

Calvin's Prayers

I like all of the classes that I teach, but I especially like this one. I always look forward to getting into this again. It has been a couple of years since I have taught it. I learn something every time as we read through Calvin's work. I also find it a blessing in different ways to go through this material again.

I use a prayer from Calvin to begin each class. We have a lot of Calvin's prayers. Fortunately, his students wrote these down as he prayed them, so they have been preserved. There are numerous prayers from Calvin, but the one I want to use now is one that we are not sure is from Calvin. However, it is often attributed to Calvin. It is in our hymnbook. It begins by saying, "I greet Thee who my sure Redeemer art." You will notice in the *Trinity Hymnal* that it is not ascribed to Calvin. It is ascribed to the *Strasburg Psalter* of 1545. We know Calvin was in Strasburg from 1538 to 1541, the so-called "three golden years" of Calvin's life when he was working with Martin Bucer. We know Calvin also highly recommended this 1545 Psalter as meeting his criteria for acceptable worship. So, these are not words by Calvin. They are words that Calvin knew and approved of. I would like to pray the prayer in two parts. I will pray part of the hymn that is really a prayer: "I greet Thee who my sure Redeemer art." Then, I will make a few more comments and pray the rest of it. Let us pray.

*"I greet Thee who my sure Redeemer art,
My only trust and Savior of my heart
Who pain didst undergo for my poor sake.
I pray Thee from our hearts all cares to take.
Thou art the king of mercy and of grace
Reigning omnipotent in every place.
So come, oh King, and our whole being sway;
Shine on us with the light of Thy pure day." Amen.*

As I was praying that, you may have detected some expected notes of Calvin's theology coming through: God is a king who demands our full allegiance: "So come, oh King, and our whole being sway." I will say that statements like that will appear quite often in the *Institutes*, which is not just scientific theology but a book of piety and devotion. Calvin meant it to be that way. Those words that I just prayed speak about God as sovereign, almighty, reigning omnipotent in every place, and they speak of God's sovereignty and kingship demanding our allegiance. These are themes that we come to expect from Calvin. The hymn goes on to enumerate other characteristics of God such as God's love, gentleness, and the importance of Christians being one—unity in the church. Those are themes that we probably do not as readily associate with Calvin, but I think that we should. I hope, by the time we study through the *Institutes* in this course, that we will see the love and mercy of God as just as prominent in Calvin's thought as the sovereignty of God. So, let me pray the rest of the hymn now. Let us pray.

*Thou art the life by which alone we live
And all our substance and our strength receive.
Oh comfort us in death's approaching hour,
Strong-hearted, then, to face it by Thy power.
Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness.
No harshness has Thou and no bitterness.
Make us to taste the sweet grace found in Thee
And ever stay in Thy sweet unity.
Our hope is in no other save in Thee.*

*Our faith is built upon Thy promise free.
Oh grant to us such stronger hope and sure
That we can boldly conquer and endure.” Amen.*

For this course you will need the two volumes of the McNeil/Battles edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In this course we will read and analyze *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with attention to Calvin's method and arrangement of material and the biblical, devotional, and theological content. One of our objectives is to understand the contents and theological method of the *Institutes*, which is what you would expect to get out of a class on Calvin's *Institutes*. Another objective that you may not think about is increased knowledge of the Bible. You will become aware of the fact the Calvin's *Institutes* is packed full of Scripture that is well used and well exegeted. As you read the *Institutes*, you will not only come to understand Calvin's theological method, but hopefully your appreciation of the Bible, your love for the Bible, and your knowledge of the Bible will be increased as well. Our last objective is a deeper, personal piety. I have already spoken about that. That is very much at the center of what Calvin is writing. This is not hard, high, scientific theology. It is very much a theology that is written from the passion of a man's heart. He exposes his heart to us as he writes his theology. He expects us to be moved to deeper allegiance to and love for God as we study his writing. So, keep those objectives in mind. Those are there not just because I have to have some objectives for this course but because they are truly important objectives that we should set before us.

There will be a lot of reading. We will read most of these two volumes. We will read almost all of the first three books and some of Book IV. We could read all of it, and it would be good to read all of it. But, Book IV does have some extended passages related to Roman Catholic sacraments that Calvin rejects. A lot of that has to do with church history and matters related to medieval Catholicism. It is very valuable and useful, but we will not read it now because you will have enough reading without that. If you do want to read it now, that is fine, but you do not have to. So you will be reading, and I will be talking about what you are reading. In this course you will read 1146 pages out of the 1486, which we find in the McNeil/Battles edition. You will generally need to read between 30 and 50 pages for each class. This is a pretty manageable chunk; although, you will not be able to skim this. This is the kind of reading that you are going to have to allow some time for. Occasionally, the reading will exceed these numbers. I also encourage you to keep a journal so that you can record memorable quotations, striking ideas, sermonic possibilities, illustrations, questions, and your own thoughts and responses to Calvin's material. This will keep you engaged with the material and give you something you can use later, not only to remind you that you have actually read through most of Calvin's *Institutes* (which is something that most people have not done, including most Presbyterians and most Presbyterian ministers), but also to use what you have learned in your ministry.