

Chapter 74: John Calvin (1) His youth

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

For many years, Calvin worked in Geneva; the Lord blessed his work richly. 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, and because he filled various ecclesiastical and civil posts, they were



House where Calvin is born; now a Calvin museum.

quite well off.

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 which 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.



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

Yes, in Noyon, they were exceptionally 'privileged' because they even had some of the bread that was leftover when Jesus had fed the multitude of five thousand men. Their 'wonderful' collection also included a tooth of the Lord Jesus!

And all that was simply believed by the poor, ignorant people. They were proud of the fact that their birthplace was the home of such treasures.

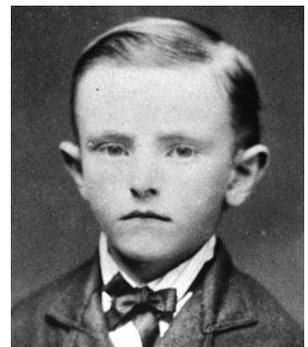
Of course, I do not need to tell you that all this was just plain lies and deceit. Here too, the Scripture was fulfilled, "God will send them a strong delusion, that they should believe the lie." (2 Thessalonians 2:11)

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. Daily, he went to their place and grew up with their



Calvin at school age

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 comfortably moved 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 that a bright future was in store for him, encouraged his son to study to become a priest. Then the prominent and well-paid ecclesiastical posts would be open to him.

And yes, that's how it happened. Already at the age of twelve, John Calvin was appointed as a chaplain; it was 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.

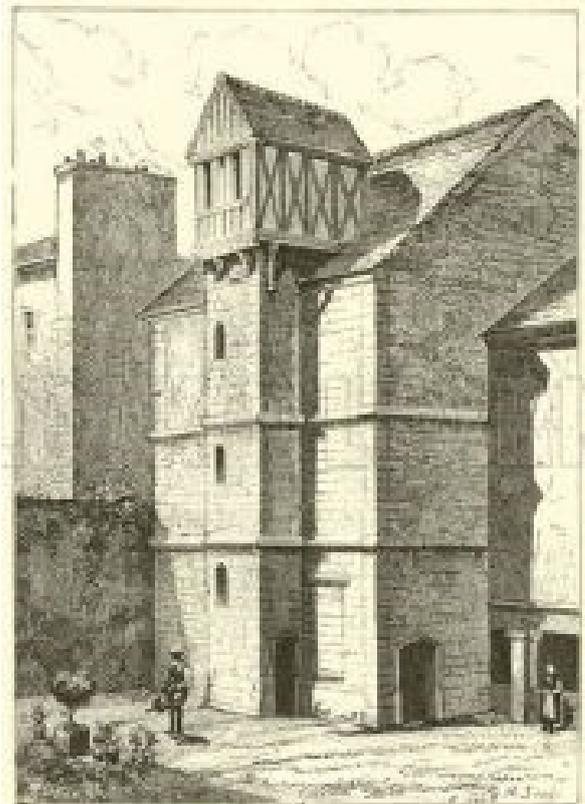
This was often the case in those days. It has even happened that the clergy appointed a four-year-old boy as bishop and an eight-year-old boy as a cardinal, a position which earned them large sums of money. What a sad state of affairs! Yes, the clergy gave each other the best and most lucrative jobs,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

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

In that same year, the children with whom Calvin studied went to Paris, 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 partake in the wickedness of the other students.



College in Paris, where Calvin studied

Yet, John was an excellent Roman Catholic and believed everything the Roman Catholic Church taught; it was in line with his upbringing. His father was friends with the Roman Catholic clergy in Noyon, and his mother had always taught him to have respect for 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 dangerous 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 was unable to 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.

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 *purposefully*! However, Calvin did not break with the Roman Catholic Church as yet; he faithfully followed the lessons at school, but he no longer blindly believed the teachings of the church. 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 class. 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 until after midnight, studying hard, 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 instructors 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, which meant that he was qualified to teach at a university.

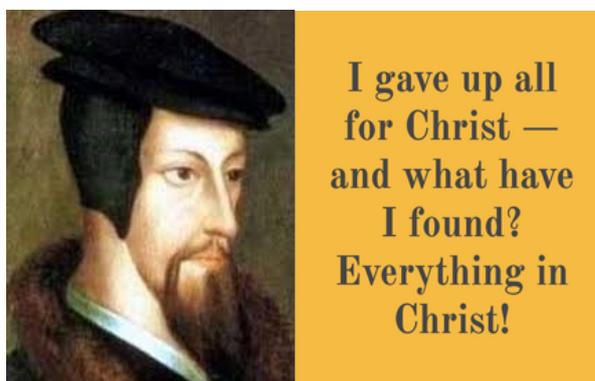
While in Orleans, he met men who secretly supported The Reformation and, together with them, he diligently searched God's Word. The Lord blessed his study of the Bible.

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.

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, which he had been getting since he was 12.

THE STRAPPADO

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



The Strappado. The torturing was incredibly cruel and devilish!

sustained those poor, poor people. Do we sufficiently appreciate that we may freely go to church each Sunday?

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

Oh, how he ached to rush over and stamp out that fire and cut them loose! It stormed within him when he witnessed his brothers and sisters suffering in such an indescribable way 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 managed to visit and encourage his brothers and sisters in prison and supported 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 at Paris receives a new principal called Nicholas Cop. This man is a great friend of Calvin. Together they write the inaugural address which 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 is going to 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 in any way. Instead, he points his hearers to the blood of Jesus Christ as the only ground for salvation.



'The Mathurin Cathedral was packed.'

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 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 that the men at the door are soldiers who are 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 was 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 make sure Calvin does not escape a second time!

But God watches over Calvin, because ...

At dawn, the next morning a vinedresser walks toward the open city gate. 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 for whom everyone is searching! The guards don't recognise him in his disguise...

CALVIN WRITES THE INSTITUTES

It would have been a scary moment when Calvin, outwardly relaxed but inwardly shaking, walked past those guards. 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 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 which 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 track down its author. Now the persecution becomes even fiercer!

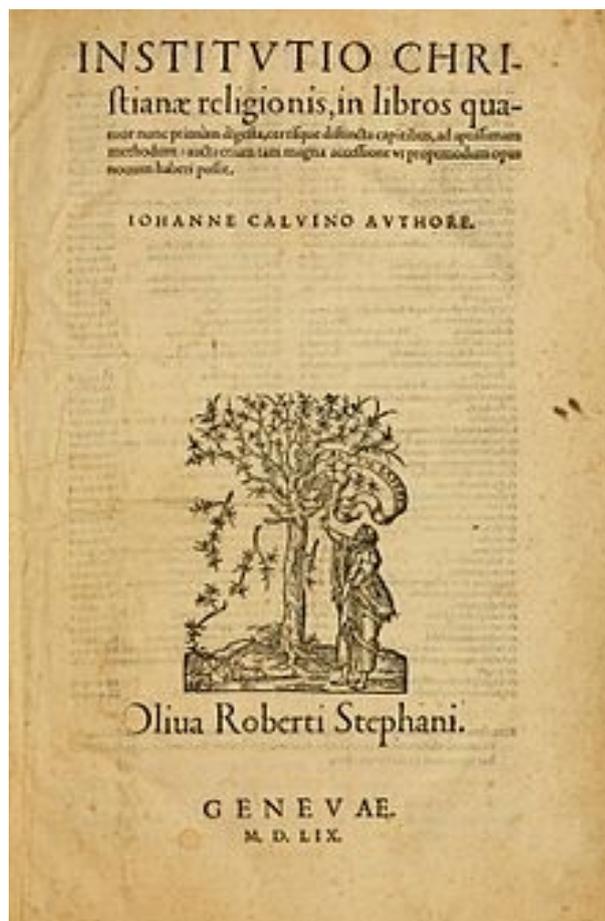
But the author of the Institutes was safe in Basle where the king of France could not reach him.

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 him; not one step further.

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the city of Noyon, France and their worship of relics.
2. Tell 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 the priesthood?
5. Compare Calvin's and Luther's conversions.
6. Explain the different focus of life for Luther and Calvin?
7. What did both Reformers discover is the only foundation for 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?



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

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 any other person 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?