

I

THE SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE OF CALVIN



It is hard to express in words
What varied and shining riches
This treasure contains:
Whatever I am about to say
5 I know will fall far short
Of the worth of the Book of Psalms.
But because it is better to give a taste,
However slight, to my readers
Than to remain utterly silent,
10 Permit me to touch briefly
On a matter whose importance
Cannot be completely explained.
Not without reason, it is my custom
To call this book
15 *An Anatomy of All the Parts of the Soul*
Since there is no emotion
Anyone will experience
Whose image is not reflected
In this mirror.
20 Indeed, here the Holy Spirit

Has drawn to the life
All pains, sorrows, fears, doubts,
Hopes, cares, anxieties—
In short—all the turbulent emotions
25 With which men's minds
Are commonly stirred.
The rest of the Scriptures contains
The commandments that God
Enjoined upon His servants
30 To announce to us.
But here the prophets themselves
Speaking with God
Uncover all their inner feelings
And call, or rather drag,
35 Each one of us
To examine himself.
Thus is left hidden
Not one of the very many infirmities
To which we are subject,
40 Not one of the very many vices

With which we are stuffed.
 A rare and singular achievement it is
 When, all recesses laid bare,
 The heart, purged of hypocrisy
 45 (Most baneful infection of all),
 Is brought into the light of day.
 In short, if calling upon God
 Is the greatest bastion of our salvation,
 Since in no other place
 50 Can one seek
 A better and surer rule for it
 Than in this book,
 It follows that,
 As each man best advances
 55 In understanding it,
 He will attain a good part
 Of heavenly doctrine.

 True prayer is born
 First from our own sense of need,
 60 Then from faith in God's promises.
 Here will the readers be best awakened
 To sense their ills,
 And, as well, to seek
 Remedies for them.
 65 Whatever can stimulate us
 When we are about to pray to God,
 This book teaches.
 Not only are God's promises presented to us there,
 But often there is shown to us
 70 Someone, girding himself for prayer,

Caught between God's invitation
 And the hindrance of the flesh.
 Thus are we taught how,
 If at any time
 75 We are plagued with various doubts,
 To fight against them
 Until the mind, freed,
 Rises to God.
 And not that only:
 80 But amid hesitations, fears,
 Trepidations, we are still
 To rely on prayer
 Until some solace comes.
 Although unfaith may shut the gate
 85 To our prayers,
 Yet are we not to yield
 Whenever our hearts waver
 Or are beset with unrest,
 Until from these struggles
 90 Faith emerges victorious.
 In many passages we are shown
 God's servants so wavering
 In the midst of prayer
 That, almost overwhelmed
 95 By alternate despair and hope,
 They gain the prize
 Only by hard effort.
 On the one hand the infirmity of the flesh
 Reveals itself,
 100 On the other, the force of faith
 Is manifested.

If it is not as vigorous
As might be desired,
Yet is it prepared to struggle
105 Until little by little
It acquires perfect strength.
But since the principles
Of proper prayer will be found
Scattered through the whole work,
110 I shall not burden my readers
With needless repetition
Nor hold up their progress.
Only, it was worthwhile in passing
To show that in this book
115 Something no less desirable
Is furnished to us:
Not only does intimate access to God
Lie open to us,
But infirmities that shame forbids us
120 To confess to men,
We are permitted and free to lay open
Before our God.
Here also is precisely prescribed
The proper way to offer
125 “The sacrifice of praise,”
Which God declares
Is most precious and sweet-smelling
To Him.
Nowhere else does one read
130 More shining tidings
Of God’s singular kindness to His Church
And of all His works.

Nowhere else are related so many deliverances,
Or shine so brightly
135 Proofs of His fatherly providence
And care for us.
Nowhere else, to sum up,
Is set forth a fuller reason
To praise God,
140 Or are we more sharply pricked
To perform this duty of piety.

Moreover, although this book is crammed
With all sorts of precepts
Capable of shaping our life
145 Holily, piously, justly,
Still especially does it instruct us
To bear the cross.
Here is the true proof of obedience,
Where, bidding farewell to our own affections,
150 We subject ourselves to God
And allow our lives
To be so governed by His will
That things most bitter and harsh to us—
Because they come from Him—
155 Become sweet to us.
Finally, here not only general praises
Of God’s goodness are recounted
To teach us to rest in Him alone,
So that godly minds may await
160 Some help from Him in all necessity;
But also freely given forgiveness of sins,
Which alone both reconciles us to God

And obtains for us quiet repose with Him,
Is so commended.
165 That utterly nothing is lacking
To our knowledge of eternal salvation.

Calvin's Identification with David

Moreover, if my readers should happen
To feel some benefit and profit
From the labor I have put
170 Into writing this commentary,
I want them to know
That the experience I have had
Through the struggles in which
The Lord has exercised me,
175 Even though it has not been of the highest degree,
Has nonetheless served me greatly.
I have benefited
Not only in being able to fathom
How one must apply
180 And put into practice
All the teaching one could gather from the Psalms,
But also in opening up more fully
To my understanding
The intention of each of the writers
185 Who composed the Psalms.

And because David is the chief among them,
I was greatly helped to understand more fully
The laments he made concerning the afflictions

The church had to bear within itself,
190 By the fact that I suffered
The same or similar troubles
From the enemies of the church
Within her household.
For although I am far away
195 From following David
And fall far short
Of being his equal—
Or, to put it better,
Although aspiring slowly
200 And with great difficulty
To the many virtues in which he excels—
I still feel so tied to the opposing vices;
Yet, if I have some things
In common with him,
205 I am content to examine these
And make some comparison
Between us.
Thus, therefore, when I read
The evidences of his faith,
210 Patience, ardor, zeal, uprightness,
I am often compelled to groan and sigh
That I am so far
From approaching him.
Yet it is a very useful thing
215 For me to contemplate in him,
As in a mirror,
Both the beginning of my calling
And the continued course of my office.
From this I recognize most certainly

220 That all that this most excellent king and prophet
Has suffered and borne
Is set before me by God
As an example to imitate.

Calvin's Education

True it is that my condition
225 Is inferior and more humble
(And I do not need to stop
In order to point this out!),
But just as he was taken
From tending sheep
230 And raised to the highest degree
Of royal dignity,
So God, from my small, humble beginnings,
Has advanced me to the point
Of calling me to this very honorable post
235 Of minister and preacher of the gospel.
From my early childhood
My father had destined me
For theology:
But after a time,
240 Having considered that the knowledge of the law
Commonly enriches those who follow it,
This hope suddenly made him change his mind.
That was the reason
I was withdrawn
245 From the study of philosophy
And was put into the study of law,
To which, although, in obedience to my father,

I tried to apply myself faithfully,
God nevertheless by His secret providence
250 Finally made me turn
In another direction.

Calvin's Conversion

And first, since I was
So obstinately devoted
To the superstitions of the Papacy
255 That it was difficult to pull me
Out of that very deep morass—
By a sudden conversion
God tamed and brought to teachableness
My heart, which, despite my youth,
260 Was too hardened in such matters.
Having therefore received
Some taste and knowledge
Of true piety,
I was suddenly fired
265 With such a great desire to advance
That, even though I had not forsaken
The other studies entirely,
I nonetheless worked at them
More slackly.
270 But I was utterly amazed
That before a year had passed,
All those who yearned
For pure doctrine
Were coming again and again to me

275 To learn it,
 Even though I was still a novice,
 A mere recruit.
 For my part, being of a nature
 Somewhat unpolished and retiring,
 280 I always longed for repose and quiet.
 Hence I began to seek
 Some hiding place
 And way to withdraw from people.
 But, far from attaining my heart's desire,
 285 All retreats and places of escape
 Became for me like public schools.
 In short, although I always cherished
 The goal of living in private, incognito,
 God so led me and caused me to turn
 290 By various changes
 That He never left me at peace in any place
 Until, in spite of my natural disposition,
 He brought me into the limelight.
 Leaving my native France,
 295 I departed into Germany
 With the express purpose
 Of being able to live
 At peace in some unknown corner,
 As I had always longed.

Calvin's Sojourn in Basel

300 But it happened that while I was dwelling at Basel,
 Hidden there, as it were, and known to only few people,
 Many faithful, holy men were burned in France,

And reports of this having spread to foreign countries,
 A great part of the Germans
 305 Reacted with grave disapproval
 So as to conceive a hatred
 Toward the authors of that tyranny.
 In order to quiet things down,
 It was arranged to circulate
 310 Certain shameful pamphlets
 Full of lies, to the effect
 That only the Anabaptists and seditious persons
 Were being treated so cruelly,
 Who by their dreams and false opinions
 315 Were overturning not only religion
 But the whole political order.
 It appeared to me that these tools of the court
 Were by their disguises trying
 Not only to keep this shameful shedding
 320 Of innocent blood
 Buried under false charges and calumnies
 Brought against the holy martyrs after their death,
 But also that thereafter they might have a means
 Of proceeding to the ultimate extremity
 325 Of murdering the poor faithful
 Without anyone having compassion for them.
 Unless, then, I strongly opposed them
 To the best of my ability,
 I could not justify my silence
 330 Without being found lax and disloyal.
 This was the reason that roused me
 To publish my *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:
 First, to answer certain wicked charges

Sowed by the others
335 And to clear the memory of my brethren
Whose death was precious
In the presence of the Lord;
Second, as the same cruelties
Could very soon thereafter
340 Be exercised against many poor people,
That foreign nations might at least
Be touched with some compassion
And concern for them.
For at that time I did not publish
345 The book as it now is,
Full and laborious,
But it was only a little booklet
Containing in summary form
The principal matters.
350 I had no other purpose
Than to acquaint others
With the sort of faith
Held by those
Whom I saw
355 These wicked and faithless flatterers
Villainously defaming.

Calvin's First Sojourn in Geneva

But to show that it was not my purpose
To acquire prominence and notoriety,
I would have it known
360 That directly afterward, I left Basel,

And even while I was there
No one knew
I was the author of the book.
Also in other places I kept
365 The matter secret and determined
To continue to do so
Until finally Guillaume Farel
Kept me at Geneva,
Not by advice and urging,
370 But by a dreadful curse
As if God from on high
Had stretched out His hand
Upon me to arrest me.

Because the most direct road to Strasbourg,
375 Where I wished to retire,
Was closed on account of hostilities,
It was my plan
To pass through Geneva
Without stopping more than one night
380 In the city.
A little earlier
Popery had been driven out
By the fine person I just named
And by Pierre Viret:
385 But conditions were not yet settled,
And evil, dangerous factions
Divided the city.
Thereupon an individual
Who has since basely revolted
390 And returned to the Papists

Discovered me and identified me
 To the others.
 At this point Farel
 (Burning with a wondrous zeal
 395 To advance the gospel)
 Suddenly set all his efforts
 At keeping me.
 After having heard
 That I was determined
 400 To pursue my own private studies—
 When he realized
 He would get nowhere by pleas—
 He came to the point of a curse:
 That it would please God
 405 To curse my leisure
 And the quiet for my studies
 That I was seeking,
 If in such a grave emergency
 I should withdraw and refuse
 410 To give aid and help.
 This word so overwhelmed me
 That I desisted from the journey
 I had undertaken.
 Still, feeling my shame
 415 And my timidity,
 I would not undertake
 To discharge any particular function.

 After that, scarcely four months passed
 Before we were assailed on one side
 420 By the Anabaptists

And on the other by a wicked apostate
 Who, being secretly sustained
 And supported by certain prominent persons,
 Was able to cause us a good deal of trouble.
 425 During this time an incredible number
 Of seditions afflicted us.
 And so, though I recognize myself
 As being timid, soft, and fainthearted
 By nature, I had, from the very beginning,
 430 To bear these violent waves.
 Even though I did not succumb to them,
 Yet I was not sustained
 By sufficient greatness of heart
 As not to rejoice more than I ought when,
 435 As a consequence of certain troubles,
 I was banished.

Calvin's Sojourn in Strasbourg

Then free, released by this means
 From my calling,
 I had planned to live quietly
 440 Without undertaking any public responsibility,
 Until that excellent servant of Christ,
 Martin Bucer, making use
 Of a curse
 Similar to that of Farel's,
 445 Removed me to another post.
 Terrified therefore by the example of Jonah
 That he set before me,