

PEACE IN A TROUBLED WORLD 8

The Prayer of Christ – John 17

Introduction

We are accustomed to calling the prayer Jesus taught His disciples (recorded in Matthew 6:9-13) the “Lord’s Prayer”. However, that prayer would perhaps better be called the “Disciples’ Prayer”, since it was a prayer taught by the Lord to His disciples. In many ways the prayer recorded in this chapter of John is the “real” Lord’s Prayer since it is a record of the prayer Jesus prayed shortly before His arrest and crucifixion. It has also been called the “High-Priestly Prayer” of Christ, since in it He is interceding on behalf of His disciples. This is a most remarkable passage of Scripture, as it gives us deep insights into the mind of Christ and the communication between the Son and the Father. In a sense we are invited eavesdroppers as we read this prayer. No wonder Warren Wiersbe could describe it as “the greatest prayer ever prayed on earth and the greatest prayer recorded anywhere in Scripture”. This point is well made, since we have seen in recent years at least one book taking an obscure prayer from Chronicles and holding it up as a (perhaps even *the*) prime example of a godly prayer.

So, then, why should we pay attention to this private prayer of Christ? There are three main reasons:

1. To better understand the mind & plan of God

This is the internal communication between two persons of the Godhead, and there can be no better way to begin to understand the eternal plan of God than to hear the communication within His very person. One of the best ways to understand a historical figure is to read his personal correspondence, since this can give insights into the real person and the motivation behind his actions that are missing from official accounts of his actions. This prayer is full of the eternal plan of God – calling a people together who would bear His name and share His eternal life and the joy which is integral to it. As we read this prayer we are invited eavesdroppers – Christ invites us to ehar and learn.

2. To better appreciate Christ’s intercession for us

The continuing intercession of Christ for us at God’s right hand is a truth we often neglect. In fact this intercession is the basis of our eternal security. This prayer is a demonstration of Christ’s intercession, and as we read it we are struck by the absolute certainty of God’s plan and of His salvation for those who have accepted Christ and His words.

3. To learn how we should pray

There can be no better model to us of prayer than the Lord Himself. From this prayer we can see what things were of greatest concern to Christ as He approached His death. These things should surely be the greatest in our prayers too.

Before we examine the prayer in detail we must realise that it is not disconnected from the preceding teaching. In Chapters 13-16 we have seen:

1. **The demonstration of Christ’s love** (13:1-17) – through the example of the basin and the towel He taught them that love is the basis of Christian discipleship, fellowship and leadership.
2. **The new command** (John 13:34&35) – Jesus gave the command to love one another as Christ loved us. It is this love that will demonstrate to world that we are His disciples
3. **Jesus is the Way, Truth and Life** (John 14:1-14) – Jesus introduces us to Father in this life & afterwards. He will return to take us to be with Him. Now we have a great privilege in prayer by which we can ask the Father anything in Jesus’ name and He will do it.
4. **The Holy Spirit will come** (14:15-31, 16:5-16) – He will be a Counsellor like Christ who will never leave them, indwelling them and leading them into truth
5. **The Vine and branches** (15:1-17) – a call to intimate relationship with Christ that results in bearing fruit
6. **There will be opposition from the world** (15:18-16:4) – the world will hate them just as it hated Him, but they will continue His mission to the world.
7. **The disciples’ grief will turn to joy** (16:17-33) – the Christian life is life of joy despite grief of this world. This joy is based on Christ’s victory over the world.

These truths are vital to life in the present age – we realise that we live in intimate relationship to the Father, praying boldly in accordance with His will, experiencing the constant help and leadership of the Holy Spirit, knowing the joy of being in God’s will, serving one another in loving community and reaching

out to a world that will often hate and oppose us with the message of Christ. Many of these same themes are continued in this prayer. Let us then examine it.

The Prayer

This prayer can be divided into three parts, as Christ prays firstly for Himself, then for His disciples and lastly for all those who will become His disciples through the mission of the apostles. Each of these sections has its own requests and theme, and each teaches us about mission:

A] Jesus' prayer for Himself (vv1-5)

Themes: glory & eternal life

CHRIST'S MISSION – to give eternal life to those the Father gave Him

- Jesus says that “the time has come” (v1). He is speaking of the cross. Remember that John’s gospel gives us frequent reminders that Jesus was living according to a divine timetable, and that His whole life and ministry was leading towards His death. It is also worth noticing that the cross meant glory for Christ – He never saw it as a defeat but as a glorious victory.
- Christ’s mission was to give eternal life to those the Father had given Him (vv2&3):
 - Eternal life is His gift – He is the universal life-giver and He has authority over all men
 - Eternal life is distinct in quality, not just duration – it is the life in all its fullness Christ spoke about in 10:10, a life of joy, peace and purpose.
 - Eternal life is defined in terms of a personal relationship with the Father and Son (it is to know them both intellectually and experientially) – the Christian life is a living relationship with God through Christ
- Jesus says that He has glorified the Father by completing the work He gave Him (He is looking forward to the cross then He could cry out “finished” – see 19:30). The way to glorify God is through obedience to His will and plan, and we too should be dedicated to the glory of God (v4).

CHRIST'S REQUEST – for the Father to return Him to the glory had before (v5)

- Christ here prays for Himself. RA Torrey once said that, “A prayer for self is not necessarily a selfish prayer”. This is surely true, but only if our concern in prayer is, as Christ’s was, for the Father’s glory (v1).
- God, of course answered this prayer affirmatively. Christ returned through resurrection and His ascension to the position of glory that was rightfully His. The cross was man’s verdict on Christ, but the resurrection and ascension was God’s (see also Philippians 2:9-11). It is interesting that Christ prays this prayer since this position was His by right. In His life He constantly displayed dependence on the Father as He lived the perfect human life. Man cannot live without God, and for the perfect human Christ He needed to live in constant submission to the Father. When He became man He laid aside the outward glory that was His and veiled His true nature in a human body. He poured Himself out into a body and became human (see Philippians 2:6-8).

B] Jesus' prayer for His disciples (vv6-19)

Theme: God's name & truth revealed

CHRIST'S MISSION – to reveal God to those He gave to Him

- He revealed God’s name to the disciples (v6 – the word “name” is missing in the main text of the NIV but is mentioned in the footnotes). God gave them to Him and they obeyed the word of God given to them by Christ.
- Christ had also given them the words of God, and they had accepted them, recognising that Christ was truly revealing God (vv7&8).
- The idea of the “name” has great significance:
 1. *In the Old Testament a name is not merely a label by which to call person* – it describes whole character and nature of the person (there are many examples of this including Jacob and Esau, and this explains why on occasions God changed a person’s name when He transformed their life – e.g. Abram became Abraham and Jacob became Israel). This is also true of the name of God (e.g. Psalm 9:10, 20:7, 22:22).
 2. *Jews could not speak the name the name of God* – there were two names by which God revealed Himself to the nation of Israel. The first is translated in most English Bibles as LORD (note the capital letters). This is used to translate the Hebrew word YHWH [there are no vowels in ancient Hebrew], which has traditionally been pronounced in English as “Jehovah”, but more recently has been pronounced “Yahweh”. In truth we are not entirely sure how exactly it should be pronounced because the Jewish people did not speak this name. The only person who would speak it was the High Priest, and then only once per year on the Day of Atonement. This was because of a fear that they might accidentally

take the name of the LORD in vain, breaking the third commandment (Exodus 20:7). Even today some devout Jews will not speak or write the name of God, and most English translations keep LORD in place of YHWH. Jesus says that He has made God's name known to them. The God who had become remote, distant, unreachable had come near. The name they had not dared to speak could now be spoken with boldness and with reverence but without apprehension. The other name by which God revealed Himself in the Old Testament was given by Him to Moses (see Exodus 3:14) – it was "I AM". That name spoke of the eternal nature of God, without beginning or end, and His absolute self-sufficiency. In John's gospel we have a series of sayings of Christ where He says "I am" (see John 6:35, 8:12, 10:7, 10:11, 11:25, 14:6, 15:1). In each of these seven sayings He reveals Himself as the source and sustainer of eternal life, and so He revealed the "I AM" as the gracious answer to every need. Finally in John 8:58 we have the amazing claim of Christ that He is the "I AM" who existed before Abraham. Christ revealed the true nature of God as one who can be known, trusted and experienced.

- Jesus clearly says that He is not praying for the world (remember that the "world" means human society without God) but for disciples (v9). It might seem strange at first that Christ does not pray at all in this prayer for those who are not Christians, since John's gospel shows that God loves the world (3:16) and that Christ had come to save the world not to condemn it (3:17). In 1 Timothy 2 Paul tells us we should pray for all men because God wants all to be saved. However, in this instance Christ's concern as He faces His imminent departure from the world is that His disciples will carry on His mission. It is through the disciples and those who believe in Him because of their message that the message He has given them will be taken out across the world. In fact, as we read the gospels we should notice that Christ devoted probably the majority of His time just to training the twelve disciples. Those who are in positions of leadership and Christian ministry would do well to learn from His example. It is much more effective to train others to carry on one's mission than to carry on doing all the work oneself.
- We should not think that because Christ prayed in this way to His Father that he was therefore less than the Father. His claim in verse 10 reminds us that He was indeed equal with the Father. He says "All I have is yours, and all you have is mine". Every Christian should be able to pray the first half of that statement, recognising that all we are and have belongs to God, but only Christ, the co-possessor of all things with Father, could pray the second half.

CHRIST'S REQUESTS:

In verse 13 we learn that Christ's prayer was intended to be heard by the disciples. Christ's prayer was intended to bring the full measure of His joy to the disciples. In this section we see His two requests for His disciples:

a) He requests the Father to protect them – this request is based on the revealed character of God (Christ kept them, and so Father will also keep them) (vv11 & 24)

- Christ calls the Father "Holy Father" (v11). This name is unique to this verse, and perhaps links to what Christ will say in verses 17-19.
- In verse 12 we read that Christ has "protected" (the idea behind this word is to conserve or prevent decay – in other words Christ prevented them from falling away from Him) the disciples and "kept them safe" (this phrase means to protect from external attack). We have here a wonderful explanation of the keeping power of Christ – our salvation is secure and cannot be lost because it is kept by His power. But one of the twelve, Judas, was lost. Surely this raises the possibility that a believer could be lost. However, that is not what Christ says. Judas was never really a true disciple (see John 6:64-71 – he was not a believer, 13:11 – he was never cleansed, 13:18 – he was not chosen, 18:8&9 – he was never given to Christ) and so he did not fall from salvation, he never possessed it. The NIV translation of verse 12 is confusing for another reason as it calls Judas the "one doomed to destruction". This sounds as if God chose Judas to be destroyed, but in actual fact the Greek phrase is literally the "son of perdition". This is almost certainly a Jewish phrase for someone who deserves and will receive judgement and condemnation. It says nothing about why they deserve it. Judas rejected Christ and so deserved the punishment that was his.
- Now that Christ is leaving them he disciples will continue to need protection. They must be kept from falling away, and, because the giving of God's word to them causes hatred from the world and they are not of the world (verses 14 and 16) they will also need protection from external attack. And so Christ asks His Father to continue the work of protecting. He entrusts to the Father's care those that the Father gave to Him.
- How will the Father protect the disciples? It is by the power of His name (v11). In other words, their security (and ours) is based on the very nature of God. It is not in His nature to fail, to lie or to make a mistake, and so we know that He will keep us through every situation. The

disciples would fail the Lord (Peter most spectacularly), but the Father kept them even through this, and after the resurrection they were restored. Will He not also keep us?

- Notice that Christ's prayer is not for the disciples to escape from the world but to have victory in it (v15). He has already overcome the world (16:33), and they too will overcome. The real Christian life is not lived out in the church but in the world. God's purpose is that we will live as overcomers in this world until He calls us home or Christ returns.
- And when the end comes, what will happen to us? Christ prays that we may finally see His glory. Our final glorification is assured because Christ prayed it (v24).

b) He requests the Father to sanctify them – this request is based on the revealed truth of God's word (v17)

- Sanctification is a progressive process in our lives of being set apart for God's purpose and shaped into a person who is able to fulfil that purpose. This is the true meaning of holiness – to be fully dedicated to the purposes of God and transformed into the likeness of Christ so that we can do His will. It comes after our justification and will continue until our glorification. Christ prays that the Father would sanctify the disciples (v17), setting them apart for the purpose of continuing the mission of Christ (as He was sent so He has sent them – v18). It is so that the disciples can be sanctified that Christ now sanctifies Himself (v19) – setting Himself apart for the purpose of God to go to the cross.
- So, then, how will the Father sanctify us? It is through truth. We can identify three aspects of this based on John's use of the word truth:
 1. God's word is truth (v17) – this impacts our minds as we read God's word and allow it to shape our thinking.
 2. Christ is the Truth (14:6) – this impacts our hearts as we grow to love Him more and so grow to love the truth.
 3. The Spirit is truth (I John 5:6) – this impacts our wills as we submit ourselves to Him to be filled and led by Him
- So, we could ask the question what may be wrong if we find that we are not growing in our faith into greater Christ-likeness. Perhaps it may be because we are not reading or meditating on God's word, applying it to our lives. Perhaps it may be because we are not deepening in our relationship with Christ through prayer and fellowship with His people. Perhaps it may be because we are not surrendering ourselves fully to the Spirit allowing Him to fill us completely. We must be serious about sanctification.

C] Jesus' prayer for us (vv20-26)

Themes: unity & mission

OUR MISSION – to continue His mission

- Jesus says that His disciples are sent just as He was sent (v18). Do we have the same sense of "sentness" that He had? Do we live our lives conscious that we live to a divine timetable, seeking always to be fulfilling His purpose in our lives and dedicated above all else to the mission of God?
- Our mission is to let the world know that Christ truly came from God (v23). Just as Christ pointed to Father, we point to Christ.
- As we continue the mission of Christ He does not leave us powerless or helpless. Christ Himself will continue to make the Father known to us through the Holy Spirit who indwells us (v26). Our mission is based on a continued relationship and discovery of God, not just testifying to a past experience. Our testimony (story of faith) should be constantly added to as we experience more of God's saving power through our daily lives.

CHRIST'S REQUEST: Complete unity of all believers

- Christ prays for complete unity among His disciples. What does it mean?
 - *Its Pattern* = unity of Father and Son (v21). The persons of the Godhead work together with one purpose and with love for one another, and this is the pattern for our unity.
 - *Its Basis* = shared life in the Father and Son (v21). This is a unity of nature not of organisation or legislation. This unity will not be built by bringing together human organisations or denominations (this is where much of the ecumenical movement has failed), and cannot include uniting with those who do not truly know Christ as Saviour.
 - *Its Purpose* = evangelism (v21). There is no greater hindrance to evangelism than disunity or lack of love among Christians. This leaves an open door for cults and false teachings to claim that they are another valid expression of Christianity and confuses those we seek to win for Christ.
- Unity of nature NOT organisation – not achieved by legislation (love for one another)

- William Barclay wrote: “Where there are divisions, where there is exclusiveness, where there is competition between the Churches, where there is disunity and dispeace, the cause of Christianity is harmed and hindered, and the prayer of Jesus is frustrated”.
- The opposite of this unity is not diversity in style and belief on non-essentials but love of one’s own group or own creed more than love of others. It does not bother me that we have many relatively small local churches rather than one huge church in each city. Variety of local churches allows diversity of style and culture, and actually multiplies our effectiveness in evangelism. Smaller church units provide a setting for believers to develop their gifts.
- So, then, how can we express this unity? We can consider it at several levels:
 - *Within this congregation* – in the words of Augustine: “in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity”. We should be united for the great purpose of mission, and this should be greater than differences of personality or over non-essential doctrinal points. It is love (“charity”) that unites us as the Spirit produces His fruit in us.
 - *Across the local church that is BCCC* – we are one congregation of three in this church. We should be committed to those few meetings when we are together with the other congregations and on those occasions take the opportunity to speak to people from other congregations. We are one church and we can support, pray for and work with one another.
 - *Between Christians from different churches* – at a personal level we can share with and learn from Christians we know from other churches. If they are true believers we can pray with them. If they visit our church they are welcome to share in the Lord’s Supper, as it is His table, and those who He has received should never be turned away.
 - *Between local churches in this area* – local churches in one area are not in competition. We are all parts of the body of Christ. This church should seek to develop communication and cooperation with other evangelical churches in the area. One way we can do this is in the student outreach. Together churches can pool resources and be more strategic. Each church has different strengths and weaknesses, and different experiences to bring to any project together. Let this church be at the forefront of encouraging team-work between evangelicals.
 - *Worldwide* – the unity of the church is not just in our city or country, but worldwide. Do we have a concern for Christians in other countries? Do we actively support missions and do we give to our brothers and sisters who are in poverty and pray for those facing persecution? If we do not, then we are denying the prayer of Christ

Implications

Let us then, in summary, return to the three purposes for which we have examined this prayer:

1. To better understand the mind & plan of God

- The plan of God was sending Christ to reveal Him to the world. Christ existed before the incarnation, sharing glory with the Father, with whom He is co-possessor of all things, but He laid aside the outward expression of His glory to come into the world as a man.
- In the world Christ lived in perfect obedience & submission to the Father – He was our pattern of perfect humanity.
- The pattern for our unity as Christians is the unity of Godhead (the Father and Son working in unity).
- Christ glorified the Father on earth by completing His work (v4) and so the Father glorified Christ in Heaven (vv1&5). We too can glorify Christ as we obey His commands (v10).
- One question we might ask from this prayer is: did God choose us for salvation? The question is not answered explicitly in this passage. We can certainly see that God gave the 11 to Christ (v6), but Christ does not say the same thing specifically about us in vv20-26. The fact that Father gave the disciples does not mean they had no choice. In Scripture we see the parallel lines of God’s foreknowledge and election and our experience and choice. Both are true and both are real, and the two parallel lines can only meet in the infinity that is the eternal Godhead. So, we can say that we must exercise choice in repenting and trusting in Christ, but that God also chooses us and then keeps us in His purpose. Because of this fact, and the nature of God who cannot lie, we are secure and will one day share in His glory.

2. To better appreciate Christ’s intercession for us

- Christ’s intercession did not end with this prayer – He continues to pray for us today (see Romans 8:4, Hebrews 7:25). Because He continues to intercede we are kept and cannot lose salvation.

