

The Glory of God in Prayer

Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

Apart from the “disciples’ prayer,” John 17 is the only extended prayer of Jesus recorded in the gospels. Some commentators have attempted to associate the content of this prayer with Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (cf. 26.36-46; Mark 14.32ff; Luke 22.40ff). While that is certainly not an impossibility; it is equally possible, and to my mind more probable that Jesus is still in the upper room with his disciples when he prays. Thus, the import of the prayer would have audible to the disciples; particularly John, who devotes nearly 25% of his Gospel (chapters 13-17) to the upper room events, discourse and prayer. Moreover, it is hardly likely that Jesus, whose life was punctuated with prayer, only prayed once on the most significant evening of his earthly ministry. What is crystal clear regarding Jesus’ ‘high priestly prayer’ (so called because of its distinctively mediatorial content) is its emphasis on the glory of the Son as a basis for intercession. As he does with the details of the upper room discourse, so, too, John records the details of Jesus’ intercessory prayer.

This prayer is not free-standing; it is intimately connected by themes and link-words with the discourse that precedes it (chs. 14-16), as even the first words of 17:1 (‘After Jesus said this ...’) intimate. ... What is unique about this prayer rests neither on form nor on literary associations but on him who offers it, and when. He is the incarnate Son of God, and he is returning to his Father by the route of a desperately shameful and painful death. He prays that the course on which he is embarked will bring glory to his Father, and that his followers, in consequence of his own death and exaltation, will be preserved *from* evil and *for* the priceless privilege of seeing Jesus’ glory, all the while imitating in their own relationship the reciprocity of love displayed by the Father and the Son.

In some respects, the prayer is a summary of the entire Fourth Gospel to this point. Its principal themes include Jesus’ obedience to his Father, the glorification of his Father through his death/exaltation, the revelation of God in Christ Jesus, the choosing of the disciples out of the world, their mission to the world, their unity modeled on the unity of the Father and the Son, and their final destiny in the presence of the Father and the Son. (D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 550-51)

PRAYING ACCORDING TO GOD’S WILL

If one accepts the “disciples’ prayer” as instruction about prayer, with the subject about the kingdom of God as a major focus (*Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as*

it is in heaven), then in John 17 Jesus presents a model of intercession for the kingdom of God. Though in John's Gospel Jesus makes only passing references to the kingdom (John 3.3; 18.36), the new birth as a requisite requirement for entrance into the kingdom is essential nevertheless. Now that the hour has come for Jesus to return to the Father, thereby securing salvation and eternal life to everyone who believes in him (John 1.12-13; 5.24), Jesus prays that the Father will glorify the Son just as the Son glorified the Father by completing the work given him: *I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began* (vv. 17.4-5). Jesus focuses his prayer on those things that bring glory to his Father and the prayer itself is comprised of three sections: Jesus prays for his glory and that he may glorify the Father; he prays for his disciples and the glory he receives through them (v. 10); and he prays for all those who will believe their message and so come to possess a saving faith with the result that they may see his glory and experience his love (24). The priestly intercession of Jesus provides the attentive reader with a window into the heart of Jesus.

GLORIFY YOUR SON (John 17.1-5)

Jesus' 'priestly prayer' is not an isolated event: John connects it to Jesus' upper room discourse with the words, *After Jesus had spoken these words*. The reader overhears the Son addressing the Father with some of his final concerns, the foremost of which is his own glory and the glory of the Father: *glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you*. The 'hour' to which John so frequently referred throughout Jesus' ministry (2.4; 7.6, 8, 30; 8.20) had finally arrived (12.23; 17.1). From the outset of the gospel John has created an expectation in the reader that something more was about to happen. Now the moment has arrived and as Jesus prays there is a sense of anticipation, not fatalism, in what is about to happen. The time has come for the righteousness of God to be vindicated through the atoning death of the Son, followed by the vindication of the Messianic Son through his resurrection and his return to the glory he enjoyed with the Father before the world existed.

As always, when properly understood, God's sovereignty is an impetus for prayer not a hindrance. It is the means whereby the believer cooperatively participates with the Father to accomplish his sovereign will. While the synoptic gospels record Jesus' *passion* in the garden of Gethsemane, John records his *passion* to complete the Father's redemptive work. The death of the Son will vindicate his Messianic work and bring glory to the Father. Jesus' willingness to suffer for the sake of God's elect demonstrates the awesome worth of God's glory: the righteous for the unrighteous (1 Peter 3.18; 2 Corinthians 5.21). Jesus does not plead to be spared from this hour; to the contrary, it is for this very hour that he has come (John 12.23-28; Matthew 26.39; Luke 22.42). It is through the obedience of his death that he glorifies the Father (cp. Isaiah 53.10 *Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief*). Thus, Jesus' petition to be glorified is based on the predetermined will of the Father (Isaiah 53.11-12). "This is

an unspeakably wonderful truth. The foundation of our justification—our acquittal, our forgiveness—is not a flimsy sentimentality in God, nor is it a shallow claim of human worth. It is the massive rock of God’s unswerving commitment to uphold the worth of his own glory, to promote the praise of his holy name and to vindicate his righteousness. The God centeredness of God is the foundation of his grace to the ungodly” (John Piper, *The Pleasures of God*).

Jesus glorifies the Father by giving eternal life to all those whom the Father has given to the Son. This is the reason for Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection. So any patronizing nonsense about Jesus merely being our “model,” a “good man,” or even a prophet is not in keeping with what Jesus has to say about himself and is contrary to the central message of Scripture (John 8.24 *I told you that you would die in your sins for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins*). The clearest evidence of Jesus glorifying the Father is his death on the cross, and the cross is his glory as well. *This is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent* (John 17.3). True knowledge about God comes through knowing Jesus (John 5.44; 14.9-11; 1 John 5.20; 1 Thessalonians 1.9). Thus, truth about God cannot be separated from knowledge about Jesus (John 1.18), and knowledge about God comes from fellowship with his Son. *All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him* (Matthew 11.27).

PRAYER FOR HIS DISCIPLES (John 17.6-19)

Based on his first petition, namely, his glorification resulting from the finished work of redemption, Jesus now prays for his disciples. They belong to God because the Father gave them to Jesus; moreover, they have received and obeyed the word given to them (John 14.23-24; 15.7), they now know and accept that Jesus came from God (John 16.27-31). As Jesus’ ministry progresses toward the final hour of his death, there is a growing animosity toward him (e.g., John 6.60–66). While others are turning away from him the disciples continue to affirm their trust in him: *Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God* (John 6.68–69; cp. 11.16; 13.37). However limited their knowledge or flawed their courage, with the exception of Judas Iscariot (17.12), they separated themselves from the world and were committed to Jesus as Lord.

The distinction between the disciples and the world is clear: they do not belong to the world because the Father has given them to the Son and the Son has kept them for the Father. “The fundamental reason for Jesus’ self-imposed restriction as to whom he prays for at this point is not utilitarian or missiological but theological: *they are yours*. However wide is the love of God (3:16), however salvific the stance of Jesus toward the world (12:47), there is a peculiar relationship of love, intimacy, disclosure, obedience, faith, dependence, joy, peace, eschatological blessing and fruitfulness that binds the

disciples together and with the Godhead. These themes have dominated the farewell discourse. The world can be prayed for only to the end that some who now belong to it might abandon it and join with others who have been chosen out of the world. ... To pray for the world, the created moral order in active rebellion against God, would be blasphemous; there is no hope for the world. There is hope only for some who now constitute the world but who will cease to be the world and will join those of whom Jesus says *for they are yours*" (Carson, p. 560). *If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you* (John 15.19; cp. 1 John 3.1-3).

The prayer of protection for the disciples (with the notable exception of *the son of destruction* [Judas Iscariot]) is not that they would be preserved from all harm, Jesus has already forewarned them that they can expect trouble (*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.* [John 16.33]), but that they would be protected from the *evil one*. The conflict that the disciples face is both worldly and other worldly. So Jesus prays that they will be protected from the influences of the devil (cp. Matthew 6.13; 1 John 2.13-14). It is the death, resurrection, ascension, exaltation, session and reign of Jesus that marks the overthrow of Satan (John 12.31; 14.30; 16.11). The protection that comes by the power of God's name (cp. Psalm 54.1; Proverbs 18.10) is not for physical safety, but character safety. That is, that they may remain true to their calling and confession that *Jesus is Lord* (John 20.28-31; cp. Romans 10.9; 2 Peter 1.10-11). By this confession they will maintain a unity that is like the one enjoyed by the Father and the Son. Jesus' prayer of consecration is preparatory for sending the disciples into the world to propagate the gospel. This is the purpose of the good news that those who hear it might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing they might have life in his name (John 20.31).

PRAYER FOR ALL BELIEVERS (John 17.20-26)

What Jesus had prayed for his disciples, he now prays for those who will come to believe through their witness: that in believing they will experience a unity that comes by faith. The oneness that they will experience is analogous to the oneness Jesus shares with the Father. "The Father is actually in the Son, so much so that we can be told that it is the Father who is performing the Son's works (14:10); yet the Son is in the Father, not only in dependence upon and obedience to him, but his agent in creation (1:2-3) and his wholly concurring Son in the redemption and preservation of those the Father has given him (e.g., 6:37-40; 17:6, 19). The Father and the Son are distinguishable (the pre-incarnate Word is 'with' God, 1:1; the Son prays to his Father; the Father commissions and sends, while the Son obeys), yet they are one. Similarly, the believers, still distinct, are to be one in purpose, in love, in action undertaken with and for one another, in joint submission to the revelation received" (Carson, p. 568). Jesus has revealed the glory of

the Father to the disciples and through them all who believe in their message glimpse something of the glory of God (John 1.14; 2 Peter 1.16-21; 1 John 1.1-4).

The longest prayer of Jesus recorded in Scripture focuses on the glory of the Son who glorifies the Father and the Father who glorifies the Son. However, the declarations at the end of the prayer are so extraordinary that, except they are authored by God, they defy belief: *The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them* (John 17.22-26). What Jesus says is that there is a perichoretic relationship between the Son with the Father and this, through the work of the Holy Spirit, unites the believer with the Triune God. When the Bible declares that *God is love* it is saying that there always existed a unity and love between the persons of the Trinity. John alludes to this in the opening of his Gospel with a clear reference to the creation narrative and the Deity of the Christ: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ...* so, too, in his first epistle he alludes to the divine nature of Christ: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ...* The importance of this could not be more clear for the believer who is the object of God's affection. Love finds its genesis in the loving fellowship of the Trinity. The relationship between the Divine persons of the Trinity have always existed and understanding what John is talking about when he says that *God is love* is rooted in the believer's grasp of the beauty and divine love that is expressed as a perichoresis [a word to describe the vital relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit] of love within the Trinity. It is "... a dynamic coinherence of the three divine persons, whose life is eternally one of shared regard, delight, fellowship, feasting, and joy" (David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* p. 155).

Now, let the truth of what Jesus has prayed sink into your heart: *that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* This is at the heart of the mystery of the good news; we are united with Christ in God, bound together that the world may believe the Jesus is the Christ and by believing might have life in his name. How is God most glorified in the believer's life? When you are most satisfied with Christ and glorify him through the proclamation of the gospel (2 Corinthians 5.16-21). So, then, Jesus' prayer of intercession becomes a model for the believer's prayers of intercession. If you are

united to God in Christ, then the affections of Christ's heart will become the affections of your heart.