

John Chapter 17

In John's gospel this is Jesus' final prayer - John doesn't record Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, but this is a wonderful prayer which is only recorded by John. Commentators often try and characterise it as the 'great high priestly prayer', or a 'prayer of consecration', or a 'Farewell Prayer', but it actually deals with a lot of issues that were on Jesus' mind at this time and doesn't fit neatly into any single category. It is the longest of Jesus' recorded prayers. Although it's in a separate chapter, it's not a separate free standing item - it's intimately connected with the thoughts and ideas of the discourses with the disciples in the four preceding chapters.

The prayer is difficult to subdivide, for it is essentially a unity, but it is possible to discern a movement. At the beginning Jesus prays about his own glorification (vv. 1-5), then he goes on to the main part of the prayer, which concerns the circle of the disciples (vv. 6-19), and he concludes by praying for those who will believe through their ministry - that's us - in (vv. 20-26). Common to all three sections is the desire that the Father's will be done.

Prayer for Himself

Jesus' opening words indicate the unity of this with the rest of the upper room discourses. Looking up to heaven was how people prayed in those days - remember the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector that Jesus told. This was a real prayer but it was also part of Jesus' last teaching of the disciples in the upper room discourses. Now the cross is in immediate prospect and Jesus can say "the time has come" - this is what the whole ministry of Jesus has been leading up to. Jesus prays that God would glorify him. From the human viewpoint, the cross was an instrument of shame. To Christ it was the means of true glory. The prayer also makes it clear that the glory of the Son and the glory of the Father are closely connected. To glorify the Son is to glorify the Father. The two are one, united within the Trinity.

In verse 2 the thought of glory continues. The giving of eternal life will be the result and outworking of the glory which Jesus seeks - his death on the cross. The cross was not to be defeat but victory. Jesus exercised authority in bringing people life even as he hung, apparently helpless, on the cross. But, though life is his gift, he does not confer it on all indiscriminately; the concept of divine predestination is introduced. Life is given "to all those you have given him." In a manner we do not completely understand this eternal life is somehow available to all (John 3:16) and yet at the same time to those who are predestined - given to Christ by the Father - (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 1:5). This is one of the mysteries of the Christian faith.

In verse 3 we have something of a definition of eternal life. Really to know God means more than knowing the way *to* life. It *is* life. In this world we are familiar with the truth that it is a blessing and an inspiration to know certain people. How much more is that the case when we know God - in all the persons of the Trinity.

In verse 4 Jesus makes it clear that the cross will be the culmination and completion of the work he has been sent to do. "I have brought you glory" indicates a finished task and he then goes on to say that this is "by completing the work" he has been given. The statement is also applicable to the disciples, sent into the world in mission - and also to Christians today. We too are to bring glory to the one who has called us, and in the same way, by doing his work in the world.

Our main motivation in our Christian service is to *glorify God*. This text also speaks of a *specific limitation*, in our service “the work you gave me to do”. From many points of view limitations were placed upon the scope of Jesus’ activities. Geographically his whole career was confined within the boundaries of central Palestine. He never saw Rome, or Athens, or Alexandria, to say nothing of the further flung lands of the globe. His ministry was circumscribed also in terms of his life experience. He never knew the intimacies of marriage, the struggles of parenthood, the challenges of middle age, or the limitations of aging. Even within the sphere of his teaching and healing ministry, there were multitudes of his needy contemporaries in Palestine to whom he never ministered, whether in word or deed. Yet his ministry was perfect and whole, because he did, with complete and single-minded dedication, ‘all that he was given to do’. So at the end he could truly say, ‘I have finished the work’; or more profoundly in his final moments on the cross, ‘It is finished.’ A similar limitation rests upon us and indeed on every disciple. We are not called to reach the whole world or to minister to every need. There is a specific work for us to do, and in finding and doing that specific thing to the limits of our powers lies our fulfilment, and our peace.

Finally, this text speaks of *a necessary completion*. The honour of God is bound up not only with the enthusiastic commencement of a project but with the faithful completion of it.

In verse 5 Jesus prays that he will be restored to the pre-incarnate glory he had with the Father before the world began. This implies that ‘becoming flesh’ entailed a forfeiture of glory on the part of Jesus (see Philippians 2:5–8) and indeed it would appear that the incarnation was, at least to some extent, irreversible. The costliness of Jesus’ mission reaches back into his pre-incarnate life.

Verses 6-19 are the main part of the prayer and they are concerned with the disciples. They had depended very heavily on the visible presence of their Master, a presence that was about to be taken from them. Though Jesus has already promised them that the Holy Spirit will come, and has even assured them that this will be better for them than his continuing bodily presence, yet he knows that the coming hours will be a great shock to them. Despite everything they are not ready for the stunning impact of Calvary. Tenderly he now commits them to the care of the heavenly Father.

In verse 6 Jesus makes it clear that he has revealed the Father to the disciples who have been drawn out of the world and will form the nucleus of an expanding messianic community – the church. They are fit for this task because they have obeyed God’s word conveyed to them through Christ. Of course, this does not imply their perfect obedience or sinlessness, but rather that they have the desire to obey. The priority and pre-eminence of the Father is implied in this verse – Jesus says that the believers belonged to the Father and have been given to him by the Father.

The “Now that they know everything” of verse 7 appears to refer to knowledge of Jesus’ mission and its divine nature - the disciples haven’t been made omniscient. Jesus also acknowledges that the attitude of the disciples is basically correct, they have grasped the fundamental truth that Jesus can be understood only in terms of the Father who sent him and that in trusting Jesus’ words we come to a sure knowledge of the Father.

In verse 10 the unity between the Father and the Son is once again emphasized – what belongs to one belongs to the other. This verse also tells us that Glory has come to Jesus through the disciples and by implication will come through future believers. This is a very

encouraging statement if we bear in mind the disciples limited achievements up to this point and their less than perfect nature. But, we can also see it as an obligation on us to honour Jesus as he honoured the Father. Seen in that way it's an awesome responsibility.

Verse 11 emphasizes the imminence of Jesus' death – his departure is referred to in the present tense. The use of the words "Holy Father" here is unique – in those times the holiness and majesty of God were generally taken for granted. The words "by the power of your name" point to the whole revealed character of God. At the end of this verse Jesus prays for a unity amongst the disciples, a unity of abiding in him and having him abide in them. Here he means that they may continually "be" one, rather than that they may "become" one. It is the Divine unity of love that is referred to, all wills bowing in the same direction, all affections burning with the same flame, all aims directed to the same end – one blessed harmony of love. Ecumenical Christians often assert that the answer to Jesus' prayer would lie in the re-unification of the church. It is true that unity of organization can be an impressive witness to unity of spirit, yet as such it is merely outward. I believe it is not this outward unity that is in mind here, but something much more difficult, a unity of heart and mind and will. It is also a unity in mission to an unbelieving world, as this is a major focus of Jesus' prayer. It is good that we work to bring the separated denominations together. But, it is better to look for a grander unity than that, and it is this grander unity for which Jesus prays here.

In verse 12, our concern turns away from the internal to the external, to the hostile world. Jesus says he protected the disciples "in" the name God gave him, by the revelation of God through Jesus. In this verse, the words "the one doomed to destruction" are often misunderstood. They point to character rather than destiny. The expression means that Judas was characterized by "lostness," not that he was predestined to be "lost". Yet this was the Father's will, because scripture was fulfilled. This does not mean that Judas was a robot. He was a responsible person and acted freely. But God used that man's evil act – which God foreknew – to bring about his own purpose. There is a combination of the human and the divine here, but in this passage it is the divine aspect rather than the human that receives emphasis.

In verse 14 we again see the emphasis placed on God's revelation. Jesus' supreme gift is God's word – the entire message he has revealed. During the time they had been with Jesus they had been given over to learning of God. This inevitably meant that the world opposed them. The disciples and the world were ranged on opposite sides. Now it can be said "they are not of the world". This doesn't mean to say that Christians are to be different for the sake of being different – God's intention is that we should be like Jesus.

Since the disciples are not "of the world" it might be thought that the prayer would be made that they should be removed from the world. But in verse 15 Jesus makes it plain that he has nothing of the sort in mind. The disciples place is still in the world, for they have a mission to fulfil. It would be bad for them and disastrous for the world if they were taken out of the world. Moses and Elijah and Jonah all prayed that they be taken out of the world (see Numbers 11:15; 1 Kings 19:4; Jonah 4:3, 8), but in no case was the request granted. The place for the people of God is 'in the world', though, of course, they must not be 'of the world'. The church has often sought to contract out, to become a kind of holy club. But, this is not the prayer of the Master. Rather he prays that the disciples would be kept from evil, actually, "from the evil one" – Satan - for the whole world is under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:19). Jesus recognizes the power of Satan and prays for his own to be kept from

him. We would do well to remember the emphasis Jesus puts on protection from Satan as opposed to material problems in our own prayers.

In verse 17 “sanctify” means to make holy or separate. Jesus says that the disciples will be sanctified by the truth of God’s word. We can also be sanctified through immersion in the scriptures which are God’s word to us and through the action of the Holy Spirit within us.

In verse 18 we see that the mission of Christ forms the pattern for the mission of the apostles. Earlier (John 10:36) John says that the Father sanctified Jesus and sent him into the world. Jesus has just prayed that the Father would sanctify the disciples and now he sends them into the world. The parallel is impressive. The disciples’ lives are not to be aimless. They are given a definite commission by their Lord. Their task is to discharge it, even as he discharged his commission from God. Indeed their mission is to continue the mission of Jesus to the world – to be the light of the world.

In verse 19 Jesus sanctifies himself, that is he sets himself apart for doing the Father’s will – going to his death on the cross. Further, this is so “that they too may be truly sanctified.” It is purposeful. Jesus dies with a view to the disciples being sanctified, being set apart for God. It is only on the basis of what he will do for them on the cross that his prayer for their being sanctified may be answered.

The remainder of this chapter is a prayer for all believers including us here today. The dominant concern is for unity and for the divine glory.

Again Jesus prays for unity – see verse 21 – this is an important issue. Here the unity is composed of four parts (i) the Father in Jesus, (ii) Jesus in the Father, (iii) the believers in Jesus and the Father, (iv) in order that the world may believe that Jesus was sent by the Father. Indwelling is the secret here, Christ indwells the Father and the Father indwells Christ, so are the believers to indwell and be indwelled – which takes us back to the allegory of the vine from John chapter 15. This four part theme is repeated in verse 23. We are not being told that the unity between believers and God is the same as that between Jesus and the Father, but we are being taught that there is an analogy. Without losing our identity we are to be in the Father and the Son and this will have the consequence that the world may believe. Our unity will have an evangelical purpose.

Verse 22 speaks of believers being given glory, but we need to remember that the ultimate glory given to Jesus was the cross. Believers are being called to a life of service and sacrifice which will bring them much glory in heaven.

Jesus’ final petition in verse 24 is for believers to be with him in heaven. Jesus prayed for you and I that we might be with him eternity – what a privilege, what an honour.

The very last words of the prayer refer to Christ’s continuing presence in his followers. Whatever the future holds he will be with them, just as he will be with us.