

UNDERSTANDING ETERNAL LIFE

Pastor Andrew B. Pigott

Chinese Christian Church of New Jersey

August 5, 2001

Scripture Reading: John 17:1-26

When Jesus went to the Upper Room to eat His Last Supper with His disciples before He would go to the cross, what took place during that time included a lot more than just eating. A great deal of instruction took place also. Four chapters in the Gospel of John record the instruction that took place, and I have more or less been using this instruction as the basis for my pulpit teaching for the past couple of months. Today I will end this series of sermons by examining the prayer that our Lord prayed at the end of this very special time He spent with His disciples. That prayer is recorded in John 17, and I would now like to read it from the New International Version of the New Testament.

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: *Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. ²For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. ³Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. ⁴I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. ⁵And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. ⁶I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. ⁸For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. ⁹I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. ¹¹I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. ¹²While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. ¹³I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. ¹⁴I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. ¹⁵My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. ²⁰My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that all of them may be one, Father, just as you 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. ²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. ²⁴Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. ²⁵Righteous Father, though the*

world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. ²⁶I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.

This prayer naturally breaks down into three sections, providing a neat outline for preachers and teachers to use. The first section is one where Jesus prays for Himself. In the second section, Jesus prays for His disciples. And in the third section, Jesus prays for the world.

John 17 is a farewell prayer that Jesus prayed in the presence of His disciples. It is a sincere conversation where God the Son spoke to God the Father. But it is also a prayer that was meant to encourage and instruct those who were listening and those who would read it later on. Through this prayer, we can learn much about prayer.

As I have just noted, John 17 does seem to be divided into three sections. In John 17:1-5 Jesus does pray for Himself; and in His prayer for Himself, He expresses two desires. The first desire can be seen in verse 1. It is that God would glorify the Son. Jesus prayed, "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you." The second desire can be seen in verse 5. There Jesus prayed, "Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." So the first desire was that God would glorify the Son, and the second desire was that God would glorify Jesus Himself. And, believe it or not, there is a difference between these two desires.

When Jesus asked God to glorify the Son, He was praying for the cross. Jesus desired that God would make Him successful in His work to bring salvation to mankind. That is what He meant when He prayed, "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son." He wanted God to glorify the work of the Son.

And then, in verse 5, we see that Jesus desired that the glory He had before He became a man would be restored to Him. This means that He desired to return to heaven and enjoy the same equality with God that He had before He became a man.

So we can sum up the two desires by saying that Jesus desired to return to heaven by way of the cross. But the reason He desired to do this was because He believed that this is what God the Father wanted Him to do. His real motive was to do the will of God the Father. It is as if Jesus had prayed, "Oh God, my heart's desire is to bring you glory, and I know that the way to bring you glory is to do your will. And since I believe your will is for me to return to heaven by way of the cross, I am going to ask you to help me do just that."

And then we come to the second section of Christ's prayer where He prays for His disciples. In that section, Jesus also expresses two desires. The first desire is found in verse 11 where Jesus prayed, "Holy Father, protect them by the power of Your name..." The second desire is found in verse 17 where Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth." Our Lord's two main desires for His disciples were that they would be protected from evil and perfected in holiness.

And then we come to the last section of the prayer that some people refer to as, "Jesus

prays for the world.” But when we read this section, we discover that Jesus was really praying for all those in the world who would become believers. For those who would become believers, Jesus also had two desires. The first was a desire for unity. In verse 21 we see Jesus pray for all those who would believe “that all of them may be one.” The second desire can be found in verse 24 where Jesus prays, “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see My glory, the glory You have given Me before the creation of the world.” In other words, Jesus wants all those who believe in Him to share His glory with Him in heaven.

So there you have it: Jesus’s farewell prayer broken into three sections, with each section containing two desires.

But now, I’m going to do something that I never have done before. I am going to introduce to you another outline for today’s scripture reading. I am not trying to say that the outline I gave you is wrong. That outline is a perfectly good outline. I just simply want you to see that there is often more than one way to look at any given passage of scripture. And, in this case, both ways can be perfectly valuable and extremely helpful.

The second outline does not try to break the chapter into three sections. Instead, it focuses in on one theme, and that is the theme of eternal life.

Jesus begins the prayer by saying, “Father, the time has come.” What time has come? Well, obviously, it is the time for Him to go to the cross to complete the work of salvation. But why does Jesus want to complete the work of salvation? It is so that people may receive eternal life. Verse two clearly states this. And what is eternal life? Well, the rest of the prayer answers that question for us.

Take a look at verse 3, for instance. That verse says, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” The Greek word which is translated “know” means more than just intellectual knowledge. It means experiencing a relationship which constantly grows and expands.

I have been married to my wife for more than twenty-six years. The relationship we have with one another is not a static one. It changes and grows sweeter as the days go by. And the same is true with my relationship with God.

In 2 Timothy 1:12, the apostle Paul wrote, “I know whom I have believed.” Notice that he did not say, “I know what I have believed.” Rather, he said, “I know whom I have believed.” We will never understand eternal life unless we see it as being a relationship with a living Being. Eternal life is a relationship that is always growing.

And then we read on, and we discover that eternal life means protection from evil. Those who have a relationship with God are protected in a special way.

In 1971 I went to Quantico, Virginia to receive basic training to become an officer in the Marine Corps. I didn’t know much about the training before it started, but I knew that the

trainers swore a lot. I also knew that they placed a great deal of pressure on the trainees to also swear. I had been brought up to believe that it was wrong to swear, but I had not yet entered into a relationship with God. When the training began, I discovered that I was too weak to resist the pressure. The day came when I began to use every swear word I could think of to curse those who gave me trouble.

Just six months after that training, I heard the gospel and entered into a personal relationship with God. I can now testify that one of the benefits of having a personal relationship with God is a special kind of protection which guarantees us that we never have to give in to the pressures around us.

1 Corinthians 10:13 promises that God will always provide us a way out of every temptation. In John 17:11 and 17:15, Jesus prayed that those who had received eternal life would receive special protection from evil. Eternal life means protection from evil.

Eternal life also means joy. Verse 13 quotes Jesus saying, "I am coming to You now, but I am saying these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them."

The kind of joy a person who has eternal life experiences is completely different from the joy a person who does not have eternal life experiences. Before I experienced eternal life, my joy was dependent upon the circumstances of life which were often beyond my control. I would find myself experiencing elation or depression depending on how things were going for me at the moment.

But now my joy is based on the work of God's grace in my life. And the work of His grace is much more reliable and consistent than all the accidental occurrences of life that cause elation or depression. When I see that my faith is growing, I joy. When I see that the cross I am bearing is causing others to believe in God, then I experience joy. Some day I will go to heaven; and on that day, I will experience joy. I cannot predict where my circumstances will lead me in the future, but I know where God's grace is leading me, and I consider heaven to be my only true home. Eternal life means joy.

And eternal life means sanctification. In verse 19 we read the words of Jesus: "For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified." To be sanctified means to be set apart as holy.

Some people think that this is the boring part of eternal life. They look at holiness as a bunch of restrictions that prevent us from having fun. But these people miss the whole point. Holiness does not restrict us; rather, it enables us to do very many exciting and important things that we could otherwise never do. Holiness is our ticket to an exciting life.

And what kind of excitement am I talking about? It is the excitement of seeing lives changed. It is the excitement of entering into spiritual warfare for the souls of people, and it is the excitement of seeing evil defeated. It is the excitement of having a positive impact on the world. People who are not set apart as holy can never experience this kind of

excitement. They are truly the ones who are restricted.

And this brings me to another point. Eternal life means mission. To have eternal life means to be commissioned to do something very important in this life. People who have eternal life know that they have a purpose for living. In John 17:18 Jesus said, "As you sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world." As we labor upon this earth, we must never lose sight of our great commission to establish the kingdom of God in every nation of this world. It is not world peace or affluence that we are after. These are not the most important things. We live to see people from every nation come into a personal relationship with the almighty God. This is our mission. Eternal life means mission.

Unity is another aspect of eternal life. John 17:22 says, "I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one."

Unity is a sensitive topic in our church where there are four different congregations that meet at separate times and use different strategies to achieve their ministry goals. Sometimes people look at all the different activities and notice that there are not that many times when everyone is together participating in the same activity. I can understand why some people might conclude that such an arrangement means that we lack unity as a church.

But I don't think that the unity Jesus is talking about here refers to people from different congregations or people from different churches spending a lot of time together. When Jesus prays for unity, He is praying for a common nature. Jesus wants us to be one the same way that God the Father and God the Son are one. The world needs to see that people from different churches have a common godly nature. If people from every congregation at CCCNJ have a very obvious nature that reflects the love and holiness of God, then the different names that we call ourselves and the different strategies we use won't matter that much.

Finally, at the end of Christ's prayer, we see that eternal life means spending eternity in fellowship with God. In John 17:24, Jesus prayed that those who have eternal life would be with Him in heaven so that they could see the glory that He had from before the creation of the world. Eternal life means spending eternity in heaven.

And so we come to the end of the second outline. Each outline looks at the prayer from a different angle. And each angle helps us to live the Christian life.

The first outline emphasizes the structure of the prayer. We can use the prayer as an example to help us pray for ourselves and for other people. Jesus knew that it was God's will for Him to go to heaven by way of the cross, so He expressed that desire in His prayer. We will please God if we pray with the same desire.

When Jesus prayed for those who were close to Him, He prayed for protection and sanctification. When we pray for the ones we are trying to disciple, we would do good to follow His example.

And when Jesus prayed for all believers, He prayed for their unity and their need to spend constant fellowship with their Savior. Again, we can use this to help us pray for believers around the world.

The second outline is also helpful. It focuses not so much on the structure of the prayer, but it emphasizes the content. It helps us to understand eternal life. We are encouraged to know that Jesus prays for us, that we will experience eternal life. And we are helped as we realize that eternal life means so much more than an endless existence. Such a concept of eternal life will help us to live the Christian life better, and it will help us to better explain the Christian life to others.

So I have given to you two outlines with two important lessons. Both come from the farewell prayer of our Lord. It was not only a prayer, but it was a perfect prayer. It was a prayer of God the Son to God the Father. Such a prayer has been and will continue to be answered.

So let's work in cooperation with this prayer so that God the Father will be glorified.