

Truth for Today

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For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. David Anderson

Bible Prayers: The Lord's prayer for His own

Of all the prayers found in Scripture, the Lord's prayer for His own in John 17 has a very special appeal to Christian believers. It was uttered immediately after the 'Upper Room' discourse of John 13-16, as the opening words of John 17:1 (English Standard Version), "*When Jesus had spoken these words*", show. After Judas Iscariot had left, the Lord Jesus had explained to the eleven remaining apostles that He was going away from them (John 13:31-35). They were to be left behind in the world, whilst He returned to the Father. That news troubled them (John 13:36-14:14). But the information He gave them about the Holy Spirit, and the instructions about how they were to live in these new circumstances, had reassured them (John 14:15-16:33). So, to show that He did really care about them, the Lord concluded by praying specifically for them (John 17:1-26). Therefore, this unique prayer is often called "the High Priestly Prayer of Intercession".

His prayer to His Father is in three parts:

1. In John 17:1-5, the Lord asks for Himself.
2. In John 17:6-19, the Lord prays for the apostles.
3. In John 17:20-26, the Lord prays for all Christian believers.

Before we look at these three sections, we need to consider the phrase "His own", which is repeatedly used in this Gospel. John 17:6 provides the answer - they're the people whom His Father had given Him from out of the world (the world being the entire system of mankind who do not believe and who are always ungodly). Therefore, we can say that they were the Father's possession according His eternal purpose and by His sovereign grace. In John 5:20, Jesus announced the truth about the eternal relationship of God the Father with God the Son, when He said, "*the Father loves the Son.*" But the amazing fact is that the Father considers believers to be a suitable gift to demonstrate His love for His Son! And the Son values us as a special love-gift from His Father is expressed by the repetition of the ideas, "*you gave them to me*" in John 17:2, 6, 9 and 24 and "*they were yours*" in John 17:6. But notice the amazing refrain of John 17:9-10 (King James (Authorised) Version), "*For they are thine. And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them!*" Furthermore, He claims they would be the means by which He would be glorified in the world, which had rejected Him. The Son had taken special care of the apostles whilst He was with them in the world. He, the Sent One, had shown them the Father's Name. That means, by revealing His name "Father", the eternal relationships within the Godhead had been made known to them. The true nature of God the Father had been seen in their Master's deeds, see John 17:6; and declared by His words, see John 17:26. They had been given the Father's words, which they had kept and treasured, John 17:6 again. That is, the Son had explained the Father's will to them, see John 17:8 and 14. They had also come to understand the Father as the source of all things that the Son possessed, see John 17:7. Above all, they had come to believe that He came from the Father's presence, see John 17:8.

But are "*His own*" only those eleven who were with Him in the Upper Room? No! In John 17:20 the Lord groups together the apostles and everyone who believes in Him as a result of their testimony. It's the whole Christian family, from Pentecost to the Rapture, who are "*His own.*" John 1:11-13 describe His own as all who, by belief in His name, have become part of God's family. They're "*His brethren.*" No wonder John 13:1 says He loves them always and always will - unto the end or the uttermost, that is, through everything in this life upon earth and into eternity!

1. John 17:1-5: The Lord asks for Himself

Let's now see what the Lord asks, or requests, for Himself. In John 17:1-3, He asks for His own glorification so that He could then glorify the Father by giving eternal life to Christian believers. To glorify is to cause the excellencies of a person to be displayed, that is, to be seen and to be understood by others. When it's God's glory, it's closely related to the truth that, "*God is light and in him is no darkness at all*" and that, "*the true light is already shining*", 1 John 1:5 with 1 John 2:8 (English Standard Version).

The very first word of His prayer is "*Father*" (John 17:1) - that hallowed name of God revealed by the Son. As Son in the Godhead, the Lord can speak with the Father on equal terms. Therefore He appropriately says, "*Father*", without an adjective being necessary! In John 17:1, He says the hour has come for Him, the Son, to be glorified by the Father. John had already used the concept of "*His hour*" several times in this Gospel. For example, in 13:1, where it's the time

for Him to depart from this world to the Father. Here in John 17:1, the hour had arrived for His, and the Father's, glorification. As always, He only seeks the glory of His Father in everything. When He raised Lazarus from the dead, God was glorified. But also *"so that the Son of God may be glorified through it"*, John 11:4. In John 12:23 He said, *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified"* in anticipation of His death (see John 12:27-33). On that occasion He said, *"Father, glorify your name"*. The immediate reply from heaven was, *"I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again"*, John 12:28. But His request in 17:1 was answered when God raised Him from among the dead and gave Him glory (1 Peter 1:21). Yes, He was raised by the glory of the Father (Romans 6:4) and taken up or received up in glory (1 Timothy 3:16). There He's seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven (Hebrews 8:1); and there the glory of God shines in His face (2 Corinthians 4:6). Now glorified at the Father's right hand, the Father authorises Him to give eternal life to believers. In doing this new work, He glorifies the Father in a new way, John 17:2.

John 17:3 defines what eternal life is. From our need we're relieved to find, in John 3:16-18, eternal life is the opposite of perishing and of condemnation. Here in John 17:3, it's to know the Father, the only true God and Jesus Christ, the Sent One of the Father. So from His side, God wants us to share in His life, that is, in the family life of God in eternity. In John's Gospel, the adjective "true" means the ultimate reality of a thing. For example, Jesus is the true bread from heaven in John 6:32; and the true Vine in John 15:1. *"The true God"* conveys the thought of finality in the progressive process of the revelation of God. God is now known as He really is in His nature. *"God is love"*, 1 John 4:16. *"The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He has [fully] declared Him"* John 1:18 (New King James Version). As the children of God, believers have a real living relationship with the Father through His Son. *"We know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son, Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life"*, 1 John 5:20 (English Standard Version).

Jesus continues His prayer to the Father in John 17:4, *"I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do."* He's anticipating the next day when He triumphantly said, *"It is finished"* (John 19:30). He'd already said something like this in John 13:32, when He announced that God had been glorified in Himself as the Son of Man. The Father was glorified in every aspect of Christ's life upon earth; and supremely in His death, resurrection and ascension. Then, in John 17:6, 8 and 14, Jesus outlines the ways in which He had glorified His Father: He had explained the meaning of the name "Father"; and He had given the Father's words to the disciples.

Now He asks in John 17:5 to be glorified as the Son of God. *"And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."* As the Son, He rightly requests to be re-invested with the uncreated glory of Deity, which He had along with the Father in eternity 'past'. At His incarnation, that glory had been veiled, but not divested. But notice He receives this glory as He is now - the risen Man in the presence of the Father! Notice, too, that Jesus speaks in the first person, "Me" and "I" - as an equal. The phrases, *"in your own presence"* and *"with you"* mean "together with yourself" or "alongside you", in a shared position of equal status. The expression *"before the world existed"* confirms Jesus is the eternal Son from before the incarnation, even before the ages began!

2. John 17:6-19: the Lord prays for the apostles

As we look in detail at what the Lord prayed for the apostles, we must include all believers in Christ in this second part of the prayer, because in John 17:20 He said, *"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word."* That means each successive generation of believers. Therefore, whenever I refer to the apostles or disciples from now on, I'm including every Christian believer.

He was now leaving His chosen followers behind in the world. His concern for their well-being is expressed in His words in John 17:11, *"I am no longer in the world but these are in the world, and I am coming to you."* Then more fully in John 17:12-13, *"While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves."* Additionally, He underlines the continuing hatred they would face from the world in John 17:14 because, like Him, they are *"not of the world."*

With these thoughts upon His mind, the Lord Jesus makes His own the focus of His prayer. *"I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours"*, John 17:9. He's confident that the outcome of their witness to Him would be that His name would be magnified. *"I am glorified in them"*, John 17:10. In John 17:10-12, He asked for their safety as they served Him in the world - that they would be preserved, that is, kept in the good of the Father's name. We realise how much the Lord wanted them to grasp about His Father when we read John 13-17. In them, the name "Father" is mentioned 53 times, which approximates to half of the total occurrences in the Gospel of John. Twice over in John 17, in John 17:11-12, the Lord refers to the name "Father" as the name He had been especially given to make known to His own. To be kept in the name of the Father is to be in the knowledge and understanding and the benefit of its meaning. We must remember that our salvation depends solely on who the Father is in His nature and on what He does. *"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority*

to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father. ... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one", John 10:17-18 and 27-30.

We also get help from John's teaching in his first epistle, 1 John 2:15-17, that the world always opposes the Father. Let's heed John's warning that if we love the world we'll not have the Father's love within us and we'll miss out on the real family life of God. Here in John 17, there are nineteen occurrences of the word "world", which emphasise the Lord's awareness of the threats that the world would pose for believers. John 17:11, 14 and 15 show the Lord's concern about this. So He calls upon His Father as "holy Father" in John 17:11. Jesus was conscious that He was leaving His own behind in a hostile and evil world, which would hate them because it hated both Him and His Father. His warnings about the world's attitude towards them are given in John 15:18-25. In John 17:13, He prayed about this situation whilst with them in the world so that afterwards they could be completely full of His joy. Then in John 17:14-15, He sought their protection from the evil in the world, and from its ruler, the evil one. In John 17:16-18, He stated this necessitated their sanctification - that they would be practically separated to the Father by obeying His Word, which is truth (John 17:17). They were to be sent into the world, just as He was sent by the Father. John 17:19 records that special action of the Lord. "For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth" (John 17:17, New King James Version). He has set Himself apart for them in heaven as their High Priest to enable them to be holy in lifestyle. John 17:19 is the assurance that the Lord continues to intercede for us even now (today!) in heaven and it's the reason why John 17 is called His high priestly prayer.

3. John 17:20-26: The Lord prays for all Christian believers

I've already said that the Lord Jesus embraces in this prayer everyone who believes the Gospel throughout this entire dispensation. In John 17:20, "these" are the apostles and "those" means all who have responded by faith to the preaching or teaching of the of New Testament message of salvation.

The spiritual unity prayed for in John 17:21 is that fundamental, essential unity of family life derived from the Father and the Son. In Ephesians 4:3, it's called the unity of the Spirit, which was formed at Pentecost and it's referred to in John 17:11. This unity was actually manifested to the world by the church in the Acts of the Apostles. In John 17:21, the Lord asks that such a witness would cause the world to believe that the Father sent the Son. To achieve this objective, the Lord states in John 17:22 that He has given believers the glory bestowed upon Him by the Father. It's His glory as the Son of Man, now glorified at God's right hand. When the perfect unity of John 17:21-23 is achieved in the coming day of glory, the Son's fullness will be displayed in the saints. The world will then realise that the Father loves believers as He loves His Son. Additionally, it will then acknowledge that the Father did indeed send His Son into the world.

At John 17:24, the prayer changes, "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world" (King James (Authorised) Version). "I will" is a strong expression meaning "I demand by my own right". And what does the Son demand? He requires His own to be "with me where I am". From John 14:2-3 we understand this to be in the Father's house, which is heaven. There in the saints' eternal home, they will behold His glory. His excellence will fill the new heavens and the new earth. The glory displayed will be the preeminent glory of the Son. It will include that glory which the apostles beheld in John 1:14 and 18, the glory of the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father! For believers, it will be the full realisation of eternal life and the everlasting enjoyment of that family life of God!

In John 17:25-26, the Lord concludes His prayer by summarising His ministry to His own, which He says continues - even today. He addresses the Father as "righteous Father" in John 17:25 when He thinks of the fact that the world is wilfully ignorant of the true God. The world proved to be unrighteous when it rejected God's Sent One, see John 16:10. By contrast, believers do know the Father because they have been given divine insight to appreciate the unique glory of the Son of His love - that He came from His Father's side. The special work of the Son was to declare the Father's name to His own and in John 17:26 He says that He has done so. But in John 20:17, the message on the resurrection morning that Mary was to carry to the disciples was, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." By the Spirit, they became fully aware of their true relationship with the Father from that time onwards. Therefore the Lord continues to make the Father's name known to His own throughout the Christian era. This is the basis of true worship, "I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee", Hebrews 2:12 (King James (Authorised) Version). This worship arises from the on-going appreciation believers have of the Father's love. It's the very same love which He has for His Son. Yes, there's no spiritual experience greater than to participate in the family life of God. This is the essence of Christianity - eternal life, known and enjoyed even now upon earth!

I finish by pointing out that the Lord Jesus Christ never prayed for anything which was not in keeping with His Father's will. Therefore, we're guaranteed that all that He has prayed in this prayer for His own has been, is, and will be, answered by the Father.

Let's pray:

*'Tis as risen, Lord, we hail Thee,
Shadows passed away;
Love has triumphed; Thou hast made us
Thine for aye.*

*Now the Father's name Thou tellest;
Joy is in Thine heart;
In His love in which Thou dwellest
We have part.*

*Joy we thus in Thee, Lord Jesus,
Gladly praising Thee;
Thine the triumph, Thine the glory
Ever be.*

*Thee we praise, our God and Father,
Thou Thy love hast shown;
'Ere the world was, Thou didst choose us
For Thine own.*

*Thou Thine only Son hast given,
Thou art glorified,
For in love to bring us near Thee,
He has died.*

*By the Holy Ghost indwelling
We with Christ have part,
Father, we Thy children call Thee,
From our heart.*

*Love divine, our present portion,
Heaven's choicest store,
Thee we worship, God and Father,
Thee adore.*

*Soon in Thine own house around Thee
Still our praise shall swell,
Sons before Thee ever joying
We shall dwell.*

*For His praise who glorified Thee,
We like Him shall be,
Firstborn among many brethren
Praising Thee.*

Amen!

Inglis Fleming (1859-1955)

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