

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 20 – Part 1

PRAYER WHICH IS THE CHIEF EXERCISE OF FAITH

In this chapter Calvin offers us an in-depth look at prayer. Though people often think of Calvin as a dry, intellectual theologian, he was in fact a man deeply devoted to prayer. His faith was not merely intellectual, but driven by a desire to personally connect with God.

**Summary:** Calvin begins his discussion of prayer by reminding his readers that since we, as human beings, are incapable of saving ourselves, then we have to seek that saving power elsewhere. We can find that power and more outside of ourselves in Jesus Christ who “...offers all happiness in place of our misery; all wealth in place of our neediness;” (pg. 850). And it is by prayer that we can have access to this “overflowing spring” of God’s grace and love in Jesus Christ. Calvin compares people who do not turn to God to find these gifts to a person who neglects “...a treasure, buried and hidden in the earth, after it had been pointed out to him” (pg. 850). He continues that “it is therefore by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches that are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father...so true it is that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord’s gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon” (pg. 851).

At this point, Calvin take up the question of, “Is prayer...superfluous?” (pg. 851). “But, someone will say, does God not know, even without being reminded, both in what respect we are troubled and what is expedient for us, so that it may seem superfluous that he should be stirred up by our prayers-as if He were drowsily blinking or even sleeping until aroused by our voice?” (pg. 852). Calvin’s response to this line of questioning is that prayer is not for God’s sake (meaning to get God to be aware of our needs) as it is for our sake (to keep us oriented to God and to recognize the good that God has done for us). He adds that prayer is a duty that will keep our faith from being “sloppy or sluggish” (pg. 852) as we lay our desires before God. Calvin then offers the following reasons to pray. And I will let Calvin speak for himself.

First, that “...our hearts might be fired with a...burning desire ever to seek, love and serve God, while we become accustomed to seek him as to a sacred anchor. Second, that there may enter into our hearts no desire or wish at all of which we should be ashamed to make with him as a witness, while we learn to set all of our wishes before his eyes, and even to pour out our whole hearts. Thirdly, that we be prepared to receive his benefits with true gratitude of heart and thanksgiving, benefits that our prayers remind us come from his hand. Fourthly, moreover, that having obtained what we are seeking, and being convinced that he has answered our prayers, we should be led to meditate upon his kindness more ardently. Fifthly, that at the same time we embrace with greater delight those things where we acknowledge to have been obtained by prayers. Finally, that...experience may...confirm his providence, while we understand not only that he promises never to fail us...but also extends his hand to help his own...” (pg. 852).

And what about those times when our prayers are not immediately answered? “On account of these things, our most merciful Father, although he never either sleeps or idles, still very often gives the impression of one sleeping or idling in order that he may thus train us...to seek, ask and entreat him to our great good” (pg. 853). Calvin finishes this section with a reminder that God is always willing “to hear our groanings that he may better prove his love for us” (pg. 853).

**Reflection:** For all of Calvin’s rather dogmatic theology, he offers us an image of a God whose love for us is overwhelming and who desires that we be in relationship with God through prayer. Prayer is the channel, or highway, if you will, by which God’s love for us and our love for God travel back and forth. It is the place where our desires and God’s plans meet. When we fail to pray, we fail to discover all that God has planned for us and we miss out on the comfort of heart and mind that can be ours.

**Questions:**

1. What is your understanding of prayer?
2. What do you think of Calvin’s reasons to pray? Which one do like the most?
3. How do you handle those times when it seems as if God is asleep or idle?