

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 20 – Part 11

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. In this section Calvin concludes his examination of the Lord's Prayer in particular and prayer in general.

**Summary:** Calvin concludes his teaching on the Lord's Prayer by reminding his readers about the importance of public prayer. *"...that the prayers of Christians ought to be public, and to look to the public edification of the church and the advancement of believers' fellowship. For each man does not pray that something be given to him privately, but all of us in common ask for our bread, forgiveness of sins, not be led into temptation and to be freed from evil"* (pg. 916). Thus, for Calvin, the Lord's Prayer has a place in the worship life of the community because it binds us all together in one common prayer before God. In addition, this prayer is appropriate for worship because it 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 approved by God. For in this summary (the prayer itself) he has set forth what is worthy of him, acceptable to him, necessary for us, in effect what he would willingly grant"* (pg. 916).

Even so, Calvin makes it clear that the prayer *"...does not bind us to its form of words but its content"* (pg. 917). He intends two things by his statement. The first is that there are many prayers in scripture and many prayers that the Spirit will lead believers to pray, and these prayers are good and right. Second, he means *"only this: that no man should ask for, expect, demand, anything at all except what is included, by way of summary, in this prayer; and though the words be utterly different, yet the sense ought not to vary"* (pr. 917). He concludes, *"Here nothing is left out that ought to be thought of in praises to God, nothing that ought to come into man's mind for his own welfare...to sum up, let us remember that this is the teaching of Divine Wisdom, teaching that it willed and willing what was needful"* (pg. 917).

Before he concludes his teaching on prayer, Calvin touches on three subjects. The first is the question of when to pray. He believes that it is important to *"set apart certain hours for this exercise"* including *"when we arise in the morning, before we begin our daily work, when we sit down to a meal, when by God's blessing we have eaten, when we are getting ready to retire"* (pg. 917-18). The second is that we should remember that our prayers are not intended to *"bind God to particular circumstances, or to prescribe at what time, in what place, or in what way he is to do anything"* (pg. 918). In other words, we are to trust that God will fulfill God's promises in God's time and God's way. The third is that just because our prayers are not answered in the manner and timing that we ask, it does not mean that God has not heard our prayers. Thus, we are not to cease praying when our prayers are not responded to as we please. As Calvin puts it, *"...we shall be sure that even though he does not appear, he is always present to us, and will in his own time declare how he has never had deaf ears to our prayers..."* (pg. 918).

**Reflection:** A friend of mine once said that God answers prayers in three ways; yes, no and wait. This makes sense when we see prayer as simply talking to God. It is a conversation into which God invites us in order that our hearts can be regularly attuned to God's love, forgiveness and purpose. It is our opportunity to pour out to God our thanks, our needs and our concerns for others and for the world. My prayer is that you will discover the value and joy of these conversations as you open yourself to God.

**Questions:**

1. On what occasions (hours) do you pray? Why those?
2. For what and for whom do you pray? Why?
3. Where have you seen some of your payers answered? Not answered? How do you deal with the latter?