

# Calvin's Lecture Prayers

## Introduction

Many of Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries are transcripts of expository lectures, delivered to scholars, ministers and other hearers in the Auditorium or Theological School next to St. Peter's cathedral in Geneva during the closing years of his life. These lectures were given on three consecutive days of each alternate week. Sometimes Calvin walked the two hundred metres from his house to the Auditorium unaided; sometimes he was supported or helped by some one; and sometimes, when he was too ill to walk, he was carried in a small chair or even on horseback. On one occasion, when his illness coincided with the completion of the lectures on the Minor Prophets, he delivered the last two or three lectures on Malachi in his bedroom to as many as could be accommodated.

Two accounts of his lecturing occur as prefaces to Hosea and the Minor Prophets. The printer Jean Crispin stresses the excellence of the transmission, noting that every single word that Calvin spoke was faithfully taken down. This is all the more remarkable, as Calvin did not lecture at dictation speed, but simply concentrated on the task before him. His custom was to mount the lectern, read each verse in Hebrew, turn it into Latin, and then lecture continuously for a full hour without referring to any notes at all. Calvin's friend Jean Budé adds that his language was a simple, understandable Latin, aimed at profiting his hearers rather than gratifying their taste for oratory. Colladon confirms this when he writes admiringly that 'when lecturing, he always had only the bare text of Scripture; and yet, see how well he ordered what he said! . . . he never had any paper before him as an aid to memory. And it was not as if he had adequate time to prepare; for . . . to say the truth, he usually had less than an hour.'

The lectures usually ended strictly on time, as Calvin himself indicates: 'It then follows . . . but the clock is striking, and I cannot

go any further today.’ Occasionally, however, he had to curtail a lecture because of some urgent duty: ‘I wish I could proceed further, but I have some business to which I was called before the lecture.’ Only once did Calvin exceed the hour, during his lecture on Jonah 3:10-4:4, and he over-ran his time by twenty minutes, apologizing for ending too soon! A marginal note reads: ‘the clock had stopped, and he thought he had finished early.’ And only once was he short of the hour, when, lecturing on Ezekiel near the close of his life, he whispered pathetically: ‘I feel too weak to go on,’ and finished ten minutes early. Once, when a severe headache prevented him from reading, he recited the Hebrew of Amos 3:11-12 from memory, and proceeded to lecture on it!

### **The Prayers**

What concerns us here, however, are the prayers appended to the lectures. Happily, we have on record the prayer with which Calvin usually preceded his lectures. It is this:

“May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and our edification. Amen.”

The prayers with which he concluded the lectures are to be found appended to his commentaries on Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea and the Minor Prophets in the Calvin Translation Society edition.

The first notable feature of these closing prayers is their dependence on the Biblical context in which they appear. Having announced his text for the section under consideration, and then explained what he understands it to mean and how its message applies to himself and his hearers, Calvin concludes with a prayer that flows as naturally from the passage as a stream from its spring.

Take, for example, the prayer that concludes his first lecture on Jeremiah, dealing with the prophet’s call. The three most

prominent features of the passage - God's electing grace, the prophet's humble response to his call, and the definite commission to preach - are all echoed in the petition which follows:

"Grant, Almighty God, that as thou hast not only provided for thine ancient church, by choosing Jeremiah as thy servant, but hast also designed that the fruit of his labours should continue to our age, O grant that we may not be unthankful to thee, but that we may so avail ourselves of so great a benefit that the fruit of it may appear in us to the glory of thy name; may we learn so entirely to devote ourselves to thy service, and each of us be so attentive to the work of his calling, that we may strive with united hearts to promote the honour of thy name, and also the kingdom of thine only-begotten Son, until we finish our warfare, and come at length into that celestial rest which has been obtained for us by the blood of thine only Son. Amen."

Similarly, following his exposition of the prediction of Roman idolatry in Daniel 11:37-39, in which the lawless, God-defying character of antichrist is revealed, Calvin fervently pleads:

"Grant, Almighty God, as in all ages the blindness of mankind has been so great as to lead them to worship thee erroneously and superstitiously, and since they manifest such duplicity and pride as to despise thy name, and also the very idols which they have fashioned for themselves: grant, I pray thee, that true piety may be deeply rooted in our hearts. May the fear of thy name be so engraven within us that we may be sincerely and unreservedly devoted to thee. May each of us heartily desire to glorify thy name, and may we endeavour to lead our brethren in the same course. Do thou purge us more and more from all dissimulation, until at length we arrive at that perfect purity which is laid up for us in heaven, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

The petition that follows Calvin's exposition of the Messianic prophecy concerning the rising of the Sun of Righteousness on all who fear God's name (Mal 4:2) also takes up the theme most naturally:

“Grant, Almighty God, that as thou hast appointed thine only-begotten Son to be like a sun to us, we may not be blind, so as not to see his brightness . . .”

The lesson is clear: our prayers should spring naturally from our believing meditation on Holy Scripture, a meditation which does not end in understanding, but which applies the message of each passage we study to our hearts and lives.

It will not have escaped their readers’ notice that a definite pattern emerges in these lecture prayers. This pattern assumes the following form: Preface, Petition, Immediate Purpose, Ultimate Purpose, The Mediator.

#### **A. Preface**

Some aspect of God’s character, especially his kindness, or of his gracious dealings with us, is first stated as a basis for what is to follow. This is a thoroughly Biblical approach to prayer, as may be seen from Nehemiah’s moving request (I:5) and the early church’s plea for the apostles (Acts 4:24). In these prefaces, Calvin invariably addresses the Most High as ‘Almighty God’, thereby indicating the profound reverence in which he held him. Calvin must have chosen this name deliberately, as it particularly expresses the fullness and riches of God’s grace. To Calvin, as to every believing Jew, it was a reminder that from God comes every good and perfect gift, that he is never weary of pouring out his blessings on his people, and that he is more ready to give than we are to receive. It portrays God as a most bountiful giver, and its use is most appropriate to the kind of petition Calvin is to offer.

In some of these prefaces, it is the sheer goodness of God that forms the basis of the request, as at the end of the commentary on Jonah:

“Grant, Almighty God, that as thou hast in various ways testified, and daily continuest to testify, how dear and precious to thee are mankind, and as we enjoy daily so many and so remarkable proofs of thy goodness and favour . . .”

In others, it is the privilege of adoption that stirs up his desires towards God, as in the prayers following the expositions of Jeremiah 3:1-3 and 4-11:

“Grant, Almighty God, that as thou hast been once pleased not only to adopt us as thy children, but also to unite us to thyself by the bond of marriage, and to give us a pledge of this sacred union in thine only-begotten Son . . .”

“Grant, Almighty God, that since thou hast deigned to adopt us as thy people, and to unite us to thyself in thine only-begotten Son . . .”

In others, it is the gift of God’s Word or of the gospel that forms the basis of Calvin’s request.

### **B. Petition**

Next follows the petition proper, always derived from the character and initiative of God elucidated in the preface. A notable example follows the lecture on Malachi 3:3, where Christ is promised as the refiner of his people’s dross:

“Grant, Almighty God, . . . that we may patiently bear whatever chastisements thou mayest daily allot to us, . . . and never murmur against thee, but give thee the glory in all our adversities . . .”

After expounding Joel’s call to repentance (2:12-14), Calvin pleads:

“O grant, that we may feel the weight of thy wrath, and be so touched with the dread of it, as to return gladly to thee, laying aside every dissimulation, and devote ourselves so entirely to thy service that it may appear that we have from the heart repented, and that we have not trifled with thee by an empty pretence . . .”

Similarly, after expounding the heroic witness of Daniel, Calvin feelingly asks:

“Grant, I pray thee, that we may never grow fatigued. May we ever be armed and equipped for battle, and whatever the trials by which thou dost prove us, may we never be found deficient . . .”

### **C. Immediate Purpose**

The immediate purpose or short-term objective of the petition is next stated, and usually embraces the desire to be wholly consecrated to God's service with a view to his glory. In addition to those requests generally associated with Calvin's austerity, these prayers contain some of the most heartening of his petitions. Following his expositions of both Joel 2:31 and Micah 6:14, there are earnest pleas for grace to look to Christ:

"O grant that we may learn to look on the face of thine Anointed, and seek comfort from him, and such a comfort as may . . . raise our thoughts to heaven, and daily seal to our hearts the testimony of our adoption, . . ."

". . . and since we in so many ways offend thee, grant that in true and sincere faith we may raise up all our thoughts and affections to thy only-begotten Son, who is our propitiation, that thou being appeased, we may lay hold on him, . . . and remain united to him by a sacred bond, . . ."

There are also several prayers for unity, sincerity and loving-kindness among God's people, as in connection with Obadiah 21 and Micah 4:4:

"O grant that being endued with the real power of thy Spirit, and gathered into one, we may so cultivate brotherly kindness among ourselves, that each may strive to help another, and at the same time keep our eyes fixed on Christ Jesus; . . ."

"O grant that we may not continue torn asunder, everyone pursuing his own perverse inclinations, at a time when Christ is gathering us to thee; . . . and may we then add to the true and lawful worship of thy name brotherly love towards one another, that with united efforts we may promote each other's good, and that our adoption may thus be proved and be more and more confirmed, . . ."

While the burden of many of these requests, in view of the prophetic message he is expounding, is that we may be tamed, subdued and submissive, some of them shed New Testament light on the situation, and throw us forward to the very end of time.

Such a prayer is the one following the great Messianic passage in Hosea 14:1-2:

“O grant that we may ever by faith direct our eyes towards heaven, and to that incomprehensible power which is to be manifested at the last day by Jesus Christ our Lord, so that in the midst of death we may hope that thou wilt be our Redeemer, and enjoy that redemption which he completed when he rose from the dead; and not doubt but that the fruit which he then brought forth by his Spirit will come also to us, when Christ himself shall come to judge the world.”

#### **D. Ultimate Purpose**

The immediate purpose of Calvin’s petition usually merges into his ultimate objective; namely, that we be brought through every trial and conflict into the enjoyment of our heavenly peace. For Calvin, this blessedness is characterized variously as being glorified, entering our rest, possessing our eternal inheritance, or some other Scriptural description.

Following the commentary on Lamentations 2:9, he begs:

“O grant that we may by a true faith seek him (i.e.Christ), and follow wherever he may call us, that having been purified from all pollutions, we may be glorified by thee our Father . . .”

At the close of the 59th lecture on Daniel, he prays:

“Relying on thine unconquered power, may we never hesitate so to pass through all commotions as to repose with quiet minds upon thy grace, till at length we are gathered into that happy and eternal rest which thou hast prepared for us in heaven by Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

The prayer at the close of the commentary on Daniel breathes a similar spirit:

“May we always aspire towards heaven with upright souls, and strive with all our endeavours to attain that blessed rest which is laid up for us in heaven in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

In a prayer full of pathos at the close of his remarks on Micah 1:5, Calvin pleads with God not to take his Spirit from us, but to subdue all our thoughts and affections till we humbly give the glory to his majesty that is due. This then merges into the request that:

“being allured by thy paternal favour, we may submit ourselves to thee, and at the same time embrace that mercy which thou offerest and presentest to us in Christ, that we may not doubt but thou wilt be a Father to us, until we shall at length enjoy that eternal inheritance which has been obtained for us by the blood of thine only-begotten Son. Amen.”

Rarely does Calvin depart from this order, though after his comments on Amos 3:3-8 he omits all reference to our heavenly rest, simply asking that God would continue to show his people his paternal love which they had experienced from the beginning.

### **E. The Mediator**

Calvin never concludes, however, without some reference to the Mediator, which is never perfunctory, but which indicates that it is only through his merits that he expects his request to be granted. In the prayer which concludes the lecture on Zechariah 8:1-8, Calvin expresses his dependence in the following humble way:

“and whatever may happen to us, may we learn ever to look to thee, that we may never despair of thy goodness, which thou hast promised to be firm and perpetual, and that especially while relying on thy only-begotten Son our Mediator, we may be able to call on thee as our Father, until we shall at length come to that eternal inheritance which has been obtained for us by the blood of thine only Son. Amen.”

Similar conclusions are found in the prayers following his exposition of Jeremiah 51:48 and Lamentations.

### **Variants**

Variants of this pattern are very few. Occasionally, as in the prayer following his 9th lecture on Jeremiah, which handles God's



remonstration with his people for their incorrigibility, Calvin commences with some aspect of our character and conduct towards God, rather than with his towards us. It is in such prefaces that we discover Calvin's profound self-abasement before his offended God. Two examples suffice to illustrate this; one following the exposition of Haggai 2:14, the other closing the lecture on Zephaniah 3:12-13:

"Grant, Almighty God, that inasmuch as we come from our mother's womb wholly impure and polluted, and afterwards continually contract so many new defilements . . ."

"Grant, Almighty God, that since the depravity of our nature is so great that we cannot bear prosperity without some wantonness of the flesh immediately raging in us, and without becoming even arrogant against thee . . ."

Two other variants may be mentioned: the first sets Satan and other spiritual and moral enemies before God's face as a strong ground for the plea that follows. Typical of this preface is the one following Calvin's remarks on Habakkuk 3:7:

"Grant, Almighty God, that as we have a continual contest with powerful enemies, we may know that we are defended by thine hand . . . so that we may boldly contend under thy protection, and never be wearied, nor yield to Satan and the wicked, or to any temptation . . ."

No less earnest is the preface following his commentary on Zechariah 1:17:

"Grant, Almighty God, that though we are continually tossed here and there by various trials, and Satan ceases not to shake our faith."

The second variant is extremely rare, and places Christ before God at the very outset, so as to acquire access through him. A fine example of this appears following the commentary on Zechariah 9:13-17:

"Grant, Almighty God, that as we cannot look for temporal or eternal happiness except through Christ alone, and as thou settest

him forth to us as the only true fountain of all blessings, O grant that we, being content with the favour offered to us through him.”

### **Theological and Practical Emphases**

It remains for us to note briefly the theological and practical emphases of the lecture prayers. The most prominent doctrinal features are Calvin’s implicit recognition of God’s absolute sovereignty in every sphere, our total depravity through the entrance of sin, our complete dependence on God’s provision of Christ as our only Mediator and propitiation, our desperate need of the Holy Spirit’s grace to overcome sin and perfect holiness, and the certainty of heaven as the ultimate goal of all the church’s prayers and endeavours. From the practical viewpoint, nothing is more frequently expressed than God’s sheer Fatherly goodness to his people, their utter unworthiness to receive anything from him but wrath, Calvin’s burning sincerity and passionate earnestness in pursuit of the complete purging away of sin and the utmost devotion to God, his ardent cries for a quiet, submissive, teachable spirit, strength to enable him to persevere through every conflict, and zeal for the glory of God and the pure worship of his name. Such recurrent emphases betray a soul thoroughly committed to the spiritual warfare in which his God and Saviour had enlisted him.

### **Conclusion**

Calvin’s lecture prayers are a practical confirmation of his thoroughly Biblical faith. Relying on the loving-kindness of God, revealed in his mighty saving and destroying acts, his terrible threats and re-assuring promises, Calvin feels justified in addressing himself to God as a reconciled Father through the Lord Jesus Christ, and as a most bountiful Giver, and in asking him for the complete fulfilment of his promises. The confidence with which he pleads is derived solely from the mercy freely offered us in Christ, a mercy that has already been sealed to us by his precious blood.

From such a cursory study as we have undertaken, it is clear to us that we too are graciously invited to approach the majesty of God under the protection of Christ, never doubting that everything God has promised is ours in Christ. The prayer that relies on him will never be rejected. Sighing among our present evils, as Calvin did before us, we may nevertheless put our whole trust in God, who has promised to deliver us out of them all into a state of perfect blessedness.