

The High-Priestly Prayer

M. W. Bassford, 11-14-10

During His life on earth, our Lord was known for any number of godly activities, but of these, one of the most prominent is prayer. Jesus had what can only be described as a marathon prayer life. At times, He would leave His disciples, go away to some deserted place, and pray for hours at a time.

However, due to the private nature of communications like these, we don't have many of the prayers of Christ recorded for us. We only learn about the content of His prayer life when others were around to hear it. Sometimes, these were prayers that Jesus used for teaching purposes, as with the model prayer we have recorded for us in Matthew 6, which is often called the Lord's prayer. Similarly, we know the content of Jesus' anguished appeal for deliverance in the garden of Gethsemane, because some of His apostles were there and listening, at least until they fell asleep.

Nonetheless, we should take care not to draw too many conclusions from these two prayers. When we consider the circumstances and the content of the prayer in the garden, it becomes evident that it represents the moment when Jesus was overwhelmed by the knowledge of His impending mortality, and He was only in that position once. Likewise, the length and wording of the model prayer show that Jesus intended it for His disciples to remember and learn from, not as a way to express to God everything that He had on His heart. Both of these prayers are exceptions, not the rule.

If we want to find the prayer recorded in Scripture that best represents the way that Jesus did pray, we must turn to John 17. Even though this prayer occurs on the same night as the prayer in the garden, it's obvious that Jesus hasn't become caught up in the moment yet. Instead, He's focusing primarily on what He wants for His people. We have much to learn from this prayer, both about what was important for Jesus and what our own prayer lives should be like. In our continuing quest to become more like Him, let's study this morning what is known as the high-priestly prayer.

God and His People

Jesus begins this prayer by seeking **HIS GLORIFICATION**. This portion of the prayer appears in John 17:1-5. When we first look at this context, it seems a little strange. In just a few verses, Jesus repeatedly asks God to glorify Him, which seems very at odds with the humble Son of Man we see throughout the gospels. This makes more sense, though, when we think about what Jesus is actually talking about. The path to glory that He was about to take led to the cross. Jesus was seeking the glory that would come to Him as the Savior of mankind. This glory wasn't something that He wanted for His own sake. As He says, He had this glory before the world was. He wanted it so He could save others.

Of course, none of us will ever have the starring role in the plan of salvation that Jesus has. It will never be necessary for any of us to be glorified so that others can be saved. However, we should still desire His ultimate goal. We should be willing to do whatever we have to do to bring the lost to the Lord, even if it leads us to our cross. Even though we live 2000 years after Jesus did, the path to eternal life is still the same: knowing God and the Christ He has sent.

After that introduction, though, Jesus dispenses with prayer about Himself. I guess when you know that you have less than 24 hours to live, the list of your personal wants and needs shrinks down quite a bit. Instead, we see Jesus praying for those dear to Him, for **GOD'S PEOPLE**. Consider His words in John 17:6-10. First of all, in this text, we see that Jesus defines who God's people are. According to Him, God's people receive the word of God, believe it, and then keep it. Anyone who does not do those things cannot rightfully claim to be part of the people of God.

It is these people who are Jesus' main concern. As we've seen repeatedly, Jesus loved and indeed still loves the sinner, but He has a special place in His heart for those who obey the gospel. In this section, we see what Jesus' main goal for these people whom He shares with God is. He's not asking that God give them lives of happiness. He doesn't want God to keep them safe from the persecution of His enemies. In fact, Jesus knows that many of them will die for their faith just as He is about to die. The desire of the Man of Sorrows is not to shield His followers from sorrow.

Instead, He wants them to glorify Him. Once again, this seems rather self-serving, until we think about it for a little bit. If we live lives that do anything other than glorify God, no matter how noble or important those lives may seem, we'll be wasting them. There is quite literally no other meaningful thing that we can do, and there is nothing else that will bring us to joy in the presence of God. This should be something we think about often. At the end of every day, we should stop and ask, "Have I glorified God today?" If we can't answer that question yes, we need to make some changes.

Likewise, this should be something we're praying about, both for ourselves and others. In the grand scheme of things, whether we are healthy or sick, employed or unemployed, happy or sad, really doesn't matter a whole lot. That being the case, why do we spend so much time praying about those things? What matters is that we and others, regardless of what our situation may be, are glorifying God where we are. Sometimes, we bring Him the greatest glory when we go through the most difficult times in our lives. We need to be willing to accept that because it's what's most important.

What Jesus Wants for Us

This takes us, then, to the meat of Jesus' prayer, the four things that He wants for us so that we can glorify God. First on this list is **PROTECTION**. Jesus asks for this in John 17:11-16. The first aspect of this protection that Jesus is seeking is that we be kept in the name of the Father. To many in the so-called Christian world, this would be gibberish. However, once we understand that "name" commonly means "authority" in Scripture, the text begins to make sense. While Jesus was on earth, He kept His disciples under God's authority, obedient to His will. Now that Jesus is leaving, He wants to make sure that His disciples continue in that godly obedience, so that not one of them will be lost.

Second, we see something that Jesus doesn't want to protect His disciples from, and that's the world. As He makes clear, we're not supposed to be part of the world any more than He was part of the world, and because we are different, the world is going to hate us. Some people in the world are going to persecute us, and just about everyone in the world is going to say and do things that pull us away from Christ. Some Christians recognize this and develop a bunker mentality. They try to keep themselves and their children as isolated from the world as possible. However, as Jesus makes clear, that's not His plan for us. If we hold ourselves apart from the world, we can't be lights in it.

What Jesus does want, though, is that we be protected from the evil one. I can't say for sure, but this likely occurs in our lives much more than we are aware. Paul promises us in 1 Corinthians 10 that we will not be tempted beyond that which we are able to bear, even though those unbearable temptations are the kind that Satan would most love to use. If God is faithful to His word, then He must be active in each one of our lives, constantly shielding us from dreadful dangers that we're not aware of, like a parent snatching a child from the path of an oncoming car. We need to be thankful for the work that God does to protect us, and we need to pray that He will continue to protect others as well.

Second, Jesus desires **HOLINESS** for us. This is not the holiness that we generate for ourselves, but the holiness that we receive from God. He expresses this desire in John 17:17-19. According to Jesus, this sanctification comes from two sources: the Christian's contact with Jesus, and the Christian's contact with the truth. Of course, today there is no way to Jesus except through His word. That word sanctifies us when we obey it by becoming baptized believers, and it continues to sanctify us, each time we open it and learn God's will. This is one of the reasons why it's so important for Christians to assemble and study the Scripture together. When we aren't here, when we aren't constantly being reminded of who God wants us to be, we inevitably forget. We lose focus, we start backsliding into our old familiar sins, and if we allow the process to continue, we inevitably fall away. Constant sanctification through the word is necessary not just for us, but for all our brethren. Let's pray they will all receive the teaching they need to be holy.

Third, we see Jesus seeking **UNITY** for His people. He explores the depth of this unity in John 17:20-23. As Jesus makes clear, this isn't something He wants only for the often-quarrelsome disciples who had accompanied Him during His ministry. Instead, it's something He wants for all of us. He wants us all to be one. Of all the commandments in Scripture, this one is one of the most difficult. Turmoil and strife in the Lord's church is a constant problem, and just about every time it erupts, it costs souls. We need to be humble and patient in our dealings with one another, willing to let our brother have his way as long as we can all keep going God's way. That's the only way to be united. It's something we need to practice every time we see another Christian, and it's something we need to constantly seek through prayer.

This unity is important not least because it's the only way that we can be one with God. God hates it when His people bicker and quarrel. When we let our egos get involved and go to war with our brother over some petty issue, that's a stench in His nostrils. If that's who we are, He doesn't want any part of us. On the other hand, though, when we are united with one another, that also brings us into unity with God. This has all kinds of beneficial effects. First, unity has its own momentum. When we work on that, we will constantly become more united. Second, our peace and our harmony, in a world so often torn by discord, will show that we are true disciples of a living God at work in our lives. All this is so difficult to achieve, and yet it's so important to our spiritual success. Let's pray for it always.

Fourth and finally, though, Jesus wants **KNOWLEDGE** for His brothers and sisters. We see this portion of the prayer in John 17:24-26. If we break this text down, we see three ascending levels of knowledge. The first is that we know that God sent Jesus to earth. Amazingly enough, there are a lot of denominational pastors and church leaders who don't believe this. Even though they craftily word their sermons to conceal their beliefs from the congregation, they think that Jesus was just a good man who died on the cross and stayed dead. If we believe that, we will never progress.

Second, we must know the name, that is, the authority of God. Jesus tells us that if we have this knowledge, then the love of the Father will also dwell in us. We often think of authority as a dry, boring, abstract topic. As Jesus' words here make clear, nothing could be further from the truth. Love isn't something we define on our own. Instead, it's something we learn about from the word, and as we obey God's commandments, we also express love.

Finally, Jesus anticipates the time when His disciples will see His glory in heaven. It would have been wonderful to see the Lord on earth for the few short years of His ministry, but it will be even more wonderful to dwell in His presence for eternity. I'm certain that the Bible doesn't describe heaven in more detail because it is wonderful beyond our human comprehension, and God is its best part. We must seek it ourselves, and pray that all of us will find it.