

John Calvin (1509-1564): Prayer Is Intimate Conversation with God

The apostle, in order to show that true faith cannot be indifferent about calling upon God, has laid down this order: just as faith is born from the gospel, so through it our hearts are trained to call upon God's name [Rom. 10:14-17]. And this is precisely what he had said a little before: the Spirit of adoption, who seals the witness of the gospel in our hearts [Rom. 8:16], raises up our spirits to dare show forth to God their desires, to stir up unspeakable groanings [Rom. 8:26], and confidently cry, "Abba! Father!" [Rom. 8:15].

Now for framing prayer duly and properly, let this be the first rule: that we be disposed in mind and heart as befits those who enter into conversation with God . . . [for] God admits us to intimate conversation.

But inasmuch as this goal of prayer has already been stated—namely, that hearts may be aroused and borne to God, whether to praise him or to beseech his help—from this we may understand that the essentials of prayer are set in the mind and heart, or rather that prayer itself is properly an emotion of the heart within, which is poured out and laid open before God, the searcher of hearts [Rom. 8:27].

[Go into your bedroom and pray in secret]: By these words, as I understand them, he taught us to seek a retreat that would help us to descend into our heart with our whole thought and enter deeply within. He promises that God, whose temples our bodies ought to be, will be near to us in the affections of our hearts [cf. 2 Cor. 6:16]. For he did not mean to deny that it is fitting to pray in other places, but he shows that prayer is something secret, which is both principally lodged in the heart and requires a tranquility far from all our teeming cares.

However, we must unquestionably feel that, either in public prayer or in private, the tongue without the mind must be highly displeasing to God. Besides, the mind ought to be kindled with an ardor of thought so as to surpass all that the tongue can express in speaking. Lastly, we hold that the tongue is not even necessary for private prayer, except in so far as either the inner feeling has insufficient power to arouse itself or as it is so vehemently aroused that it carries with it the action of the tongue. For even though the best prayers are sometimes unspoken, it often happens that, when feelings of mind are aroused, unostentatiously the tongue breaks into speech, and other members into gesture.

I admit that the heart ought to move and direct the tongue in prayer, but, as it often flags or performs its duty in a slow and sluggish manner, it requires to be aided by the tongue. . . . And surely, if the singing be tempered to that gravity which is fitting in the sight of God and the angels, it lends dignity and grace to sacred actions and has the greatest value in kindling our hearts to a true zeal and eagerness to pray. . . . But just as the lifting up of the hands is a symbol of confidence and longing, so in order to show our humility, we fall down on our knees.

We must observe the distinction between the theoretical knowledge derived from the Word of God and what is called the experimental knowledge of his grace. For as God shows himself present in operation, (as they usually speak,) he must first be sought in his Word. . . . Again, we may hence draw the general truth, that it is only through the goodness of God that we have

access to him; and that no man prays aright but he who, having experienced his grace, believes and is fully persuaded that he will be merciful to him.

[L]et us learn from the Prophet's example to acquaint ourselves with the nature of God, from the various experiences we have had of it, that we may have certain evidence that he is merciful to us. And, in truth, were not his grace known to us from the daily experience we have of it, which of us would dare to approach him?

With this inward conflict the godly must necessarily be exercised whenever God withdraws from them the tokens of his favor, so that, in whatever direction they turn their eyes, they see nothing but the darkness of night. . . . God, for a time, may withdraw from us every token of his goodness, and, apparently regardless of the miseries which afflict us, should, as if we were strangers to him, and not his own people, forsake us.

As the miseries to which there is no prospect of a termination commonly bring despair in their train, nothing is more difficult than for persons, when involved in grievous and deep sorrow, to stir up their minds to the exercise of prayer.

David is here to be considered as exposing that diseased but deeply-rooted principle in our nature, which leads us to hide our griefs, and ruminate upon them, instead of relieving ourselves at once by pouring out our prayers and complaints before God.

I indeed admit that he did not remain unshaken as if he had had a heart of steel. But the more violently he was assailed, the more firmly did he lean upon the truth, That the goodness of God is so inseparably connected with his essence as to render it impossible for him not to be merciful. Whenever, therefore, doubts enter into our minds upon our being harassed with cares, and oppressed with sorrows, let us learn always to endeavor to arrive at a satisfactory answer to this question, Has God changed his nature so as to be no longer merciful?

It is a very difficult matter to believe that God is merciful to us when he is angry with us, and that he is near us when he has withdrawn himself from us. David, aware of this, brings to his view a subject which he may oppose to this distrust, and by pleading for the exercise of the mercy and great compassions of God towards him, shows, that the only consideration which inspired him with hope was the benignant and merciful character of God.

The Psalmist does not say, that God has heard prayer in this or that instance, but gives him the name of the hearer of prayer, as what constitutes an abiding part of his glory, so that he might as soon deny himself as shut his ear to our petitions.

But if we are thoroughly persuaded that the sole cause by which God is moved to promise us salvation is the mercy inherent in his own nature, we will approach him without hesitation or doubt, because he has bound himself to us of his own accord.

By this example, we are taught that when we are reduced to the greatest extremity, there is a remedy always ready for our misery, in calling upon God. . . . for it is a singular alleviation of our sorrows when we have opportunity freely to pour out our hearts before God.