

Living for Eternity – seeking the city to come

Introduction

- *‘Calvin is remarkably helpful guide, a man of great wisdom, insight, and personal energy when it comes to thinking about the resurrection of the body and our anticipation of eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth’ (Sam Storms in ‘With Calvin in the theatre of God’)*

The necessity of meditating upon the heavenly life – future life with Christ after death; the future resurrection of the body

Institutes Book 3

Chapter 9 – *‘Of Meditating on the future life’*

Chapter 25 – *‘Of the last resurrection’*

- *we are beset above and below, behind and before, with violent temptations, which our minds would be altogether unable to withstand, were they not set free from earthly objects and devoted to the heavenly life, though apparently remote from us. Wherefore, he alone has made solid progress in the Gospel who has acquired the habit of meditating continually on a blessed resurrection. (Institutes 3.25.1)*

Matthew 6:19-21

Lay not up for yourselves treasures on the earth, where rust and the moth consume, where thieves break through and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither rust nor moth consumes, and where thieves do not break through nor steal. For where your treasure shall be, there will also your heart be.

Commenting on verse 21

- *If honour is reckoned the supreme good, the minds of men must be wholly occupied with ambition: if money, covetousness will immediately predominate: if pleasure, it will be impossible to prevent men from sinking into brutal indulgence. We have all a natural desire to pursue happiness; and the consequence is, that false imaginations carry us away in every direction. But if we were honestly and firmly convinced that our happiness is in heaven, it would be easy for us to trample upon the world, to despise earthly blessings, (by the deceitful attractions of which the greater part of men are fascinated,) and to rise towards heaven.*

Romans 8:18-19

¹⁸ I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. ¹⁹ The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.

- *The excellency of our glory is of such importance even to the very elements, which are destitute of mind and reason, that they burn with a certain kind of desire for it; how much more it behoves us, who have been illuminated by the Spirit of God, to aspire and strive with firmness of hope and with ardour of desire, after the attainment of so great a benefit.*

Four benefits of meditating upon the heavenly life

1. That we might see ourselves as pilgrims

Hebrews 11:13-16

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. ¹⁴ People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Commenting on verse 16:

- *We are hence to conclude, that there is no place for us among God's children, except we renounce the world, and that there will be for us no inheritance in heaven, except we become pilgrims on earth*

Hebrews 13:14

For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

- *...as strangers and wanderers in this world we should consider that we have no fixed residence but in heaven. Whenever, therefore, we are driven from place to place, or whenever any change happens to us, let us think of what the Apostle teaches us here, that we have no certain shade on earth, for heaven is our inheritance; and when more and more tried, let us ever prepare ourselves for our last end; for they who enjoy a very quiet life commonly imagine that they have a rest in this world: it is hence profitable for us, who are prone to this kind of sloth, to be often tossed here and there, that we who are too much inclined to look on things below, may learn to turn our eyes up to heaven.*

2. That we might rightly view affliction

Institutes Book 3, chapter 9 – *'Of Meditating on the future life'*

Section 1 - The design of God in afflicting his people.

1. To accustom us to despise the present life.
 - Our infatuated love of it.
 - Afflictions employed as the cure.
 2. To lead us to aspire to heaven.
- *Whatever be the kind of tribulation with which we are afflicted, we should always consider the end [the goal] of it to be, that we may be trained to despise the present, and thereby stimulated to aspire to the future life. For since God well knows how strongly we are inclined by nature to a slavish love of this world, in order to prevent us from clinging too strongly to it, he employs the fittest reason for calling us back, and shaking off our lethargy.*

- *Every one of us, indeed, would be thought to aspire and aim at heavenly immortality during the whole course of his life... But when you attend to the plans, wishes, and actions of each, you see nothing in them but the earth. Hence our stupidity; our minds being dazzled with the glare of wealth, power, and honours, that they can see no farther. The heart also, engrossed with avarice [greed], ambition, and lust, is weighed down and cannot rise above them. In short, the whole soul, ensnared by the allurements of the flesh, seeks its happiness on the earth.*
- *To meet this disease, the Lord makes his people sensible [be aware through their senses] of the vanity of the present life, by a constant proof of its miseries. Thus, that they may not promise themselves deep and lasting peace in it, he often allows them to be assailed by war, tumult, or rapine [the violent seizure of property], or to be disturbed by other injuries. That they may not long with too much eagerness after fleeting and fading riches, or rest in those which they already possess, he reduces them to want [poverty], or, at least, restricts them to a moderate allowance, at one time by exile, at another by sterility, at another by fire, or by other means. That they may not indulge too complacently in the advantages of married life, he either vexes them by the misconduct of their partners, or humbles them by the wickedness of their children, or afflicts them by bereavement.*
- *We duly profit by the discipline of the cross, when we learn that this life, estimated in itself, is restless, troubled, in numberless ways wretched, and plainly in no respect happy; that what are estimated its blessings are uncertain, fleeting, vain, and vitiated [spoiled or impaired] by a great admixture of evil. From this we conclude, that all we have to seek or hope for here is contest; that when we think of the crown we must raise our eyes to heaven. For we must hold, that our mind never rises seriously to desire and aspire after the future, until it has learned to despise the present life.*

To discuss:

1. What does Calvin say is the spiritual disease we all suffer from that needs curing?
2. What does Calvin say is the treatment we receive from the Lord's hand?
3. How do you find yourself reacting to Calvin's words?

- *Still the contempt which believers should train themselves to feel for the present life, must not be of a kind to beget hatred of it or ingratitude to God. This life, though abounding in all kinds of wretchedness, is justly classed among divine blessings which are not to be despised. (Institutes 3.9.3)*

2 Corinthians 4:16-17

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

Commenting on verse 16

- *As he here sets before us two men, so you must place before your view two kinds of life — the earthly and the heavenly. The outward man is the maintenance of the earthly life, which consists not merely in the flower of one's age [prime of life] and in good health, but also in riches, honours, friendships, and other resources. Hence, according as we suffer a reduction or loss of these blessings...is our outward man in that proportion corrupted.*
- *For as we are too much taken up with the present life.. the Lord, on that account, by taking away from us, by little and little, the things that we are engrossed with, calls us back to meditate on a better life. Thus, therefore, it is necessary, that the condition of the present life should decay, in order that the inward man may be in a flourishing state; because, in proportion as the earthly life declines, does the heavenly life advance, at least in believers.*

Commenting on verse 17. 'Light and momentary troubles'.

- *Our flesh always shrinks back from its own destruction, whatever reward may be presented to our view, and we are influenced much more by present feeling than by the hope of heavenly blessings. Paul on that account admonishes us, that the afflictions and vexations of the pious have little or nothing of bitterness, if compared with the boundless blessings of everlasting glory.*

2 Corinthians 4:18

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

- *Mark what it is, that will make all the miseries of this world easy to be endured, — if we carry forward our thoughts to the eternity of the heavenly kingdom. For a moment is long, if we look around us on this side and on that; but, when we have once raised our minds heavenward, a thousand years begin to appear to us to be like a moment.*

3. That we might welcome death

- *when the earthly is compared with the heavenly life, it may undoubtedly be despised and trampled underfoot. We ought never, indeed, to regard it with hatred, except in so far as it keeps us subject to sin; and even this hatred ought not to be directed against life itself. (Institutes 3.9.4)*
- *It becomes us to live and die to the Lord, let us leave the period of our life and death at his disposal. Still let us ardently long for death, and constantly meditate upon it, and in comparison with future immortality, let us despise life, and, on account of the bondage of sin, long to renounce it whenever it shall so please the Lord. (Inst. 3.9.4)*

Philippians 1: 21-24

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

- *'many who boast of being Christians, instead of thus longing for death, are so afraid of it that they tremble at the very mention of it as a thing ominous and dreadful.'*
- *'our natural feelings should be somewhat shocked at the mention of our dissolution.'*
- *'But it is altogether intolerable that the light of piety should not be so powerful in a Christian breast as with greater consolation to overcome and suppress that fear. For if we reflect that this our tabernacle, unstable, defective, corruptible, fading, pining, and putrid, is dissolved, in order that it may forthwith be renewed in sure, perfect, incorruptible, in fine, in heavenly glory, will not faith compel us eagerly to desire what nature dreads? If we reflect that by death we are recalled from exile to inhabit our native country, a heavenly country, shall this give us no comfort?' (Inst. 3.9.5)*

2 Corinthians 5:1

we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven

- *As, however, all naturally view death with horror, unbelievers never willingly quit this life, except when they throw it off in disgust or despair. Believers, on the other hand, depart willingly, because they have a better hope set before them beyond this world.*
- *...believers do not desire death for the sake of losing any thing, but as having regard to a better life.*
- *...we have naturally an aversion to the quitting of this life, considered in itself, as no one willingly allows himself to be stripped of his garments.*
- *However, 'the natural horror of death is overcome by confidence' in the same way that 'an individual will, without any reluctance, throw away a coarse, dirty, threadbare, and, in one word, tattered garment, with the view of his being arrayed in an elegant, handsome, new, and durable one.'*

4. That we might rightly respond to bereavement and loss

Hebrews 10:34

You sympathised with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

- *As poverty is deemed an evil, the plunder of their goods considered in itself touched them with grief*
- *But as they looked higher, they found a cause for joy, which allayed whatever grief they felt. It is indeed thus necessary that our thoughts should be drawn away from the world, by looking at the heavenly recompense*
- *feelings never so prevail in overwhelming them with grief, but that with their minds raised up to heaven they emerge into spiritual joy.*

- *Joyfully then did they endure the plundering of their goods, not because they were glad to find themselves plundered; but as their minds were fixed on the recompense, they easily forgot the grief occasioned by their present calamity. And indeed wherever there is a lively perception of heavenly things, the world with all its allurements is not so relished, that either poverty or shame can overwhelm our minds with grief. If then we wish to bear anything for Christ with patience and resigned minds, let us accustom ourselves to a frequent meditation on that felicity, in comparison with which all the good things of the world are nothing but refuse.*

1 Thess 4:13

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.

- *Paul does not forbid us altogether to mourn, but requires moderation in our mourning, for he says, that ye may not sorrow, as others who have no hope. He forbids them to grieve in the manner of unbelievers...*
- *...believers know that they quit the world, that they may be at last gathered into the kingdom of God, they have not the like occasion of grief. Hence the knowledge of a resurrection is the means of moderating grief.*
- *Paul lifts up the minds of believers to a consideration of the resurrection, lest they should indulge excessive grief on occasion of the death of their relatives*
- *Those that abuse this testimony, so as to establish among Christians Stoical indifference, that is, an iron hardness, will find nothing of this nature in Paul's words. ...it is one thing to bridle our grief, that it may be made subject to God, and quite another thing to harden one's self so as to be like stones, by casting away human feelings.*
- *Let, therefore, the grief of the pious be mixed with consolation, which may train them to patience. The hope of a blessed resurrection, which is the mother of patience, will effect this.*

Two final comments:

1. More than once Calvin emphasises that we need a personal and individual conviction regarding our eternal future.

2. When we speak of the heavenly life and the resurrection life to come, we can only describe them in the smallest part