



# Minutes With Messiah

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## NOT TO BE HEALTHY

Ask many Christians, especially those that balk at reading the book of Leviticus, why God established the dietary laws for the Jewish people, laws we call kosher, and they will give a quick answer: it was for health reasons. Pigs carry *trichinosis*. Lobsters and catfish are bottom feeders. Many raptors are carrion eaters. Ask many of those same people if they keep *kashrus* (that is, if they eat only kosher foods) and they will admit that they like pork, cheeseburgers, or pepperoni pizza. If you carry the conversation further, the next question is probably, “why don’t you follow those laws, if they were for health reasons?” Here you may get a variety of answers. Some will simply admit that they do a lot of things that aren’t exactly healthy. Others will point out that the Law of Moses was given while they were in the desert in a time when refrigeration, sanitation, and the United States Department of Agriculture were not available or not as advanced as they are today. But is that the reason?

If the laws of *kashrus* were strictly to keep the Jewish people healthy in the desert, then why did God make them permanently binding on the Jewish people? God did not repeal those laws when they entered the Promised Land, and were no longer desert nomads. He did not repeal those laws when refrigeration became more advanced, or when scientists learned about bacterial, viral, and parasitic infections. For the Jewish people, or at least those who are strictly observant, those laws continue in effect today and forever.

If the laws are simply because kosher food is generally healthier, then there is a problem. Many nations whose cultures regularly eat non-kosher foods have longer life spans and generally healthier populations than those nations or areas that keep *kashrus*. The Japanese are among the healthiest people in the world, in spite of a diet that is strong on pork and non-kosher seafood. Further, there is no scientific evidence that camel meat is any more likely to contain parasites than mutton or steak. Catfish and crabs are bottom feeders, and more likely to eat just about anything; but sharks and whales (included because they are swimmers, even though they are not fish) are much more selective in their diets. Vultures and corvids (crows, ravens, and jays) eat carrion; but hawks, eagles, and ospreys eat live prey. (And lest anyone argue that they generally eat unclean (non-kosher) animals, ospreys keep *kashrus* better than many Jews.)

But what about forbidding the mixing of meat and dairy? Is it not true that they are digested at different rates and so it would be healthier not to mix them? Yes, they are digested differently, but there is no evidence that combining them makes one any less healthy, all other things being equal. It should also be pointed out that this is a rabbinic interpretation of a law that appears to be more about being humane than healthy. “Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother’s milk.” (Ex 23:19; 34:26; Deut 14:21) The prohibition against mixing meat and dairy appears to be more about preventing a violation of this humane law than it is about digestion.

If the restrictions of Genesis 11 are not primarily for health reasons, then why did God place those restrictions on the Jewish people? If one reads the entire chapter, it becomes evident that the laws of *kashrus* were placed on the Jewish people simply because they were the Jewish people. It was not to make them any healthier than the nations surrounding them; it was to make them different than the nations surrounding them. The same could be said for circumcision, sabbath law, or even limiting the offering of sacrifices only to the tabernacle or, later, the Temple. Does God say any of these are for health reasons? No. His justification is that they were a select people.

For I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy: neither shall ye defile yourselves with any manner of creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. For I am the LORD that bringeth you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

Ultimately, this should be our justification for anything we do.

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# SOVEREIGNTY AND PRAYER

Having made a cursory examination of the doctrines of predestination and a more complete examination of the five basic tenets of Calvinism, one is struck by the number of times the word sovereignty is invoked. John Calvin became the supreme ruler of Geneva, and ruled with an iron hand, banishing anyone who disagreed with his beliefs. This is consistent with his idea of sovereignty. Because God is sovereign, he has the right to elect who will and won't receive forgiveness of sins. He has the power to preserve the elect from the possibility of rejecting election. Calvin's view of sovereignty appears to be that the sovereign power (be it God over all or himself over Geneva) not only has the right to have his will obeyed, but also has the power to enforce that will on everyone. It is a self-limiting power.

There is an old question that asks if there is anything God cannot do. Can God create an immovable object that even He cannot move? If so, there is something God cannot do. Either he cannot create an immovable object or he can move anything; they appear to be mutually exclusive. (Yes, the scriptures say there is one thing God cannot do; He cannot lie—Hebrews 6:18.)

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Some believe that a prayer by a sinner is a work that must be done in order to be saved.

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Calvin's view of God's sovereignty limits God's power. Once he determines that something will happen, then it must happen and even He cannot change it. So when God told Moses that he was going to destroy Israel and raise up a people from Moses (Ex 32:10; Num 14:12) either He was lying or he was able to be convinced to change his mind, thus giving up what Calvin defined as sovereignty. A third option was that His decision was conditional, but that would also be a violation of His sovereignty. So either God is not sovereign in the way Calvin defines the word, or Calvin's definition is wrong.

The kings and queens of England are sovereign, or at least were until Parliament gained supremacy. Nevertheless, even a king did not exercise absolute control over all his people. King Henry I developed the jury system, and Henry II refined it. If, however, either of those men had absolute control, a jury system would be unnecessary; there would be no violation of the king's will. That is the ultimate question about predestination. If God is sovereign, why is there sin? If man is totally

depraved and cannot come to faith in God without God's intervention, then 1) why did he create men who would sin; and 2) why does he provide a way for a select few to come to an irresistible grace? To go further, how can you even define sin? If everything is destined to be as it is, because God is out of time and knows everything that will happen so it must happen, how can anyone be held guilty of disobedience? If some are predetermined to be elect and some reprobate, then are not the reprobate being obedient? 'Tis a puzzlement!

But then, another question comes to mind. What is the purpose of prayer? On this issue even Calvin seems to reject absolute predestination. He believes that prayer is an essential part of the life of the elect. Some who have even limited Calvinist leanings, such as many Baptists, even believe that a prayer by a sinner is a work that must be done in order to be saved. So prayer is not limited to the elect after they have received grace, but is a work that must be done to receive the grace reserved to the elect. If, though, prayer is essential, then what is its purpose?

If predestination is absolute in all things, then prayer is useless because it cannot change anything. Why pray for healing of a sick relative if it is already determined irrevocably whether that person will live or die, suffer or be healed? Is predestination then limited? What are the limits? Is the only thing predestined whether one is elect forever or reprobate forever? But then, if man has choice in all other things, why does he not have free will in that? On the other hand, is predestination conditional upon the will of the elect (such as when Moses appeared to change God's mind)?

These questions are hard to answer, and even harder for a Calvinist. It might be important, though to see exactly what Calvin teaches about prayer.

## Calvin on Prayer

To Calvin, prayer was a necessary response to our adoption by God. Since God is the source of all blessings, and particularly salvation, then we need to pray to him for those blessings.

“Admirable peace and tranquillity are given to our consciences; for the straits by which we were pressed being laid before the Lord, we rest fully satisfied with the assurance that none of our evils are unknown to him, and that he is both able and willing to make the best provision for us.” (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III, Chapter 20, section 2)

While it is true that God knows all our needs before we ask, nevertheless he demands that we pray. Prayer is not so much for God as it is for man. In prayer, man acknowledges his weakness and inferiority.

“It is very much for our interest to be constantly supplicating him; first, that our heart may always be inflamed with a serious and ardent desire of seeking, loving and serving him, while we accustom ourselves to have recourse to him as a sacred anchor in every necessity; secondly, that no desires, no longing whatever, of which we are ashamed to make him the witness, may enter our minds, while we learn to place all our wishes in his sight, and thus pour out our heart before him; and, lastly, that we may be prepared to receive all his benefits with true gratitude and thanksgiving, while our prayers remind us that they proceed from his hand. Moreover, having obtained what we asked, being persuaded that he has answered our prayers, we are led to long more earnestly for his favour, and at the same time have greater pleasure in welcoming the blessings which we perceive to have been obtained by our prayers. Lastly, use and experience confirm the thought of his providence in our minds in a manner adapted to our weakness, when we understand that he not only promises that he will never fail us, and spontaneously gives us access to approach him in every time of need, but has his hand always stretched out to assist his people, not amusing them with words, but proving himself to be a present aid.” (*Institutes*, III.20.3)

Having given this as the purpose of our prayers, Calvin then sets forth four rules of right prayer, namely: reverence, a sincere sense of want and repentance, humility, and confident hope. We reverently acknowledge God, without frivolity and without conversing as if to another mortal. Prayer should acknowledge that God is the source of all good things, knowing that we have no right in ourselves to receive anything of Him. Yet we should pray with the hope of receiving God’s blessings. It should be directed to God through Jesus as the only mediator.

“But though prayer is properly confined to vows and supplications, yet so strong is the affinity between petition and thanksgiving, that both may be conveniently comprehended under one name.” (*Institutes*, III.20.28) In other words, prayer is most proper when we make our vows to God and seek his blessings, but giving thanks for those blessings is so closely tied that it is also a part of prayer.

## The Biblical View

Most of what Calvin says about prayer is correct and valuable. It is what he doesn’t say about prayer that makes a difference.

God does enjoin prayer upon us. “Pray unceasingly.” (1 Thes 5:17) Jesus taught his disciples to pray; in fact they requested that he do so because they knew it was necessary. James set forth certain circumstances in which prayer is appropriate. (Jas 5:13-16) Prayer can be found in the Bible from Genesis through the Revelation.

There are certainly things for which we are not to pray. “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.” (Jas 4:3) Jeremiah was even told on more than one occasion not to pray for Israel because God’s mind was made up.

It is in considering that last point that we may question what Calvin means by petitioning God. Did God tell Jeremiah not to pray for Israel because if he were to do so God would have to consider relenting? Is Calvin saying that we should pray only for what God is going to give us anyway?

So much of Calvin’s doctrine is based on the lack of free will by man. God has predetermined who will be saved and lost. God has predetermined that the elect cannot choose either to reject election or to reject God after having received salvation. If, as he says, we are to pray with confident hope in the answer to our prayers, then it would be wrong to pray for those who are not among the elect. If we have a relative or close friend who is clearly rejecting God, it seems that Calvin would not

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have us pray that such a person be taught or saved. Such would be an empty prayer. If God has already determined that a person will succumb to disease, do we ignore the command of James to pray for them?

On the other hand, you are to “pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.” (Matt 5:44) What is the purpose of that prayer? Is it not that they might see God and follow His way? Or is it just that they might stop persecuting you? Jesus seems to be encouraging the former.

There are many examples of people changing God’s mind through prayer. Moses has already been mentioned. Others would include Abraham’s prayer for Sodom, unsuccessful though it was. Hezekiah prayed for healing, and it was granted. Hannah, the wife of Manoah, and Elizabeth all prayed that they no longer be barren, and God gave them children. (Admittedly, it could be argued that God meant for Samuel, Samson, and John to be born all along, and these women prayed before it was time for the answer.) Even Jesus prayed for what he knew could not happen, that he would not have to suffer death on the cross. It would seem that Calvin would tell these people that they were not praying properly.

Calvin has much good to say about prayer. His understanding of the sovereignty of God, though, limits the effectiveness of prayer. He says we should ask God for his blessings, but limits what those blessings may be. In essence, Calvin says that in prayer we ask God for what God has already determined to give us. Thus he says that

# WHICH DOOR?

Preachers and writers are generally intelligent people. Much of what they say or write is more or less original. Sometimes we borrow things from other people, and sometimes even give them credit. It is not a new thing. William Shakspeare, for instance, doesn't have an original plot in any of his plays. Even within the plays he borrowed phrases and thoughts extensively. Tolstoy even argued that he was not a great writer because he was unoriginal and immoral. The thoughts that follow I am borrowing from a former college roommate of mine, Steve Singleton. If you agree with it, I will take the credit. If you disagree, give him the blame.

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to such a one, and will sup with such a one, and such a one with me. (Rev 3:20, with the gender bias removed from the indefinite articles)

Many people have seen the picture that has Jesus standing at a door knocking, and the door has no outer knob. The point, they say, is that Jesus is not going to force himself on anyone, and each person must open the door from the inside. Then he will come into your life and you will begin life as a Christian. Thus we each must "invite Jesus into your heart." But taken in context, is that what the verse says?

This verse is part of one of the letters to the seven churches of Asia in the early part of the Revelation; specifically it is to the backsliding church at Laodicea. This is a church that is called lukewarm, and spiritually "poor, blind, and naked." That is important context.

In an even broader context, verses 14 to 22 as we have the book divided are written to a church, a body of followers of Christ. Thus the verse is not written to unbelievers telling them to open the door, but rather to those who have believed.

Here is the picture then. The church at Laodicea was a group of Christ-followers who had lost their zeal for Christ. They were going through the motions of worshiping. In modern terms, these people showed up regularly every Sunday, sang all the songs, bowed their heads during the prayers, took the Lord's Supper, and tried to stay awake during the sermon; then they went home and lived like the world around them. Sound familiar? I hope not.

So Jesus comes and knocks on the door. What door? The door to the church. "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house." (1 Pet 2:5)

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit. (Eph 2:19-22)

God has built us up into his house, the church. We are the house of Jesus. But in the case of Laodicea, the church had kicked Jesus out of his own house. He had to knock on the door of his own house and ask to be allowed back in. In the words of Sylvester the Cat, "What a revolting thituathion."

Jesus does seek those unbelievers who need to follow him. In this case, though, he is saying that he wants back into his own house. If a church, or individuals in the church, kicks him out, he is going to stand at the door and knock. He may even have the key to the door, but he is knocking, asking to be let back in. And when he is allowed back in, then it's party time.

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