

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 3 – Chapter 20 – Part 8

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 begins an in-depth look at the Lord's Prayer.

**Summary:** Calvin believes that the Lord's Prayer is a necessity for us. *"Now we must learn not only a more certain way of praying but also the form itself; namely that which the Heavenly Father has taught us through his beloved Son, in which we may acknowledge his boundless goodness and clemency...for he prescribed a form for us in which he set forth as in a table all that he allows us to seek of him, all that is of benefit to us, all that we need to ask...that we know we are requesting nothing absurd, nothing strange...since we are asking in his words"* (pg. 897). The prayer, in Calvin's understanding is divided into six petitions. The first three are about God's glory and the second three deal with our own need.

**"Our Father"** – Calvin sees these opening words as pointing to Christ. *"For in calling God, "Father", we put forward the name "Christ." With what confidence would anyone address God as "Father?" Who would break forth into such rashness as to claim for himself the honor of a son of God unless we had been adopted as children of grace in Christ"* (pg. 899)? In other words we have been adopted as brothers and sisters of Christ who was and is the Son of God, and thus we become children of God as well, allowing us to speak to God as our Father.

The upshot of this is that we can come to God as those who are free *"...from all distrust, since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father. Therefore, he could not attest his own boundless love toward us with any surer proof than the fact that we are called children of God"* (pg. 899). He continues, *"But just as he surpasses all men in goodness and mercy, so is his love greater and more excellent than all our parent's love. Hence, though all earthly father, should divest themselves of all feelings of fatherhood and forsake their children, he will never fail us"* (Pg. 899). In other words, even if earthly fathers forsake their children, God would never do so because God is *"...not only a father but far the best and kindest of all fathers..."* (pg. 900).

By addressing God as "Our Father" we are not only connected to God but to all who call upon God in the same way; they are our brothers and sisters. Calvin writes that this connection to God and to one another ought to create a *"...great feeling of brotherly love to be among us, since by the same right of mercy...we are equally children of such a father"* (pg. 901). This familial connection is not only one in the local church but extends to *"...all men who dwell on earth"* (pg. 901).

**"Our Father in heaven."** Calvin wants his readers to understand that this language does not mean that God resides only in heaven, but instead is *"...set beyond all place, so that when we would seek him we must rise above all perception of body and soul...is lifted beyond all chance of either corruption or change...and holds together the entire universe and controls it by his might"* (pg. 903). In summary then we are to give God the glory God deserves because of God's love and care and our adoption as God's children.

**Reflection:** Even though Calvin has a very high and sometimes stern view of God, we can also see here his sense that God's love is an ever-present and life-transforming power. Perhaps this is where we ought to start with the Lord's Prayer, that we are reminded that God is the constant love that always enfolds and forgives us; that even when all others fail us, we can turn to God and find the one who is there for us and with us.

**Questions:**

1. What does it mean for you to call God, Father?
2. How do you see this prayer connecting you with other Christians?
3. What does it mean to you to see God as being "in heaven?"