sup> See above, pp. 793-796.

discharge his duty. He may indeed perform an occasional act which, on the outside, appears commendable, but he will not be accepted before God's throne, however much men may admire him.

Furthermore, if God's calling is not to be our constant rule, there will be nothing sure which will hold or knit together the different parts of our life. Thus whoever lives with this as his goal will lead a truly well-ordered life. All this will be a source of remarkable comfort to us, for there will be no activity, however mean or despised, which will not shine brightly in God's sight and be most precious to him, as long as, in doing it, we follow our calling.