

JESUS' HIGH-PRIESTLY PRAYER

John 17:1-26

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This morning, I begin with a meditation from the book *God Is No Fool* by Lois Cheney.

One morning I awoke with a desire I wanted to fulfill. It concerned a way I wanted to be.

This was a matter to lay before God. This was a matter for prayer. The desire was for a power and goodness, and I wanted the prayer to be right. I would preface my request with an acknowledgement of my unworthiness. This wasn't false; I knew it, and God would accept it.

All day phrases and words escaped me. My special prayer lay limp and wouldn't take shape. I would set aside a time. I would approach him in truth.

In the evening I closed myself away from others. I read from his word. I fought for phrases and words—I felt embarrassed and mute. And the world got bigger, and God got greater, and I got smaller.

Frustrated, I jerked to reality, and suddenly I was flooded with the answer, and I was the way I wanted to be.

But I felt confused . . . I had wanted that moment of communication with God, but I had found myself impotent and alone. Then I thought I heard something.

“I heard you this morning.”

I think I have a lot to learn about prayer.¹

From time to time, in my life, my most heart-felt, soul-wrenching prayers have not found verbal expression. Groping for words has given way to groaning in spirit, and sometimes I have simply said to God, “Please help me.” In such times, I seek solace and strength from Rom 8:26-27:

^{8:26}In the same way the Spirit also comes to help us, weak as we are. For we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express. ²⁷And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is; because the Spirit pleads with God on behalf of his people and in accordance with his will (Rom 8:26-27, TEV).

¹Lois A. Cheney, *God Is No Fool* (Abingdon, 1969), 14-15.

Fluency in prayer: sometimes we speak the language of words and sometimes we speak the language of groans. *I am thankful that not only does the Spirit speak to me for God, He also speaks for me to God.*

In the Gospel of John, the intimate relationship between Jesus the Son and God the Father is emphasized. Prayer for Jesus is a sustained spiritual communion with the Father in which He requests and receives what is needed for His ministry. This requesting and receiving, however, is not always expressed in actual uttered words.² But before anyone jumps to the wrong conclusion that Jesus did not need to pray, it is the Gospel of John that highlights Jesus' long prayer of petition recorded in chapter 17.

With regard to this chapter, in the early fifth century, Cyril of Alexandria (370-444) said that Jesus was acting as a high priest making intercession on our behalf. Then in the sixteenth century, David Chytraeus (1531-1600, Lutheran theologian) called John 17 "The High-Priestly Prayer" of Jesus, and this title has been widely adopted.³ But Jesus also prays for Himself, and so some have favored the title "The Prayer of Consecration."⁴ There is no need to argue over whether the prayer is offered on behalf of Jesus or on behalf of His disciples. The answer is "Yes": the prayer is offered on behalf of both. Ideally, we should refer to this prayer as "The Lord's Prayer" since it is a personal prayer prayed by Jesus. But, as you well know, that title is already taken.

Speaking of the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4), there are several similarities that stand out between the prayer Jesus taught His disciples to pray and this prayer which Jesus Himself prayed.⁵ The expression "Our Father" is reflected here in the simple "Father" (v. 1). "Hallowed by Your *name*" finds echoes in the mention of God's *name* four times (vv. 6, 11, 12, 26). "Your kingdom come" has certain thematic connections with "glorify Your Son" (vv. 1, 5). "Do not bring us to the time of trial" (or,

²Andrew T. Lincoln, "God's Name, Jesus' Name, and Prayer in the Fourth Gospel," in R. N. Longenecker, ed., *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, McMaster New Testament Studies (Eerdmans, 2001), 158-160.

³Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)*, Anchor Bible, vol. 29A (Doubleday, 1970), 747.

⁴George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Word, 1987), 294.

⁵For a full discussion, see William O. Walker, Jr., "The Lord's Prayer in Matthew and John," *New Testament Studies* 28 (1982): 237-256.

the more familiar “lead us not into temptation”) compares with “I protected them . . . I guarded them” (v. 12), while “rescue us from the evil one” compares with “I ask You to protect them from the evil one” (v. 15). Let’s read together the seventeenth chapter of John’s Gospel.

^{17:1}After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ²since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. ⁶I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

⁹“I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. ¹⁴I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

²⁰“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so

that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:1-26, NRSV—paragraph division is mine).

This prayer falls into three major units, with an ever-increasing vision in each of the units. First, Jesus prays for Himself in verses 1-8; then He prays for His disciples in verses 9-19; and finally, Jesus prays for all believers in verses 20-26. There are seven specific petitions, with the first and last sections having two each and the longer middle section having three.⁶ For the sake of brevity, we will limit our focus to these seven petitions.

Petitions 1 & 2. The first part of the prayer contains two petitions concerning Jesus’ glory: v. 1—“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you”; v. 5—“So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.” The supreme manifestation of the glory of God is not a blinding flash of resplendent light, but is the trial and the triumph of the cross and the empty tomb. Jesus prays that the Father will accept His willing and obedient suffering and by that suffering grant grace to humanity and restore the Son to His original glory. In essence, Jesus prays, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The glory of the Father and the Son is expressed in the gift of eternal life to mankind. Eternal life is not so much everlasting life as it is knowing the Everlasting One. We come to have eternal life by coming to know God by coming to know Jesus.

Petitions 3, 4 & 5. The second part of the prayer contains three petitions expressing Jesus’ concerns for His disciples. For them, He makes three specific requests: that they be kept safe in the divine name—v. 11; that they be protected from the evil one—v. 15; and that they be sanctified in the truth—v. 17. Jesus intercedes for His disciples and not for the world. “The only prayer He could possibly pray for the world is that it should cease

⁶I am following the structure suggested by, among others, Lincoln, “God’s Name, Jesus’ Name, and Prayer in the Fourth Gospel,” *Into God’s Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, 162-170.

to be the world, and that is the prayer He does pray later.”⁷ Notice that Jesus does not pray that His disciples “become one,” but that they “be one” (v. 11). “The idea is not that they may progressively achieve unity, but simply that they may be a unity continually.”⁸ Therefore, Jesus prays for the Father’s protection of His disciples so that they may be unified. Furthermore, since it is the mission of Jesus’ disciples “to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37), they will need to be set apart in the truth.

Petitions 6 & 7. As a result of the disciples’ mission in the world, others will become believers, so the scope of the final part of the prayer expands to include two petitions for the whole host of believers, both present and future. Jesus’ first plea for all believers is “that they may all be one”—v. 21. This complete unity between Father, Son, *and* believers has as its twofold purpose the world’s coming to know (1) ~~the~~ the truth about Jesus’ mission—v. 21b—“so that the world may believe that you have sent me”; and (2) ~~the~~ the truth about the believer’s relationship to God—v. 23—“so that the world may know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” How does the world come to know God as love? Not only through hearing the Good News about Jesus Christ, but also through seeing Christians that are united in loving acceptance of one another. To know God as love, the world must hear the word *and* see the witness. “Loving others as Jesus loves us”—the mission statement of this congregation—must be preceded by “Loving one another as Jesus loves us.” God’s love for us causes us to love another; and then, as loved and loving people, our love spills over and spreads out into the world. The final plea of the prayer turns to the future destiny for the followers of Jesus: v. 24—“Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory.”

Every lesson I have presented on prayer has had a profound impact on me. As I reach the end of each study, I often sit staring at the computer screen wishing for a revelation. And then I realize that I have already received more than I can handle. Here is some of what I have learned.

⁷Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Gospel of John* (Baker, 1988), 579.

⁸D. A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus: An Exposition of John 14-17* (Baker, 1980), 189.

(1) *If Jesus prayed for unity, then we cannot call Him “Lord” and at the same time fight with our Christian brothers and sisters.* We cannot expect the Father to bless us when we are cursing His children. It just may be that what most hinders our prayers to the one God is our failure to pray our prayers together.

(2) *The ultimate desire in prayer is that others will come to know the God to whom we pray.* We may go into the closet to pray, but we must not leave God in the closet. Through prayer, the more we grow in our relationship with God, the more we grieve for those who have no relationship with Him. If we have truly experienced the love of God, we know that love yearns to be received by all mankind. The love that saved us seeks to save others. And so then, you and I cannot expect God to work His will in our world and then expect Him to leave us alone. To pray for an answer is to offer to be the answer.

(3) *In John 14-17, it is striking that the magnificent promises about the power of prayer in Jesus’ farewell discourse mention six times the condition that such prayer must be in Jesus’ name (“in my name”—14:13, 14; 15:16; 16:23, 24, 26; cf. “abide in me”—15:7).* Since after His departure to return to the Father, Jesus Himself will not be present to pray, His followers will pray on Jesus’ authority. “One could say that they are given His ‘power of attorney’ so that their praying will be the equivalent to Jesus Himself praying.”⁹ Now that is a staggering thought. When we pray in the name of Jesus, it is equivalent to Jesus Himself praying. What, then, keeps us from praying as we should? The problem is not with prayer; it is with the pray—er.

O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Ev’rything to God in prayer.¹⁰

⁹Lincoln, “God’s Name, Jesus’ Name, and Prayer in the Fourth Gospel,” *Into God’s Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, 176.

¹⁰From the hymn *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* by Joseph M. Scriven (1855).