

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 20 – Part 9

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 offers an in-depth look at the Lord's Prayer. In the previous article we examined "Our Father, who art in heaven." Here we look at the first three (out of six) petitions which make up the prayer.

Summary: Holy be your name (Petition 1): Calvin wants his readers to understand that we are to give God's name (and by extension God's own self) the honor God so richly deserves. We are to do so because in God we see "*...might, goodness, wisdom, righteousness, mercy, truth...*" (pg. 904). All of which means that we are to speak of God with great reverence, rather than using God's name as a "profanity." We can demonstrate God's holiness by offering words of praise as well as by giving God, God's own due, meaning that our lives are ordered in the way God has taught us in Jesus Christ.

Thy Kingdom Come (Petition 2): The Kingdom of God for Calvin, exists wherever people deny themselves and the world and then pledge themselves to God in order to "*...aspire to a heavenly life*" (pg. 905). This allows God, through the Spirit to reorient people's lives to God's will and shape their actions to God's rule. Thus, when we pray this petition, we are asking God not only to align our hearts and minds with God's will but "*...to bring all men's minds and hearts into voluntary obedience*" to God's will as well. This reorienting work will be done by God directly, as well as indirectly through the church. Calvin encourages the planting of churches in order that people can come to know what it means to follow God and see God's "*...light and truth*" (pg. 906).

Thy Will be Done on Earth as it is in Heaven (Petition 3): In this petition Calvin begins by making a distinction between God's secret will and God's will or desire, to which we as human beings ought to align ourselves. God's secret will for Calvin is God's will which "*...controls all things and directs them to his will*" (pg. 906). This is a reminder for us that Calvin views God as completely sovereign, meaning everything that happens in the world happens exactly as God directs it to happen. At the same time Calvin believes that we can choose how we orient our hearts to what God is doing in our lives. And what we ought to desire is that God "*...rule us according to his decision*" thereby creating "*new hearts and minds in us...*" (pg. 907).

Conclusion: Calvin wraps up the first part of the prayer (the first three petitions) with some concluding remarks. First, he reminds us that we are to begin our prayers by keeping God's glory before our eyes, while setting aside our needs for later. Second, we are to realize that God's kingdom will come and God's will, will be done regardless of any "*...thought or desire or petition of ours*" (pg. 907). Even so we ought to still pray for them because it demonstrates that we are servants and children of God.

Reflection: It might be helpful for us to look at these petitions from the point of view of First Century Judaism. To pray that God's Kingdom come was asking God to complete God's work of restoring creation to its original form; one in which people loved God, loved neighbor and cared for God's creation. It was more than an internal reorientation of people's hearts (though that is part of it). It was asking that God fulfill God's promises to save the world in the here and now.

Questions:

1. What does it mean to you to ask that God's name be made holy?
2. What does God's kingdom look like to you?
3. How do you try and align yourself with God's will in your life?