

Lifting up Our Hearts

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150 Selected Prayers from John Calvin



Edited by
Dustin W. Bengé



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Lifting up Our Hearts

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dad and mom,

who have stood at my side—
encouraging, praying, and supporting—
every step of the journey

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have stood at my side, helping me on the journey. Through my ministry they have undergirded me with continual prayer, and it is only fitting that this book of prayers be in thanks for their countless hours before the throne of God on my behalf.

“Let us search and try our ways,
and turn again to the LORD.
Let us lift up our heart with our hands
unto God in the heavens.”

—LAMENTATIONS 3:40-41

LIFTING UP HIS HEART: The Life and Ministry of John Calvin

After five hundred years of stories, legends, and myths, the emerged caricature of John Calvin (1509–1564) has been one of an emaciated recluse—shut up in a musty study surrounded by books and parchments, content to live life in the shadows. Calvin biographer Bruce Gordon asks the question, “What would it have been like to have known John Calvin?”¹ Many answers have poured forth through the years. Reformation historian J. H. Merle D’Aubigné provides insight into a typical week of Calvin’s life:

On Sundays [Calvin] conducted divine service, and had daily service every other week. He devoted three hours in each week to theological teaching; he visited the sick, and administered private reproof. He received strangers; attended the consistory on Thursday, and directed its deliberations; on Friday was present at the conference on Scripture, called the *congregation*; and, after the minister in office of the day had presented his views on some passage of Scripture, and the other pastors had made their remarks, Calvin added some observations, which were *a kind of lecture*.... The week in which he did not

1. Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 146.

preach was filled up with other duties; and he had duties of every kind. In particular, he devoted much attention to the refugees who flocked to Geneva, driven by persecution out of France and Italy; he taught and exhorted them. He consoled, by his letters, “those who were still in the jaws of the lion”; he interceded for them. In his study he threw light on the sacred writings by admirable commentaries, and confuted the writings of the enemies of the gospel.²

This is the portrait of a man who loved God, was passionate about the gospel, and dedicated his life to the growth of others in the Christian faith—far from the recluse that is often depicted.

Early Life

Two years after Reformation hero Martin Luther (1483–1546) was ordained to the priesthood, a son named John was born to Gerard and Jeanne Cauvin on July 10, 1509, fifty miles northeast of Paris in Noyon, France.³ Gerard Cauvin noticed John possessed great gifts for learning and sought to provide a first-class education for him. Initially, Calvin (the name by which we have come to know him) began his studies for the priesthood, but in 1526 he abandoned such studies for the study of law—at the insistence of his father. The reason for this change of plan is unknown, but it is widely thought that Calvin’s father began experiencing trouble with Roman Catholic Church authorities, which finally culminated in his excommunication on November 2,

2. J. H. Merle D’Aubigné, *History of the Reformation in Europe in the Time of Calvin* (1880; repr., Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 2000), 7:82.

3. W. Robert Godfrey, *John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2009), 23.

1528.⁴ After his father's death, Calvin was freed from his obligations to be a law student. He quickly returned to his study of the Greek and Latin authors, as he desired to become a Renaissance scholar.

A Sudden Conversion

It is unclear when John Calvin became a true Christian. But more important than the date of his conversion is that Calvin embraced Christ and never looked back. Sinclair Ferguson observes, "By whatever means, whether slow or sudden, Calvin's conversion took place. His stubborn addiction to the papacy was broken and his heart subdued."⁵ Soon after his conversion, Calvin adopted the personal motto "Lord, I offer my heart to Thee, promptly, and sincerely." To accompany the motto, he designed a symbol with an open hand holding a heart between the letters *J* and *C*, signifying his lifting up his heart in service to God. After his radical conversion, he embraced the tenets of the ever widening Reformation. One early fruit of his conversion was the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, published when he was only twenty-six years old.⁶ The *Institutes* proved to be more than just a systematic theology; it was a manual for Christian piety and devotion leading the student of the Bible to delve deeply into the Scriptures with confidence.⁷ Calvin saw the *Institutes* as a work in progress, which he would add to and edit for the remainder of his life. It was

4. Godfrey, *Pilgrim and Pastor*, 26.

5. Sinclair B. Ferguson, "Calvin the Man: A Heart Aflame," in *Calvin, Theologian and Reformer*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Garry J. Williams (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 15.

6. Godfrey, *Pilgrim and Pastor*, 33.

7. J. Mark Beach, *Piety's Wisdom* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 10.

clear through this work that Calvin would emerge as the preeminent theologian of the Reformation.

Pastoral Ministry

With mounting religious tension, Calvin decided he needed a permanent residence outside of France. He chose the city of Strasbourg as a place where he could settle into a quiet life of study and scholarship.⁸ In 1536, due to military conflict in the region, Calvin chose an indirect travel route to Strasbourg, which led him to spend the night in the city of Geneva, Switzerland. By God's providence, a friend, William Farel, urged Calvin to remain in Geneva and help with Reformation efforts in the city. Farel continually prodded Calvin, and although it was with great resistance, Calvin stayed in Geneva, viewing his life there as "being under the curse of God."⁹ The early years in Geneva proved to be extremely difficult, with much opposition from the people and the town leaders. The constant friction came to a critical point on Easter Sunday of 1538. Calvin and other ministers preached but refused to serve the Lord's Supper. Because they took this stand, they were instructed to leave the city.

During Calvin's two-year exile, he moved to Strasbourg and came under the encouragement and mentorship of fellow pastor Martin Bucer. Under Bucer's tutelage and example, Calvin grew in his faith and pastoral ministry. In August 1540, Calvin married Idelette de Bure. They would enjoy a happy but short marriage, having only one child

8. Godfrey, *Pilgrim and Pastor*, 35.

9. Ferguson, "Calvin the Man," 17.

who died in infancy in 1542.¹⁰ Calvin considered his time in Strasbourg to be the happiest of his life.

In 1540, Calvin was invited to return to his pastoral post in Geneva. He returned to Geneva a much different and more mature man than when he left. By 1541, he found a sense of great stability and productivity in the city. During this time, he increased the size of his *Institutes* and began his multiple-volume commentary series. Calvin wrote extensively in theology and biblical studies, providing, as a pastor, a framework that other Reformed pastors would seek to emulate. He trained pastors, encouraged fellow Christians through letters, sought to reform Geneva and surrounding areas, restructured education for children, preached thousands of sermons, and became a model of Reformation theology and thought. Calvin would remain in Geneva until his death in 1564. As a result of Calvin's pastoral work in Geneva, the city became, according to John Knox, "the most perfect school of Christ since the days of the apostles."

A Man of Prayer

The student of John Calvin is aware of the theologian's extensive writing on the subject of prayer. In book 3 of the *Institutes* Calvin writes, "For there is a kind of intercourse between God and men, by which, having entered the upper sanctuary, they appear before Him and appeal to His promises, that when necessity requires, they may learn by experience that what they believed merely on the authority of His word was not in vain."¹¹ When we examine the *Institutes*,

10. Ferguson, "Calvin the Man," 19.

11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 3.20.2.

we see that Calvin understood how important prayer is to the Christian life, but we come to a firmer grasp of how the Reformer viewed prayer by examining his personal prayers.

According to Ford Lewis Battles in *The Piety of John Calvin*, there are three main channels through which Calvin's prayers have come to us: (1) the Strasbourg and Geneva liturgies, (2) his sermons, and (3) his lectures on the Old Testament prophets.¹² The editors of the *Corpus Reformatorum*¹³ decided not to include most of Calvin's prayers from his sermons or lectures because of their close similarities. Therefore, it is necessary to go to earlier publications of Calvin's works to find the prayers from the final two categories. Thankfully, however, the Calvin Translation Society chose to include the prayers from his Old Testament lectures in its edition of the Old Testament commentaries. In addition to preaching from the New Testament and Psalms on Sundays at St. Pierre in Geneva, Calvin also delivered numerous lectures during weekdays at the Geneva Academy. These lectures primarily consisted of expositions of Old Testament texts and, in time, due to the work of secretaries and transcribers, eventually became Calvin's Old Testament commentaries. Bruce Gordon points out, "In his theological and pastoral work Calvin's example was Paul, but when he entered the pulpit it was the prophets of the Old Testament who loomed large."¹⁴ His Old Testament series addressed the

12. Ford Lewis Battles, trans. and ed., *The Piety of John Calvin* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2009), 151.

13. The *Corpus Reformatorum* is the general Latin title given to a large collection of Reformation writings containing reprints of the collected works of John Calvin, Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), and Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531). Texts in this work are provided in Latin, French, or German.

14. Gordon, *Calvin*, 293.

following books: Jeremiah and Lamentations (up to 1550); the Minor Prophets and Daniel (1550–1552); Ezekiel (174 sermons, 1552–1554); Job (159 sermons, 1554–1555); Deuteronomy (200 sermons, 1555–1556); Isaiah (342 sermons, 1556–1559); Genesis (123 sermons); Judges (a short series); 1 Samuel (107 sermons) and 2 Samuel (87 sermons); and 1 Kings (a sermon series).¹⁵ Among the great blessings of these dictated lectures are the sound biblical content of the scriptural text Calvin expounded as well as his numerous prayers, which accompany each lecture. Calvin always began his lecture with an unvaried prayer: “May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion and to our edification.”¹⁶ His concluding prayer to each lecture seems to be more extemporaneous, reflecting on the text he had just taught.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin suggests six ways prayer contributes to our growth in Christ:

- (1) it inflames our hearts with the desire to seek, love, and serve God;
- (2) it trains us to expose the secrets and desires of our hearts to God;
- (3) it promotes gratitude;
- (4) it leads to meditation on God’s kindness as a result of His having answered our prayers;
- (5) it produces even greater joy in those things that we have obtained through prayer; and
- (6) finally, it serves as a personal confirmation of God’s providence.¹⁷

15. T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1975), 92.

16. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 9:26.

17. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.3; for Calvin on prayer, see “The Communion of Men with God,” by Joel R. Beeke, in *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion*,

The Purpose of This Work

For centuries, with only a few exceptions, Calvin's prayers have remained buried within the pages of his Old Testament commentaries. Over a year ago I began to compile these prayers into a format that would make them accessible to the wider Christian community. While all of Calvin's prayers would prove to be richly edifying to the reader, it has been my purpose to provide a selection of prayers that will aid your personal prayer time. In this book you will find 150 of Calvin's prayers, arranged by subject, along with the Scripture passage on which Calvin was lecturing. Each prayer relates to the theme of the biblical text Calvin was expounding, which is why the Scripture text has been included. With the Spirit's blessing, the prayers will awaken your affections for the glory of God and point you to Christ, the one of whom all the Scriptures speak. Prayers are arranged thematically in sections, and each section begins with a quotation from the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

These prayers should not take the place of your regular daily communication with God in prayer but are provided with a devotional purpose, as a tool to lead you into prayer. It is my great and most sincere hope that Christians would learn not only how to pray, read good books on prayer, and talk about prayer but also ultimately engage themselves in prayer. Calvin never thought prayer was a vain exercise to a God who was not involved in the welfare of His people. Calvin saw prayer as intimate communion with the living God who cared enough about His own people that He sent His Son, the Lord Jesus

Doctrine, and Doxology, ed. Burk Parsons (Lake Mary, Fla.: Reformation Trust, 2008), 231–46.

Christ, to be the mediator between God and man. Use this volume as an aid in expanding your prayer life in obedience to Paul's command in 1 Thessalonians 5:17: "Pray without ceasing."

THE WORD OF GOD



The highest proof of Scripture is uniformly taken from the character of Him whose word it is. The prophets and apostles boast not their own acuteness or any qualities which win credit to speakers, nor do they dwell on reasons; but they appeal to the sacred name of God, in order that the whole world may be compelled to submission.



Ezekiel 20:13–20

But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness: they walked not in my statutes, and they despised my judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them; and my sabbaths they greatly polluted: then I said, I would pour out my fury upon them in the wilderness, to consume them. But I wrought for my name's sake, that it should not be polluted before the heathen, in whose sight I brought them out. Yet also I lifted up my hand unto them in the wilderness, that I would not bring them into the land which I had given them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the glory of all lands; because they despised my judgments, and walked not in my statutes, but polluted my sabbaths: for their heart went after their idols. Nevertheless mine eye spared them from destroying them, neither did I make an end of them in the wilderness. But I said unto their children in the wilderness, Walk ye not in the statutes of your fathers, neither observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols: I am the LORD your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; and hallow my sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between me and you, that ye may know that I am the LORD your God.



Teachable and Flexible Disposition

Grant, Almighty God,
since the doctrine of Thy gospel sounds daily in
our ears when Thou invitest us so kindly by Thy
amazing clemency and stretch out Thy hand
by Thine only begotten Son—

Grant, I pray Thee, that we may be of a teachable and
flexible disposition, and that we may sincerely
submit to Thee.

And since Thy law contains so many dreadful examples of
Thy wrath, may we be moved by them,
and may we walk with fear and trembling in obedience
to Thy Word, that at length we may enjoy that
inheritance Thou hast promised for us
in Thy heavenly kingdom, by the same Christ
our Lord. Amen.



Daniel 2:3–9

And the king said unto them, I have dreamed a dream, and my spirit was troubled to know the dream. Then spake the Chaldeans to the king in Syriack, O king, live for ever: tell thy servants the dream, and we will shew the interpretation. The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, The thing is gone from me: if ye will not make known unto me the dream, with the interpretation thereof, ye shall be cut in pieces, and your houses shall be made a dunghill. But if ye shew the dream, and the interpretation thereof, ye shall receive of me gifts and rewards and great honour: therefore shew me the dream, and the interpretation thereof. They answered again and said, Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will shew the interpretation of it. The king answered and said, I know of certainty that ye would gain the time, because ye see the thing is gone from me. But if ye will not make known unto me the dream, there is but one decree for you: for ye have prepared lying and corrupt words to speak before me, till the time be changed: therefore tell me the dream, and I shall know that ye can shew me the interpretation thereof.



Pilgrimage in This World

Grant, Almighty God,
since during our pilgrimage in this world we
have daily need of the teaching and government
of Thy Spirit,
that with true modesty we may depend on Thy Word
and secret inspiration and not take too much on
ourselves.

Grant, also, that we may be conscious of our ignorance,
blindness, and stupidity, and always flee to Thee,
and never permit ourselves to be drawn aside in any way
by the cunning of Satan and of the ungodly.

May we remain so fixed in Thy truth as never to turn aside
from it whilst Thou dost direct us through
the whole course of our vocation,
and then may we arrive at that heavenly glory that has
been obtained for us through the blood
of Thine only begotten Son. Amen.



Jeremiah 19:1–5

Thus saith the LORD, Go and get a potter's earthen bottle, and take of the ancients of the people, and of the ancients of the priests; and go forth unto the valley of the son of Hinnom, which is by the entry of the east gate, and proclaim there the words that I shall tell thee, and say, Hear ye the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah, and inhabitants of Jerusalem; Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, the which whosoever heareth, his ears shall tingle. Because they have forsaken me, and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it unto other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known, nor the kings of Judah, and have filled this place with the blood of innocents; they have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind.



Wholly Subject to Thee

Grant, Almighty God,
that since Thou hast been pleased to show to us
the way in which we cannot err, provided we
obey Thee—

O grant that we may render ourselves really teachable and
ready to obey, and never undertake anything but
what we know is approved by Thee nor turn aside
on the right hand or on the left;
but continue in that form of worship Thou hast
prescribed to us in Thy Word, so that we may be
able to bear witness, not only before the world,
but before Thee and the holy angels, that we
obediently follow Thee.

And may we never blend anything of our own, but with
submissive minds worship Thee alone and strive to
render ourselves wholly subject to Thee until, having at
length rendered to Thee due service through the whole
course of our life, we shall reach that blessed rest Thy
Son has procured for us by His own blood. Amen.