

## Calvin on Prayer

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We all pray, and we all believe that coming before the throne of grace is vitally important. However, if you can imagine a church that simply did not know how to pray—this was the late medieval church, the one that John Calvin inherited. As Geneva’s consistory records show, the people thought that it was more pious to pray in Latin, even though they had no idea what they were saying. Public prayer, in the common tongue, was simply unheard of.

Calvin sought to remedy this dire state of affairs, and, to that end, he wrote quite a bit about prayer. Through a chronological analysis of selected writings from his corpus, this essay demonstrates both changes and expansions in Calvin’s thinking on prayer. I will begin with one of his earliest publications, the 1536 edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and will then examine, among other works, an Old Testament commentary and a sermon on prayer based upon Ephesians 6:18–19, before concluding with Calvin’s four-book edition of the *Institutes* from 1559.

### A Selection of Calvin’s Writings on Prayer

*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, first edition, (1536)<sup>1</sup>

At twenty-seven years old, Calvin already demonstrated both spiritual wisdom and the ability to craft beautiful prose.<sup>2</sup> From his early writings, he established that, while we are destitute outside of Christ, we enjoy complete happiness and great treasures in Him.

#### Rules for Prayer in General

Calvin’s first rule of prayer is that we must abandon all thoughts of our own glory. His second rule is that we must sense our own insufficiency and earnestly seek what we need from God. To impel us to pray, there is both a command and a promise.<sup>3</sup> Prayer, like our faith, rests on God’s promises and should be performed in Christ’s name.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), and specifically Chapter III, “Prayer: With an Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer”. Calvin gleaned from Martin Bucer’s 1530 *Commentary on the Gospels* and, probably, from William Farel’s *Sommaire*.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 68: “For in Christ he offers all happiness in place of our misery, all wealth in place of our neediness: in him the Lord opens to us the heavenly treasures that our whole faith may contemplate that beloved son of his, our whole expectation depend upon him and our whole hope cleave to and rest in him. This, indeed, is that secret and hidden philosophy which cannot be rested from syllogisms.” The final sentence demonstrates the radical difference between true evangelical piety and scholastic philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 68–69.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 70.

Given his cultural context, Calvin had to address the notion of the intercession of the saints. He was, of course, opposed to such babbling. His reasons were clear: godly prayers are for the advancement of God's kingdom, with special focus on saving the lost and confounding the reprobate. To believe that departed saints can help in this supernatural task is to think of God's kingdom, as Calvin wrote, "stupidly and carnally and even contemptuously."<sup>5</sup> Further, the supposed need for the intercession of the saints implies that Christ is too severe for believers to approach in prayer—which dishonors both Christ our sole Mediator and God the Father, who sent Him, and loves us.<sup>6</sup>

Calvin asserted that there are two parts of prayer: petition and thanksgiving:

By petition we lay the desires of our heart before God, seeking from his goodness first what serves only his glory; secondly, what also is conducive to our use [1 Tim. 2:1]. By thanksgiving we recognize his benefits to us, and confess them with praise, referring to his goodness all the good things, whatever they are.<sup>7</sup>

He also held that praying in a church building is not "holier" than doing so in some other location.<sup>8</sup>

Calvin also examined Paul's command to pray without ceasing in 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18 and 1 Timothy 2:1 and 8. God wants believers to lift our desires to Him at all times, at all places, and in all situations. He also wants us to praise Him, and He gives us plenty of reasons to do so. This constancy of prayer refers to private prayer rather than to the public prayers of the church. These public prayers cannot be constant. Rather, they ought to take place at agreed-upon times. Thus, while God does not command us to pray at certain hours of the day, we must pray together at set times to coordinate our efforts and to accommodate all within our congregations. That is, public prayers are to be offered decently and in order.<sup>9</sup>

Calvin defined prayer beautifully when he wrote:

That our hearts may be aroused and borne to God, whether to praise him or to beseech his help- we may understand from this that the essentials of prayer are set in the mind and heart, or rather that prayer itself is properly an emotion of the heart within, which is poured out and laid bare before God, the searcher of hearts.<sup>10</sup>

This definition, combined with Calvin's following comments, demonstrates the falsity of characterizing Calvinists as the "frozen chosen." For Calvin, the heart was fundamental to prayer. Believers speak to God from the affections of the heart, and true prayer must spring from the deep feeling of the heart. However, this does not mean that the mind is absent in prayer, as public prayers must be intelligibly offered in the common tongue so that all can understand.<sup>11</sup> From this introduction Calvin moved to the Lord's Prayer.

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<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 71. We trample on Scripture if we think otherwise. Indeed, "scripture very often declares the prudence of our flesh to be the enemy of God's wisdom; it wholly condemns the vanity of our mind; laying low our whole reason it bids us look to God's will alone... Scripture offers Christ alone to us, sends us to him, and establishes us in him" (ibid.). Calvin's view was in stark contrast to the famous Roman Catholic apologist Johann Eck, who defended the idea that departed saints pray for the living.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 72: "They obscure the glory of his birth and make void the cross; in short, they strip and defraud of its rightful praise all that he has done or suffered for our salvation!"

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 73.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 73.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 73.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 73-75.

### Calvin's Exposition of the Lord's Prayer

Calvin judged the Lord's Prayer to have six petitions instead of following Luther's division of the prayer into seven.<sup>12</sup>

To acknowledge God as Father requires one's adoption into His family through the great and merciful work of Christ. God's deep love for his children in Christ exceeds the love and care of any earthly parent. Indeed, we cannot seek help from anywhere else. Calvin then addressed an important pastoral point. We sometimes think that, while God is still our Father, He is displeased with us because of our sin, which makes us timid in prayer. But if God truly is our Father through Christ, then he will not fail to be moved by the son who, "suppliant and humble, acknowledging his guilt, implores his father's mercy."<sup>13</sup> The parable of the prodigal son perfectly demonstrates "this abundance of fatherly compassion" towards the repentant son. Calvin writes, "the father embraces him with open arms, and does not wait for him to ask for pardon but anticipates him, recognizes him returning afar off, willingly runs to meet him, comforts him, receives him into favor."<sup>14</sup>

Further, God must be recognized as our communal Father and not just as any one individual's Father. This recognition fosters brotherly love among members of the congregation. Since all good gifts come from this Father, each of us should be willing to share with one another as need demands. While this sharing is particularly exhibited in mutual prayers, it is also observed practically when believers take financial care of those whom they know are suffering. Such financial aid is usually limited to those we know within our own community, but our prayers can extend to the unknown brethren throughout the whole earth.

Calvin drew attention to our God who is in heaven. He acknowledged that God is not restricted to the upper atmosphere and that He is diffused through all things. Because our minds are crass, we cannot think of Him as earthly. Rather, He is mighty, lofty, and incomprehensible.<sup>15</sup>

The first petition of the Lord's Prayer is: "hallowed be thy name" (Matt. 6:9, ASV). Calvin tells us immediately that His name refers to His power. His power comprises all of His excellencies, such as His might, wisdom, righteousness, mercy, and truth. This petition promotes the setting apart of His majesty and of the excellencies that characterize His greatness and wonderfulness. More specifically, the petition yearns that His excellencies be held holy by all, that all recognize them and magnify them. He must be glorified in all of His works. We yearn that the praise of our God would resound in all hearts and on all tongues. This positive yearning also implies that ungodliness should perish and be confounded. Ungodliness besmirches and profanes God's name, and His glory shines more brightly when ungodliness is put away. Finally, yearning for His name to be hallowed means that we praise God for all the good things that we have received from His gracious hand and recognize the compassionate benefits with which He blesses us.<sup>16</sup>

The second petition is: "Thy kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10). Calvin defined the petition this way:

The Kingdom of God is this: ... by his Holy Spirit, to act and to rule over his own people, in order to make the riches of his goodness and mercy conspicuous in all their works. On the other hand, it is to ruin and cast down the reprobate, who do not acknowledge themselves to be for God and the Lord, who refuse to be subjected

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<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 75. Calvin had excellent reasons for his decision. Luke's presentation, in six petitions, cannot be defective. Thus, the addition in Matthew should be related exegetically to the sixth petition.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 76.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 77.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 77–78.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 78–79.

to His rule; and to destroy and lay low their sacrilegious arrogance, in order to make clear that there is no power which can withstand His power.<sup>17</sup>

The kingdom of God, for Calvin, is not of this world because it is spiritual, incorruptible, and eternal. The kingdom comes by adding believers to itself, that those believers may grow in grace.

The third petition is: “Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth” (Matt. 6:10). Calvin’s analysis of this petition underscores the observation he made concerning the first petition. Calvin believed that it should be our heart’s desire that *all* men and women subject their wills to God’s divine will.<sup>18</sup> But he also taught that the reprobate try to evade God’s rule and disobey Him, such that this petition cries out even for their unwilling and reluctant obedience.

The fourth petition, “give us this day our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11), is a transition in the prayer wherein we ask God to turn toward our own affairs and to aid us in our great need. We know both sides of the issue: God providentially nourishes and preserves us, and we lean on Him for even the smallest matters. We also know that, while eternal life should be our highest concern, anxiety regarding this present life, to use Calvin’s powerful words, “sinks its teeth into the very bones of almost all men.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the word “daily” is important because we must not be enslaved by an unbridled desire for countless things.

According to Calvin, the request for God to “forgive us our debts” (Matt. 6:12), has two main aspects. First, our sins are like debts because we owe a penalty to God for them, one that can only be released by His gracious forgiveness in Christ. The other aspect is the error of Roman Catholic theology—although Calvin did not mention Rome by name—wherein Catholics trust in their own or others’ merits to earn this divine satisfaction.<sup>20</sup>

The phrase “as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12) likewise has two aspects in Calvin’s thought. Of first importance is the comfort that believers enjoy despite the weakness of their faith. We know that we are forgiven by Christ, and, by His Spirit, we forgive others and cast from our minds the desire for revenge and even the remembrance of injustices against us. The second aspect is that, by offering this petition, the Lord excludes those who are eager for revenge and slow to forgive. Such people dare not call God their Father.

The sixth petition is: “bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matt. 6:13). The first part of the petition acknowledges the many and varied forms of temptation that flow from our own inordinate desires or from the Devil’s evil promptings. Calvin said that temptations can attack from the right—in the form of riches, power, and honors—or from the left—from poverty, disgrace, and contempt.<sup>21</sup> In all of these temptations, the Devil yearns to crush God’s children, while God uses them to chasten us and to keep us from growing sluggish.

“Deliver us from the evil one” has a distinct interpretation. It means that we are not vanquished by any temptation—rather, we stand fast through the Lord’s power. We yearn to remain unconquered by sin, death, and even the Devil’s entire kingdom. We never accomplish such a victory through our own power; indeed, the Lord Himself earns the victory by abiding in us and fighting for us.

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<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 79.

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 80: “Indeed as we petition this, we are renouncing all our desires, resigning and turning over to the Lord any affections that are in us, and asking that God respond to our prayer not as we wish, but as he has foreseen and decreed.”

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 81.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 81–82.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 83.

Each of the last three petitions underlines the public nature of the Lord's Prayer. We pray for the growth of Christ's church and for the advance of our fellowship. We don't just pray for ourselves—we also pray for all believers the world over.<sup>22</sup>

This great prayer concludes with a firm assurance of our faith, as God's kingdom, power, and glory cannot be snatched away. The amen at the end reminds us that these petitions will surely be granted because God has promised to fulfill them and cannot deceive us.

### The Practice of Prayer

Calvin described the Lord's Prayer as the perfect model for prayer.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, we are not bound by those exact words.<sup>24</sup> There are other biblical examples of prayer that are given by the same Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

Given our laziness and the command to pray without ceasing, we should set aside specific times for prayer. Specifically, we should pray in the morning, in the evening, and at meals.<sup>26</sup>

Also, we should not try to bind God to particular times and circumstances in an effort to coax Him into action. We rest in what He is going to do in His perfect timing, and thus we always pray "thy will be done" (Matt. 6:10). He always hears our prayers, even when, from our perspective, He seems to have turned a deaf ear to us. Remembering who He is—a loving Father who always hears us—causes us to change. In the midst of our poverty and our misery, we possess abundance and solemn comfort.<sup>27</sup>

### *The First Genevan Catechism (1538)*<sup>28</sup>

Having considered Calvin's thoughts on prayer from the first edition of his *Institutes*, we move on to a work that he completed shortly after, when he was just beginning pastoral ministry. This First Genevan Catechism—Calvin's first attempt to write a catechism for the people of Geneva—was methodologically flawed. The full title of the work is actually *Catechism or Institution of the Christian Religion*—it should have been either one or the other! Calvin had already published the *Institutes*, and, as my analysis will demonstrate, he attempted to include way too much theology within a catechism that should be accessible to common citizens.

Section 22, "On Prayer," outlines in one short paragraph the inherent bankruptcy of humanity and the need to find help in God, who is the source of all goodness.<sup>29</sup> The following section comprises two paragraphs. The first distinguishes between prayers uttered by the mouth and prayers that flow from the depth of the heart. True prayer comes from the recesses of the heart and is not simply sputtered by the lips.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 83–84.

<sup>23</sup> "And this prayer is in all respects so perfect that any extraneous or alien thing added to it, which cannot be related to it, is impious and unworthy to be conceded by God" (Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 84).

<sup>24</sup> "We would not have it understood that we are so bound by this form of prayer that we are not allowed to change it in either word or syllable" (Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 85).

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 85.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 85. "But this must not be any superstitious observance of hours, whereby, as if paying our debt to God, we imagine ourselves paid up the remaining hours" (ibid.).

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 86.

<sup>28</sup> John Calvin, *John Calvin: Catechism, 1538*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1972)

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Catechism*, 1538, 33–34.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine spoke in a similar manner in his *Confessions*, as did Bucer in his *Commentary on the Gospels*. See Calvin, *Catechism*, 1538, 34n10.

The second paragraph has two major themes. It begins and ends with reasons why believers should offer praise and thanksgiving, including divine command and the promise of answer. Sandwiched in between these themes are two Scripture passages that introduce the two parts of prayer: invocation, or petition, and thanksgiving.

Section 24 is an exposition of the Lord's Prayer. Calvin's brief introduction noted that the prayer was given to believers because of our weakness and that it serves as a guide for our prayers. The first three petitions begin with God's glory and allow God's people to offer their own petitions—but those petitions need to be enveloped in an overall concern for God's glory.<sup>31</sup>

I note in passing that Calvin published a second Genevan catechism in 1542, a work that featured the more familiar (to us) question and answer format. This much-improved catechism also included sample prayers.<sup>32</sup>

*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, second edition (1539)

Calvin's *Institutes* underwent major changes between its first and second editions. This is partly because Calvin wrote his magisterial Romans commentary after the first edition, which helped prepare his thinking for the second edition.

In this work, Calvin added a new section on the necessity of prayer. Through prayer, the believer enjoys the riches that our heavenly Father has laid up for us. God has prepared treasures for His children, and we need to ask Him for them. Calvin cannot be described as a man who lacked for words, yet he exclaims: "Words fail to explain how necessary prayer is, and in how many ways the exercise of prayer is profitable."<sup>33</sup> He cited Joel 2:32 and underlined that prayer is the only stronghold of safety. When we go to God in prayer, we receive certain benefits. At the very least, we know that God has heard our petitions and that He is able to take care of us. This is one of the great benefits of prayer, and it offers us peace.

Another new section refutes the practical objection that prayer is simply superfluous. God ordains prayer for our sake, not His; it profits us, not Him. Calvin told his readers to look at Elijah. The prophet was sure of God's purpose but still anxiously prayed and sent his servant seven times to look for rain because he knew it was his duty to lay his desires before God.<sup>34</sup> While God often helps us even when we fail to ask Him, it is still important for us to call upon Him.

The Genevan preacher provided six further reasons for prayer: to cause our hearts to zealously desire to love God, to serve Him, and to flee to Him as to the anchor of a ship; to set truly godly prayers before Him of which we are not ashamed; to strengthen our hearts with true gratitude, as prayer reminds us that benefits truly come from His hand; to think more highly of his kindness, as we know that we have prayed and that God has answered our prayer; to more deeply delight in answered prayer; and, finally, to recognize that God is a true help to us in deeds and not simply in words.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *Catechism*, 1538, 36.

<sup>32</sup> John H. Leith, foreword to John Calvin, *Instruction in Faith* (1537), trans. and ed. Paul T. Fuhrmann (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 9–13.

<sup>33</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.20.2, 851.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 852. The reference is to 1 Kings 18:42.

<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.20.3; 852. 1. "That our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love and serve him, while we become accustomed in every need to flee to him as to a sacred anchor." 2. "That there may enter our hearts no desire and no wish at all of which we should be ashamed to make him a witness, while we learn to set all our wishes before his eyes, and even to pour out our whole hearts." 3. "That we be prepared to receive his benefits with true gratitude of heart and thanksgiving,

Calvin acknowledged that, in practice, God does not always speedily answer our prayers because He wants to train our lazy hearts.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the doctrine of God's providence does not stand against prayer! God's providence goes hand in hand with the human need to exercise faith. "And so both are true," Calvin asserted, "that the keeper of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps, and yet that he is inactive, as if forgetting us, when he sees us idle and mute."<sup>37</sup> This theme appears in Calvin's other writings, such as the discussion of Psalm 145 in his *Commentary on Psalms*.<sup>38</sup> Jumping ahead a number of years, let's turn to Calvin's analysis of prayer in the life of two Old Testament patriarchs.

*Commentary on Genesis*<sup>39</sup>

The very fallible Old Testament patriarchs, even during that time of shadows, were, according to Calvin, models for prayer. Isaac knew about the power of prayer because he acknowledged that blessing cannot be produced by man, but that it must be sought out through prayer.<sup>40</sup> Isaac was a model of perseverance in prayer. God may wait a long time to answer our prayers, but He never turns a deaf ear toward us.<sup>41</sup>

Calvin's analysis of Jacob's life concluded that Jacob was disturbed from without so that his prayers might become more authentic.<sup>42</sup> Calvin said that God works in believers' lives, not to redeem them from all fear and anxiety, but rather to give them sufficient strength to continue to progress amid life's many stresses.<sup>43</sup>

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benefits that our prayer reminds us come from his hand [Ps. 145:15–16]." 4. "Having obtained what we were seeking, and being convinced that he has answered our prayers, we should be led to meditate upon his kindness more ardently." 5. "We embrace with greater delight those things which we acknowledge to have been obtained by prayers." 6. By experience, we can know that "he promises never to fail us," that He "opens the way to call upon him," and that He will always defend us "with present help."

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.20.3; 853. Sometimes, God, who never sleeps, gives us the impression that He is dozing to train us, who are "otherwise idle and lazy, to seek, ask, and entreat him to our great good."

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 853. Calvin is referring to Psalm 121:4, but he adds that Scripture also supports this idea in Psalm 145; Psalm 34:15; 33:16; and 1 Peter 3:12.

<sup>38</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint 1981). Consider these quotes from Calvin's commentary on Psalm 145: is found in *Commentary* Vol. 5., 281: "Faith lies idle and even dead without prayer, in which the spirit of adoption shows and exercises itself, and by which we evidence that all his promises are considered by us as stable and sure." "It is by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father." "Nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayers." And, "So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon" (*ibid.*, 5:281).

<sup>39</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First book of Moses called Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint 1981). For yet another development in Calvin's thinking, see his "Letter to the Reader" 1542 "La Forme des prieres et chantz ecclesiastic." Ford Lewis Battles, *CTJ* 15 (1980) 160-65.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* at 25:19, 2:41: "It therefore, had not now for the first time, entered into his mind to pray, seeing that for more than 20 years he had been disappointed of his hope." "...yet reason dictates that these prayers had continued through many years."

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:42: "And as Isaac teaches us, by his example, to persevere in prayer; so God also shows that he never turns a deaf ear to the wishes of his faithful people, although he may long defer the answer."

<sup>42</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:189: "And the Lord willed that the mind of his servant should be oppressed by this anxiety for a time, although without any real cause, in order the more to excite the fervor of his prayer."

<sup>43</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:189: "For God does not promise that he will be present with us, for the purpose of removing the sense of our dangers, but in order that fear may not prevail, and overwhelm us in despair."

We know the story of Jacob meeting Esau in Genesis 32. Jacob first approached his brother to see how he would be received, and it did not look good. Esau was approaching him with four hundred armed men. Jacob then made complex plans to survive this confrontation, but he added to those plans earnest supplication to God.<sup>44</sup> This portrait of Jacob sure was different from the earlier one in Genesis 28, when Jacob tried to cut a rather impious deal with God. Here, Jacob confesses his unworthiness for God to answer him, remembers God's sure promises, and bases his petition upon those promises.

Calvin was rightly convinced that Jacob's actions were wholly approved by God and were meant to be an example to believers, one that helps answer the question: "How shall we live as Christians today?" While Scripture was not yet recorded, Jacob's pattern of prayer was founded on God's Word of promise. From this truth, Calvin concluded that a Christian pattern for prayer must also be founded on God's Word.<sup>45</sup>

Following this biblical pattern of prayer yields great benefits for believers. When God's children have done all that is necessary and appropriate to remedy the distress of our situation, we can bring our request to God in a familiar way, and we can have what Calvin wonderfully terms a "holy boldness"—because our request is in line with biblical promises. God is gracious to us in our suffering because of our intimate union with Him; He binds Himself to us, and Calvin is so bold as to say that God "becomes in a sense voluntarily our debtor." The pattern of prayer and of life for Jacob, and likewise for believers, is always to walk before God and to be holy. This pattern could be summarized by the phrase "repentance and remembrance."

Calvin taught that believers can be at peace with God in the midst of their trials.<sup>46</sup> After they pray and commit their lives to God, God's children may not be disturbed. In addition, believers cannot be deterred from approaching God in prayer due to their perceived unworthiness. No, God has responded to the dangers and difficulties of the Christian life. Believers are to resort to the Lord, to use the means that are available to resolve their problems, and then to proceed boldly.

Jacob prayed, worked, and clearly trusted in God, yet he still had fears. Calvin thought that there is nothing wrong with this on its face. Fear is sinful when it becomes debilitating.<sup>47</sup> Let us now turn to a New Testament passage.

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<sup>44</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:190: "Having arranged his affairs as the necessity of the occasion suggested, he now betakes himself to prayer."

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:191: "And indeed we must seek the true rule of prayer in the word of God, that we may not rashly break through to him, but may approach him in the manner in which he has revealed himself to us." "There is a holy boldness, when having discharged our duty according to God's calling, we familiarly ask of him whatsoever he has promised; since he, by binding himself gratuitously to us, becomes in a sense voluntarily our debtor." "However, we cannot offer prayers without a command or promise of God; it is vain and empty words shot into the air."

<sup>46</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:193: "The principal advantage of prayer is, to wait for the Lord in silence and quietness." We should use means which are in our power and leave the success "in the hand of God. For though by prayer we cast our cares upon God, that we may have peaceful and tranquil minds; yet this security ought not to render us indolent. For the Lord will have all the aids which he affords us applied to use." "When they have discharged their duty, they still depend on the same grace of God; and when nothing remains which they can attempt, they nevertheless are at rest."

<sup>47</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:194: "We must overcome anxiety in intricate affairs, lest we should be hindered or retarded in our duty." "That he was not so seized with fear, as to be unable prudently to order his affairs."



*Sermons on Ephesians*<sup>48</sup>

In May 1558, Calvin had been preaching on Isaiah and began a new series on the book of Ephesians. While he was not yet fifty years old, his health was already deteriorating, and he actually burst a blood vessel while preaching to his enormous congregation—which, at the time, included the Scottish Reformer John Knox.<sup>49</sup>

I will focus on Calvin's handling of an important passage on prayer, to which he alluded in the first edition of the *Institutes*, Ephesians 6:18: "with all prayer and supplication praying at all seasons in the Spirit, and watching thereunto in all perseverance and supplication for all the saints." A brief analysis will help us to see how a great theologian applied this passage to the rough-and-tumble life of the Genevan streets.

It is foolish for Christians to think that, when they are in danger, they should simply say, "God will help us." Rather, we should flee to Him for refuge. Paul said at another place that God's Word is the essential sword in our fight against Satan, that faith is our shield, and that we ought to fight by our prayers and supplications (Eph. 6:16–18). These arms of battle are inseparable. The more advanced we are in faith, the more zeal we will have to call upon God.<sup>50</sup>

We ought not grow tired in our prayers and supplications. God has promised that He will hear us even before we cry out to Him. Indeed, our diligence in prayer is a proof of our faith. We demonstrate that God's promises have worked powerfully in us when we trust in them and flee to Him as soon as we are touched with grief or affliction.<sup>51</sup>

Calvin admonished his congregation to recognize the beauty of prayer. Our prayers are the keys that unlock the treasures that God has reserved for us—"Therefore we must open the way to them by praying."<sup>52</sup> About a year after this sermon, Calvin published his final edition of the *Institutes*.

*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, definitive edition (1559)

As Calvin moved from the first edition of the *Institutes* in 1536 to the final edition in 1559, his analysis of prayer exploded from a mere eighteen pages to seventy.<sup>53</sup>

His first new section, which is the fifth in the final edition, deals with a practical subject: how to pray. He took only one sentence from the second edition and expanded on it. The section has two main points. The first concerns a universal struggle: our minds wander when we pray. Calvin admonished his readers to engage their minds and efforts zealously in prayer. Our minds must transcend the hindrance of irrelevant thoughts.<sup>54</sup>

His second point was that we ought not ask God for any more than He allows. While God promises to hear our prayers, we should not simply open our stupid and wicked emotions like a faucet.

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<sup>48</sup> John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Arthur Golding (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, reprint 1979).

<sup>49</sup> Publisher's Introduction, *Sermons on Ephesians*, viii.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 677.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 678: "Or the right way for us to show truly that his promises have been powerful in us, and that we trust to them is that as soon as we are touched with any grief or affliction, we go straight to him and unburden our hearts there." He also references Psalm 50:15 and Psalm 62:8.

<sup>52</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 678.

<sup>53</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 852. "Having obtained what we were seeking, and being convinced that he has answered our prayers, we should be led to meditate upon his kindness more ardently." "We embrace with greater delight those things which we acknowledge to have been obtained by prayers." By experience, we can know that "he promises never to fail us," that he "opens the way to call upon him," and that he will always defend us "with present help."

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.20.5, 854.

Calvin confessed that some pray to almighty God in a way that would embarrass them were they speaking with an equal.<sup>55</sup>

Two expanded sections address yet another practical concern: there are many times in which we do not feel obligated to pray.<sup>56</sup> We know that Paul tells us to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17), but because of our laziness, God sometimes pricks us so that we might pray more earnestly. No matter how rich our material blessings, each of us knows that we cannot enjoy a single bite of food without God's continuing favor. Thus, we may never fail to ask God for our daily bread. Even more, we need to be forgiven for our daily sins, and so we must turn regularly to God.<sup>57</sup>

Section 8 expanded specifically on the first edition of the *Institutes*, where Calvin had given two rules for prayer: to abandon thoughts of our own glory and to sense our own insufficiency and earnestly seek what we need from God. Now, he added a third rule, which combined parts of his thinking from the first and second editions and which included further biblical references that highlight the necessity to see our need and God's great mercy.<sup>58</sup>

In an entirely new ninth section, Calvin argued that the plea for the forgiveness of sins is the most important part of prayer. He demonstrated from biblical examples the foundational principle that any confidence in prayer must be founded solely on God's mercy. When the contrite believer fully confesses his sins to God and enjoys a clear conscience, then Christ is altogether lovely to him.<sup>59</sup>

Section 14 was a new, lengthy admonition for believers to pray confidently with reverential fear, but not terror, toward God. Calvin believed rightly that those who reverence and fear God, who lie prostrate in their attitude toward God, are often graciously lifted up by Him.<sup>60</sup>

The following section is also new. Calvin dealt with the perplexing problem of how God hearkens to perverted prayer. He wrestled with a number of biblical examples in which God hears prayers that either do not follow the prescribed biblical pattern for prayer or are offered by those who clearly do not have faith. His practical analysis of these examples concludes that the exception does not invalidate the rule of following the biblical pattern and that God demonstrates His great graciousness and tender mercy when He grants the petitions of the unregenerate.<sup>61</sup>

Section 16 specifically addressed what Calvin had written in sections 4, 5, and 6 on the rules for prayer. He admitted that while those rules are true, God does not reject prayers that do not tightly fit within Calvin's biblical framework. Rather, God "tolerates even our stammering and pardons our ignorance whenever something inadvertently escapes us."<sup>62</sup>

Calvin introduced a short but beautiful eighteenth section. It is a distinct biblical-theological analysis that compares and contrasts the nature of prayer under the law and after Christ's resurrection. At first, the priest entered God's presence bearing the names of the tribes of Israel on his shoulders, as well as corresponding gems on his breastplate, all of which signified the need for a Mediator to enter God's presence and to cleanse us through His blood. Later, before His crucifixion, Jesus told His disciples that, after the resurrection, they were to pray to God in His

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<sup>55</sup> Calvin mentioned in his Ephesians sermon that while God graciously condescends to us so that we can present all of our needs and godly wants to Him, yet we must do so in a reverent manner recognizing that we are simple subjects addressing the king of the universe. Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 678–79.

<sup>56</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.20.7, 857–58.

<sup>57</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.20.8, 859–60.

<sup>58</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.20.8, 859–60.

<sup>59</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.20.9, 860–61.

<sup>60</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.20.14, 869.

<sup>61</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.20.15, 870–72. Calvin analyzed Psalm 106; Psalm 107; Genesis 18, in which Abraham prays for Sodom; and 1 Samuel 15, in which Samuel prays for Saul.

<sup>62</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.20.16, 872.

name (John 16:26). Jesus took up the office of advocate and demonstrates that He was the foundation for Israel's prayers and is now an even more sure foundation for Christian petition.<sup>63</sup>

A final new addition, section 27, was a concluding refutation of the doctrine of the intercession of the saints. While Calvin expanded the length of his analysis of the Lord's Prayer in the final sections, he did not present any new ideas.

### Analysis

**First, on the nature of prayer.** The first edition of the *Institutes* taught that the fundamental source of prayer is the heart. Believers speak to God from the heart's affections, and true prayer springs from the heart's deep feeling. That same theme was repeated in the first Genevan Catechism: true prayer arises from the recesses of the heart and is not simply sputtered by the mouth. This is an excellent admonition for any of us who lead in public prayer. The purity and the passion of our hearts, not the beauty of our words, take precedence.

**Second, on the reasons for prayer.** Calvin's new section in the second edition of the *Institutes* was a benefit to me and, I hope, to you. In part, he taught that prayer causes our hearts to love God, to serve Him, and to stick to Him like a ship does to its anchor. Prayer strengthens our hearts with gratitude because it reminds us that benefits only come from His hand. Prayer makes us think more highly of God because He has answered our prayers. Prayer allows us to recognize that God is a true help to us in deeds and not simply in words.

**Third, on the Lord's Prayer.** Calvin's analysis of the first petition of the Lord's Prayer undergirds a Reformed Presbyterian distinctive—to advocate God-honoring civil laws. His analysis runs counter to the American evangelical notion of principled pluralism. Rather than tolerating the public recognition of both false religions and atheism, we ought to pray for the end of public ungodliness and actively petition our civil government to turn from its wicked path in our pastoral prayers on Sunday.

**Fourth, on preaching on prayer.** Calvin's preaching on prayer in Ephesians helps us learn how to apply God's Word. As he preached phrase by phrase from the text, Calvin made sure that his hearers understood what Paul meant by each section. For example, to pray "at all times" wasn't a chronological reference but an admonition to pray even when we enjoy prosperity and when we feel no need to pray.<sup>64</sup> To pray with diligence meant to offer ourselves in lowliness while rejoicing that we are able to come into the presence of our triune God.<sup>65</sup> Further, Calvin used a homiletical device that preachers can imitate: He took Paul's words and said to the congregation, "my friends, you will find such a coldness in yourselves that you will never pray to God, neither will you ever aspire to pray, unless you urge and force yourselves."<sup>66</sup> Such a paraphrase of Scripture in the current vernacular is a helpful means by which to preach the Word.

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<sup>63</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.20.19, 875–76.

<sup>64</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 681.

<sup>65</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 682.

<sup>66</sup> Calvin, *Sermons on Ephesians*, 658.