

74. John Calvin (1) His youth

At the end of the previous chapter, we said that the light of the Reformation would shine brightly in Geneva. The man the Lord used for this was *John Calvin*.

Calvin worked in Geneva for many years, and the Lord richly blessed his work. However, Calvin was not born in the city of Geneva.

On the 10th of July 1509, Calvin was born in Noyon, a little town some 90 km north of Paris. His father, Gerard Calvin, was the son of a skipper. His ancestors had also been skippers on riverboats. His mother, Jeanne le Franc, was the daughter of an innkeeper. She was a pious, serious woman who taught her children well. His father was very intelligent; they were well off because he filled various ecclesiastical and civil posts.



*The house where Calvin was born;
now a Calvin museum.*

RELICS

Superstition was rife in the little village of Noyon. It was the home of various rare relics, such as a piece of the crown of thorns that Jesus had worn when He stood before Pontius Pilate. They had the great 'privilege' of possessing a few hairs of John the Baptist. They had some real manna: that miracle bread with which God had fed the people of Israel for forty years in the barren wilderness.

Yes, in Noyon, they were exceptionally 'privileged' because they even had some of the leftover bread when Jesus fed the multitude of five thousand



*Relic of Jesus' crown of thorns, which can still be viewed
in the Notre Dame Church in Paris*

men. Their 'wonderful' collection also included a tooth of the Lord Jesus!

The poor ignorant people believed all that! They were proud that their birthplace was the home of such treasures.

We know that all this was just lies and deceit. Here too, the Scripture was fulfilled, "God will send them a strong delusion, that they should believe the lie." (2 Thessalonians 2:11)

Meanwhile, monks and priests were setting a terrible example. Fights between monks and priests occurred frequently and openly in the streets, to the great amusement or vexation of the spectators.

This was the village that Calvin grew up in.

CALVIN'S EDUCATION

Because his father was an important man, Calvin could receive private tutoring with the children of a nobleman. He went to their place every day and grew up with their children. They were his playmates. In this way, Calvin received an excellent education which benefitted him for the rest of his life. Knowing how to behave, he was comfortable in upper-class society.

John Calvin had received a brilliant mind and an excellent memory from the Lord. He was a very diligent student. His father, who knew a bright future was in store for him, encouraged his son to

study for priest. Then the prominent and well-paid ecclesiastical posts would be open to him. And that's what happened. John Calvin was appointed a chaplain at age twelve, a well-paid position.

But a twelve-year-old boy could not be a chaplain, could he? No, but he did not have to do the actual work. A poor priest did the job, but the rich income went to John Calvin.

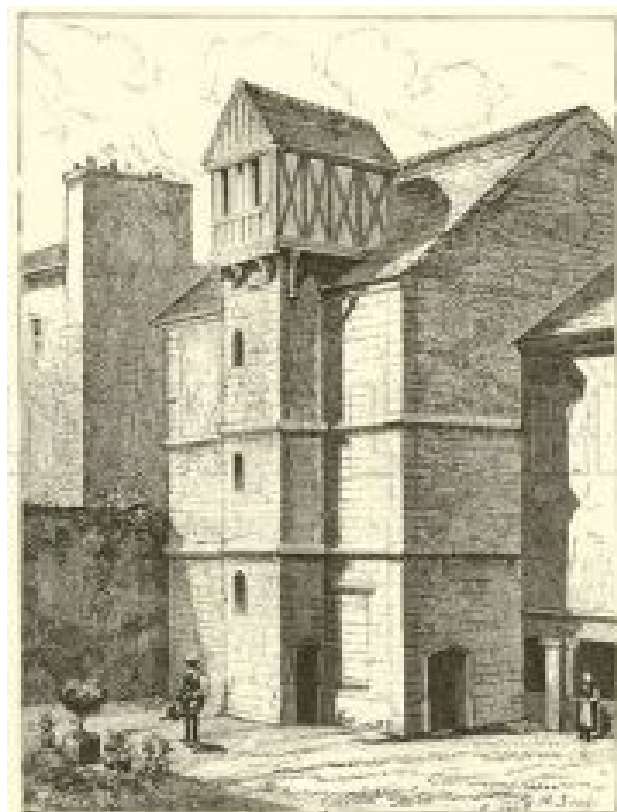
This was often the case in those days. It has even happened that the clergy appointed a four-year-old boy as bishop and an eight-year-old boy as a cardinal, a position which earned them large sums of money. What a sad state of affairs! Yes, the clergy gave each other the best and most lucrative jobs, meaning the positions that paid the most. It was quite common in those days for a poor priest to do the actual work for a meagre wage.

In 1523, a pandemic raged in Noyon, and many people died. Jeanne le Franc, the caring mother of Calvin, died at that time, possibly from the plague. His mother's death was quite traumatic for the young Calvin; how he must have missed his beloved mother.

OFF TO PARIS

The children with whom Calvin studied went to Paris that same year, and the fourteen-year-old John went with them. He was allowed to stay with one of his uncles, who was a capable locksmith. While there, he received lessons in Latin, which he would need later in life. We see here the providence of God, Who was busy shaping Calvin for the task that awaited him. Calvin studied with great care and precision. At that time, many students lived a licentious life, but Calvin didn't join in with that. As a child, he was a serious, quiet boy who had no desire at all to join in with the wickedness of the other students.

Yet, John was an excellent Roman Catholic and believed everything the Roman Catholic Church taught; it was in line with his upbringing. His



College in Paris, where Calvin studied. Wordpres.com

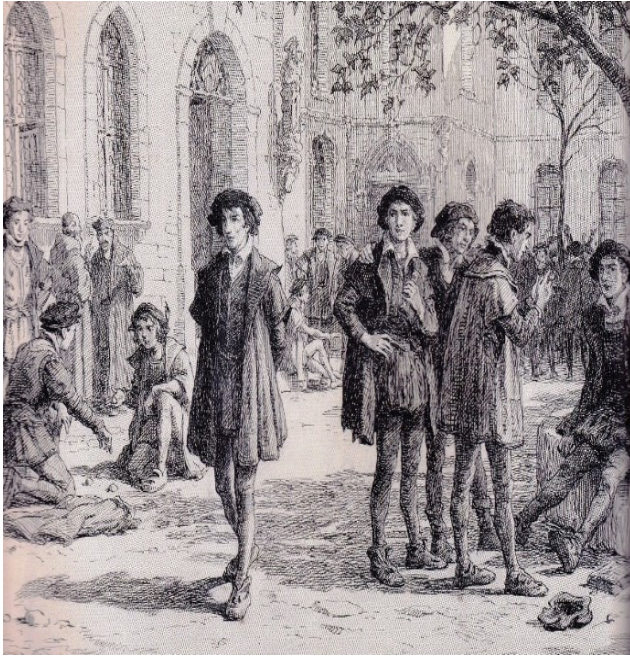
father was friends with the Roman Catholic clergy in Noyon, and his mother had always taught him to respect the church.

And yet?

We often see the young man at gatherings where the infallible Word of the Lord was read and studied. This was already a dangerous thing to do then! Persecution was raging in Paris as the Reformation had taken a foothold there. The writings of Luther were secretly read and studied. God blessed that to the hearts of many.

Rome responded to this; the stakes smoked! But Rome could not stop the Reformation as *God* was at work here.

Persecution did not deter Calvin and his fellow Bible students. They quietly continued to search the Scriptures without becoming careless. The dangers were too great for that! Whenever they organised a secret meeting, some students were put on guard to warn of any threat coming their way.



Calvin at the College Montaigu, Paris. 1525.
<http://www.dewoesteweg.nl/>

Through the study of the Bible, it became more and more apparent to Calvin that the Roman Catholic Church deviated from God's Word on many points.

It was very wicked of Rome to *withhold the Bible from the people purposely!* However, Calvin did not break with the Roman Catholic Church yet; he faithfully followed the lessons at school, but he no longer blindly believed the church's teachings. The seed of God's Word was busy shaping his thoughts.

Calvin studied for some years in Paris and made excellent progress. His teacher promoted him to the highest classes. They were pleased with his progress.

Then things suddenly changed! His father got into a fierce argument with the clergy. Long friendships changed into hatred.

It also changed Father Calvin's ideas about John becoming a priest! He commanded John to stop his religious studies. Calvin obeyed his father and began to study law instead. This study would lead to a well-paid position as a lawyer. He left Paris and became a student at the University of Orleans. He would sit and study hard until after

midnight, only to wake up early to continue his studies.

Understandably he progressed rapidly but didn't give himself enough time to rest. This was not good for his health. He began to look ill, pale and thin. His health never fully recovered from this time in Orleans. That was a setback.

His teachers continued to be more than happy with his progress. It often happened that whenever a teacher could not come to school due to sickness or other reasons, Calvin would take his place and teach the students. At the age of twenty, he was already a doctor, meaning he was qualified to teach at a university.

While in Orleans, he met men who secretly supported The Reformation and together with them, he diligently searched God's Word. The Lord blessed his study of the Bible.

In 1531 his father died, and Calvin went back to Paris as he had completed his law studies.

CALVIN'S CONVERSION

In 1533, when he was 24, his life changed dramatically. The Lord worked powerfully with His Holy Spirit in the life of young Calvin and converted him. Compared to Luther, who struggled for many years to come to the knowledge of true repentance and salvation through faith alone, Calvin's conversion happened much quicker, but he also had come to know himself to be dead in sin. God had made him ready to fully accept Christ's work as the *only* ground for his salvation.



**I gave up all
for Christ —
and what have
I found?
Everything in
Christ!**

Luther's great struggle was: "*How can I become reconciled with God?*" Calvin's focus was: "*How will God receive His honour?*"

Though the way of conversion was different, both learned that they could only be saved by Christ's sacrifice.

From that moment on, Calvin resolutely chose the side of the oppressed Protestants. He declined the annual ecclesiastical payment he had received since he was 12.

THE STRAPPADO

In Paris, the persecutions were worse than ever. The torture was cruel and devilish! The Roman Catholic executioners had invented the strappado. The poor victims were tied to the gallows, pushed off the platform, and abruptly stopped just above the ground, resulting in their arms being pulled out of their sockets at the shoulder. This was repeated, often with a fire underneath. Each time the clothes of the martyr caught fire, the



The Strappado. The torture was incredibly cruel and devilish! Wikipedia

executioner would quickly pull up the rope again to prolong their agony. This way, they were slowly roasted for the 'entertainment' of the executioner and audience. These tortures were too horrific to write more about it. God sustained those poor, poor people. Do we sufficiently appreciate that we may freely go to church every Sunday?

Calvin was often a witness to the inhumane suffering of the martyrs.

Oh, how he ached to rush over, stamp out that fire, and cut them loose! It stormed within him when he witnessed his brothers and sisters suffering indescribably, for Christ's sake.

But he controlled himself with much willpower, leaving marks of his fingernails in the palms of his hand. He surrendered to his righteous God, Who will one day demand an account from those Roman Catholic brutes who stood by enjoying the spectacle. He comforted himself with the thought that the crown of victory was ready for those martyrs. And he 'heard' the Lord Jesus speak to John on Patmos: "Be faithful unto death!" Risking his own life, he worked in the severely tested congregation in Paris. He comforted widows and orphans in their sorrow and mourning. He even visited and encouraged his brothers and sisters in prison, supporting them in their grief and suffering. Not surprisingly, this attracted attention.

The protestants mentioned his name with gratitude and appreciation.

The prisoners spoke well of him in their dark and musty dungeons.

However, the Roman Catholic Inquisition also heard about him.

His enemies preyed on him. That heretic had to be made harmless!

THE NEW PRINCIPAL, NICHOLAS COP

In that same year, 1533, the university in Paris receives a new principal called Nicholas Cop. This man is a great friend of Calvin. Together they write the inaugural address that Nicholas Cop will

deliver. When finally, that day dawns, the Mathurin cathedral is packed.

The university professors are all present. We see many members of the royal court. Many students also find a seat. Several Franciscan monks have also come, anxious to hear what this young principal will say.

When Nicholas Cop ascends the pulpit and delivers his inaugural address, everyone listens carefully!

It happens to be All Saint's Day, a great Roman Catholic feast day. However, the new principal does not mention this or allude to it at all. Instead, he points his hearers to the blood of Jesus Christ as the only ground for salvation. The whole speech is Reformed instead of Roman Catholic!

The Franciscan monks are furious. They call Nicholas Cop a "heretic" and lodge an accusation against him. The consequences soon follow: Cop receives an order to appear before the French parliament to explain his speech. Friends warn him against going; it would seal his death



The Saint Mathurin Cathedral was packed.

sentence. Hastily he flees and escapes death at the stake. This story clearly shows that Rome doesn't *want* to see the truth. It becomes known that Calvin had helped him to write that speech. The government sends some soldiers to arrest him. While he is teaching a group of young students, there is a sudden, loud and threatening knock at the door of the university.

They immediately realise the men at the door are soldiers coming for Calvin. The room in which Calvin is teaching is on the second floor of the university. Hastily his young students tear some bedsheets into strips, quickly tie them together and tie the length of sheets to a basket in which they quietly let Calvin down to the ground. Calvin safely reaches the ground and slips away through back gardens and along quiet streets to a friend, where he stays for the night. He escapes just in time because soon after he is let down in the basket, the soldiers storm into the classroom where he had just been teaching. Too late, the bird had flown the coop!

Annoyed, the soldiers look down through the open window, but Calvin has disappeared. Swearing and cursing, the soldiers rush downstairs again, led by their captain. But he does not give up! He immediately organises guards to be placed at all the gates of Paris. They must closely inspect everyone leaving the city to ensure Calvin does not escape again!

But God watches over Calvin because ...

A vinedresser walks toward the open city gate at dawn the following day. The guards allow him to pass; it's obvious this man, with tools on his shoulder, is going to work in his vineyard outside the city wall. But the guards are wrong; this man is not a vinedresser but John Calvin, the man everyone is searching for! The guards don't recognise him in his disguise...

It would have been a scary moment when Calvin walked past those guards outwardly relaxed but inwardly shaking. Yet, he trusted that the Lord would protect him and blind the eyes of the guards. You may be sure that he thanked the Lord for that successful escape. The devil missed out. God was a step ahead of Satan.

CALVIN WRITES THE INSTITUTES

Calvin fled to Basle, where he wrote his world-famous book: *"The Institutes, an instruction in the Christian Doctrine."*

Everywhere the Protestants were slandered and reviled. But in this book, Calvin sticks up for his

oppressed and persecuted companions in the faith.

The Institutes clearly explain the scriptural doctrine that the despised Protestants embrace. In the preface, Calvin addresses Francis I, king of France. He expresses the hope that this book will show the king that he wrongly judges the Protestants and that he will command an end to the terrible persecutions. Calvin is disappointed because this does not happen. On the contrary, the king is furious! He orders the book to be burned and commands his men to hunt down its author. Now the persecution becomes even fiercer!

But the author of the Institutes was safe in Basle, where the king of France could not reach him.

Yet Calvin did not stay in Basle. He roamed from one place to the next.

Calvin was hunted like a fox by the hounds. The Bible tells us that the Lord preserved David wherever he went, and we could say the same of Calvin. Every attempt made by Rome to catch him

was unsuccessful. God protected him because his task on earth was far from finished. There was still a big task ahead for Calvin. Although the devil is *mighty*, he is not *almighty*. He can only go as far as God permits, not one step further.

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the city of Noyon, France and their worship of relics.
2. Retell something about Calvin's childhood up to the death of his mother in 1523.
3. What beliefs did Calvin embrace while studying at the University of Paris?
4. What did Calvin do when commanded by his father to stop studying for priest?
5. Compare Calvin's and Luther's conversions.
6. Explain the different focuses of life for Luther and Calvin.
7. What did both Reformers discover is the only foundation for the forgiveness of sin?
8. Identify the strappado.
9. Identify Nicholas Cop.
10. How did Calvin escape? Where did he go?
11. What did Calvin do in Basle?
12. Describe the contents of The Institutes.
13. Why did he address the preface to King Francis I?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why was Calvin protected despite intense persecution?
2. In a sense, Calvin was in self-appointed exile in Basle, far away from his native surroundings. Here he wrote his famous book: 'The Institutes.' Luther completed many important works while in the Castle of Wartburg. Can you think of anyone who wrote his greatest work while in prison? Can you think of any biblical figure who wrote a book of the Bible while in exile?



The title page from the fifth and final 1559 edition of John Calvin's *Institutio Christianae Religionis*