

“Prayer”

From God’s Prophet Jeremiah

Based on commentary by John Calvin
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When wickedness and lawlessness abound, let us pray: While therefore we now see all things in the world in a corrupted state, so that we are allured by a thousand things from the true worship of God, let us learn by the example of the Prophet to hide ourselves under the wings of God, and to pray that He may heal us, for we shall not only be apparently vicious, but many corruptions will immediately devour us, unless God Himself brings us help. Hence the worse the world is, and the greater the licentiousness of sin, the more necessity there is for praying God to keep us by His wonderful power.¹

In times of trial, we ought to pray: Whenever stumbling blocks come in our way, we ought to call on God with increasing ardor [zeal] and earnestness.²

In times of anxiety, let us pray: Whenever thoughts creep into our minds, which toss us here and there, we ought to flee to prayer. For many increase their anxieties by kindling them, while they turn themselves to all quarters and indulge their own thoughts and weary themselves without any benefit. Whenever, therefore, any anxiety stealthily lays hold on our minds, let us know that the remedy ought to be in due time applied, that is, to pray to God so that He may relieve us and not suffer [allow] us to sink into the deep, as it usually happens to all who are curious and give loose reins to their own imaginations (Jer. 32:16-18).³

True faith is a prerequisite for prayer: God is not really invoked by the unbelieving. Faith alone opens a door of access to us, and there cannot be any right praying except what proceeds from faith (Jer. 31:7).⁴

To true faith must be added true humility: In prayer two things are necessary—faith and humility: by faith we rise up to God, and by humility we lie prostrate on the ground. This is the reason why Scripture often says that prayer ascends, for we cannot pray as we ought unless we raise upwards our minds; and faith, sustained by promises, elevates us above all the world. Thus then prayer is raised upwards by faith; but by humility it falls down on the earth; for fear ought to be connected with faith. And as faith in our hearts produces alacrity [zeal] by confidence, so also conscience casts us down and lays us prostrate (Jer. 36:8).⁵

Prayer is an ordinary means of grace, an act of worship, and should be a regular part of every Christian’s life. Prayers must be offered in accordance with God’s will, which has been revealed to us in the Scriptures alone: If then we desire to pray aright, we must first learn what is God’s will towards us; we must also know that we then only advance

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, Vol. II, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 365-366.

² Vol. II, 365.

³ Vol. IV, 168-169.

⁴ Vol. IV, 67.

⁵ Vol. IV, 332-333.

as we ought in the attainment of salvation when we flee to God and exercise ourselves in prayer.⁶

Christ clearly exhorted His disciples to pray, saying, “Seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you.” There is no doubt but that He speaks there of prayer; He yet adopted various modes of speaking, derived from the common habits of men. But to seek when we feel the need of God’s grace is nothing else than to pray (Jer. 29:13).⁷

What is the place of fasting in the Christian life? Fasting involves a solemn confession of sin and guilt; for by fasting they acknowledged themselves to be exposed to God’s judgment, and also by sackcloth and ashes; for it was their custom to throw aside their fine garments and to put on sackcloth and also to scatter ashes on their heads or to lie on the ground. In this state of debasement they sought pardon of God, thus acknowledging in the first place their own filthiness by these external symbols, and secondly, confessing before God and angels that they were worthy of death, and that no hope remained for them except God forgave them (Jer. 36:9-10).⁸

For this reason also, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7:5, when bidding husbands to dwell with their wives, adds this, “Except it may be for a time”—for what purpose? Even that they might give themselves entirely to prayer and fasting. We hence see that fasting was not an ordinary thing, but when required by some urgent and extraordinary necessity (Jer. 36:9-10).⁹

Diligence in prayer brings true and spiritual joy: True and spiritual joy we then have, derived from God’s word, when we are diligent in prayer; and coldness and security are no tokens of faith, but of insensibility. The promises of God produce no real effects in us, as it must needs be, unless our minds are kindled into a desire for prayer, yes, into a fervor in prayer.¹⁰

This promise is to be extended to all the godly—that when they call on God in their miseries, He will hear them. And Jeremiah seems to have taken this sentence from Isaiah, “As soon as you call on me, I will hear you; before you speak, I will stretch forth My hand” (Isa. 58:9).¹¹

Sample Prayers by John Calvin from *Jeremiah*

Prayers on Faith

Cast away all self-confidence; trust in Christ alone: Grant, Almighty God, that as we are completely nothing and less than nothing, we may know our nothingness, and having cast away all confidence in the world as well as in ourselves, we may learn to flee to You as suppliants [humble petitioners], and so put our trust in You for our present life and for eternal salvation, that You alone may be glorified; and may we be devoted to You through the whole course of our life, and so persevere in humility and in calling on

⁶ Vol. II, 67.

⁷ Vol. III, 435.

⁸ Vol. IV, 335.

⁹ Vol. IV, 336.

¹⁰ Vol. IV, 68.

¹¹ Vol. III, 437.

Your name, that You may not only for once bring us help, but that we may know that You are always present with those who truly and from the heart call on You, until we shall at last be filled with the fullness of all those blessings, which are laid up for us in heaven by Christ our Lord. Amen.¹²

Rely on God alone: Grant, Almighty God, that since we see that the most opulent [affluent] kingdoms have not escaped Your hand, we may learn to rest only on Your aid, and to submit ourselves to You, with due humility, so that we may be protected by Your hand, and that this only true confidence may sustain us in all perils—that You have undertaken the care of our salvation; and that we may, in the meantime, fight under Your banner with sincerity and uprightness of life, until we shall at last enjoy the fruit of our victory, in the celestial kingdom, through Christ our Lord. Amen.¹³

The Gospel teaches us self-denial, not self-love: Grant, Almighty God, that as You have revealed to us in Your Gospel how guilty and miserable we are, we may learn to loathe ourselves, and so lie down confounded and despairing on account of the sins and guilt we have contracted, as yet to know that true glory is offered to us, and that we can be made partakers of it, if by true faith we embrace Your only-begotten Son, in whom is offered to us perfect righteousness and salvation. And grant also that we may so cleave to Christ, and so receive by faith His blessings, that we may be able, not only before the world, but also against Satan and death itself, to glory in You, for You alone are just and wise and strong; and may Your strength and justice and wisdom shine forth on us in our iniquity and ignorance and infirmity, until we shall at last reach that fullness of glory, which has been prepared for us in heaven by Christ our Lord. Amen.¹⁴

True Christians hate their own sins and judge themselves: “Grant, Almighty God, that as we cease not by our sins to provoke You more and more, we may at least be warned by Your threatenings and the words of Your prophets and may not continue obstinate in evil nor pertinaciously resist Your will, but that we may on the contrary learn to anticipate Your judgment and thus receive Your corrections, so that our sins may be hated by us, and that we may become judges of ourselves, in order that we may obtain pardon, and that having obtained it we may not doubt ever to call on You as our Father, until You at last gather us unto that blessed inheritance, which has been procured for us by the blood of Your only Son. Amen.¹⁵

Repent and believe: Grant, Almighty God, that as You have been pleased to stretch forth Your hand to us, we may be raised by faith above the world, and learn to submit to You in true humility, and to know how miserable must be our condition and life, except we entirely rest on You alone, so that we may be made partakers of that glory which You have purchased for us in Heaven, and which Your only-begotten Son, our Lord, has obtained for us. Amen. (Jer. 49:18)¹⁶

Trust in God, and fight for Jesus: Grant, Almighty God, that as You would have to exist a monument of Your invaluable mercy towards Your chosen people, when You did so grievously punish the unbelieving—O grant, that we may at this day flee to You

¹² Vol. II, 355.

¹³ Vol. IV, 585.

¹⁴ Vol. I., 508.

¹⁵ Vol. I, 473.

¹⁶ Vol. V, 87.

whenever our enemies distress us, and never doubt but that You will take care of our safety, and so rest on Your mercy, that we may patiently wait for the time of our deliverance; and that, in the meantime, we may see from on high, as in a mirror, the punishment prepared for the unbelieving, so that we may not follow their example nor implicate ourselves in their vices, but separate ourselves from them, that, being devoted to You, we may fight under the banner of Your only-begotten Son, until He shall gather us into His celestial kingdom. Amen. (Jer. 47:6-7)¹⁷

Prayers on the Fear of God

Grant, Almighty God, that when You indulge us, we may not abuse Your patience nor become reckless in prosperity, but learn so to subdue ourselves of our own accord, that we may obey You through the whole course of our life and mortify [put to death] our flesh, lest we be elated by pride and false confidence, but so live in Your fear as to reverence You when we regard You as the righteous Judge of the world and rest at the same time on You, when we acknowledge You as our Father, as You have been pleased to adopt us in Your only-begotten Son our Lord. Amen.¹⁸

The Old Testament teaches us true wisdom: Grant, Almighty God, that as You set before our eyes memorable judgments which ought to benefit us at this day, so we may be kept under Your yoke and under the fear of Your law. O grant, that we may not grow hardened by such threatenings, but rather anticipate Your wrath and so submit to You that whatever You denounce on the ungodly may turn to our comfort and for a cause of joy, when we know that the salvation of Your church is thus promoted, of which You have been pleased to regard and acknowledge us as members in Your Son our Lord. Amen. (Jer. 49:24)¹⁹

Prayers of Obedience & Submission

Grant, Almighty God, that as You have not only in Your Law prescribed to us what is right and showed to us the way of a godly life, but have also more clearly revealed Your will to us by the light of Your Gospel, where Christ Your Son shines forth as the Sun of righteousness—O grant, that we may submit ourselves entirely to You, and from the heart render You obedience, and to this apply all our efforts and direct all our doings, so that having finished the course of this life, we may at last come into that blessed rest which has been prepared for us in heaven by Christ our Lord. Amen. (Jer. 44:20-23)²⁰

Grant, Almighty God, that since You teach us by the example of the ungodly to fear Your name, we may learn to submit our necks to Your word and willingly, and as it becomes us, submissively to receive Your yoke, that while we strive to glorify Your name, being safe under Your protection, we may disregard all the attacks of our enemies, and all the assaults and onsets of Satan, who is the captain of all our enemies, until we shall at last enjoy our victory in the celestial kingdom, through Christ our Lord—Amen. (Jer. 50:42)²¹

¹⁷ Vol. IV, 617.

¹⁸ Vol. IV, 596.

¹⁹ Vol. V, 99.

²⁰ Vol. IV, 553.

²¹ Vol. V, 187.

Prayers on Spiritual Warfare

Grant, Almighty God, that since You have been pleased to call us to the spiritual warfare, we may never be wearied; and that, as our weakness is so great that we are unequal to our conflicts, O grant, that being supported by the power of Your Spirit we may persevere in the course of Your holy calling and never be broken down by anything that may happen to us but learn so to break through all dangers as to commit our life into Your hands and be in the meantime prepared to live or to die, until You gather us into that blessed rest which is laid up for us in heaven, through Christ our Lord. Amen. (Jer. 46:1-2)²²

God is our Defender: Grant Almighty God, that since You were formerly so solicitous respecting the salvation of Your people as to undertake war for their sake against a most powerful nation [Babylon]—O grant that we also, at this day, may know that we shall be safe and secure under the protection of Your hand and that we may so experience Your power, that there may be to us a just reason for glorying in You, and that our enemies may be confounded, in order that Your glory may shine forth more and more and that the kingdom of Your only-begotten Son may also be thus promoted. Amen. (Jer. 51:4)²³

Grant, Almighty God, that as You did formerly testify Your favor towards Your Church by not sparing the greatest of monarchies—O grant that we may know You at this day to be the same towards all Your faithful people who call on You; and as the power and cruelty of our enemies are so great, raise up Your hand against them, and show that You are the perpetual Defender of Your Church, so that we may have reason to magnify Your goodness in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen. (Jer. 51:33)²⁴

Prayers on True Worship

Grant, Almighty God, that as You have acted to gather us into Your Church, we may never turn aside in the least from the purity of Your worship, but always regard what pleases You, and learn to direct our doings and our thoughts in obedience to Your truth, and worship You so purely both in spirit and in external forms, that Your name may be glorified by us, and that we may especially retain that purity which You everywhere commend to us, so that we may be indeed the members of Your only-begotten Son; and that as He has sanctified Himself on our account, we may also through His Spirit be made partakers of the same sanctification, until He at last will gather us into His celestial kingdom, which He has obtained for us by His own blood—Amen. (Jer. 11:16-17)²⁵

Grant, Almighty God, that as You have once cleansed us by the blood of Your only-begotten Son, to the end that we might worship You in true sincerity of heart, and that we might also strive to regulate our whole life according to the rule of righteousness—O grant that we, being mindful of our vocation, may labor to render ourselves approved by You, so that Your name may through us be glorified, and that casting far away from us all pollutions, we may retain the simple worship of You, and preserve ourselves within the limits of Your word, so that we may not be led astray after vanities and the sinful superstitions of this world, but advance towards the mark which You have been pleased to set before us, until we shall be at last gathered into that celestial kingdom in which we

²² Vol. IV, 574.

²³ Vol. V, 199.

²⁴ Vol. V, 245.

²⁵ Vol. II, 105.

shall enjoy that inheritance which Your only-begotten Son has provided for us.—Amen. (Jer. 13:27)²⁶

Grant, Almighty God, that since You have been pleased to show us the way in which we cannot err, provided we obey You—O grant, that we may render ourselves completely teachable and ready to obey, and never undertake anything but what we know is approved by You, nor turn aside to the right hand or to the left; but continue in that form of worship which You have prescribed to us in Your word, so that we may be able to bear witness, not only before the world, but before You and the holy angels, that we obediently follow You; and may we never blend anything of our own but with submissive minds worship You alone, and strive to render ourselves entirely subject to You, until having at last rendered to You due service through the whole course of our life, we shall reach that blessed rest which Your Son has procured for us by His own blood. Amen.²⁷

Grant, Almighty God, that since You have been pleased to prescribe a rule for us, by which we may truly and purely worship You—O grant that we may follow this plain rule and never indulge our own imaginations, nor trifle with You through our own fancies or through the foolish wisdom of our flesh, but continue in Your law, and in the doctrine which Your only-begotten Son, our Lord, has delivered to us, so that we may advance more and more in the knowledge of that glory, the foretaste of which you give us now, until we shall at last fully and perfectly enjoy it, when we shall be gathered into that celestial kingdom, which Your Son has procured for us by His own blood. Amen.²⁸

Grant, Almighty God, that since by our adoption, You have favored us with this honor, that we may call on Your name—O grant, that we may with a pure mouth call on You, that You may be glorified among us, through the whole course of our life; and that while we labor to render to You that sincere obedience which You require, Your truth may be more and more propagated among us, and that the memory of Your name may flourish more and more, until we shall at last come into that glory, which we know is laid up for us in heaven, by Christ our Lord. Amen. (Jer. 44:29-30)²⁹

²⁶ Vol. II, 201.

²⁷ Vol. II, 440.

²⁸ Vol. II, 453.

²⁹ Vol. IV, 564.