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CALVIN ON PRAYER

*Taken from the
INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION*

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Calvin on Prayer is a reprint of Book Three Chapter XX from Calvin's masterwork of theology, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which the publishers desire to introduce to a modern generation of readers. Therefore, we have undertaken careful improvements in the punctuation and minor editing of the translation by Henry Beveridge, originally published in 1599, while remaining true to the meaning of Calvin's original in Latin, published in 1536. To ensure accuracy we have consulted the translation of Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster Press, 1960 edition) as authority for resolving all questions of wording.

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Sections 1-3 Overview of Prayer

Section 1 Introduction

From the previous part of the work, we clearly see how completely destitute man is of all good and how devoid of every means of procuring his own salvation. Hence, if he would obtain succor¹ in his necessity, he must go beyond himself and procure it in some other quarter. It has farther been shown that the Lord kindly and spontaneously manifests Himself in Christ, in whom He offers all happiness for our misery, all abundance for our want, opening up the treasures of heaven to us, so that we may turn with full faith to His beloved Son, depend upon Him with full expectation, rest in Him, and cleave to Him with full hope. This, indeed, is that secret and hidden philosophy that cannot be learned by syllogisms:² a philosophy thoroughly understood by those whose eyes God has so opened as to see light in His light (Psa 36:9).

But after we have learned by faith to know that whatever is necessary for us or defective in us is supplied in God and in our Lord Jesus Christ, in Whom it hath pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell (Col 1:19; John 1:16), that we may thence draw as from an inexhaustible fountain, it remains for us to seek and in prayer implore of Him what we have learned to be in Him. To know God as the sovereign disposer of all good, inviting us to present our requests, and yet not to approach or ask of Him, were so far from availing us, that it were just as if one told of a treasure were to allow it to remain buried in the ground. Hence, the Apostle, to show that a faith unaccompanied with prayer to God cannot be genuine, states this to be the order: as faith springs from the Gospel, so by faith our hearts are framed to call upon the name of God (Rom 10:14-17). And this is the very thing that he had expressed some time before—i.e., that the Spirit of adoption,³ which seals the testimony of the Gospel on our hearts (Rom 8:16), gives us courage to make our requests known unto God, calls forth groanings⁴ (Rom 8:26) that cannot be uttered, and enables us to cry, “Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15).

This last point, as we have hitherto only touched upon it slightly in passing, must now be treated more fully.

Section 2 Prayer: Definition, Necessity, and Use

To *prayer*, then, are we indebted for penetrating to those riches that are treasured up for us with our heavenly Father. For there is a kind of intercourse⁵ 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 experiences that what they believed, merely on the authority of His Word, was not in vain. Accordingly, we see that nothing is set before us as an object of expectation from the Lord that we are not enjoined to ask of Him in prayer, so true it is that prayer digs up those treasures that the Gospel of our Lord discovers⁶ to the eye of faith.

The necessity and utility of this exercise of prayer no words can sufficiently express. Assuredly, it is not without cause our heavenly Father declares that our only safety is in calling upon His name (Joe 2:32). By it, we invoke the presence of His providence⁷ to watch over our interests; of His power to sustain us when weak and almost fainting; of His goodness to receive us into favor, though miserably loaded with sin; in fine,⁸ [we] call upon Him to manifest Himself to us in all His perfections. Hence, admirable peace and tranquility are given to our consciences; for the [necessities] by which we were pressed being laid before the Lord, we rest fully satisfied with the assurance that none of our evils are unknown to Him, and that He is both able and willing to make the best provision for us.

Section 3 Why We Must Pray

But someone will say, does He not know without a monitor⁹ both what our difficulties are and what is meet¹⁰ for our interest, so that it seems in some measure superfluous¹¹ to solicit Him by our prayers, as if He were winking, or even sleeping, until aroused by the sound of our voice? Those who argue thus attend not to the end for which the Lord taught us to pray. It was not

¹ **succor** – help.

² **syllogisms** – crafty or deductive reasoning.

³ **adoption** – an act of God’s free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God.—*Spurgeon’s Catechism, Q. 33*

⁴ **groanings** – long, low utterances or sighs, expressing great concern or stress.

⁵ **intercourse** – communion.

⁶ **discovers** – reveals.

⁷ **providence** – God’s...most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures, and all their actions.—*Spurgeon’s Catechism, Q. 11 (available from Chapel Library)*

⁸ **in fine** – in short; to sum up.

⁹ **monitor** – one who advises another to do something.

¹⁰ **meet** – suitable; proper.

¹¹ **superfluous** – unnecessary.

so much for His sake as for *ours*. He wills indeed, as is just, that due honor be paid Him by acknowledging that all that men desire or feel to be useful and pray to obtain is derived from Him. But even the benefit of the homage that we thus pay Him redounds¹² to ourselves. Hence the holy patriarchs, the more confidently they proclaimed the mercies of God to themselves and others, felt the stronger incitement to prayer. It will be sufficient to refer to the example of Elijah, who being assured of the purpose of God had good ground for the promise of rain that he gives to Ahab, and yet prays anxiously upon his knees, and sends his servant seven times to inquire (1Ki 18:42); not that he discredits the oracle, but because he knows it to be his duty to lay his desires before God, lest his faith should become drowsy or torpid.¹³

Wherefore, although it is true that while we are listless or insensible to our wretchedness, He wakes and watches for us and sometimes even assists us unasked. It is very much for our interest to be constantly supplicating Him: first, that our heart may always be inflamed with a serious and ardent desire of seeking, loving, and serving Him, while we accustom ourselves to have recourse to Him as a sacred anchor in every necessity; secondly, that no desires, no longing whatever, of which we are ashamed to make Him the witness, may enter our minds, while we learn to place all our wishes in His sight and thus pour out our heart before Him; and, lastly, that we may be prepared to receive all His benefits with true gratitude and thanksgiving, while our prayers remind us that they proceed from His hand. Moreover, having obtained what we asked, being persuaded that He has answered our prayers, we are led to long more earnestly for His favor, and at the same time have greater pleasure in welcoming the blessings that we perceive to have been obtained by our prayers. Lastly, use and experience confirm the thought of His providence in our minds in a manner adapted to our weakness, when we understand that He not only promises that He will never fail us, and spontaneously gives us access to approach Him in every time of need, but has His hand always stretched out to assist His people, not amusing them with words, but proving Himself to be a present aid.

For these reasons, though our most merciful Father never slumbers nor sleeps, He very often seems to do so, that thus He may exercise us, when we might otherwise be listless and slothful,¹⁴ in asking, entreating, and earnestly beseeching Him to our great good. It is very absurd, therefore, to dissuade men from prayer, by pretending that Divine Providence, which is always watching over the government of the universes, is in vain importuned¹⁵ by our supplications. On the contrary, the Lord Himself declares that He is “nigh unto all that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth” (Psa 145:18). No better is the frivolous allegation of others that it is superfluous to pray for things that the Lord is ready of His own accord to bestow; since it is His pleasure that those very things that flow from His spontaneous liberality should be acknowledged as conceded to our prayers. This is testified by that memorable sentence in the psalms to which many others corresponds: “The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry” (Psa 34:15; 1Pe 3:12). This passage, while extolling the care that Divine Providence spontaneously exercises over the safety of believers, omits not the exercise of faith by which the mind is aroused from sloth.¹⁶ The eyes of God are awake to assist the blind in their necessity, but He is likewise pleased to listen to our groans, that He may give us the better proof of His love. Thus both things are true, “He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep” (Psa 121:4); and yet whenever He sees us dumb and torpid, He withdraws as if He had forgotten us.

Sections 4-16 Rules to Be Observed in Prayer

Section 4 Reverence to God

Let the first rule of right prayer then be to have our heart and mind framed as becomes those who are entering into converse with God. This we shall accomplish with respect to the mind, if, laying aside carnal thoughts and cares that might interfere with the direct and pure contemplation of God, it not only be wholly intent on prayer, but also, as far as possible, be borne¹⁷ and raised above itself. I do not here insist on a mind so disengaged as to feel none of the gnawings¹⁸ of anxiety. On the contrary, it is by much anxiety that the fervor of prayer is inflamed. Thus we see that the holy servants of God betray great anguish, not to say solicitude,¹⁹ when they cause the voice of complaint to ascend to the Lord from the deep abyss and the jaws of death (Psa 130:1). What I say is that all foreign and extraneous²⁰ cares must be dispelled by which the mind might be driven to and fro in vague suspense, be drawn down from heaven, and kept groveling on the earth. When I say it must be raised above itself, I mean that it must not bring into the presence of God any of those things that our blind and stupid reason is wont²¹ to devise, nor keep itself confined within the little measure of its own vanity, but rise to a purity²² worthy of God.

¹² **redounds** – returns.

¹³ **torpid** – sluggish in functioning; lacking in energy.

¹⁴ **slothful** – not inclined to action.

¹⁵ **importuned** – persistently begged.

¹⁶ **sloth** – laziness.

¹⁷ **borne** – carried.

¹⁸ **gnawings** – torments or vexations.

¹⁹ **solicitude** – anxiety.

²⁰ **extraneous** – nonessential; added from without.

²¹ **wont** – accustomed.

²² **purity** – holiness.

Section 5 How We Must Pray

Both things are especially worthy of notice. First, let everyone, in professing to pray, turn thither²³ all his thoughts and feelings and be not (as is usual) distracted by wandering thoughts. For nothing is more contrary to the reverence due to God than that levity²⁴ which bespeaks a mind too much given to license and devoid of fear. In this matter, we ought to labor the more earnestly the more difficult we experience it to be. For no man is so intent on praying as not to feel many thoughts creeping in, either breaking off the tenor of his prayer or retarding it by some turning or digression. Here let us consider how unbecoming it is when God admits us to familiar intercourse²⁵ to abuse His great condescension by mingling things sacred and profane, [to abuse] reverence for Him, not keeping our minds under restraint, but just as if in prayer we were conversing with one like ourselves, forgetting Him, and allowing our thoughts to run to and fro.

Let us know, then, that none duly prepare themselves for prayer but those who are so impressed with the majesty of God that they engage in it free from all earthly cares and affections. The ceremony of lifting up our hands in prayer is designed to remind us that we are far removed from God, unless our thoughts rise upward. As it is said in the psalm, “Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul” (Psa 25:1). Scripture repeatedly uses the expression to *lift up our prayer* (Isa 37:4), meaning that those who would be heard by God must not “settle on their lees²⁶” (Jer 48:11). The sum is, that the more liberally God deals with us, condescendingly inviting us to unburden our cares into His bosom, the less excusable we are if this admirable and incomparable blessing does not in our estimation outweigh all other things and win our affection, that prayer may seriously engage our every thought and feeling. This cannot be unless our mind, strenuously exerting itself against all impediments, rises upward.

Our second proposition was that we are to ask only as far as God permits. For though He bids us pour out our hearts (Psa 62:8; Psa 145:19), He does not indiscriminately give loose reins to foolish and depraved affections. When He promises that He will grant believers their wish, His indulgence does not proceed so far as to submit to their caprice.²⁷ In both matters, grievous delinquencies²⁸ are everywhere committed. For not only do many without modesty or without reverence presume to invoke God concerning their frivolities, but impudently bring forward their dreams, whatever they may be, before the tribunal²⁹ of God. Such is the folly or stupidity under which they labor, that they have the hardihood to obtrude upon God³⁰ desires so vile, that they would blush exceedingly to impart them to their fellow men. Profane³¹ writers have derided and even expressed their detestation of this presumption, and yet the vice has always prevailed. Hence, it happened that the ambitious adopted Jupiter as their patron; the avaricious,³² Mercury; the literary aspirants,³³ Apollo and Minerva; the warlike, Mars; the licentious, Venus. So in the present day, as I lately observed, men in prayer give greater license to their unlawful desires than if they were telling jocular tales³⁴ among their equals. God does not suffer His condescension to be thus mocked, but vindicating His own light, places our wishes under the restraint of His authority. We must attend, therefore, to the observation of John: “And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us” (1Jo 5:14).

But as our faculties are far from being able to attain to such high perfection, we must seek for some means to assist them. As the eye of our mind should be intent upon God, so the affection of our heart ought to follow in the same course. But both fall far beneath this, or rather, they faint and fail, or are carried in a contrary direction. To assist this weakness, God gives us the guidance of the Spirit in our prayers to dictate what is right and regulate our affections.³⁵ For seeing “we know not what we should pray for as we ought...the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Rom 8:26). Not that He actually prays or groans, but He excites in us sighs, wishes, and confidence, which our natural powers are not at all able to conceive. Nor is it without cause Paul gives the name of “groanings which cannot be uttered” to the prayers that believers send forth under the guidance of the Spirit. For those who are truly exercised in prayer are not unaware that blind anxieties so restrain and perplex them that they can scarcely find what it becomes them³⁶ to utter. Nay, in attempting to lisp,³⁷ they halt and hesitate. Hence, it appears that to pray aright is a special gift. We do not speak thus in indulgence to our sloth, as if we were to leave the office of prayer to the Holy Spirit and give way to that carelessness to which we are too prone. Thus, we sometimes hear the impious³⁸ expression that we are to wait in suspense until He takes possession of our minds while otherwise occupied. Our meaning is that, weary of our own heartlessness and sloth, we are to long for the aid of the Spirit. Nor indeed does Paul, when he enjoins us to pray *in the Spirit* (1Co 14:15), cease to exhort us to vigilance, intimating³⁹ that, while the

²³ **thither** – to that place.

²⁴ **levity** – lack of seriousness.

²⁵ **familiar intercourse** – intimate conversation.

²⁶ **settle on their lees** – settle in complacency.

²⁷ **caprice** – whim or impulse.

²⁸ **delinquencies** – sins; faults.

²⁹ **tribunal** – judgment seat.

³⁰ **hardihood to obtrude** – disrespectful boldness to thrust.

³¹ **profane** – pagan.

³² **avaricious** – greedy.

³³ **literary aspirants** – those who are greedy for knowledge.

³⁴ **telling jocular tales** – sharing humorous gossip.

³⁵ **affections** – feelings.

³⁶ **what it becomes them** – what is appropriate for them.

³⁷ **lisp** – utter childlike, imperfect speech.

³⁸ **impious** – disrespectful.

³⁹ **intimating** – suggesting; implying.

inspiration of the Spirit is effectual to the formation of prayer, by no means does the Spirit impede or retard our own endeavors,⁴⁰ since in this matter God is pleased to try⁴¹ how efficiently faith influences our hearts.

Section 6 Our Need for Prayer

Another rule of prayer is, that in asking, we must always truly feel our wants,⁴² and seriously considering that we need all the things that we ask, accompany the prayer with a sincere, nay, *ardent* desire of obtaining them. Many repeat prayers in a perfunctory⁴³ manner from a set form, as if they were performing a task to God. And, though they confess that this is a necessary remedy for the evils of their condition, because it were fatal to be left without the divine aid that they implore, it still appears that they perform the duty from custom because their minds are meanwhile cold; and they ponder not what they ask. A general and confused feeling of their necessity leads them to pray, but it does not make them solicitous⁴⁴ as in a matter of present consequence, that they may obtain the supply of their need. Moreover, can we suppose anything more hateful or even more execrable⁴⁵ to God than this fiction of asking the pardon of sins, while he who asks at the very time either thinks that he is not a sinner, or at least is not thinking that he is a sinner; in other words, a fiction by which God is plainly held in derision? But mankind, as I have lately said, are full of depravity, so that in the way of perfunctory service they often ask many things of God that they think come to them without His beneficence,⁴⁶ or from some other quarter, or are already certainly in their possession.

Another fault seems less heinous, but is not to be tolerated. Some murmur out prayers without meditation, their only principle being that God is to be propitiated⁴⁷ by prayer. Believers ought to be especially on their guard never to appear in the presence of God with the intention of presenting a request unless they are under some serious impression, and are at the same time desirous to obtain it. Nay, although in these things, which we ask only for the glory of God, we seem not at first sight to consult for our necessity, yet we ought not to ask with less fervor and vehemence of desire. For instance, when we pray that His name be hallowed⁴⁸ (Mat 6:9; Luk 11:2)—that hallowing must, so to speak, be earnestly hungered and thirsted after.

Section 7 We Must Pray Always

If it is objected that the necessity that urges us to pray is not always equal, I admit it. This distinction is profitably taught us by James: “Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms” (Jam 5:13). Therefore, common sense itself dictates that, as we are too sluggish, we must be stimulated by God to pray earnestly whenever the occasion requires. This David calls a time when God “may be found” (a seasonable time) (Psa 32:6; 31:6) because, as he declares in several other passages, that the more hardly⁴⁹ grievances, annoyances, fears, and other kinds of trial press us, the freer is our access to God, as if He were inviting us to Himself.

Still not less true is the injunction of Paul to pray “always” (Eph 6:18; 1Th 5:17) because, however prosperously according to our view things proceed and however we may be surrounded on all sides with grounds of joy, there is not an instant of time during which our want does not exhort us to prayer. A man abounds in wheat and wine: but as he cannot enjoy a morsel of bread, unless by the continual bounty of God, his granaries or cellars will not prevent him from asking for daily bread. Then, if we consider how many dangers impend⁵⁰ every moment, fear itself will teach us that no time ought to be without prayer.

This, however, may be better known in spiritual matters. For when will the many sins of which we are conscious allow us to sit secure without suppliantly⁵¹ entreating freedom from guilt and punishment? When will temptation give us a truce, making it unnecessary to hasten for help? Moreover, zeal for the kingdom and glory of God ought not to seize us by starts, but urge us without intermission, so that every time should appear seasonable. It is not without cause, therefore, that assiduity⁵² in prayer is so often enjoined. I am not now speaking of perseverance, which shall afterwards be considered. But Scripture, by reminding us of the necessity of constant prayer (1Th 5:17), charges us with sloth because we feel not how much we stand in need of this care and assiduity. By this rule, hypocrisy and the device of lying to God are restrained, nay, altogether *banished* from prayer. God promises that He will be near to those who call upon Him in truth (Psa 145:18) and declares that those who seek Him with their whole heart will find Him (Jer 29:13-14). Those, therefore, who delight in their own pollution, cannot surely aspire to⁵³ Him. One of the requisites of legitimate prayer is repentance. Hence the common declaration of Scripture is that God does not listen to the wicked (Joh 9:31); that their prayers (Pro 28:9; Isa 1:15), as well as their sacrifices (Pro 15:8; 21:27), are an abomination to Him. For it is right that those who seal up their hearts should find the ears of God closed against them, that

⁴⁰ **endeavors** – efforts.

⁴¹ **try** – test.

⁴² **wants** – lack of necessary things.

⁴³ **perfunctory** – routine; merely for the sake of getting through the duty.

⁴⁴ **solicitous** – concerned.

⁴⁵ **execrable** – detestable.

⁴⁶ **beneficence** – active kindness.

⁴⁷ **propitiated** – appeased; pacified.

⁴⁸ **hallowed** – treated as holy; revered.

⁴⁹ **hardly** – harshly.

⁵⁰ **impend** – hover threateningly.

⁵¹ **suppliantly** – humbly begging manner.

⁵² **assiduity** – constancy; diligence.

⁵³ **aspire to** – reach.

those who, by their hardheartedness, provoke His severity should find Him inflexible. In Isaiah, He thus threatens: “When ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood” (Isa 1:15). In like manner, in Jeremiah, “Though they shall cry unto Me, I will not hearken unto them” (Jer 11:7-8, 11) because He regards it as the highest insult for the wicked to boast of His covenant while profaning His sacred name by their whole lives. Hence, He complains in Isaiah, “This people draw near to Me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me” (Isa 29:13). Indeed, He does not confine this to prayers alone, but declares that He abominates pretense in every part of His service. Hence, the words of James: “Ye ask and receive not because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (Jam 4:3). It is true, indeed, as we shall again see in a little, that the pious, in the prayers that they utter, trust not to their own worth. Still the admonition of John is not superfluous: “Whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep his commandments” (1Jo 3:22). An evil conscience shuts the door against us. Hence, it follows that none but the sincere worshippers of God pray aright or are listened to. Therefore, let everyone who prepares to pray feel dissatisfied with what is wrong in his condition and assume, which he cannot do without repentance, the character and feelings of a poor suppliant.⁵⁴

Section 8 No Place for Pride

The third rule to be added is that he who comes into the presence of God to pray must divest himself of all vainglorious⁵⁵ thoughts, lay aside all idea of worth. In short, [he must] discard all self-confidence, humbly giving God the whole glory, lest by arrogating⁵⁶ anything, however little, to himself, vain pride cause Him to turn away His face. Of this submission, which casts down all haughtiness, we have numerous examples in the servants of God. The holier they are, the more humbly they prostrate themselves when they come into the presence of the Lord. Thus Daniel, on whom the Lord Himself bestowed such high commendation, says, “We do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God: for thy city and thy people are called by thy name” (Dan 9:18-19). This he does not indirectly in the usual manner, as if he were one of the individuals in a crowd: he rather confesses his guilt apart, and as a suppliant betaking⁵⁷ himself to the asylum of pardon, he distinctly declares that he was confessing his own sin and the sin of his people Israel (Dan 9:20). David also sets us an example of this humility: “And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified” (Psa 143:2; 142:2). In like manner, Isaiah prays, “Behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved. But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid Thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities. But now, O Lord, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand. Be not wroth very sore, O Lord, neither remember iniquity for ever: Behold, see, we beseech thee, we are all thy people” (Isa 64:5-9).

You see how they put no confidence in anything but this: considering that they are the Lord’s, they despair not of being the objects of His care. In the same way, Jeremiah says, “O Lord, though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name’s sake” (Jer 14:7). For it was most truly and piously written by the uncertain author (whoever he may have been) that wrote the book that is attributed to the prophet Baruch,⁵⁸ “But the soul that is greatly vexed, which goeth stooping and feeble, and the eyes that fail, and the hungry soul, will give thee praise and righteousness, O Lord. Therefore, we do not make our humble supplication before thee, O Lord our God, for the righteousness of our fathers, and of our kings” (Baruch 2:18-19). “Hear, O Lord, and have mercy; for thou art merciful: and have pity upon us, because we have sinned before thee” (Baruch 3:2).

Section 9 Plea for Forgiveness: the Most Important Part

In fine, supplication for pardon [from sins’ penalty], with humble and ingenuous⁵⁹ confession of guilt, forms both the preparation and commencement of right prayer. The holiest of men cannot hope to obtain anything from God until he has been freely reconciled to Him. God cannot be propitious⁶⁰ to any but those whom He pardons. Hence, it is not strange that this is the key by which believers open the door of prayer, as we learn from several passages in the Psalms. David, when presenting a request on a different subject, says, “Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: according to thy mercy remember me for thy goodness’ sake, O Lord” (Psa 25:7). Again, “Look upon mine affliction and my pain; and forgive all my sins” (Psa 25:18). Here also, we see that it is not sufficient to call ourselves to account for the sins of each passing day; we must also call to mind those that might seem to have been long before buried in oblivion.

For in another passage, the same prophet, confessing one grievous crime, takes occasion to go back to his very birth, “I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psa 51:5); not to extenuate the fault by the corruption of his nature, but as it were to accumulate the sins of his whole life, that the stricter he was in condemning himself, the more [easily entreated] God might be. But, although the saints, in express terms, do not always ask forgiveness of sins, yet if we carefully ponder those prayers as given in Scripture, the truth of what I say will readily appear; namely, that their courage to pray was de-

⁵⁴ **suppliant** – one who humbly prays.

⁵⁵ **vainglorious** – excessively proud.

⁵⁶ **arrogating** – claiming for one’s self without the right to do so.

⁵⁷ **betaking** – committing.

⁵⁸ **Baruch** – the son of Neriah (Jer 36:4), a scribe in Jerusalem during the years prior to the Babylonian destruction (587 B. C.), and a close friend of the prophet Jeremiah.

⁵⁹ **ingenuous** – straightforward.

⁶⁰ **propitious** – favorably inclined.

rived solely from the mercy of God, and that they always began with appeasing Him. For when a man interrogates his conscience, so far is he from presuming to lay his cares familiarly before God, that if he did not trust to mercy and pardon, he would tremble at the very thought of approaching Him.

There is, indeed, another special confession. When believers long for deliverance from punishment, they at the same time pray that their sins may be pardoned. For it were absurd to wish that the effect should be taken away while the cause remains. We must beware of imitating foolish patients, who, anxious only about curing accidental⁶¹ symptoms, neglect the root of the disease. Nay, our endeavor must be to have God propitious even before He attests His favor by external signs, both because this is the order that He Himself chooses, and it were of little avail to experience His kindness did not conscience feel that He is appeased, and thus enable us to regard Him as altogether lovely. Of this, we are even reminded by our Savior's reply. Having determined to cure the paralytic, He says, "Thy sins are forgiven thee" (Mat 9:2). In other words, He raises our thoughts to the object that is especially to be desired, i.e., admission into the favor of God. [He] then gives the fruit of reconciliation by bringing assistance to us.

But besides that special confession of present guilt which believers employ, in supplicating for pardon of every fault and punishment, that general introduction that procures favor for our prayers must never be omitted because prayers will never reach God unless they are founded on *free mercy*. To this, we may refer the words of John, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1Jo 1:9). Hence, under the Law it was necessary to consecrate prayers by the expiation⁶² of blood (Gen 12:8; 26:25; 33:20; 1Sa 7:9), both that they might be *accepted*, and that the people might be *warned* that they were unworthy of the high privilege until, being purged from their defilements, they founded their confidence in prayer entirely on the mercy of God.

Section 10 Righteousness: Ours or God's?

Sometimes, however, the saints in supplicating God seem to appeal to their own righteousness, as when David says, "Preserve my soul; for I am holy" (Psa 86:2). Also Hezekiah, "Remember now, O Lord, I beseech Thee how I have walked before Thee in truth, and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight" (2Ki 20:3; Isa 38:3). All they mean by such expressions is that regeneration declares them to be among the servants and children to whom God engages that He will show favor. We have already seen how He declares by the Psalmist that His eyes "are upon the righteous, and his ears are open unto their cry" (Psa 34:15) and again by the Apostle, that "whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments" (1Jo 3:22). In these passages, He does not fix a value on prayer as a meritorious work, but designs to establish the confidence of those who are conscious of an unfeigned integrity and innocence, such as all believers should possess. For the saying of the blind man who had received his sight is in perfect accordance with divine truth, "God heareth not sinners" (Joh 9:31), provided we take the term *sinners* in the sense commonly used by Scripture to mean "those who, without any desire for righteousness, are sleeping secure in their sins." For no heart will ever rise to genuine prayer that does not at the same time long for holiness. Those supplications in which the saints allude to their purity and integrity correspond to such promises, that they may thus have, in their own experience, a manifestation of that which all the servants of God are made to expect.

Thus, they almost always use this mode of prayer when, before God, they compare themselves with their enemies, from whose injustice they long to be delivered by His hand. When making such comparisons, there is no wonder that they bring forward their integrity and simplicity of heart, that thus, by the justice of their cause, the Lord may be the more disposed to give them succor. We rob not the pious breast of the privilege of enjoying a consciousness of purity before the Lord, and thus feeling assured of the promises with which He comforts and supports His true worshippers. But we would have them to lay aside all thought of their own merits and found their confidence of success in prayer solely on the divine mercy.

Section 11 Hope and Faith Overcome Fear

The fourth rule of prayer is that, notwithstanding our being thus a-based and truly humbled, we should be animated to pray with the sure hope of succeeding. There is, indeed, an appearance of contradiction between the two things, between a sense of the just vengeance of God and firm confidence in His favor. Yet they are perfectly accordant,⁶³ if it is the mere goodness of God that raises up those who are overwhelmed by their own sins. We have formerly shown that repentance and faith go hand in hand, being united by an indissoluble tie. The one [causes] terror, the other joy; so in prayer, they must *both* be present. This concurrence David expresses in a few words: "But as for me, I will come into thy house in the multitude of thy mercy, and in thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple" (Psa 5:7). Under the goodness of God, he comprehends faith, at the same time not excluding fear. For not only does His majesty compel our reverence, but our own unworthiness also divests us of all pride and confidence, and keeps us in fear.

The "confidence" of which I speak is not one that frees the mind from all anxiety and soothes it with sweet and perfect rest. Such rest is peculiar to those who, while all their affairs are flowing [to their liking], are annoyed by no care, stung with no regret, agitated by no fear. But the best stimulus that the saints have to prayer is when, in consequence of their own necessities, they feel the greatest disquietude⁶⁴ and are all but driven to despair, until faith seasonably comes to their aid. For in such

⁶¹ **accidental** – non-essential.

⁶² **expiation** – the act of making atonement.

⁶³ **accordant** – in agreement.

⁶⁴ **disquietude** – unrest.

straits,⁶⁵ the goodness of God so shines upon them that while they groan, burdened by the weight of present calamities and tormented with the fear of greater, they yet trust to this goodness. In this way, [they] both lighten the difficulty of endurance and take comfort in the hope of final deliverance. It is necessary therefore that the prayer of the believer should be the result of *both* feelings and exhibit the influence of both; namely, that while he groans under present and anxiously dreads new evils, he should at the same times have recourse to God, not at all doubting that God is ready to stretch out a helping hand to him. It is not easy to say how much God is irritated by our distrust, when we ask what we expect not of His goodness.

Hence, nothing is more accordant to the nature of prayer than to lay it down as a fixed rule that it is not to come forth at random, but is to follow in the footsteps of faith. To this principle, Christ directs all of us in these words: "Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mar 11:24). The same thing He declares in another passage: "And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive" (Mat 21:22). In accordance with this are the words of James: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering" (Jam 1:5-6a). He most aptly expresses the power of faith by opposing it to wavering. No less worthy of notice is his additional statement that those who approach God with a doubting, hesitating mind, without feeling assured whether they are to be heard or not, gain nothing by their prayers (Jam 1:7). Such persons he compares to a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed (Jam 1:6). Hence, in another passage he terms genuine prayer "the prayer of faith" (Jam 5:15). Again, since God so often declares that He will give to every man according to his faith (Mat 8:13; 9:29; Mar 11:24), He intimates⁶⁶ that we cannot obtain anything without faith.

In short, it is faith that obtains *everything* that is granted to prayer. This is the meaning of Paul in the well-known passage to which dull men give too little heed, "How then shall they call upon him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?...So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom 10:14, 17). Gradually deducing the origin of prayer from faith, he distinctly maintains that God cannot be invoked sincerely except by those to who, by the preaching of the Gospel, His mercy and willingness have been made known, nay, familiarly explained.

Section 12 **Against the Denial of Certainty That Prayer Is Granted**

This necessity our opponents do not at all consider. Therefore, when we say that believers ought to feel firmly assured, they think we are saying the most absurd thing in the world. But if they had any experience in true prayer, they would assuredly understand that God cannot be duly invoked without this firm sense of the Divine benevolence. But as no man can well perceive the power of faith without at the same time feeling it in his heart, what profit is there in disputing with men of this character, who plainly show that they have never had more than a vain imagination? The value and necessity of that assurance for which we contend is learned chiefly from prayer. Everyone who does not see this gives proof of a very stupid conscience. Therefore, leaving those who are thus blinded, let us fix our thoughts on the words of Paul, that God can only be invoked by such as have obtained a knowledge of His mercy from the Gospel (Rom 10:14) and feel firmly assured that that mercy is ready to be bestowed upon them.

What kind of prayer would this be? "O Lord, I am indeed doubtful whether or not thou art inclined to hear me; but being oppressed with anx-iety I fly to thee that, if I am worthy, thou mayest assist me." None of the saints whose prayers are given in Scripture thus supplicated. Nor are we thus taught by the Holy Spirit, Who tells us to "come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16). Elsewhere [he] teaches us to have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of Christ (Eph 3:12). This confidence of obtaining what we ask, a confidence that the Lord commands and all the saints teach by their example, we must therefore hold fast with both hands, if we would pray to any advantage. The only prayer acceptable to God is that which springs (if I may so express it) from this presumption of faith and is founded on the full assurance of hope. He might have been contented to use the simple name of faith; but he adds not only confidence, but also lib-erty or boldness that by this mark He might distinguish us from unbelievers. [They] indeed, like us, pray to God, but pray at random. Hence, the whole church thus prays, "Let thy mercy O Lord, be upon us, according as we hope in thee" (Psa 33:22). The same condition is set down by the Psalmist in another passage, "When I cry unto thee, then shall mine enemies turn back: this I know; for God is for me" (Psa 56:9). Again, "In the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up" (Psa 5:3). From these words we gather that prayers are vainly poured out into the air unless accompanied with faith, in which, as from a watchtower, we may quietly wait for God. With this agrees the order of Paul's exhortation when urging believers to pray in the Spirit always with vigilance and assiduity, he enjoins them to take "the shield of faith...the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spir-it, which is the word of God" (Eph 6:16-18).

Let the reader here call to mind what I formerly observed, that faith by no means fails though accompanied with recognition of our wretchedness, poverty, and pollution. However much believers may feel that they are oppressed by a heavy load of iniquity and are not only devoid of everything that can procure the favor of God for them, but justly burdened with many sins that make Him an object of dread, yet they cease not to present themselves, this feeling not deterring them from appearing in His presence, because *there is no other access to Him*. Genuine prayer is not that by which we arrogantly extol ourselves before God or set a great value on anything of our own, but that by which, while confessing our guilt, we utter our sorrows before God, just as children familiarly lay their complaints before their parents. Nay, the immense accumulation of our sins should

⁶⁵ **straits** – bad situations.

⁶⁶ **intimates** – implies.

rather spur us on and incite us to prayer. Of this, the Psalmist gives us an example: “Heal my soul; for I have sinned against thee” (Psa 41:4). I confess indeed that these stings would prove mortal darts, did not God give succor; but our heavenly Father has, in ineffable⁶⁷ kindness, added a remedy by which—calming all perturbation,⁶⁸ soothing our cares, and dispelling our fears—He condescendingly allures us to Himself. Nay, removing all doubts, not to say obstacles, [He] makes the way smooth before us.

Section 13 God’s Command and Promise Motive for Prayer

And first, indeed in enjoining us to pray, He by the very injunction convicts us of impious contumacy⁶⁹ if we obey not. He could not give a more precise command than that which is contained in the psalms: “Call upon me in the day of trouble” (Psa 50:15). But as there is no office of piety more frequently enjoined by Scripture, there is no occasion for here dwelling longer upon it. “Ask,” says our Divine Master, “and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Mat 7:7). Here, indeed, a promise is added to the precept; and this is necessary. For though all confess that we must obey the precept, yet the greater part would shun the invitation of God, did He not promise that He would listen and be ready to answer.

These two positions being laid down, it is certain that all who cavillingly⁷⁰ allege⁷¹ that they are not to come to God directly are not only rebellious and disobedient but are also convicted of unbelief, inasmuch as they distrust the promises. There is the more occasion to attend to this because hypocrites, under a pretense of humility and modesty, proudly contemn⁷² the precept, as well as deny all credit to the gracious invitation of God. Nay, [they] rob Him of a principal part of His worship. For when He rejected sacrifices, in which all holiness seemed then to consist (Psa 50:7-13), He declared that the chief thing, that which above all others is precious in His sight, is to be invoked in the day of necessity (Psa 50:15). Therefore, when He demands that which is His own and urges us to alacrity⁷³ in obeying, no pretexts for doubt, how specious⁷⁴ so ever they may be, can excuse us. Hence, all the passages throughout Scripture in which we are commanded to pray are set up before our eyes as so many banners to inspire us with confidence. It were presumption to go forward into the presence of God, did He not anticipate us by His invitation. Accordingly, He opens up the way for us by His own voice: “I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The Lord is my God” (Zec 13:9).

We see how He anticipates His worshippers and desires them to follow, and therefore we cannot fear that the melody that He Himself dictates will prove displeasing. Especially let us call to mind that noble description of the divine character, by trusting to which we shall easily overcome every obstacle: “O thou that hearest prayer, unto thee shall all flesh come” (Psa 65:1-2). What can be more lovely or soothing than to see God invested with a title that assures us that nothing is more proper to His nature than to listen to the prayers of suppliants? Hence the Psalmist infers that free access is given not to a few individuals, but to all men, since God addresses all in these terms, “Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me” (Psa 50:15). David, accordingly, appeals to the promise thus given in order to obtain what he asks: “Thou, O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, hast revealed to thy servant, saying, I will build thee an house: therefore hath thy servant found in his heart to pray this prayer unto thee” (2Sa 7:27). Here we infer that he would have been afraid, but for the promise that emboldened him. So in another passage, he fortifies himself with the general doctrine, “He will fulfill the desire of them that fear him” (Psa 145:19). Nay, we may observe in the Psalms how the continuity of prayer is broken and a transition is made at one time to the power of God, at another to His goodness, at another to the faithfulness of His promises. It might seem that David, by introducing these sentiments, unseasonably mutilates his prayers. But believers well know by experience that their ardor⁷⁵ grows languid⁷⁶ unless new fuel be added; and therefore that meditation as well on the *nature* as on the *Word* of God during prayer is by no means superfluous. Let us not decline to imitate the example of David and introduce thoughts that may reanimate our languid minds with new vigor.

Section 14 Pray Confidently with Reverential Fear

It is strange that these delightful promises affect us coldly or scarcely at all, so that the generality of men prefer to wander up and down, forsaking the fountain of living waters and hewing out to themselves broken cisterns (Jer 2:13), rather than embrace the divine liberality voluntarily offered to them. “The name of the Lord,” says Solomon, “is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it, and is safe” (Pro 18:10). Joel, after predicting the fearful disaster that was at hand, subjoins the following memorable sentence: “And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered” (Joe 2:32; Rom 10:13). This, we know, properly refers to the course of the Gospel (Act 2:21). Scarcely one in a hundred is moved to come into the presence of God, though He Himself exclaims by Isaiah, “And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear” (Isa 65:24). This honor He elsewhere bestows upon the whole church

⁶⁷ **ineffable** – indescribable; too great for words.

⁶⁸ **perturbation** – mental agitation.

⁶⁹ **contumacy** – stubborn resistance to authority.

⁷⁰ **cavillingly** – object without good reason.

⁷¹ **allege** – plead as an excuse.

⁷² **contemn** – treat with contempt.

⁷³ **alacrity** – liveliness; eagerness.

⁷⁴ **specious** – deceptively attractive.

⁷⁵ **ardor** – feelings of intensity.

⁷⁶ **languid** – idle, especially in a dreamy way.

in general, as belonging to all the members of Christ: “He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him” (Psa 91:15).

My intention, however, as I already observed, is not to enumerate all, but only select some admirable passages as a specimen of how kindly God allures us to Himself, and how extreme our ingratitude must be when with such powerful motives our sluggishness still retards us. Wherefore, let these words always resound in our ears: “The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth” (Psa 145:18). Likewise, those passages that we have quoted from Isaiah and Joel, in which God declares that His ear is open to our prayers and that He is delighted as with a sacrifice of sweet savor when we cast our cares upon Him (1Pe 5:7; Psa 55:22). The special benefit of these promises we receive when we frame our prayer, not timorously⁷⁷ or doubtfully, but when trusting to His Word, Whose majesty might otherwise deter us, we are bold to call Him Father. He Himself deigns⁷⁸ to suggest this most delightful name.

Fortified by such invitations, it remains for us to know that we have therein sufficient materials for prayer, since our prayers depend on no merit of our own. All their worth and hope of success are founded and depend on the promises of God, so that they need no other support and require not to look up and down on this hand and on that. It must therefore be fixed in our minds that though we equal not the lauded sanctity of patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, yet as the command to pray is common to us as well as them, and faith is common, so if we lean on the Word of God, we are in respect of this privilege their associates. For God declaring, as has already been seen, that He will listen and be favorable to all, encourages the most wretched to hope that they shall obtain what they ask; and, accordingly, we should attend to the general forms of expression, which, as it is commonly expressed, exclude none from first to last. Only let there be sincerity of heart, self-dissatisfaction, humility, and faith that, by the hypocrisy of a deceitful prayer, we may not profane the name of God. Our most merciful Father will not reject those whom He not only encourages to come, but urges in every possible way. Hence, David’s method of prayer to which I lately referred: “And now, O Lord God, thou art that God, and thy words be true, and thou hast promised this goodness unto thy servant: that it may continue forever before thee” (2Sa 7:27-28). So also, in another passage, “Let, I pray thee, thy merciful kindness be for my comfort, according to thy word unto thy servant” (Psa 119:76). And the whole body of the Israelites, whenever they fortify themselves with the remembrance of the covenant, plainly declare that since God thus prescribes, they are not to pray timorously (Gen 32:13). In this, they imitated the example of the patriarchs—particularly Jacob—who, after confessing that he was unworthy of the many mercies that he had received of the Lord’s hand, (Gen 32:10) says that he is encouraged to make still larger requests because God had promised that He would grant them (Gen 32:12-13).

But whatever be the pretexts that unbelievers employ, when they do not flee to God as often as necessity urges, nor seek after Him, nor implore His aid, they defraud Him of His due honor just as much as if they were fabricating to themselves new gods and idols. For in this way they deny that God is the author of all their blessings. On the contrary, nothing more effectually frees pious minds from every doubt than to be armed with the thought that no obstacle should impede them while they are obeying the command of God, Who declares that nothing is more grateful to Him than obedience.

Hence, again, what I have previously said becomes still clearer: that a bold spirit in prayer well accords with fear, reverence, and anxiety, and that there is no inconsistency when God raises up those who had fallen prostrate. In this way, forms of expression apparently inconsistent admirably harmonize. Jeremiah and Daniel speak of humbly laying their supplications before God (Jer 42:9; Dan 9:18). In another passage, Jeremiah says, “Let, we beseech thee, our supplication be accepted before thee, and pray for us unto the Lord thy God, even for all this remnant” (Jer 42:2). On the other hand, believers are often said to *lift up prayer*. Thus Hezekiah speaks, when asking the prophet to undertake the office of interceding (2Ki 19:4). And David says, “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (Psa 141:2). The explanation is, that though believers, persuaded of the paternal love of God, cheerfully rely on His faithfulness and have no hesitation in imploring the aid that He voluntarily offers, they are not elated with supine⁷⁹ or presumptuous security; but climbing up by the ladder of the promises still remain humble and abased suppliants.

Section 15 Harkening to Perverted Prayer

Here, by way of objection, several questions are raised. Scripture relates that God sometimes complied with certain prayers that had been dictated by minds not duly calmed or regulated. It is true that the cause for which Jotham imprecated⁸⁰ on the inhabitants of Shechem the disaster that afterwards befell them was well founded. Still, he was inflamed with anger and revenge (Jdg 9:20); hence God, by complying with the execration,⁸¹ seems to approve of passionate impulses. Similar fervor also seized Samson, when he prayed, “Strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes” (Jdg 16:28). For although there was some mixture of good zeal, yet his ruling feeling was a fervid,⁸² and therefore vicious, longing for vengeance. God assents. Hence, apparently, it might be inferred that prayers are effectual, though not framed in conformity to the rule of the Word.

⁷⁷ **timorously** – fearfully.

⁷⁸ **deigns** – stoops down to us; condescends.

⁷⁹ **elated with supine** – puffed up with negligent.

⁸⁰ **imprecated** – cursed; wished evil upon.

⁸¹ **execration** – the act of cursing or denouncing.

⁸² **fervid** – impassioned; zealous.

But I answer, *first*, a perpetual law is not abrogated⁸³ by singular examples. *Secondly*, special suggestions have sometimes been made to a few individuals, whose case thus becomes different from that of the generality of men. For we should attend to the answer that our Savior gave to His disciples when they inconsiderately wished to imitate the example of Elias, “Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of” (Luk 9:55). We must, however, go farther and say that the wishes to which God assents are not always pleasing to Him. Yet He assents because it is necessary, by way of example, to give clear evidence of the doctrine of Scripture, i.e., that He assists the miserable and hears the groans of those who, unjustly afflicted, implore His aid. Accordingly, He executes His judgments when the complaints of the needy, though in themselves unworthy of attention, ascend to Him. For how often in inflicting punishment on the ungodly for cruelty, rapine,⁸⁴ violence, lust, and other crimes; in curbing audacity and fury; and also in overthrowing tyrannical power, has He declared that He gives assistance to those who are unworthily oppressed though they by addressing an unknown deity only beat the air? There is one psalm that clearly teaches that prayers are not without effect, though they do not penetrate to heaven by faith (Psa 107:6, 13, 19). For it enumerates the prayers that, by natural instinct, necessity extorts from unbelievers not less than from believers, and to which it shows by the event, that God is, notwithstanding, propitious. Is it to testify by such readiness to hear that their prayers are agreeable to Him? Nay. It is, first, to magnify or display His mercy by the circumstance, that even the wishes of unbelievers are not denied. Secondly, [it is] to stimulate His true worshippers to more urgent prayer, when they see that sometimes even the wailings of the ungodly are not without avail.

This, however, is no reason why believers should deviate from the law divinely imposed upon them or envy unbelievers, as if they gained much in obtaining what they wished. We have observed that in this way God yielded to the feigned⁸⁵ repentance of Ahab (1Ki 21:29), that He might show how ready He is to listen to His elect when with true contrition they seek His favor. Accordingly, He upbraids the Jews because shortly after experiencing His readiness to listen to their prayers (Psa 106:8-12), they returned to their own perverse inclinations (Psa 106:43). It is also plain from the Book of Judges that, whenever they wept, though their tears were deceitful, they were delivered from the hands of their enemies (Jdg 3:9). Therefore, as God sends His sun indiscriminately on the evil and on the good (Mat 5:45), so He despises not the tears of those who have a good cause and whose sorrows are deserving of relief. Meanwhile, though He hears them, it has no more to do with salvation than the supply of food that He gives to other despisers of His goodness.

There seems to be a more difficult question concerning Abraham and Samuel, the one of whom, without any instruction from the Word of God, prayed in behalf of the people of Sodom (Gen 18:23), and the other, contrary to an express prohibition, prayed in behalf of Saul (1Sa 15:11). Similar is the case of Jeremiah, who prayed that the city might not be destroyed (Jer 32:16). It is true their prayers were refused, but it seems harsh to affirm that they prayed without faith. Modest readers will, I hope, be satisfied with this solution, i.e., that leaning to the general principle on which God enjoins us to be merciful even to the unworthy, they were not altogether devoid of faith, though in this particular instance their wish was disappointed. Augustine⁸⁶ shrewdly remarks, “How do the saints pray in faith when they ask from God contrary to what He has decreed? Namely, because they pray according to His will, not His hidden and immutable will, but that which He suggests to them, that He may hear them in another manner; as He wisely distinguishes.” This is truly said: for, in His incomprehensible counsel, He so regulates events that the prayers of the saints, though involving a mixture of faith and error, are not in vain. Yet, this no more sanctions imitation than it excuses the saints themselves, who I deny not exceeded due bounds. Wherefore, whenever no certain promise exists, our request to God must have a condition annexed to it. Here we may refer to the prayer of David, “Awake for me to the judgment that thou hast commanded” (Psa 7:6); for he reminds us that he had received special instruction to pray for a temporal blessing.

Section 16 God’s Forgiveness Necessary for Answered Prayers

It is also of importance to observe, that the four laws of prayer of which I have treated are not so rigorously enforced, as that God rejects the prayers in which He does not find perfect faith or repentance, accompanied with fervent zeal and wishes duly framed.

We have said that, though prayer is the familiar intercourse of believers with God, yet reverence and modesty must be observed: we must not give loose reins to our wishes or long for anything farther than God permits. Moreover, lest the majesty of God should be despised, our minds must be elevated to pure and chaste veneration.⁸⁷ This no man ever performed with due perfection. For, not to speak of the generality of men, how often do David’s complaints savor of intemperance?⁸⁸ Not that he actually means to expostulate⁸⁹ with God or murmur at His judgments; but failing through infirmity, he finds no better solace than to pour his griefs into the bosom of His heavenly Father. Nay, even our stammering is tolerated by God. Pardon is granted to our ignorance as often as anything rashly escapes us: indeed, without this indulgence, we should have no freedom to pray. But although it was David’s intention to submit himself entirely to the will of God, and he prayed with no less patience than

⁸³ **abrogated** – done away with.

⁸⁴ **rapine** – the use of force to seize someone else’s property.

⁸⁵ **feigned** – not genuine.

⁸⁶ **Aurelius Augustine** (354-430) – Bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa and theologian.

⁸⁷ **reverence** – reverence.

⁸⁸ **savor of intemperance** – smell of a lack of restraint.

⁸⁹ **expostulate** – argue.

fervor, yet irregular emotions appear, nay, sometimes burst forth—emotions not a little at variance with the first law that we laid down.

In particular, we may see in a clause of the thirty-ninth Psalm, how this saint was carried away by the vehemence of his grief and unable to keep within bounds. “O spare me, that I may recover strength, before I go hence, and be no more” (Psa 39:13). You would call this the language of a desper-ate man, who had no other desire than that God should withdraw and leave him to relish in his distresses. Not that his devout mind rushes into such intemperance or that, as the reprobate are wont, he wishes to have done with God. He only complains that the divine anger is more than he can bear. During those trials, wishes often escape that are not in accordance with the rule of the Word, and in which the saints do not duly consider what is lawful and expedient.⁹⁰ Prayers contaminated by such faults, indeed, deserve to be rejected. Yet provided the saints lament, administer self-correction, and return to themselves, God pardons.

Similar faults are committed concerning the second law, for the saints have often to struggle with their own coldness, their want and misery not urging them sufficiently to serious prayer. It often happens also that their minds wander and are almost lost. Hence, in this matter also there is need of pardon, lest their prayers, from being languid or mutilated, or interrupted and wandering, should meet with a refusal. One of the natural feelings that God has imprinted on our mind is that prayer is not genuine unless the thoughts are turned *upward*. Hence, [we have] the ceremony of raising the hands, to which we have adverted,⁹¹ a ceremony known to all ages and nations and still in common use. But who in lifting up his hands is not conscious of sluggishness, the heart cleaving to the earth?

In regard to the petition for remission⁹² of sins, though no believer omits it, yet all who are truly exercised in prayer feel that they bring scarcely a tenth of the sacrifice of which David speaks, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Psa 51:17). Thus, a twofold pardon is always to be asked. First, because they are conscious of many faults the sense of which, however, does not touch them so as to make them feel dissatisfied with themselves as they ought. Secondly, as far as they have been enabled to profit in repentance and the fear of God, they are humbled with just sorrow for their offenses and pray for the remission of punishment by the Judge.

The thing that most of all vitiates⁹³ prayer, did not God indulgently interpose, is weakness or imperfection of faith. But is it not wonderful that this defect is pardoned by God, Who often exercises His people with severe trials, as if He actually wished to extinguish their faith? The hardest of such trials is when believers are forced to exclaim, “O Lord God of hosts, how long wilt thou be angry against the prayer of thy people?” (Psa 80:4), as if their very prayers offended Him. When Jeremiah says in like manner, “Also when I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayer” (Lam 3:8), there cannot be a doubt that he was in the greatest perturbation. Innumerable examples of the same kind occur in the Scriptures, from which it is manifest that the faith of the saints was often mingled with doubts and fears; while believing and hoping, they however betrayed some degree of unbelief. But, because they do not come so far as were to be wished, that is only an additional reason for their exerting themselves to correct their faults that they may daily approach nearer to the perfect law of prayer and at the same time feel into what an abyss of evils those are plunged, who, in the very cures they use, bring new diseases upon themselves: since there is no prayer that God would not deservedly disdain, did He not overlook the blemishes with which all of them are polluted. I do not mention these things in order that believers may securely pardon themselves in any faults that they commit, but that they may call themselves to strict account and thereby endeavor to surmount these obstacles. Though Satan endeavors to block up all the paths in order to prevent them from praying, they may, nevertheless, break through, being firmly persuaded that though not disencumbered of⁹⁴ all hindrances, their attempts are pleasing to God and their wishes are approved, provided they hasten on and keep their aim, though without immediately reaching it.

Sections 17-20 Through Whom Prayer Is to Be Made

Section 17 Prayer in the Name of Jesus

But since no man is worthy to come forward in his own name and appear in the presence of God, our heavenly Father, to relieve us at once from fear and shame, with which all must feel oppressed, has given us His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, to be our Advocate (1Jo 2:1) and Mediator⁹⁵ (1Ti 2:5; Heb 8:6; 9:15). Under His guidance, we may approach securely, confident that with Him for our Intercessor, nothing that we ask in His name will be denied to us, as there is nothing that the Father can deny to Him (1Ti 2:5; 1Jo 2:1). To this, it is necessary to refer all that we have previously taught concerning faith because, as the

⁹⁰ **expedient** – appropriate.

⁹¹ **adverted** – made reference to.

⁹² **remission** – forgiveness.

⁹³ **vitiates** – make ineffective or weak.

⁹⁴ **disencumbered of** – untangled from.

⁹⁵ **Mediator** – one who mediates between two parties to remove a disagreement or reach a common goal; “It pleased God in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus His only begotten Son, according to the Covenant made between them both, to be the Mediator between God and Man; the Prophet, Priest and King; Head and Savior of His Church, the heir of all things, and judge of the world: Unto whom He did from all Eternity give a people to be His seed, and to be by Him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified.”—*1689 London Baptist Confession (available from Chapel Library)*

promise gives us Christ as our Mediator, so, unless our hope of obtaining what we ask is founded on Him, it deprives us of the privilege of prayer.

For it is impossible to think of the dread majesty of God without being filled with alarm. Hence, the sense of our own unworthiness must keep us far away until Christ interpose⁹⁶ and convert a throne of dreadful glory into a throne of grace. The Apostle teaches that thus we can “come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16). And as a rule has been laid down as to prayer, as a promise has been given that those who pray will be heard, so we are specially enjoined to pray in the name of Christ, the promise being that we shall obtain what we ask in His name. “Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name,” says our Savior, “that will I do; that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (Joh 14:13). “Hitherto ye have asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full” (Joh 16:24).

Hence, it is incontrovertibly clear that those who pray to God in any other name than that of Christ contumaciously⁹⁷ falsify His orders and regard His will as nothing, while they have no promise that they shall obtain. For, as Paul says “All the promises of God in him are yea, and in him amen” (2Co 1:20), that is, are confirmed and fulfilled in Him.

Section 18 The Risen Christ as Our Intercessor

We must carefully attend to the circumstance of time. Christ enjoins His disciples to have recourse to His intercession after He shall have ascended to heaven: “At that day ye shall ask in my name” (Joh 16:26). It is certain, indeed, that from the very first all who ever prayed were heard only for the sake of the Mediator. For this reason, God had commanded in the Law, that the priest alone should enter the sanctuary, bearing the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on his shoulders and as many precious stones on his breast (Exo 28:9-21). [Meanwhile,] the people were to stand at a distance in the outer court and thereafter unite their prayers with the priest. Nay, the sacrifice had even the effect of ratifying and confirming their prayers. That shadowy ceremony of the Law therefore taught, *first*, that we are all excluded from the face of God. Therefore, there is need of a Mediator to appear in our name, carry us on His shoulders, and keep us bound upon His breast that we may be heard in His person. *Secondly*, [the Law taught] that our prayers, which, as has been said, would otherwise never be free from impurity, are cleansed by the sprinkling of His blood. We see that the saints, when they desired to obtain anything, founded their hopes on sacrifices because they knew that by sacrifice all prayers were ratified: “Remember all thy offerings,” says David, “and accept thy burnt sacrifice” (Psa 20:3). Hence, we infer that in receiving the prayers of His people, God was appeased from the very first by the intercession of Christ.

Why then does Christ speak of a new period (“at that day”) when the disciples were to begin to pray in His name, unless it be that this grace, being now more brightly displayed, ought also to be in higher estimation with us? In this sense, He had said a little before, “Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full” (Joh 16:24). Not that they were altogether ignorant of the office of Mediator (all the Jews were instructed in these first rudiments), but they did not clearly understand that Christ by His ascent to heaven would be more the advocate of the church than before. Therefore, to solace their grief for His absence by some more than ordinary result, He asserts His office of advocate. [He] says that, hitherto they had been without the special benefit that it would be their privilege to enjoy, when aided by His intercession they should invoke God with greater freedom. In this sense, the Apostle says that we have “boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us” (Heb 10:19-20). Therefore, the more inexcusable we are, if we do not with both hands (as it is said) embrace the inestimable gift that is properly destined for us.

Section 19 Christ, the Believers Only Mediator

Moreover, since He himself is the only way and the only access by which we can draw near to God (Joh 14:6), those who deviate from this way and decline this access have no other remaining. His throne presents nothing but wrath, judgment, and terror. In short, as the Father has consecrated Him (Joh 6:27) our Guide (1Co 11:3; Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col 1:18) and Head (Mat 2:6), those who abandon or turn aside from Him in any way endeavor, as much as in them lies, to sully⁹⁸ and efface⁹⁹ the stamp that God has impressed. Christ, therefore, is the only Mediator by Whose intercession the Father is rendered propitious and exorable¹⁰⁰ (1Ti 2:5).

For though the saints are still permitted to use intercessions, by which they mutually beseech God in behalf of each other’s salvation and of which the Apostle makes mention (Eph 6:18-19; 1Ti 2:1), yet these depend on that one intercession, so far are they from [detracting from His in any way]. For as the intercessions that, as members of one body we offer up for each other, spring from the feeling of love, so they have reference to this one head. Being thus also made in the name of Christ, what more do they declare than that no man can derive the least benefit from any prayers without the intercession of Christ? As there is nothing in the intercession of Christ to prevent the different members of the church from offering up prayers for each other, so let it be held as a fixed principle that all the intercessions thus used in the church must have reference to that one intercession. Nay, we must be especially careful to show our gratitude on this very account, that God, pardoning our unworthiness, not only allows each individual to pray for himself, but also allows all to intercede mutually for each other. God having given a place in

⁹⁶ **interpose** – intervenes.

⁹⁷ **contumaciously** – rebelliously.

⁹⁸ **sully** – soil or tarnish.

⁹⁹ **efface** – wipe out.

¹⁰⁰ **exorable** – accessible to prayer.

His church to intercessors who would deserve to be rejected when praying privately on their own account, how presumptuous were it to abuse this kindness by employing it to obscure the honor of Christ?

Section 20 Christ Is the Eternal and Abiding Mediator

Moreover, the Sophists¹⁰¹ are guilty of the merest trifling: they allege that Christ is the Mediator of *redemption*, but that believers are mediators of *intercession*, as if Christ had only performed a temporary mediation and left an eternal and imperishable mediation to His servants! Such is the treatment that He receives from those who pretend only to take from Him a minute portion of honor. Very different is the language of Scripture, with whose simplicity every pious man will be satisfied, without paying any regard to those imposters! For when John says, “If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1Jo 2:1), does he mean merely that we *once* had an advocate? Does he not rather ascribe to Him a *perpetual* intercession? What does Paul mean when he declares that He “is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us”? (Rom 8:34). But when in another passage he declares that He is the only Mediator between God and man (1Ti 2:5), is he not referring to the supplications that he had mentioned a little before (*cf.* 1Ti 2:1-2)? Having previously said that prayers were to be offered up for all men, he immediately adds in confirmation of that statement that there is “one God, and one Mediator between God and men” (1Ti 2:5).

Nor does Augustine give a different interpretation when he says, “Christian men mutually recommend each other in their prayers. But He, for Whom none intercedes, while He Himself intercedes for all, is the only true Mediator. Though the Apostle Paul was a principal member under the Head, yet because he was a member of the body of Christ and knew that the most true and High Priest of the church had entered not by figure into the inner veil to the holy of holies but by firm and express truth into the inner sanctuary of heaven to holiness, holiness not imaginary but eternal, he also commends himself to the prayers of the faithful (Rom 15:30; Eph 6:19; Col 4:3). He does not make himself a mediator between God and the people, but asks that all the members of the body of Christ should pray mutually for each other, since the members are mutually sympathetic: if one member suffers, the others suffer with it (1Co 12:25-26). Thus, the mutual prayers of all the members still laboring on the earth ascend to the Head, Who has gone before into heaven and in Whom there is propitiation¹⁰² for our sins (1Jo 2:2). For if Paul were a mediator, so would also the other Apostles. Thus, there would be many mediators, and Paul’s statement could not stand: “There is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1Ti 2:5); “in whom we also are one” (Rom 12:5); “if we keep the unity of the faith in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). Likewise in another passage, Augustine says, “If thou require a priest, He is above the heavens, where He intercedes for those who on earth died for thee” (Heb 7:26).

Imagine not that He throws Himself before His Father’s knees and suppliantly intercedes for us. But we understand with the Apostle that He appears in the presence of God and that the power of His death has the effect of a perpetual intercession for us (Rom 8:34). Having entered into the upper sanctuary, He alone continues to the end of the world (Heb 9:24) to present the prayers of His people, who are standing far off in the outer court.

Sections 21-27 are omitted.

Sections 28-33 Different Kinds of Prayer

Section 28 Private Prayer

But though prayer is properly confined to vows and supplications, yet so strong is the affinity between petition and thanksgiving that both may be conveniently comprehended under one name. The forms that Paul enumerates (1Ti 2:1) fall under the first member of this division. By prayer and supplication, we pour out our desires before God, asking as well those things that tend to promote His glory and display His name, as the benefits that contribute to our advantage. By thanksgiving, we duly celebrate His kindnesses toward us, ascribing to His liberality every blessing that enters into our lot. David accordingly includes both in one sentence: “Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me” (Psa 50:15). Scripture, not without reason, commands us to use both continually. We have already described the greatness of our want, while experience itself proclaims the straits that press us on every side to be so numerous and so great that all have sufficient ground to send forth sighs and groans to God without intermission and suppliantly implore Him. For, even if they should be exempt from adversity, the holiest ought still to be stimulated—first by their sins and secondly by the innumerable assaults of temptation—to long for a remedy. The sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving can never be interrupted without guilt, since God never ceases to load us with favor upon favor, so as to force us to gratitude, however slow and sluggish we may be. In short, so great and widely diffused¹⁰³ are the riches of His liberality towards us, so marvelous and wondrous the miracles that we behold on every side, that we never can want a subject and materials for praise and thanksgiving.

¹⁰¹ **Sophists** – one skilled in elaborate and devious argumentation. Calvin uses the term for the Roman Catholic theologians at *the Sorbonne*. Founded in 1257 by Robert de Sorbon, it was a major center of learning and the core of the University of Paris.

¹⁰² **propitiation** – appeasement; a sin offering that turns away wrath.

¹⁰³ **diffused** – poured out.

To make this somewhat clearer: since all our hopes and resources are placed in God—this has already been fully proved¹⁰⁴—so that neither our persons nor our interests can prosper without His blessing, we must constantly submit ourselves and our all to Him (Jam 4:14-15). Then whatever we deliberate, speak, or do should be deliberated, spoken, and done under His hand and will, in fine, under the hope of His assistance. God has pronounced a curse upon all who, confiding in themselves or others, form plans and resolutions; who, without regarding His will or invoking His aid, either plan or attempt to execute (Isa 30:1; 31:1). And since, as has already been observed, He receives the honor that is due when He is acknowledged to be the Author of all good, it follows that, in deriving all good from His hand, we ought continually to express our thankfulness, and that we have no right to use the benefits that proceed from His liberality, if we do not assiduously¹⁰⁵ proclaim His praise and give Him thanks, these being the ends for which they are given. When Paul declares that every creature of God “is sanctified by the word of God and prayers” (1Ti 4:5), he intimates that without the word and prayers none of them are holy and pure, *word* being used metonymically¹⁰⁶ for *faith*. Hence David, on experiencing the lovingkindness of the Lord, elegantly declares, “He hath put a new song in my mouth” (Psa 40:3); intimating, that our silence is malignant when we leave His blessings unpraised, seeing every blessing He bestows is a new ground of thanksgiving. Thus Isaiah, proclaiming the singular mercies of God, says, “Sing unto the Lord a new song” (Isa 42:10). In the same sense, David says in another passage, “O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth thy praise” (Psa 51:15). In like manner, Hezekiah and Jonah declare that they will regard it as the end of their deliverance “to celebrate the goodness of God with songs in his temple” (Isa 38:20; Jon 2:10). David lays down a general rule for all believers in these words, “What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits toward me? I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord” (Psa 116:12-13). This rule the church follows in another psalm, “Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the heathen, to give thanks unto thy holy name, and to triumph in thy praise” (Psa 106:47). Again, “He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and not despise their prayer. This shall be written for the generation to come: and the people which shall be created shall praise the Lord...To declare the name of the Lord in Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem” (Psa 102:17-18, 21). Nay, whenever believers beseech the Lord to do anything *for His own name’s sake*, as they declare themselves unworthy of obtaining it in their own name, so they oblige themselves to give thanks, and promise to make the right use of His lovingkindness by being the heralds of it. Thus Hosea, speaking of the future redemption of the church, says, “Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously; so will we render the calves of our lips” (Hos 14:2).

Not only do our tongues proclaim the kindness of God, but also they naturally inspire us with love to Him. “I love the Lord, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications” (Psa 116:1). In another passage, speaking of the help that he had experienced, he says, “I will love thee, O Lord, my strength” (Psa 18:1). No praise will ever please God that does not flow from this feeling of love. Nay, we must attend to the declaration of Paul, that all wishes are vicious and perverse that are not accompanied with thanksgiving. His words are, “In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God” (Phi 4:6). Because many, under the influence of moroseness,¹⁰⁷ weariness, impatience, bitter grief, and fear, use murmuring in their prayers, he enjoins us so to regulate our feelings as cheerfully to bless God even before obtaining what we ask. But if this connection ought always to subsist in full vigor between things that are almost contrary, the more sacred is the tie that binds us to celebrate the praises of God whenever He grants our requests.

And as we have already shown that our prayers, which otherwise would be polluted, are sanctified by the intercession of Christ, so the Apostle, by enjoining us “to offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually” by Christ (Heb 13:15), reminds us that without the intervention of His priesthood our lips are not pure enough to celebrate the name of God. Hence, we infer that a monstrous delusion prevails among Papists, the great majority of whom wonder when Christ is called an intercessor. The reason why Paul enjoins, “Pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks” (1Th 5:17-18), is because he would have us with the utmost assiduity, at all times, in every place, in all things, and under all circumstances, direct our prayers to God, to expect all the things that we desire from Him, and when obtained, ascribe them to Him; thus furnishing perpetual grounds for prayer and praise.

Section 29 Necessity and Danger of Public Prayer

This assiduity in prayer, though it specially refers to the peculiar private prayers of individuals, extends also in some measure to the public prayers of the church. These, it may be said, cannot be continual and ought not to be made, except in the manner that, for the sake of order, has been established by public consent. This I admit; and hence, certain hours are fixed beforehand, hours which, though indifferent in regard to God, are necessary for the use of man, that the general convenience may be consulted, and all things be done in the church, as Paul enjoins, “decently and in order” (1Co 14:40). But there is nothing in this to prevent each church from being now and then stirred up to a more frequent use of prayer and being more zealously affected under the impulse of some greater necessity. Of perseverance in prayer, which is much akin to assiduity, we shall speak towards the close of the chapter (sec. 51, 52).

This assiduity, moreover, is very different from the *vain speaking*, which our Savior has prohibited (Mat 6:7). For He does not there forbid us to pray long, frequently, or with great fervor, but warns us against supposing that we can extort anything

¹⁰⁴ See Section 1.

¹⁰⁵ **assiduously** – constantly.

¹⁰⁶ **metonymically** – a figure of speech consisting of using the name of one thing for that of another with which it is associated.

¹⁰⁷ **moroseness** – gloominess.

from God by importuning¹⁰⁸ Him with garrulous loquacity,¹⁰⁹ as if He were to be persuaded after the manner of men. We know that hypocrites, because they consider not that they have to do with God, offer up their prayers as pompously as if it were part of a triumphal show. The Pharisee, who thanked God that he was not as other men, no doubt proclaimed his praises before men, as if he had wished to gain a reputation for sanctity by his prayers (Luk 18:11). Hence that *vain speaking*, which for a similar reason prevails so much in the Papacy in the present day, some vainly spinning out the time by a reiteration of the same frivolous prayers, and others employing a long series of verbiage¹¹⁰ for vulgar display. This childish garrulity,¹¹¹ being a mockery of God, it is not strange that it is prohibited in the church, in order that every feeling there expressed may be sincere, proceeding from the inmost heart.

Akin to this abuse is another that our Savior also condemns, namely, when hypocrites for the sake of ostentation,¹¹² court the presence of many witnesses and would sooner pray in the market-place than pray without applause (Mat 6:5). The true object of prayer being, as we have already said (sec. 4, 5), to carry our thoughts directly to God, whether to celebrate His praise or implore His aid, we can easily see that its primary seat is in the mind and heart, or rather that prayer itself is properly an effusion and manifestation of internal feeling before Him Who is the searcher of hearts (Rom 8:27). Hence (as has been said), when our divine Master was pleased to lay down the best rule for prayer, His injunction was, “Enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret, and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (Mat 6:6). Dissuading us from the example of hypocrites, who sought the applause of men by an ambitious ostentation in prayer, He adds the better course—enter thy chamber, shut thy door, and there pray. By these words (as I understand them), He taught us to seek a place of retirement that might enable us to turn all our thoughts inwards and enter deeply into our hearts, promising that God would hold converse with the feelings of our mind, of which the body ought to be the temple (2Co 6:16).

He meant not to deny that it may be expedient to pray in other places also, but He shows that prayer is somewhat of a secret nature, having its chief seat in the mind and requiring a tranquility far removed from the turmoil of ordinary cares. And hence it was not without cause that our Lord Himself, when He would engage more earnestly in prayer, withdrew into a retired spot beyond the bustle of the world, thus reminding us by His example that we are not to neglect those helps that enable the mind, in itself too much disposed to wander, to become sincerely intent on prayer. Meanwhile, as He abstained not from prayer when the occasion required it, though He was in the midst of a crowd, so must we, whenever there is need, lift up “pure hands” (1Ti 2:8) at all places. Hence, we must hold that he, who declines to pray in the public meeting of the saints, knows not what it is to pray apart, in retirement, or at home. On the other hand, he who neglects to pray alone and in private, however sedulously¹¹³ he frequents public meetings, there gives his prayers to the wind because he defers more to the opinion of man than to the secret judgment of God.

Still, lest the public prayers of the church should be held in contempt, the Lord anciently bestowed upon them the most honorable appellation,¹¹⁴ especially when He called the temple the “*house of prayer*” (Isa 56:7; Mat 21:13). For by this expression He both showed that the duty of prayer is a principal part of His worship, and that to enable believers to engage in it with singular consent, His temple is set up before them as a kind of banner. A noble promise was also added, “Praise waiteth for thee, O God, in Sion: and unto thee shall the vow be performed” (Psa 65:1). By these words, the Psalmist reminds us that the prayers of the church are never in vain because God always furnishes His people with materials for a song of joy. But although the shadows of the Law have ceased, yet because God was pleased by this ordinance to foster the unity of the faith among us also, there can be no doubt that the same promise belongs to us—a promise that Christ sanctioned with His own lips and that Paul declares to be perpetually in force.

Section 30 Public Prayer

As God in His Word enjoins common prayer, so public temples are the places destined for the performance of them. Hence, those who refuse to join with the people of God in this observance have no ground for the pretext that they enter their chamber in order that they may obey the command of the Lord. For He, Who promises to grant whatsoever two or three assembled in His name shall ask (Mat 18:19-20), declares that He by no means despises the prayers that are publicly offered up, provided there be no ostentation or catching at human applause, and provided there be a true and sincere affection in the secret recesses of the heart.

If this is the legitimate use of churches (and it certainly is), we must on the other hand beware of imitating the practice that commenced some centuries ago, of imagining that churches are the proper dwellings of God, where He is more ready to listen to us, or of attaching to them some kind of secret sanctity, which makes prayer there more holy. For seeing *we* are the true temples of God, we must pray in ourselves if we would invoke God in His holy temple. Let us leave such gross ideas to the Jews or the heathen, knowing that we have a command to pray without distinction of place, “in spirit and in truth” (Joh 4:23). It is true that by the order of God the temple was anciently dedicated for the offering of prayers and sacrifices, but this was at a time when the truth (which being now fully manifested, we are not permitted to confine to any material temple) lay hid under

¹⁰⁸ **importuning** – urgently asking.

¹⁰⁹ **garrulous loquacity** – excessive talking.

¹¹⁰ **verbiage** – excessive wordiness.

¹¹¹ **garrulity** – talkativeness.

¹¹² **ostentation** – excessive display.

¹¹³ **sedulously** – diligently.

¹¹⁴ **appellation** – the act of calling by a name.

the figure of shadows. Even the temple was not represented to the Jews as confining the presence of God within its walls, but was meant to train them to contemplate the image of the true temple. Accordingly, a severe rebuke is administered both by Isaiah and Stephen to those who thought that God could in any way dwell in temples made with hands (Isa 66:2; Act 7:48).

Section 31 On Speaking and Singing in Prayer

Hence, it is perfectly clear that neither words nor singing (if used in prayer) are of the least consequence or avail one iota¹¹⁵ with God, unless they proceed from deep feeling in the heart. Nay, rather they provoke His anger against us, if they come from the lips and throat only, since this is to abuse His sacred name and hold His majesty in derision. This we infer from the words of Isaiah, which, though their meaning is of wider extent, go to rebuke this vice also: “Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men: therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, even a marvelous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid” (Isa 29:13-14).

Still, we do not condemn words or singing, but rather greatly commend them, provided the feeling of the mind goes along with them. For in this way, the thought of God is kept alive on our minds, which, from their fickle and versatile nature, soon relax and are distracted by various objects, unless various means are used to support them. Besides, since the glory of God ought in a manner to be displayed in each part of our body, the special service to which the tongue should be devoted is that of singing and speaking, inasmuch as it has been expressly created to declare and proclaim the praise of God. This employment of the tongue is chiefly in the public services that are performed in the meeting of the saints. In this way, the God whom we serve in one spirit and one faith, we glorify together, as it were, with one voice and one mouth; and that openly, so that each may in turn receive the confession of his brother’s faith and be invited and incited to imitate it.

Section 32 Church Singing

It is certain that the use of singing in churches (which I may mention in passing) is not only very ancient, but was also used by the Apostles, as we may gather from the words of Paul, “I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also” (1Co 14:15). In like manner, he says to the Colossians, “Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col 3:16). In the former passage, he enjoins us to sing with the voice and the heart; in the latter, he commends spiritual songs by which the pious mutually edify each other. That it was not a universal practice, however, is attested by Augustine, who states that the church of Milan first began to use singing in the time of Ambrose,¹¹⁶ when the orthodox faith, being persecuted by Justina,¹¹⁷ the mother of Valentinian,¹¹⁸ the vigils of the people were more frequent than usual, and that the practice was afterwards followed by the other Western churches. He had said a little before that the custom came from the East. He also intimates that it was received in Africa in his own time. His words are, “Hilarius, [an ex-tribune], assailed with the bitterest invectives¹¹⁹ he could use, the custom that then began to exist at Carthage, of singing hymns from the book of Psalms at the altar, either before the oblation,¹²⁰ or when it was distributed to the people; I answered him at the request of my brethren.” And certainly if singing is tempered to a gravity befitting the presence of God and angels, it both gives dignity and grace to sacred actions and has a very powerful tendency to stir up the mind to true zeal and ardor in prayer. However, we must carefully beware, lest our ears be more intent on the music than our minds on the spiritual meaning of the words. Augustine confesses that the fear of this danger sometimes made him wish for the introduction of a practice observed by Athanasius,¹²¹ who ordered the reader to use only a gentle inflection of the voice, more akin to recitation than singing. But, on again considering how many advantages were derived from singing, he inclined to the other side. If this moderation is used, there cannot be a doubt that the practice is most sacred and salutary. On the other hand, songs composed merely to tickle and delight the ear are unbecoming the majesty of the church and cannot but be most displeasing to God.

Section 33 Public Prayers to Be Understood

It is also plain that the public prayers are not to be couched in Greek among the Latins, nor in Latin among the French or English (as hitherto has been everywhere practiced), but in the vulgar¹²² tongue, so that all present may understand them. They ought to be used for the edification of the whole church, which cannot be in the least degree benefited by a sound not understood. Those who are not moved by any reason of humanity or charity, ought at least to be somewhat moved by the authority of Paul, whose words are by no means ambiguous: “When thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say, Amen, at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? For thou verily givest thanks, but the other is not edified” (1Co 14:16-17). How then can one sufficiently admire the unbridled license of the Papists, who,

¹¹⁵ **iota** – an amount too small to measure.

¹¹⁶ **Ambrose** (c. 339-397) – Bishop of Milan, defender of Christ’s deity.

¹¹⁷ **Justina** (died 388) – wife of Roman Emperor Valentinian I (321-375); tried to introduce Arianism, the doctrine that Christ is a created being, into the church at Milan.

¹¹⁸ **Valentinian II** or **Flavius Valentinianus** (371-392) – boy emperor who began to reign at four years old, following the death of his father Valentinian I.

¹¹⁹ **invectives** – condemnations and abusive remarks.

¹²⁰ **oblation** – offering the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

¹²¹ **Athanasius** (c. 295-373) – Bishop of Alexandria, Egypt; defender of the deity of Christ.

¹²² **vulgar** – common, of the ordinary people.

while the Apostle publicly protests against it, hesitate not to bawl out the most verbose¹²³ prayers in a foreign tongue, prayers of which they themselves sometimes do not understand one syllable, and which they have no wish that others should understand?

Different is the course that Paul prescribes: “What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also; I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also” (1Co 14:15) meaning by the *spirit* the special gift of tongues, which some who had received it abused when they dissevered¹²⁴ it from the mind, that is, the understanding. The principle we must always hold is, that in all prayer, public and private, the tongue without the mind must be displeasing to God. Moreover, the mind must be so incited, as in ardor of thought far to surpass what the tongue is able to express.

Lastly, the tongue is not even necessary to private prayer, unless in so far as the internal feeling is insufficient for incitement, or the vehemence of the incitement carries the utterance of the tongue along with it. For although the best prayers are sometimes without utterance, yet when the feeling of the mind is overpowering, the tongue spontaneously breaks forth into utterance, and our other members into gesture. Hence, that dubious muttering of Hannah (1Sa 1:13), something similar to which is experienced by all the saints when concise and abrupt expressions escape from them. The bodily gestures usually observed in prayer, such as kneeling and uncovering of the head (Act 20:36), are exercises by which we attempt to rise to [a] higher veneration of God.

Sections 34-52 The Lord’s Prayer as Our Great Example

Section 34 A Necessary Guide for Prayer

We must now attend not only to a surer method, but also form of prayer, that, namely, which our heavenly Father has delivered to us by His beloved Son, and in which we may recognize His boundless goodness and condescension (Mat 6:9; Luk 11:2). Besides admonishing and exhorting us to seek Him in our every necessity (as children are wont to betake themselves to the protection of their parents when oppressed with any anxiety), seeing that we were not fully aware how great our poverty was, or what was right or for our interest to ask, He has provided for this ignorance; that wherein our capacity failed He has sufficiently supplied. For He has given us a form in which is set before us, as in a picture, everything that it is lawful to wish, everything that is conducive to our interest, everything that it is necessary to demand. From His goodness in this respect, we derive the great comfort of knowing that as we ask almost in His words, we ask nothing that is absurd, foreign, or unseasonable; nothing, in short, that is not agreeable to Him. Plato,¹²⁵ seeing the ignorance of men in presenting their desires to God, desires that, if granted, would often be most injurious to them, declares the best form of prayer to be that which an ancient poet has furnished: “O king Jupiter, give what is best, whether we wish it or wish it not; but avert from us what is evil even though we ask it.” This heathen shows his wisdom in discerning how dangerous it is to ask of God what our own passion dictates; while, at the same time, he reminds us of our unhappy condition in not being able to open our lips before God without dangers unless His Spirit instruct us how to pray aright (Rom 8:26). The higher value, therefore, ought we to set on the privilege, when the only begotten Son of God puts words into our lips, and thus relieves our minds of all hesitation.

Section 35 Six Petitions

This form or rule of prayer is composed of *six petitions*. For I am prevented from agreeing with those who divide it into *seven* by the adversative mode of diction¹²⁶ used by the Evangelist, who appears to have intended to unite the two members together; as if he had said, Do not allow us to be overcome by temptation, but rather bring assistance to our frailty, and deliver us that we may not fall. Ancient writers also agree with us, that what is added by Matthew as a seventh head is to be considered as explanatory of the sixth petition.

But though in every part of the prayer the first place is assigned to the glory of God, still this is more especially the object of the three first petitions, in which we are to look to the glory of God alone, without any reference to what is called *our own advantage*. The three remaining petitions are devoted to our interest, and properly relate to things that it is useful for us to ask. When we ask that the name of God may be hallowed, as God wishes to prove whether we love and serve Him freely or from the hope of reward, we are not to think at all of our *own* interest. We must set His glory before our eyes and keep them intent upon it alone. In the other similar petitions, this is the only manner in which we ought to be affected.

It is true, that in this way our own interest is greatly promoted because, when the name of God is hallowed in the way we ask, our own sanctification¹²⁷ also is thereby promoted. But in regard to this advantage, we must, as I have said, shut our eyes

¹²³ **verbose** – wordy; excessively long.

¹²⁴ **dissevered** – separated.

¹²⁵ **Plato** (428?-347 B.C.) – influential Greek philosopher.

¹²⁶ **Adversative...diction** – *adversative* expresses the direct opposite of something; *diction* is the manner in which something is expressed in words. The word *but* is the adversative Calvin refers to. As he explains, some make a seventh petition of “*but* deliver us from evil.” However, he believes that it explains the sixth petition “lead us not into temptation.”

¹²⁷ **sanctification** – Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.—*Spurgeon’s Catechism*, Q. 34

and be in a manner blind, so as not even to see it. Hence, were all hope of our private advantage cut off, we still should never cease to wish and pray for this hallowing and everything else that pertains to the glory of God. We have examples in Moses and Paul, who did not count it grievous to turn away their eyes and minds from themselves and with intense and fervent zeal long for death, if by their loss the kingdom and glory of God might be promoted (Exo 32:32; Rom 9:3). On the other hand, when we ask for daily bread, although we desire what is advantageous for ourselves, we ought also especially to seek the glory of God, so much so that we would not ask at all unless it were to turn to His glory. Let us now proceed to an exposition of the Prayer.

Section 36 “Our Father”

The first thing suggested at the very outset is, as we have already said (Sections 17-19), that all our prayers to God ought only to be presented in the name of Christ, as there is no other name that can recommend them. In calling God our Father, we certainly plead the name of Christ. For with what confidence could any man call God His Father? Who would have the presumption to arrogate¹²⁸ to himself the honor of a son of God were we not gratuitously adopted as His sons in Christ? He, being the true Son, has been given to us as a brother, so that that which He possesses as His own by nature becomes ours by adoption, if we embrace this great mercy with firm faith. As John says, “As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe in his name” (Joh 1:12).

Hence, He both calls Himself our Father and is pleased to be so called by us, by this delightful name relieving us of all distrust, since nowhere can a stronger affection be found than in a father. Hence, too, He could not have given us a stronger testimony of His boundless love than in calling us His sons (1Jo 3:1). But His love towards us is so much the greater and more excellent than that of earthly parents, the farther He surpasses all men in goodness and mercy (Isa 63:16). Earthly parents, laying aside all paternal affection, might abandon their offspring; He will never abandon us (Psa 27:10), seeing He cannot deny Himself (2Ti 2:13). For we have His promise, “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” (Mat 7:11). In like manner in the prophet, “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will not I forget thee” (Isa 49:15). But if we are His sons, then as a son cannot betake himself to the protection of a stranger and a foreigner without at the same time complaining of his father’s cruelty or poverty, so we cannot ask assistance from any other quarter than from Him, unless we would upbraid Him with poverty, want of means, or cruelty and excessive austerity.¹²⁹

Section 37 Our Sins Do Not Exclude Us

Nor let us allege that we are justly rendered timid by a consciousness of sin, by which our Father, though mild and merciful, is daily offended. For if among men a son cannot have a better advocate to plead his cause with his father, and cannot employ a better intercessor to regain his lost favor than if he come himself suppliant and downcast, acknowledging his fault, to implore the mercy of his father, whose paternal feelings cannot but be moved by such entreaties, what will that “Father of all mercies, and God of all comfort” do? (2Co 1:3). Will He not rather listen to the tears and groans of His children, when supplicating for themselves (especially seeing He invites and exhorts us to do so), than to any advocacy of others to whom the timid have recourse, not without some semblance of despair, because they are distrustful of their father’s mildness and clemency?¹³⁰ The exuberance of His paternal kindness He sets before us in the parable (Luk 15:11-32) when the father with open arms receives the son who had gone away from him, wasted his substance in riotous living (Luk 15:13), and in all ways grievously sinned against him (Luk 15:18). He waits not until pardon is asked in words, but, anticipating the request, recognizes him afar off, runs to meet him (Luk 15:20), consoles him, and restores him to favor (Luk 15:22-24). By setting before us this admirable example of mildness in a man, He designed to show in how much greater abundance we may expect it from Him Who is not only a Father, but also the best and most merciful of all fathers, however ungrateful, rebellious, and wicked sons we may be, provided only we throw ourselves upon His mercy. And the better to assure us that He is such a Father. If we are Christians, He has been pleased to be called not only a Father, but *our* Father, as if we were pleading with Him after this manner, “O Father, who art possessed of so much affection for thy children, and art so ready to forgive, we thy children approach thee and present our requests, fully persuaded that thou hast no other feelings towards us than those of a father, though we are unworthy of such a parent.”

But as our narrow hearts are incapable of comprehending such boundless favor, Christ is not only the earnest and pledge of our adoption, but also gives us the Spirit as a witness of this adoption, that through Him we may freely cry aloud, “Abba, Father” (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15). Whenever, therefore, we are restrained by any feeling of hesitation, let us remember to ask of Him that He may correct our timidity, and placing us under the magnanimous¹³¹ guidance of the Spirit, enable us to pray boldly.

Section 38 Why “Our Father”

The instruction given us, however, is not that every individual in particular is to call Him Father, but rather that we are all in common to call Him “Our Father.” By this we are reminded how strong the feeling of brotherly love between us ought to

¹²⁸ **arrogate** – claim without right.

¹²⁹ **austerity** – excessive, harsh discipline.

¹³⁰ **clemency** – mercy toward offenders.

¹³¹ **magnanimous** – noble and kind.

be, since we are all alike, by the same mercy and free kindness, the children of such a Father. For if He from Whom we all obtain whatever is good is our common Father (Mat 23:9), everything that has been distributed to us we should be prepared to communicate to each other as far as occasion demands.

But if we are thus desirous as we ought, to stretch out our hands and give assistance to each other, there is nothing by which we can more benefit our brethren than by committing them to the care and protection of the best of parents, since if He is propitious and favorable, nothing more can be desired. And, indeed, we owe this also to our Father. For as he who truly and from the heart loves the father of a family, extends the same love and good-will to all his household, so the zeal and affection that we feel for our heavenly Parent it becomes us to extend towards His people, His family, and, in fine, His heritage, which He has honored so highly as to give them the appellation of the “fullness” of His only begotten Son (Eph 1:23). Let the Christian, then, so regulate his prayers as to make them common and embrace all who are his brethren in Christ; not only those whom at present he sees and knows to be such, but all men who are alive upon the earth. What God has determined with regard to them is beyond our knowledge, but to wish and hope the best concerning them is both pious and humane. Still it becomes us to regard with special affection those who are of the household of faith, and whom the Apostle has in express terms recommended to our care in everything (Gal. 6:10). In short, all our prayers ought to bear reference to that community that our Lord has established in His kingdom and family.

Section 39 Whom to Pray For

This, however, does not prevent us from praying specially for ourselves, and certain others, provided our mind is not withdrawn from the view of this community, does not deviate from it, but constantly refers to it. For prayers, though couched in special terms, keeping that object still in view, cease not to be common. All this may easily be understood by analogy. There is a general command from God to relieve the necessities of all the poor. Yet this command is obeyed by those who, with that view, give succor to all whom they see or know to be in distress, although they pass by many whose wants are not less urgent, either because they cannot know or are unable to give supply to all. In this way, there is nothing repugnant to the will of God in those who, giving heed to this common society of the church, yet offer up particular prayers, in which, with a public mind, though in special terms, they commend to God themselves or others, with whose necessity He has been pleased to make them more familiarly acquainted.

It is true that prayer and the giving of our substance are not in all respects alike. We can only bestow the kindness of our liberality on those of whose wants we are aware, whereas in prayer we can assist the greatest strangers, how wide so ever the space that may separate them from us. This is done by that general form of prayer that, including all the sons of God, includes them also. To this, we may refer the exhortation that Paul gave to the believers of his age, to lift up “holy hands without wrath and doubting” (1Ti 2:8). By reminding them that dissension is a bar to prayer, he shows it to be his wish that they should present with one accord their prayers in common.

Section 40 “Which Art in Heaven”

The next words are, “WHICH ART IN HEAVEN.” From this, we are not to infer that He is enclosed and confined within the circumference of heaven, as by a kind of boundaries. Hence Solomon confesses, “The heaven of heavens cannot contain thee” (1Ki 8:27); and He himself says by the Prophet, “The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool” (Isa 66:1; Act 7:49), thereby intimating, that His presence, not confined to any region, is diffused over all space. But as our gross¹³² minds are unable to conceive of His ineffable glory, it is designated to us by *heaven*, nothing that our eyes can behold being so full of splendor and majesty. While then we are accustomed to regard every object as confined to the place where our senses discern it, no place can be assigned to God. Hence, if we would seek Him, we must rise higher than all corporeal¹³³ or mental discernment. Again, this form of expression reminds us that He is far beyond the reach of change or corruption, that He holds the whole universe in His grasp and rules it by His power. The effect of the expressions therefore is the same as if it had been said that He is of infinite majesty, incomprehensible essence, boundless power, and eternal duration. When we thus speak of God, our thoughts must be raised to their highest pitch. We must not ascribe to Him anything of a terrestrial or carnal¹³⁴ nature, must not measure Him by our little standards, or suppose His will to be like ours. At the same time, we must put our confidence in Him, understanding that heaven and earth are governed by His providence and power.

In short, under the name of Father, is set before us that God, Who hath appeared to us in His own image, that we may invoke Him with sure faith, the familiar name of Father being given not only to inspire confidence, but also to curb our minds and prevent them from going astray after doubtful or fictitious gods. We thus ascend from the only begotten Son to the supreme Father of angels and of the church. Then when His throne is fixed in heaven, we are reminded that He governs the world, and, therefore, that it is not in vain to approach Him, Whose present care we actually experience. “He that cometh to God” says the Apostle, “must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Heb 11:6). Here Christ makes both claims for His Father, *first*, that we place our faith in Him; and *second*, that we feel assured that our salvation is not neglected by Him, inasmuch as He condescends to extend His providence to us. By these elementary principles, Paul prepares us to pray aright; for before enjoining us to make our requests known unto God, He premises in this way, “The Lord is

¹³² **gross** – so unrefined as to be lacking in sensibility and the ability to make fine distinctions; dull.

¹³³ **corporeal** – bodily.

¹³⁴ **terrestrial or carnal** – earthly or fleshly.

at hand. Be careful for nothing” (Phi 4:5-6). Whence it appears that doubt and perplexity hang over the prayers of those in whose minds the belief is not firmly seated, that “the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous” (Psa 34:15; 1Pe 3:12).

Section 41 “Hallowed Be Thy Name”

The first petition is, “HALLOWED BE THY NAME” (Mat 6:9). The necessity of presenting it bespeaks our great disgrace. For what can be more unbecoming than that our ingratitude and malice should impair, our audacity and petulance¹³⁵ should as much as in them lies destroy, the glory of God? But though all the ungodly should burst with sacrilegious¹³⁶ rage, the holiness of God’s name still shines forth. Justly does the Psalmist exclaim, “According to thy name, O God, so is thy praise unto the ends of the earth” (Psa 48:10). For wherever God hath made Himself known, His perfections must be displayed, His power, goodness, wisdom, justice, mercy, and truth, which fill us with admiration and incite us to show forth His praise. Therefore, as the name of God is not duly hallowed on the earth, and we are otherwise unable to assert it, it is at least our duty to make it the subject of our prayers.

The sum of the whole is [this]: it must be our desire that God may receive the honor that is His due [and] that men may never think or speak of Him without the greatest reverence. The opposite of this reverence is profanity, which has always been too common in the world and is very prevalent in the present day. Hence, the necessity of the petition that, if piety had any proper existence among us, would be superfluous. But, if the name of God is duly hallowed only when separated from all other names, it alone is glorified. We are in the petition enjoined to ask, not only that God would vindicate His sacred name from all contempt and insult, but also that He would compel the whole human race to reverence it.

Then, since God manifests Himself to us partly by His word and partly by His works, He is not sanctified unless in respect to both of these we ascribe to Him what is due and thus embrace whatever has proceeded from Him, giving no less praise to His justice than to His mercy. On the manifold diversity of His works, He has inscribed the marks of His glory, and these ought to call forth from every tongue an ascription¹³⁷ of praise. Thus, Scripture will obtain its due authority with us, and no event will hinder us from celebrating the praises of God in respect to every part of His government. On the other hand, the petition implies a wish that all impiety that pollutes this sacred name may perish and be extinguished; that everything that obscures or impairs His glory, all detraction and insult, may cease; that all blasphemy being suppressed, the divine majesty may be more and more signally displayed.

Section 42 “Thy Kingdom Come”

The second petition is, “THY KINGDOM COME” (Mat 6:10). This contains nothing new, and yet there is good reason for distinguishing it from the first. For if we consider our lethargy in the greatest of all matters, we shall see how necessary it is that what ought to be in itself perfectly known should be inculcated¹³⁸ at greater length. Therefore, after the injunction¹³⁹ to pray that God would reduce to order, and at length completely efface every stain that is thrown on His sacred name, another petition containing almost the same wish is added—i.e. “Thy kingdom come” (Mat 6:10).

Although a definition of this kingdom has already been given, I now briefly repeat that God reigns when men, in denial of themselves and contempt of the world and this earthly life, devote themselves to righteousness and aspire to heaven. Thus, this kingdom consists of two parts: the first is when God by the agency of His Spirit corrects all the depraved lusts of the flesh, which in bands war against Him; and the second, when He brings all our thoughts into obedience to His authority.

This petition, therefore, is duly presented only by those who begin with themselves, in other words, who pray that they may be purified from all the corruptions that disturb the tranquility and impair the purity of God’s kingdom. Then as the Word of God is like His royal scepter, we are here enjoined to pray that He would subdue all minds and hearts to voluntary obedience. This is done when, by the secret inspiration of His Spirit, He displays the efficacy of His Word and raises it to the place of honor that it deserves. We must next descend to the wicked who perversely and with desperate madness resist His authority. God therefore sets up His kingdom by humbling the whole world (though in different ways), taming the wantonness of some, and breaking the ungovernable pride of others. We should desire this to be done every day in order that God may gather churches to Himself from all quarters of the world, may extend and increase their numbers, enrich them with His gifts, establish due order among them; on the other hand, beat down all the enemies of pure doctrine and religion, dissipate their counsels, defeat their attempts. Hence, it appears that there is good ground for the precept that enjoins daily progress, for human affairs are never as prosperous as when the impurities of vice are purged away and integrity flourishes in full vigor. The completion, however, is deferred to the final advent of Christ, when, as Paul declares, “God will be all in all” (1Co 15:28).

This prayer, therefore, ought to withdraw us from the corruptions of the world that separate us from God and prevent His kingdom from flourish-ing within us. Secondly, it ought to inflame us with an ardent desire for the mortification of the flesh. Lastly, it ought to train us to the endurance of the cross, since this is the way in which God would have His kingdom to be advanced. It ought not to grieve us that the outward man decays, provided the inner man is renewed (2Co 4:16). For such is the nature of the kingdom of God, that while we submit to His righteousness, He makes us partakers of His glory. This is the case when continually adding to His light and truth, by which the lies and the darkness of Satan and his kingdom are dissipated,

¹³⁵ **audacity and petulance** – shameless disrespect and bad-tempered behavior.

¹³⁶ **sacrilegious** – profane and offensive disrespect toward what is holy.

¹³⁷ **ascription** – declaration.

¹³⁸ **inculcated** – taught or impressed by frequent repetitions or admonitions.

¹³⁹ **injunction** – formal command.

extinguished, and destroyed, He protects His people, guides them aright by the agency of His Spirit, and confirms them in perseverance. On the other hand, He frustrates the impious conspiracies of His enemies, dissipates their wiles and frauds, prevents their malice and curbs their petulance, until at length He consumes Antichrist “with the spirit of his mouth” and destroy all impiety “with the brightness of his coming” (2Th 2:8).

Section 43 “Thy Will Be Done”

The third petition is, “THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN” (Mat 6:10). Though this depends on His kingdom and cannot be disjoined from it, yet a separate place is not improperly given to it on account of our ignorance, which does not at once or easily apprehend what is meant by God reigning in the world. This, therefore, may not improperly be taken as the explanation: that God will be King in the world when all shall subject themselves to His will.

We are not here treating of that secret will by which He governs all things and destines them to their end.¹⁴⁰ For although devils and men rise in tumult against Him, He is able by His incomprehensible counsel not only to turn aside their violence, but also to make it subservient to the execution of His decrees.

What we here speak of is another will of God, namely, that of which voluntary obedience is the counterpart. Therefore, heaven is expressly contrasted with earth because, as is said in The Psalms, the angels “do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word” (Psa 103:20). We are therefore enjoined to pray that as everything done in heaven is at the command of God and the angels are calmly disposed to do all that is right, so the earth may be brought under His authority, all rebellion and depravity having been extinguished. In presenting this request, we renounce the desires of the flesh because he who does not entirely resign his affections to God does as much as in him lies to oppose the divine will, since everything that proceeds from us is vicious. Again, by this prayer we are taught to deny ourselves that God may rule us according to His pleasure; and not only so, but also having annihilated our own [desires], may create new thoughts and new minds (Psa 51:10), so that we shall have no desire save that of entire agreement with His will. In short, [we are taught to] wish nothing of ourselves, but have our hearts governed by His Spirit, under Whose inward teaching we may learn to love those things that please and hate those things that displease Him. Hence, also, we must desire that He would nullify and suppress all affections that are repugnant to His will.

Such are the three first heads of the prayer, in presenting that we should have the glory of God only in view, taking no account of ourselves, and paying no respect to our own advantage, which, though it is thereby greatly promoted, is not here to be the subject of request. And though all the events prayed for must happen in their own time, without being either thought of, wished, or asked by us, it is still our duty to wish and ask for them. And it is of no slight importance to do so that we may testify and profess that we are the servants and children of God, desirous by every means in our power to promote the honor due to Him as our Lord and Father, and truly and thoroughly devoted to His service. Hence, if men, in praying that the name of God may be hallowed that His kingdom may come and His will be done, are not influenced by this zeal for the promotion of His glory, they are not to be accounted among the servants and children of God. And as all these things *will* take place against their will, so they will turn out to their confusion and destruction.

Section 44 “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”

Now comes the second part of the prayer, in which we descend to our own interests, not, indeed, that we are to lose sight of the glory of God to which, as Paul declares, we must have respect even in meat and drink (1Co 10:31) and ask only what is expedient for ourselves. But the distinction, as we have already observed, is this: God claiming the three first petitions as specially His own, carries us entirely to Himself, that in this way He may prove our piety. Next He permits us to look to our own advantage, but still on the condition that when we ask anything for ourselves it must be in order that all the benefits which He confers may show forth His glory, there being nothing more incumbent on us than to live and die to Him (Rom 14:7-9).

By the first petition of the second part, GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD, we pray in general that God would give us all things that the body requires in this sublunary¹⁴¹ state—not only food and clothing, but everything that He knows will assist us to eat our bread in peace. In this way, we briefly cast our care upon Him and commit ourselves to His providence that He may feed, foster, and preserve us. For our heavenly Father disdains not to take our body under His charge and protection, that He may exercise our faith in those minute matters, while we look to Him for everything, even to a morsel of bread and a drop of water. For since, owing to some strange inequality, we feel more concern for the body than for the soul, many who can trust the latter to God still continue anxious about the former, still hesitate as to what they are to eat, as to how they are to be clothed, and are in trepidation¹⁴² whenever their hands are not filled with corn, and wine, and oil, so much more value do we set on this shadowy, fleeting life, than on a blessed immortality. But those who, trusting to God, have once cast away that anxiety about the flesh, immediately look to Him for greater gifts, even salvation and eternal life. It is no slight exercise of faith, therefore, to hope in God for things that would otherwise give us so much concern, nor have we made little progress when we get quit¹⁴³ of this unbelief, which cleaves, as it were, to our very bones.

¹⁴⁰ See *Institutes*, III, xxiv, 17.

¹⁴¹ **sublunary** – earthly.

¹⁴² **trepidation** – a state of alarm or dread.

¹⁴³ **get quit** – get free.

The speculations of some concerning “supersubstantial bread”¹⁴⁴ seem to be very little accordant with our Savior’s meaning. For our prayer would be defective were we not to ascribe to God the nourishment even of this fading life (Mat 6:11). The reason that they give is heathenish, i.e., that it is inconsistent with the character of sons of God, who ought to be spiritual, not only to occupy their mind with earthly cares, but to suppose God also [is] occupied with them. As if His blessing and paternal favor were not eminently displayed in giving us food, or as if there were nothing in the declaration that godliness hath “the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come” (1Ti 4:8). But although the forgiveness of sins is of far more importance than the nourishment of the body, yet Christ has set down the inferior in the prior place, in order that He might gradually raise us to the other two petitions, which properly belong to the heavenly life—in this providing for our sluggishness.

We are enjoined to ask [for] *our bread*, that we may be contented with the measure that our heavenly Father is pleased to dispense, and not strive to make gain by illicit arts.¹⁴⁵ Meanwhile, we must hold that the title by which it is ours is donation because, as Moses says (Lev 26:20, Deu 8:17), neither our industry, nor labor, nor hands, acquire anything for us, unless the blessing of God be present; nay, not even would abundance of bread be of the least avail were it not divinely converted into nourishment. Hence, this liberality of God is not less necessary to the rich than the poor because, though their cellars and barns were full, they would be parched and pine with want¹⁴⁶ did they not enjoy His favor along with their bread. The terms *this day*, or, as it is in another Evangelist, *daily*, and also the epithet *daily*, lay a restraint on our immoderate desire of fleeting good—a desire that we are extremely apt to indulge to excess, and from which other evils ensue. For, when our supply is in richer abundance, we ambitiously squander it in pleasure, luxury, ostentation, or other kinds of extravagance. Wherefore, we are only enjoined to ask as much as our necessity requires and as it were for each day, confiding that our heavenly Father, Who gives us the supply of today, will not fail us on the morrow. How great so ever our abundance may be, however well-filled our cellars and granaries, we must still always ask for daily bread, for we must feel assured that all substance is nothing, unless in so far as the Lord, by pouring out His blessing, make it fruitful during its whole progress. For even that which is in our hand is not ours except in so far as He every hour portions it out and permits us to use it. As nothing is more difficult to human pride than the admission of this truth, the Lord declares that He gave a special proof for all ages, when He fed His people with manna in the desert (Deu 8:3), that He might remind us that “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Mat 4:4). It is thus intimated that by His power alone our life and strength are sustained, though He ministers supply to us by bodily instruments. In like manner, whenever it so pleases, He gives us a proof of an opposite description, by breaking the strength, or, as He Himself calls it, the *staff* of bread (Lev 26:26), and leaving us even while eating to pine with hunger, and while drinking to be parched with thirst (Eze 4:16-17; 14:13).

Those who, not contented with daily bread, indulge an unrestrained insatiable cupidity,¹⁴⁷ or those who are full of their own abundance and trust in their own riches, only mock God by offering up this prayer. For the former ask what they would be unwilling to obtain, nay, what they most of all abominate, namely, daily bread only, and as much as in them lies disguise their avarice from God, whereas true prayer should pour out the whole soul and every inward feeling before Him. The latter, again, ask what they do not at all expect to obtain, namely, what they imagine that they in themselves already possess.

In its being called *ours*, God, as we have already said, gives a striking display of His kindness, making that to be ours to which we have no just claim (Deu 8:18). Nor must we reject the view to which I have already adverted—i.e., that this name is given to what is obtained by just and honest labor, as contrasted with what is obtained by fraud and rapine, nothing being our own that we obtain with injury to others.

When we ask God to *give us*, the meaning is, that the thing asked is simply and freely the gift of God, whatever be the quarter from which it comes to us, even when it seems to have been specially prepared by our own art and industry and procured by our hands, since it is to His blessing alone that all our labors owe their success.

Section 45 “Forgive Us Our Debts”

The next petition is, “FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS” (Mat 6:12). In this and the following petition, our Savior has briefly comprehended whatever is conducive to the heavenly life, as these two members contain the spiritual covenant that God made for the salvation of His church: “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it on their hearts”; “I will pardon all their iniquities” (Jer 31:33; 33:8). Here our Savior begins with the forgiveness of sins and then adds the subsequent blessing, i.e., that God would protect us by the power and support us by the aid of His Spirit, so that we may stand invincible against all temptations.

To sins He gives the name of *debts* because we owe the punishment due to them, a debt that we could not possibly pay were we not discharged by this remission, the result of His free mercy, when He freely expunges¹⁴⁸ the debt, accepting nothing in return; but of His own mercy receiving satisfaction in Christ, Who gave Himself a ransom for us (Rom 3:24). Hence, those who expect to satisfy God by merits of their own or of others, or to compensate and purchase forgiveness by means of satisfactions, have no share in this free pardon, and while they address God in this petition, do nothing more than subscribe their own

¹⁴⁴ **supersubstantial bread** – Here Calvin disagrees with the Roman Catholic view of Matthew 6:11. Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate of A.D. 405, said, “Give us this day our supersubstantial bread,” not “our daily bread.” *Supersubstantial* means “above material substance; spiritual.” Rome concludes that the “supersubstantial bread” is a Eucharistic term referring to “the Bread of Life, the Body of Christ.” Calvin viewed this as “exceedingly absurd” in his *Harmony of the Gospels* and Erasmus’ defense of it “frivolous.”

¹⁴⁵ **illicit arts** – unlawful means.

¹⁴⁶ **parched and pine...want** – thirsty and suffering because of the lack of necessities.

¹⁴⁷ **cupidity** – inordinate desire for wealth; greed.

¹⁴⁸ **expunges** – wipes out.

accusation and seal their condemnation by their own testimony. For they confess that they are debtors, unless they are discharged by means of forgiveness. This forgiveness, however, they do not receive, but rather reject, when they obtrude¹⁴⁹ their merits and satisfactions upon God, since by so doing they do not implore His mercy, but appeal to His justice.

Let those, again, who dream of a perfection that makes it unnecessary to seek pardon, find their disciples among those whose itching ears incline them to imposture.¹⁵⁰ Only let them understand that those whom they thus acquire have been carried away from Christ, since He, by instructing all to confess their guilt, receives none but sinners, not that He may soothe and so encourage them in their sins, but because He knows that believers are never so divested of the sins of the flesh as not to remain subject to the justice of God. It is, indeed, to be wished, it even ought to be our strenuous endeavor to perform all the parts of our duty, so as truly to congratulate ourselves before God as being pure from every stain. But as God is pleased to renew His image in us by degrees, so that to some extent there is always a residue of corruption in our flesh, we ought by no means to neglect the remedy. But if Christ, according to the authority given Him by His Father, enjoins us, during the whole course of our lives, to implore pardon, who can tolerate those new teachers who, by the phantom of perfect innocence, endeavor to dazzle the simple and make them believe that they can render themselves completely free from guilt? This, as John declares, is nothing else than to make God a liar (1Jo 1:10).

In like manner, those foolish men mutilate the covenant in which we have seen that our salvation is contained by concealing one head of it, and so destroying it entirely; being guilty not only of profanity in that they separate things that ought to be indissolubly connected; but also of wickedness and cruelty in overwhelming wretched souls with despair—of treachery also to themselves and their followers, in that they encourage themselves in a carelessness, diametrically opposed to the mercy of God. It is excessively childish to object that when they long for the advent of the kingdom of God, they at the same time pray for the abolition of sin. In the former division of the prayer, absolute perfection is set before us; but in the latter, our own weakness. Thus, the two fitly correspond to each other—we strive for the goal and at the same time neglect not the remedies that our necessities require.

In the next part of the petition, we pray to be forgiven, “*as we forgive our debtors*” (Mat 6:12), that is, as we spare and pardon all by whom we are in any way offended, either in deed by unjust, or in word by contumelious¹⁵¹ treatment. Not that we can forgive the guilt of a fault or offense; this belongs to God only. But we can forgive to this extent: we can voluntarily divest our minds of wrath, hatred, and revenge, and efface the remembrance of injuries by a voluntary oblivion.¹⁵² Wherefore, we are not to ask the forgiveness of our sins from God, unless we forgive the offenses of all who are or have been injurious to us. If we retain any hatred in our minds, if we meditate revenge, and devise the means of hurting; nay, if we do not return to a good understanding with our enemies, perform every kind of friendly office, and endeavor to effect a reconciliation with them, we by this petition beseech God not to grant us forgiveness. For we ask Him to do to us as we do to others. This is the same as asking Him not to do unless we do also. What, then, do such persons obtain by this petition but a heavier judgment? Lastly, it is to be observed that the condition of being forgiven as we forgive our debtors is not added because by forgiving others we *deserve* forgiveness, as if the cause of forgiveness were expressed. But by the use of this expression, the Lord has been pleased partly to solace the weakness of our faith, using it as a sign to assure us that our sins are as certainly forgiven as we are certainly conscious of having forgiven others, when our mind is completely purged from all envy, hatred, and malice; and partly using as a badge by which He excludes from the number of His children all who, prone to revenge and reluctant to forgive, obstinately keep up their enmity, cherishing against others that indignation that they deprecate¹⁵³ from themselves; so that they should not venture to invoke Him as a Father. In the Gospel of Luke (Luk 11:4), we have this distinctly stated in the words of Christ.

Section 46 “Lead Us Not into Temptation”

The sixth petition (Mat 6:13) corresponds (as we have observed) to the promise of *writing the law upon our hearts* (Pro 3:3; 2Co 3:3). But because we do not obey God without a continual warfare, without sharp and arduous contests, we here pray that He would furnish us with armor and defend us by His protection that we may be able to obtain the victory. By this we are reminded that we not only have need of the gift of the Spirit inwardly to soften our hearts and turn and direct them to the obedience of God, but also of His assistance, to render us invincible by all the wiles and violent assaults of Satan. The forms of temptation are many and various. The depraved conceptions of our minds provoking us to transgress the Law—conceptions that our concupiscence¹⁵⁴ suggests or the devil excites—are temptations. Things that in their own nature are not evil become temptations by the wiles of the devil, when they are presented to our eyes in such a way that the view of them makes us withdraw or decline from God (Jam 1:2, 14; Mat 4:1, 3; 1Th 3:5). These temptations are both on the right hand and on the left. On the right, when riches, power, and honors, which by their glare and the semblance of good that they present, generally dazzle the eyes of men and so entice by their blandishments,¹⁵⁵ that, caught by their snares and intoxicated by their sweetness, they forget their God. On the left, when offended by the hardship and bitterness of poverty, disgrace, contempt, afflictions, and

¹⁴⁹ **obtrude** – thrust.

¹⁵⁰ **imposture** – pretending to be what one is not.

¹⁵¹ **contumelious** – insolently abusive and humiliating.

¹⁵² **oblivion** – forgetting.

¹⁵³ **deprecate** – seek to turn away.

¹⁵⁴ **concupiscence** – lust.

¹⁵⁵ **blandishments** – flatteries.

other things of that description, they despond,¹⁵⁶ cast away their confidence and hope, and are at length totally estranged from God.

In regard to both kinds of temptation, which either enkindled in us by concupiscence or presented by the craft of Satan's war against us, we pray God the Father not to allow us to be overcome, but rather to raise and support us by His hand, that strengthened by His mighty power we may stand firm against all the assaults of our malignant enemy, whatever be the thoughts that he sends into our minds. Next, we pray that whatever of either description is allotted us, we may turn to good, that is, may neither be inflated with prosperity nor cast down by adversity.

Here, however, we do not ask to be altogether exempted from temptation, which is very necessary to excite, stimulate, and urge us on, that we may not become too lethargic.¹⁵⁷ It was not without reason that David wished to be tried (Psa 26:2), nor is it without cause that the Lord daily tries His elect (Gen 22:1; Deu 8:2; 13:3), chastising them by disgrace, poverty, tribulation, and other kinds of cross. But the temptations of God and Satan are very different: Satan tempts that he may destroy, condemn, confound, throw headlong; God, that by proving His people, He may make trial of their sincerity and, by exercising their strength, confirm it; may mortify, tame, and cauterize their flesh, which, if not curbed in this manner, would wanton¹⁵⁸ and exult above measure. Besides, Satan attacks those who are unarmed and unprepared that he may destroy them unawares; whereas whatever God sends, He "will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1Co 10:13; 2Pe 2:9).

Whether by the term *evil* we understand the devil or sin is not of the least consequence. Satan is indeed the very enemy who lays snares for our life, but it is by sin that he is armed for our destruction. Our petition, therefore, is, that we may not be overcome or overwhelmed with temptation, but in the strength of the Lord may stand firm against all the powers by which we are assailed. In other words, [our petition is that we] may not fall under temptation: that being thus taken under His charge and protection, we may remain invincible by sin, death, the gates of hell, and the whole power of the devil; in other words, be delivered from evil.

Here it is carefully to be observed that we have no strength to contend with such a combatant as the devil or to sustain the violence of his assault. Were it otherwise, it would be mockery of God to ask of Him what we already possess in ourselves. Assuredly, those, who in self-confidence prepare for such a fight, do not understand how bold and well equipped the enemy is with whom they have to do. Now we ask to be delivered from his power, as from the mouth of some furious raging lion (1Pe 5:8), who would instantly tear us with his teeth and claws and swallow us up, did not the Lord rescue us from the midst of death; at the same time knowing that if the Lord is present and will fight for us while we stand by, through Him "we shall do valiantly" (Psa 60:12). Let others if they will confide in the powers and resources of their "free will" that they think they possess; enough for us that we stand and are strong in the power of God alone.

But the prayer comprehends more than at first sight it seems to do. For, if the Spirit of God is our strength in waging the contest with Satan, we cannot gain the victory unless we are filled with Him, and thereby freed from all infirmity of the flesh. Therefore, when we pray to be delivered from sin and Satan, we at the same time desire to be enriched with new supplies of divine grace, until completely replenished with them, we triumph over every evil.

To some it seems rude and harsh to ask God not to lead us into temptation, since, as James declares (Jam 1:13), it is contrary to His nature to do so. This difficulty has already been partly solved by the fact that our concupiscence is the cause, and therefore properly bears the blame of all the temptations by which we are overcome. All that James means is that it is vain and unjust to ascribe to God vices that our own consciousness compels us to impute to ourselves. But this is no reason why God may not, when He sees it meet, bring us into bondage to Satan, give us up to a reprobate¹⁵⁹ mind and shameful lusts, and so by a just, indeed, but often hidden judgment, lead us into temptation. Though the cause is often concealed from men, it is well known to Him. Hence, we may see that the expression is not improper, if we are persuaded that it is not without cause He so often threatens to give sure signs of His vengeance, by blinding the reprobate and hardening their hearts.

Section 47 "Thine Is the Kingdom"

These three petitions, in which we specially commend ourselves and all that we have to God, clearly show what we formerly observed (sec. 38, 39), that the prayers of Christians should be public and have respect to the public edification of the church and the advancement of believers in spiritual communion. For no one requests that anything should be given to him as an individual, but we all ask in common for daily bread and the forgiveness of sins, not to be led into temptation, but delivered from evil.

Moreover, there is subjoined the reason for our great boldness in asking and confidence of obtaining (sec. 11, 36). Although this does not exist in the Latin copies, yet as it accords so well with the whole, we cannot think of omitting it. The words are, "THINE IS THE KINGDOM, AND THE POWER, AND THE GLORY, FOREVER" (Mat 6:13). Here is the calm and firm assurance of our faith. For were our prayers to be commended to God by our own worth, who would venture even to whisper before Him? Now, however wretched we may be, however unworthy, however devoid of commendation, we shall never want a reason for prayer, nor a ground of confidence, since the kingdom, power, and glory, can never be wrested from our Father.

¹⁵⁶ **despond** – become depressed; lose heart.

¹⁵⁷ **lethargic** – sluggish; dull.

¹⁵⁸ **wanton** – indulge in excess or lewdness.

¹⁵⁹ **reprobate** – literally, "failing to meet the test," therefore, worthless; corrupted.

The last word is “AMEN” (Mat 6:13), by which is expressed the eagerness of our desire to obtain the things that we ask, while our hope is confirmed, that all things have already been obtained and will assuredly be granted to us, seeing they have been promised by God, Who cannot deceive. This accords with the form of expression to which we have already adverted: “Grant, O Lord, for thy name’s sake, not on account of us or of our right-eousness” (Dan 9:18-19). By this, the saints not only express the end of their prayers, but also confess that they are unworthy of obtaining, did not God find the cause in Himself and were not their confidence founded entirely on His nature.

Section 48 The Lord’s Prayer as a Binding Rule

All things that we ought, indeed, all that we are able to ask of God are contained in this *formula* and, as it were, *rule* of prayer, [which was] deliv-ered by Christ, our divine Master, Whom the Father has appointed to be our teacher, and to Whom alone He would have us to listen (Mat 17:5). For He ever was the eternal wisdom of the Father (Isa 11:2) and, being made man, was manifested as the Wonderful, the Counselor (Isa 9:6).

Accordingly, this prayer is complete in all its parts; so complete, that whatever is extraneous and foreign to it, whatever cannot be referred to it, is impious and unworthy of the approbation of God. For He has here summarily prescribed what is worthy of Him, what is acceptable to Him, and what is necessary for us; in short, whatever He is pleased to grant.

Those, therefore, who presume to go further and ask something more from God, first seek to add of their own to the wisdom of God (this it is insane blasphemy to do); secondly, refusing to confine themselves within the will of God and despising it, they wander as their cupidity directs; lastly, they will never obtain anything, seeing they pray without faith. For there cannot be a doubt that all such prayers are made without faith because [they are] at variance with the Word of God, on which if faith does not always lean, it cannot possibly stand. Those who, disregarding the Master’s rule, indulge their own wishes, not only have not the Word of God, but also as much as in them lies oppose it. Hence, not less truly than elegantly, Tertullian¹⁶⁰ has termed it *Lawful Prayer*, tacitly intimating that all other prayers are lawless and illicit.

Section 49 The Lord’s Prayer Does Not Bind Us to Its Form of Words but to Its Content

By this, however, we would not have it understood that we are so restricted to this form of prayer as to make it unlawful to change a word or syllable of it. For in Scripture, we meet with many prayers differing greatly from it in word, yet written by the same Spirit and capable of being used by us with the greatest advantage. Many prayers also are continually suggested to believers by the same Spirit, though in expression they bear no great resemblance to it. All we mean to say is that no man should wish, expect, or ask anything that is not summarily comprehended in this prayer. Though the words may be very different, there must be no difference in the sense. In this way, all prayers, both those that are contained in the Scripture, and those that come forth from pious breasts, must be referred to it. Certainly none can ever equal it, far less surpass it in perfection. It omits nothing that we can conceive in praise of God, nothing that we can imagine advantageous to man, and the whole is so exact that all hope of improving it may well be renounced. In short, let us remember that we have here the doctrine of heavenly wisdom. God has taught what He willed; He willed what was necessary.

Section 50 Prayer at Regular Times

But although it has been said above (sec. 7, 27, etc.) that we ought always to raise our minds upwards towards God and pray without ceasing, yet such is our weakness, which requires to be supported, such our torpor,¹⁶¹ which requires to be stimulated, that it is requisite for us to appoint special hours for this exercise, hours that are not to pass away without prayer, and during which the whole affections of our minds are to be completely occupied; namely, when we rise in the morning, before we commence our daily work, when we sit down to food, when by the blessing of God we have taken it, and when we retire to rest.

This, however, must not be a superstitious observance of hours, by which, as it were, performing a task to God, we think we are discharged as to other hours. It should rather be considered as a discipline by which our weakness is exercised and ever and anon¹⁶² stimulated. In particular, it must be our anxious care, whenever we are ourselves pressed, or see others pressed by any strait, instantly to have recourse to Him not only with quickened pace, but with quickened minds. Again, we must not in any prosperity of ourselves or others omit to testify our recognition of His hand by praise and thanksgiving.

Lastly, we must in all our prayers carefully avoid wishing to confine God to certain circumstances or prescribe to Him the time, place, or mode of action. In like manner, we are taught by this prayer not to fix any law or impose any condition upon Him, but leave it entirely to Him to adopt whatever course of procedure seems to Him best in respect of method, time, and place. For before we offer up any petition for ourselves, we ask that His will may be done (Mat 6:10), and by so doing place our will in subordination to His, just as if we had laid a curb upon it, that, instead of presuming to give law to God, it may regard Him as the Ruler and Disposer of all its wishes.

Section 51 Patient Perseverance in Prayer

If, with minds thus framed to obedience, we allow ourselves to be gov-erned by the laws of Divine Providence, we shall easily learn to persevere in prayer and, suspending our own desires, wait patiently for the Lord, certain, however little the ap-

¹⁶⁰ **Tertullian** (c. 160-225) – Latin theologian from Carthage, Africa.

¹⁶¹ **torpor** – state of mental inactivity; apathy.

¹⁶² **ever and anon** – continually at intervals.

pearance of it may be, that He is always present with us and will in His own time show how very far He was from turning a deaf ear to prayers, though to the eyes of men they may seem to be disregarded. This will be a very present consolation, if at any time God does not grant an immediate answer to our prayers, preventing us from fainting or giving way to despondency, as those are wont to do who, in invoking God, are so borne away by their own fervor that unless He yield on their first importunity¹⁶³ and give present help, they immediately imagine that He is angry and offended with them and, abandoning all hope of success, cease from prayer. On the contrary, deferring our hope with well-tempered equanimity,¹⁶⁴ let us insist with that perseverance that is so strongly recommended to us in Scripture. We may often see in The Psalms how David and other believers, after they are almost weary of praying and seem to have been beating the air by addressing a God Who would not hear, yet cease not to pray (Psa 22:2) because due authority is not given to the Word of God, unless the faith placed in it is superior to all events.

Again, let us not tempt God and, by wearying Him with our importunity, provoke His anger against us. Many have a practice of formally bargaining with God on certain conditions, and, as if He were the servant of their lust, binding Him to certain stipulations;¹⁶⁵ with which if He does not immediately comply, they are indignant and fretful, murmur, complain, and make a noise. Thus offended, He often in His anger grants to such persons what in mercy He kindly denies to others. Of this, we have a proof in the children of Israel, for whom it had been better not to have been heard by the Lord, than to swallow His indignation with their flesh (Num 11:18, 33).

Section 52 Unheard Prayers?

But if our sense is not able, until after long expectation, to perceive what the result of prayer is or experience any benefit from it, still our faith will assure us of that which cannot be perceived by sense, i.e., that we have obtained what was fit for us, the Lord having so often and so surely engaged to take an interest in all our troubles from the moment they have been deposited in His bosom. In this way, we shall possess abundance in poverty and comfort in affliction. For, though all things fail, God will never abandon us, and He cannot frustrate the expectation and patience of His people. He alone will suffice for all, since in Himself He comprehends all good and will reveal it to us at last on the Day of Judgment, when His kingdom shall be plainly manifested.

We may add that, although God complies with our request, He does not always give an answer in the very terms of our prayers, but while apparently holding us in suspense, yet in an unknown way, shows that our prayers have not been in vain. This is the meaning of the words of John, “If we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him” (1Jo 5:15). It might seem that there is here a great superfluity¹⁶⁶ of words, but the declaration is most useful, namely, that God, even when He does not comply with our requests, yet listens and is favorable to our prayers, so that our hope founded on His word is never disappointed. But believers have always [a] need of being supported by this patience, as they could not stand long if they did not lean upon it. For the trials by which the Lord proves and exercises us are severe, nay, He often drives us to extremes, and when driven, allows us long to stick fast in the mire before He gives us any taste of His sweetness. As Hannah says, “The Lord killeth, and maketh alive; he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up” (1Sa 2:6). What could they here do but become dispirited and rush on despair, were they not, when afflicted, desolate, and half-dead, comforted with the thought that they are regarded by God, and that there will be an end to their present evils. But however secure their hopes may stand, they in the meantime cease not to pray, since prayer unaccompanied by perseverance leads to no result. ❧

¹⁶³ **importunity** – urgent request.

¹⁶⁴ **equanimity** – steadiness of mind under stress.

¹⁶⁵ **stipulations** – terms or conditions of an agreement.

¹⁶⁶ **superfluity** – excess.