EVERYDAY PRAYER

with

JOHN CALVIN

DONALD K. MCKIM

Dr. McKim has served theological education faithfully for more than a few decades and has written more than one book on Calvin. Here he presents eighty-five different Scripture meditations, weaving throughout the Scripture Calvin's insights on the topic as well as his own deep thoughts on the blessings and privileges of prayer. McKim's comments and challenges are those not of a scholar and teacher—even though he is one—but of a humble believer who knows existentially the difficulties, challenges, and blessings of prayer.

This is a very helpful volume that will challenge the reader to think more deeply about prayer, to thank God more earnestly for the privilege of prayer, and most importantly to spur us on to seek his face more diligently!

—**Richard C. Gamble**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

A helpful and inviting introduction to a better prayer life under the mentoring of the Genevan Reformer, as conveyed by an attentive student. Unlike the many misfocused guidebooks to the landscape of Calvinism, this accessible and faithful work by Donald McKim actually takes us to the heartland of Calvin, spotlighting his piety and depth—and it does so with pithy yet substantive devotionals. Reading this book could well be viewed as learning to pray from one of the masters, and it thankfully includes some of Calvin's own prayers. How helpful to have Calvin's own words served as such an appealing feast. With many hours of research compressed into each page, this prayer catalyst will be welcomed not only by Calvinophiles but by all who value prayer.

—**David Hall**, Executive Director, Calvin500; Senior Pastor, Midway Presbyterian Church, Powder Springs, Georgia

Donald McKim has collected materials on prayer from John Calvin's commentaries to produce a valuable resource for private and family worship. What makes this guide particularly

beneficial is its basis in Scripture. Each entry begins with a biblical passage and includes Calvin's reflections in order to provide instruction about prayer and encouragement to pray. This combination of Scripture and theological reflection displays once again the genius of the Protestant Reformation.

—**D. G. Hart**, Distinguished Associate Professor of History, Hillsdale College

Donald McKim draws on Calvin's prayers to help us with our own. Like the psalms that shaped the Reformer's prayer life, this guide breathes spiritual passion, energy, and wisdom. If, like mine, your prayer life could use a little help, this book will be of immense value to you.

—**Michael S. Horton**, Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

Calvin's emphasis on the ministry of the Holy Spirit led him to engage with and encourage believers' daily prayers. Donald McKim, with the acumen of a renowned scholar and the care of a nurturing pastor, gathers choice practical texts on prayer from Calvin's writings and integrates them into digestible and uplifting biblical meditations. *Everyday Prayer with John Calvin* affords rich nourishment for your soul and clarifying insights for your theology.

—**Peter A. Lillback**, President, Westminster Theological Seminary

Donald McKim's book *Everyday Prayer with John Calvin* invites the reader to enroll in Calvin's schoolhouse of prayer. This precious little book provides timeless instruction into the nature of prayer and what it means to commune with the living God. Pick up, read, and pray along with one of the spiritual giants of the Christian church!

—**Scott M. Manetsch**, Professor of Church History, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; Author, *Calvin's Company of Pastors*

Don McKim has a wonderful way of making theology accessible to all. *Everyday Prayer with John Calvin* offers a helpful and thought-provoking guide to better understanding the purpose and practice of prayer in the Christian life, based upon the prayers and reflections of Calvin—one of the greatest theologians of church history. There's no better way to encounter Calvin at his best than in the reverence that he showed for the practice of prayer.

—**Jennifer Powell McNutt**, Franklin S. Dyrness Chair of the School of Biblical and Theological Studies, Wheaton College; Author, *Calvin Meets Voltaire*

Our prayer lives can be—and perhaps often are—tedious and lacking in zeal. While there is no easy cure for this, it is always helpful to have our thoughts guided and focused by others in the communion of saints. In this book, Donald McKim weaves together Scripture, his own theological reflections, and the thoughts of John Calvin to help us focus our minds not simply on prayer itself but on the God to whom we pray. This is a book that will help any Christian who takes the time to read it, to ponder its thoughts, and to adopt its priorities.

—**Carl R. Trueman**, Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Grove City College

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with

John Calvin

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with

JOHN CALVIN

DONALD K. MCKIM

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To Westminster College friends:

Bryce Craig
Mike Loudon
Tom McGrath

With appreciation for our friendship,
for good times of learning together,
and for the ministries of each of you

In memory of our beloved Westminster
College philosophy professor,
Dr. Thomas M. Gregory

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Preface

For some years, I have wanted to write something about the observations of John Calvin (1509–1564) on prayer. I have written and edited other books on Calvin; his theology is deeply rich and has been of key significance to me. So I am especially pleased to introduce, in this book, his insights on this important theological topic.

Prayer is central to the Christian life. In the 1559 edition of Calvin's major theological work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the longest chapter is the chapter on prayer. Calvin had much to say about prayer. His theological views were grounded in his interpretation of Scripture and of the many passages in which prayer is mentioned in the Bible. Calvin built on these interpretive or exegetical findings in order to synthesize his thoughts on prayer, which he presented in the *Institutes* (see 3.20).

My approach in this book is to provide a series of short devotional reflections on quotations from Calvin, which are drawn from the *Institutes* and from his commentaries on Old and New Testament books. My reflections on Calvin explain what he is saying theologically and point out its importance for our Christian faith and lives today.

I have had a vocational passion in the past few years to try to introduce insights from major theologians in an accessible way, through short devotional pieces that each center around a quotation from one of those theologians. In my *Coffee with Calvin: Daily Devotions*, I focused on quotations from Calvin's

Institutes that cover the whole range of Christian faith. In *Conversations with Calvin: Daily Devotions*, I explored quotations from Calvin's commentaries on Christian belief and Christian living. I have also written devotional books on Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer using this method.

This book focuses on quotations from Calvin about prayer in its many aspects. As we hear Calvin's comments and reflect on them, my hope is that our theological understanding will be deepened and our lives of faith will be impacted and strengthened through our own prayers.

These devotions, plus fifteen prayers that Calvin prayed at the end of various lectures that he gave on biblical passages, introduce us to Calvin's perspectives—which are based on Scripture—and to what they mean for Christians who pray to God. The devotions here explore different aspects of what prayer meant to Calvin, with some of the themes being reinforced as they emerge through the course of Calvin's interpretation of many biblical passages. Collectively, the pieces open up Calvin's thoughts on prayer, which was so vital and central to his own Christian belief and experience.

I would like to thank the fine folks at P&R Publishing for their interest in and splendid help with this project. David Almack guided me through the early process of the book proposal. Good conversations with Dave and Amanda Martin strengthened the structure of the devotions and introduced the idea of adding Calvin's prayers to the book. To them and their colleagues, including Emily Hoeksema, I am most appreciative.

This book is of special significance to me, because my initial contact was with my friend, Bryce Craig, the president of P&R Publishing. Bryce and I were students together at Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. After all the years, it has been great to be back in touch, and I am most grateful for his support of this project. It is also a privilege to publish with the publishing house that was begun by Bryce's grandfather

and served by his father and, so faithfully, by Bryce himself for many years.

This book is dedicated to Bryce and to two of our other Westminster College friends. Mike Loudon and Tom McGrath have both been dedicated Presbyterian pastors with whom I have shared many hours and whom I greatly admire. I am deeply thankful for these three friends and for the happy memories we hold. I honor their ministries of faithful service to Jesus Christ.

The book is also dedicated to the memory of our Westminster College philosophy professor, Dr. Thomas M. Gregory. Bryce, Mike, Tom, and I were all blessed to count Dr. Gregory as our teacher and friend. He was a committed Reformed Christian whose teaching ministry enhanced our lives and our faith. Dr. Gregory was especially kind in helping me to become a student pastor for the three churches of Friendship Parish in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania. I served the churches during my senior year at Westminster, while I was a student at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and during the years of my doctoral studies. I was ordained as their Stated Supply minister, and I am immensely thankful for Dr. Gregory's initiative in helping this relationship to develop. In the further providence of God, my sister, Thelma, met her future husband, Dave, in one of the Parish churches where he was a member.

All my writing is supported and energized by the gift of God that is my family. LindaJo and I have shared married life for over forty years. Her love, through all our times together, is my great blessing, and I thank her from the bottom of my heart for all the support and loving care she has given and continues to give me. Our deep joy is our sons and their families: Stephen and his wife Caroline with our grandchildren Maddie, Annie, and Jack, and Karl and his wife Lauren. They bring us true happiness and are ongoing sources of blessing that we receive most gratefully. We praise God!

My hope is that this book will introduce readers to the

theology of John Calvin as it emerged from his interpretation of Scripture passages on prayer. Calvin's views can enhance and deepen our theological understanding as we live our Christian lives and are part of the church and, daily, people of prayer. To God be the glory!

Using This Book

This book introduces John Calvin's reflections on Christian prayer. I have drawn quotations from Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and from his commentaries on the Old and New Testaments. My goal is to provide understanding of Calvin's views and also to suggest ways in which his insights can nourish our Christian faith today. This book can be used for individual devotional reading as well as with groups.

The format of each devotion is the same. A Scripture passage is provided for initial reading. I explain the context and emphases of the passage in the text of the devotion. The order of the devotions in the book follows the biblical or canonical order of these Scripture passages.

Calvin's comments on prayer are provided, and reflections are given on their meaning and importance for contemporary Christians as they pray.

Each devotion ends with either a prayer point or a reflection question. Prayer points suggest ways that readers can incorporate that devotion's insights into their own prayers. Reflection questions suggest further dimensions to what has been described, for reflection or group discussion.

I recommend the following approach:

1. *Read*. Read the Scripture passage at the top of each devotion and then the devotion itself. You can meditate on this Scripture before reading the devotion or can

keep it in mind as you read the devotion. Each devotion is compact, and every sentence is important. Try to contemplate each sentence as you read it.

2. *Meditate*. After reading the devotion, meditate on its instruction, asking questions such as
   - What has Calvin conveyed in his comments on prayer here?
   - In what ways can the church's life of prayer be deepened by Calvin's insights?
   - What do Calvin's observations mean for my life of prayer?
   - To what new directions in my prayer does this devotion call me?
   - What ongoing changes in my prayer life do Calvin's words point to?
3. *Pray*. Whether or not a specific prayer point appears at the end of the devotion, spend time in prayer reflecting on the Scripture passage, on Calvin's insights, and on the comments in the devotion. Incorporate all that you experience into your "conversation with God" in prayer.
4. *Act*. These insights about prayer may lead you to move into new directions or to act in new ways in your life. Be open to the new dimensions of Christian living to which your prayers move you.

The title of each devotion expresses a main point of the devotion. As you read and reread these titles, recall what the corresponding devotion says.

If you keep a journal, incorporate insights about your encounters with prayer in the journal either daily or at special times in the week. If you keep a prayer list, expand it to include what God's Spirit tells you through your devotional readings. These materials may be reviewed later and appropriated again for your life.

The devotions and the prayers from Calvin can be read either daily or on occasion. Calvin had a robust doctrine of the providence of God and of the work of the Holy Spirit. However and whenever you use these devotions, use them prayerfully and with the anticipation that God can—and will!—speak to you through them.

Two lists of resources are provided at the back of the book: a list of the specific works by Calvin that contain the material that is quoted throughout this book, as well as a list of selected additional resources to enable further study of Calvin's teachings. The first list contains the specific printings of Calvin's works that I consulted for the quotes and prayers that are used throughout the book, but you can find these same quotations in any edition of the same translation of each work (many of them are easily available online).

Grant, Almighty God, that since thou art pleased kindly to invite us to thyself, and hast consecrated thy word for our salvation,—O grant that we may willingly, and from the heart, obey thee, and become so teachable, that what thou hast designed for our salvation may not turn to our perdition; but may that incorruptible seed by which thou dost regenerate us into a hope of the celestial life so drive its roots into our hearts, and bring forth fruit, that thy name may be glorified; and may we be so planted in the courts of thine house, that we may grow and flourish, and that fruit may appear through the whole course of our life, until we shall at length enjoy that blessed life which is laid up for us in heaven, through Christ our Lord.—Amen.

Pray and Proceed

Genesis 32:9–23

Sometimes we pray, ask God for something, and then forget about it. We assume that God will act while we stand by and wait for the answer to our prayer to appear. But this is too simple, and it is not what God desires.

After Jacob had tricked his brother Esau out of his birthright, he fled in order to escape Esau's fury (see Gen. 27). Later, Jacob wanted to be reconciled with Esau (see Gen. 32:5). Before doing so, he prayed to God and confessed his unworthiness (see v. 10) and his fear of his brother (see v. 11). Then he took a present for Esau, and the two brothers met and were reconciled (see Gen. 33).

Calvin saw, in these steps that Jacob took, a prescription for how we should follow through with our own prayers to God. He wrote, "After he has prayed to the Lord, and arranged his plans, he now takes confidence and meets the danger. By which example the faithful are taught, that whenever any danger approaches, this order of proceeding is to be observed; first, to resort directly to the Lord; secondly, to apply to immediate use whatever means of help may offer themselves; and thirdly, as persons prepared for any event, to proceed with intrepidity whithersoever the Lord commands."

First, pray. Then use whatever means of help God gives. Then proceed "with intrepidity," or boldness, to do whatever God commands. We don't pray and then forget it. We pray—and then proceed! We proceed in the direction of our prayer, using the means that God gives and acting to obey God's commands.

Follow through with your prayers: pray; use helps; obey God!

Prayer Point: Pray, and ask God to help you to use the helps that he gives and to obey his will.

Pray to the God Who Is True

Numbers 14:13–19

When Israel was in the wilderness and moving toward the Promised Land, the people rebelled against Moses and Aaron (see Num. 14). They thought that they would die, and some of them wanted to go back to Egypt.

But Moses interceded for the people with God. He prayed, "Let the power of the Lord be great in the way that you promised when you spoke, saying . . ." and then recounted God's promise to be "slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Num. 14:17–18; also see Ex. 34:6–7). Moses appealed to God's word of promise as he sought forgiveness for the people (see Num. 14:19).

Calvin saw in this "a sure directory for prayer." For "nothing can be more sure than [God's] own word, on which if our prayers are based, there is no reason to fear that they will be ineffectual, or that their results should disappoint us, since He who has spoken will prove Himself to be true. And, in fact, this is the reason why He speaks . . . to afford us the grounds for addressing Him, for else we must needs be dumb."

This is our "directory for prayer" as well. We have all confidence in praying to the God who has spoken and will prove to be true to his own self. The God who speaks invites us to speak to him. This is the basis of prayer. When we pray, based on God's Word, our prayers will always bring effects. They will not disappoint. God proves true—ever and always! God is God. We can trust his Word as we pray!

Prayer Point: Pray a prayer based on God's words of promise in Scripture.

Tongues Break Forth into Speech

1 Samuel 1:9–18

We can pray in two ways: through unspoken thoughts that we direct toward God and through words that we speak audibly. In both cases, we focus our attention on God, knowing that he surely and certainly hears our prayers, whether they are "unuttered or expressed."

Calvin noted that sometimes the best prayers are silent—inaudible to others and known only by the one who is silently praying and by God. He wrote, "Even though the best prayers are sometimes unspoken, it often happens in practice that, when feelings of mind are aroused, unostentatiously the tongue breaks forth into speech, and the other members into gesture. From this obviously arose that uncertain murmur of Hannah's [1 Sam. 1:13], something similar to which all the saints continually experience when they burst forth into broken and fragmentary speech."

The example of Hannah touches us. As she prayed for a son, she was "deeply distressed" and "wept bitterly" (1 Sam. 1:10). Her desire was so deep that she was "praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard" (v. 13). Our silent prayers break forth into speech, even when they are not heard by others. Our lips move, even if only in "broken and fragmentary speech," as Calvin says.

God hears all our prayers—whether they are silent, audible, quiet, or loud expressions. This comforts us. It is not the "form" of the prayer that counts but the prayer's focus on God. We can let our tongues "break forth into speech" and know that God hears our words and thoughts—however they are expressed!

Prayer Point: Spend time in both silent prayer and audible prayer, focusing on God in both ways of praying.