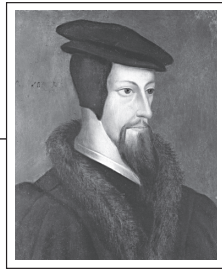


JOHN CALVIN

A PILGRIM'S LIFE



HERMAN J. SELDERHUIS

Translated by Albert Gootjes


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INTRODUCTION



Life is a steeplechase: there are dangers everywhere, and God himself, who has put most of the obstacles in our way, watches to see whether we make it over them. Such is John Calvin's view of life—and of God. Calvin never spoke of life as something fun, and his own wasn't. Many of his followers concluded that there shouldn't be any fun in life, and here they misunderstand him.

Calvin runs the race of this life, falling all the while, picking himself up again and again, and looking forward to the finish, which he calls "the reflection of the life to come." The race wears him out, often seeming to pointlessly bring him back to the place he started, and yet there remains something to look forward to. Calvin stays on the course in faith that the God who makes the race so difficult also secures the runner's finish. At times, Calvin understands nothing of his God, but still hews closely to him and calls others to do the same. Without that God, life is nothing.

Calvin wanted things to be otherwise, but he had no choice. This is his greatest problem: there is so much he wants to do, but cannot. He wants to be free, but God always stands in the way. As so many others then and now have also seen, Calvin seems to be aware that even his own character is

often only another obstacle in his way. Calvin pleads for freedom, but prays for providence. Doesn't he see that these two just do not go together? Or is this precisely what gives life its edge—a battle between the human race that wants to run free, and the God who wants to keep a tight rein on things?

Does this make Calvin more exciting as a person than his dull appearance suggests?

In this book, Calvin is approached as neither friend nor enemy; I just do not categorize him in that sense. I feel nothing for Calvin either way, but I am fascinated by him as a person. Without intending to, he created a worldwide community of believers, arousing as much scorn as admiration and accomplishing so much in spite of his many limitations. I have tried to tell the story of his life to discover what he was like as a person. Since Calvin himself claimed that we learn most about people from their letters, the most important source for this book is his correspondence. Because I hope it will get us closer to Calvin himself, there are few references to secondary literature.

Much more can be said about Calvin than what is in this book, but I hope the story told here will reveal a very interesting person hidden behind perceptions of him as a somber academic. At first glance, he is no more than a bookish man with a long goatee who spent his entire life chopping away at dry doctrine with an occasional pause to burn some odd heretic in his spare time. In the coming of Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us, God clothes himself in the skin of another to transform each human being into another person. Maybe, just maybe, we will see another transformation if we ourselves crawl into Calvin.

It is well worth trying to get under his skin, and—if you get that far—I will let you out again at the end. I promise.