

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 20 – Part 5

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 article we will examine the Fourth Rule: We pray with confident hope.

Summary: This section is the conclusion of Calvin’s “level one” teaching on prayer. He will later spend time looking at Jesus’ role in prayer and at the Lord’s prayer, but here he wraps up his basic discussion. He does so through a series of observations.

Observation one reminds us that our faith should encourage us “...to pray by a sure hope that our prayers will be answered” (pg. 862). This faith is the belief that God loves us and forgives us, such that God not only hears, but responds to our prayers. In addition, faith should encourage us to pray not only when everything appears to be going our way but, even more so, when we find ourselves in times of distress. “But for the saints the occasion that best stimulates them to call upon God is when...they are troubled by their greatest need...” (pg. 863).

Observation two is that prayers are to be based in hope. Calvin puts it this way. “If we would pray fruitfully, we ought therefore to grasp with both hands this assurance of obtaining what we ask, which the Lord enjoins with his own voice...for only that prayer is acceptable to God which is...grounded in unshaken assurance of hope” (pg. 865). Though Calvin is clear that we may not always get what we ask for, he is clear that we are to always hope for that for which we pray.

Observation three is that God commands us to pray. While this may appear to be a bit odd, that we are commanded to pray, Calvin reminds his readers that prayer is the connection between ourselves and God, and when we neglect it, we disconnect ourselves from the fuel that keeps our ardor with God alive and brightly burning. Thus God desires to hear from us that God might offer us all that we need.

Observation four is that all of our prayers are grounded in God’s promises. Calvin writes, “It is strange that by promises of such great sweetness that many of us prefer to wander through mazes...rather than to embrace God’s generosity, freely given to us” (pg. 867). His point being that God has promised us love, forgiveness, guidance and support and that we can either connect to these gifts through prayer, or simply wander through life trying to find them on our own.

Observation five is that God hears all prayers. Calvin believes that all prayers, and not just those of Christians, with faith, not only reach the ears of God but that God often answers them. “And one Psalm clearly teaches that prayers which do not reach heaven by faith still are not without effect...yet from the outcome (of prayers from non-Christians) proves that God is gracious towards them” (pg. 870-1). God does this to show God’s mercy to non-Christians as well as to encourage believers to pray even more.

Observation six is that we obtain all that we obtain in prayer because of God’s forgiveness. Calvin believes that because God forgives and reconciles us, that regardless of the perfection, or imperfection of our hearts, or the perfection or imperfection of our prayers, those prayers will be heard and acted upon by God.

Reflection: If one goes into a Christian bookstore, one will find multiple books on prayer purporting to tell us how make sure we get what we pray for, as if there is some magic formula we can use. Calvin reminds us that prayer is not magic, but that is it an intimate conversation with our Creator. And we pray so that we can find forgiveness, direction, encouragement and help. Prayer was at the heart of Calvin’s life, and I hope it will be at the heart of ours as well.

Questions:

1. What does it mean to you to pray with hope?
2. Where have God’s promises to you been revealed through answers to your prayers?
3. What do you think of Calvin’s contention that God hears all prayers of all people?