

THE LONGEST PRAYER

by Ray C. Stedman

The passage for our study today, John 17, is often referred to as the "Holy of Holies" of the New Testament. This wonderful prayer of our Lord closes the Upper Room Discourse and precedes his agony in the shadows of Gethsemane, the betrayal by Judas the traitor, his arrest and the beginning of his trials. I have called this "The Longest Prayer" for two reasons:

First, it is indeed the longest recorded prayer of our Lord. In it we can discern the inner thoughts of his mind and learn much of his relationship with his Father.

But this prayer is also the longest in the scope of time that it covers. It stretches across twenty centuries and includes us as well as the apostles.

John never forgot the scene in which this prayer was uttered. Our Lord had left the Upper Room with his disciples and had passed through the vineyards that surrounded Jerusalem. As he paused somewhere along that route, in all likelihood he picked up a vine and taught them, saying, "I am the vine and you are the branches." Then in the vineyard or elsewhere along the way, in the bright Passover moonlight "he lifted up his face unto heaven," and prayed aloud in the hearing of the disciples. I propose to take this prayer in but one message. That is roughly akin to being handed a gallon bucket and being told to empty the Pacific Ocean in less than an hour! While I regret that I cannot dwell on details, there is great value in seeing the full sweep of this prayer.

Our Lord prays essentially about three matters. First, he prays for himself that he may be glorified, then he prays for the eleven apostles, that they may be protected and sanctified, and, finally, he prays for the whole church down through the centuries, that they all may be unified.

The first eight verses of the prayer constitute his prayer for himself:

**When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee, since thou hast given him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him. And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent. I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do; and now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made. I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them to me, and they have kept thy word. Now they know that everything that thou hast given me is from thee; for I have given them the words which thou gavest me, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from thee; and they have believed that thou didst send me."
{John 17:1-8 RSV}**

Twice Jesus asks to be glorified, in two different ways, and for two different reasons:

First, he asks to be glorified in and by means of the cross. This is what he means by the words. "The hour has come." All through the gospel we have seen him moving toward this hour which he has long anticipated, the hour of crisis when he confronts, deliberately and personally, the massed powers of darkness. Thus in the cross, with its agony, blood, grief and loneliness he is asking to be glorified. It is not a selfish prayer because he immediately adds that by means of his death he will glorify the Father.

We must understand what this term "glorified" means. How is someone "glorified"? The word means to make manifest hidden values, hidden riches. The sun is a glory because the gases that make it up are being consumed and manifested in brilliant light. Jesus himself is glorified that way. John began his gospel by

saying, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, ... and we beheld his glory," {John 1:14a, 1:14b RSV}. What glory? "Full of grace and truth," {John 1:14b RSV}. All his inner qualities of grace and truth became visible. Here our Lord is praying that by means of the cross something that is hidden to the world will be manifested.

We do not have to guess what that is because he tells us. It is, first, that God has given him "power over all flesh," i.e., he has Lordship, sovereignty, the right to rule over all the nations of the earth. This will come by means of the cross.

How truly this is confirmed by the epistles. In Philippians, Paul writes that because Jesus became obedient unto death, God the Father "highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, ... and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father," {cf, Phil 2:9-11 RSV}. Thus by means of that exaltation following the cross, God the Father is glorified. At the close of the gospel of Matthew our Lord stands in resurrection glory beside the Sea of Galilee and says to his disciples. "All power in heaven and on earth is given unto me," {cf, Matt 28:18}. What an encouraging word for all believers! The One we follow holds in his hands the reins of the nations and all the forces at work on the earth even the powers of darkness. In Colossians, the apostle says that on the cross Jesus "disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it," {cf, Col 2:15 RSV}, i.e., in the cross. So this prayer has been fully answered. In the cross Jesus was glorified and his Lordship was revealed.

But more than that, our Lord also states that through the cross he will gain the right to give eternal life to all whom the Father brings to him. He defines eternal life as "knowing God." That is really living. Coming to know the Father and Jesus will fill life to the full. It is a quality of life that lasts forever. That is what Jesus means. Through my own lifetime I have come to learn that God is the most exciting Being there is. It is the world that is filled with boredom, loneliness, and misery. All its offers of adventure and allurements crumble to dust when you try to grasp them. But when you walk with God, every day is an adventure. He is innovative, imaginative, creative. That is the eternal life for which everyone longs deep in his heart. Jesus says that is what he gives -- his redemptive life -- to those who come to him.

Thus the cross reveals both his Lordship and his Saviorhood. He is the source of life to all who come to him. No wonder we sing in one of the great hymns,

In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

That is Jesus' first reason for asking to be glorified -- not only because it will bring glory to the Father, but, as he goes on to say, it will complete his work on earth: All that he has done finds its completion in the cross. Thus he says, "I glorified thee on earth," having accomplished the work which he now sees as completed, anticipating the cross, "the work which thou gavest me to do." This death he awaits is the capstone of that work.

Then Jesus prays to be glorified by returning to heaven: "And now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made." Surely this is his creative glory. Before he came to earth he was not the Redeemer, he was the Creator, the One behind the mysteries of nature, the One who invented all the marvels of the universe. Several passages in Hebrews and Colossians make that declaration. Now he is to return to that glory so, as Hebrews tells us, he now "upholds all things by the word of his power," {cf, Heb 1:3 KJV}. We sing of this in another hymn.

Fairest Lord Jesus.
Ruler of all nature.
O Thou of God and man, the Son.

He asks now to take up again the manifestation of his creative glory, because his redemptive work is finished.

He summarizes it in Verses 6, 7 and 8: "I have given thy name to the men whom thou gavest me" and "I have given your words to the men whom thou gavest me, and they have received them and know that I came from thee and have believed that thou didst send me." That work is now concluded, so he prays that he may be permitted to resume the glory which he had before.

Verses 9-19 constitute the beautiful prayer of our Lord for these eleven men. It divides into three sections. First, he prays for them because they belong to him: then he prays that they may be kept from the enemy, from the world and the devil; and finally he prays that they may be sanctified.

It opens with words of tender concern:

"I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine; all mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I am glorified in them. And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee." {John 17:8-11a RSV}

Jesus gives two reasons for this prayer. First, because these disciples are his: they are a gift from the Father. He has spent 3-1/2 years with them. He knows them intimately and they are very precious to him. That is how we, too, pray. We pray first for those we love. Perhaps you have heard the minimal prayer of the man who said he prayed for his wife, and himself, his son John and his wife -- "us four and no more." Some of us, perhaps, may pray that way. Because they are precious to us, my wife and I try to pray every morning for our children and our grandchildren before we pray about other matters.

This is surely our Lord's feeling here. He sees the apostles as a gift from the Father and therefore precious to himself. This is what he means when he says he "does not pray for the world." The world, i.e., secular society, has not been given to him in this intimate fashion by the Father. But these men are so given, and thus he makes this distinction. This does not mean, of course, that Jesus had no concern for the world. It was for the world that he was to die. It was the world that drew him from heaven to earth. If you wish to hear him pray for the world, listen to his words from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," {Luke 23:34}.

Jesus also is conscious that he is leaving these men behind, and he is concerned for them.

Our friend, David Roper, said once that, when he left home, he told his wife he would pray that God would keep her while he was away. He was startled when she replied. "Who do you think keeps us when you are here?"

Knowing that he must leave these men behind, Jesus commends them to the Father's care for it was in the Father's name that they were kept when he was with them.

"Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in thy name, which thou hast given me; I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves." {John 17:11b-13 RSV}

First, he desires them to be guarded and kept by the Father's authority and by his activity. "Keep them," he prays, "in thy name." The name, of course, stands for all God's resources, power, and ability. He is asking God to assume responsibility now for these men directly so that while he is personally absent from them they may be kept by wholly adequate resources.

Notice to what end they are to be kept:

First, to an unbroken unity. "Keep them that they may be one even as we are one." "While I was with them." he says, "I kept them in thy name," i.e., he was conscious that the Father was at work with him and was able to supply through him the power to keep. This is the way we can guard others in a consciousness that it is God

who must keep them. We must pray for them as Jesus prayed for his disciples! And he says he fully succeeded: "Not one of them is lost except the son of perdition," i.e., the one whom the Scripture had said would never belong to that group that would be kept. He is referring to the traitor, Judas, who never was truly a member of the apostolic band. Outwardly he was, but inwardly his heart never yielded to the grace, love and mercy of God. He retained his fancied independence, the deadly force by which men are still kept from the Kingdom of God.

Further, the Lord points out that they were kept by his word and his gift of inner joy: "These things I speak in the world" (the revelation of truth which he came to give), "that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves." That is what kept these men. He told them the truth, and as they believed it they found it worked and led them to joy.

But what is it they are to be kept from? It is the world's hatred and the devil's enmity.

"I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world, I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one, They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." {John 17:14-16 RSV}

Jesus clearly saw the terrible danger these men faced. He understood that the world would hate them, fight them, and undermine them every way it could. Why? Because he had given them the Father's word. It is the Scripture, the Word of God, that is the primary object of the enemy's hatred. If he cannot destroy it, he seeks to dilute its impact.

At a pastors' conference where I was teaching a group of pastors the necessity of preaching from the Word, one pastor asked, "What should I do when I have analyzed a passage of Scripture, learned what it means, and found that I do not agree with it?" I had not anticipated such a question, but had to answer it. I replied, "I'll tell you what I would do, I would ask myself, 'What is wrong with me that I do not agree with this passage?'" The problem is never in the Word, but in our limitation, our foolish, unreasonable resistance to truth, and our feeling that we know everything. That feeling is the work of the enemy, part of his subtle attack upon the Word. Jesus reveals that the apostles will be hated because they speak the truth.

He prays then that they will be kept in the midst of the world. This is very important. For centuries Christians have read the Scriptures as indicating that, because the world is a dangerous place, we ought to keep as far from it as we can, we ought to put up walls around our family, our home, to keep the world out. As I was growing up I was taught that the only safe thing to do was to steer clear of the world, and have nothing to do with it: Do not go to places where worldly people go. Do not have contact with non-Christians, do not make friends among them. Some families would remove their children from any contact with the world by sending them only to Christian schools. Now there is a good reason for that at times, but one can go too far in that direction, and create another danger entirely -- the danger of boredom from uninvolvedness with life.

We are clearly not to isolate ourselves from the world. When he sent these men out to preach, Jesus had said. "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves," {Matt 10:16}. No sensible shepherd would ever do that, for wolves are dangerous animals. With one slash of their teeth they can rip a sheep's throat wide open. The world can do that to believers too. We must never forget that it is a dangerous place. The only safeguard is the provision the Shepherd has made to be with us, and in us. Maintaining that loving relationship with him is what enables Christians to be in the world, but not of the world -- to make contact with the world, to establish friendships in the world, and yet to be kept from the terrible dangers of the world.

Behind the world's hatred, Jesus sees the god of this world, the devil. "I pray that they will be kept from the evil one." "The evil one" -- that malevolent, monstrous being who is constantly seeking to physically and spiritually destroy our race. Death is his weapon. Jesus called him "a murderer." He invents a million ways to kill people. His favorite tactic is to deceive them. Thus drug abuse ends in death, and despair ends in suicide. Even to give ourselves to pleasure -- automobile driving, for instance -- ends in traffic accidents and death. That is why quarreling ends in killing and murder, and differences between nations end in bloody wars that involve terrible slaughter. It is from this evil one that the Lord prays that his people be kept. He assures them

that the devil really has no claim on them, they do not have to follow him: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world."

Our Lord's second request for these men is that they may be sanctified:

"Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth. As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth." {John 17:17-19 RSV}

"Consecrate" and "sanctify" are the same word in Greek, so that this whole section is talking about sanctification.

Many misconstrue that word. It is a religious, a theological, word. Some think of it as involving a kind of a religious fumigation where all evil is somehow washed away. Some have actually believed that after they have gone through what they call "sanctification," by means of prayer or dedication, that they now were incapable of sinning. That is a very distressing situation, quite akin to living with people who don't take a bath because they never think they need to be cleansed.

But what does "sanctification" mean? It means to separate, or set apart, to a specific purpose; to put to an intended use. You are sanctifying those pews at this moment as you sit on them. You sanctified your car as you drove here this morning. (It did not make it run better but it was put to the proper use!) I sanctify my comb when I comb my hair -- I use it for its intended purpose. And what are we intended for? What purpose did God have in mind in making man? That he might use him as the instrument of his working and to manifest his character. That he might be the instrument of God. When you become that, you are sanctified. In this context it includes a sense of personal agreement with that, a determination, a willingness, to do it. Thus we could use the word "commitment." Our Lord is praying that these men be personally, willingly committed to the work of being used of God.

He models this himself. "As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." Just as he was God's instrument, living among people right where they were (he did not hide from them but ministered to the weak, the hurting, and the broken), so he sends us to do the same. We are sent to the same task, sent with the same resource, and thus we are continuing the work of Jesus in the world. That is sanctification.

Further, he prays, this will be made possible by his death on the cross: "For their sake I sanctify myself." Love was willingly determined to go to the cross "that they also may be sanctified in truth." As the outcome of that death of Jesus on our behalf we are granted the power of the Spirit by which we may be useful instruments in the Kingdom of God.

In the last section of his prayer Jesus prays in words which reach out to the whole of the church, and encompass all believers of all time, including us here this morning. This section is also in three divisions: He prays for the unity of the church, for its ultimate destiny, and for its present intimacy.

"I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me, The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me." {John 17:20-23 RSV}

Notice the inclusiveness of his words. He says, "I do not pray for these only [he is referring to the eleven apostles], but also for those who believe in me through their word." There is a sentence that extends clear across the running centuries of time. He is praying for all the millions of people who have come to believe through the apostolic word. "I pray for these ... and those." They add up to the word "all." "That they may all be one." So the first element of his prayer is that all Christians may share with the apostles in the apostolic faith.

The apostles have given us the Word, the truth. The church is to rest upon the apostles' witness. We do not need modern apostles.

A woman came up to me after the service this morning and said she had been for years a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which claims to have modern apostles. She said, "Where does it say in the Scriptures that there are only twelve apostles." I referred her to the book of Revelation to the great city that God is building and the statement "the foundations of the city have upon them the names of the twelve apostles."

We are linked with them. The only errorless faith is the apostolic faith. The Jesus that we must worship is the Jesus presented by the apostles. Thus, there is a oneness of faith throughout the church.

But more than that, there is a spiritual unity. Notice the nature of it: "that they may all be one: even as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." Just as the Father and the Son share life, so all believers share the same life: the life of the Son in us. That is what makes us brothers and sisters wherever we are in the world.

As I travel around the world I meet people with a different color of skin and a totally different background than mine, yet, the minute we meet, I know they are my brother or my sister because we share an inward life.

That is the unity for which our Lord prays. He is not speaking of outward union. There have been many attempts to bring all churches together in one great outward organization, but it has never succeeded and cannot succeed. Our Lord never intended that to be. There is divisiveness that is totally wrong within the body of Christ. But when we meet together, regardless of what our local label may be, we belong to one another because we share the same life together. That is the life the world will recognize as true.

Notice the means by which this is produced. It is the inner glory of love: "The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them." What was that? It was love. The Father loved the Son. That was the Son's glory. He strengthened himself by that. Jesus says that same love "I have given to them, *that they may be one* ." That is why we are to love one another as our Lord has bade, because it creates the oneness he desires.

Then he prays for the church's ultimate destiny.

"Father I desire that they also whom thou hast given me may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world." {John 17:24 RSV}

What vast cosmic themes are hinted at in this magnificent prayer! Here is the prayer that the church will be with him. That is the promise of Scripture. Paul speaks of this in First Thessalonians: "The Lord himself shall descend with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God, and then shall the dead in Christ rise first and we which remain shall be caught up together with them in clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord," {cf, 1 Th 4:16-17}. To be with him, that is heaven -- and that is our ultimate destiny.

The purpose of that, he says, is "to behold my glory." That sounds as though we are all to sit around for all eternity staring at him. But that is not what he means. Other Scriptures interpret this. It means that we shall be like him: "When we see him we shall be like him," {cf, 1 Jn 3:2}. And his glory which we behold is something that we are actually experiencing. George MacDonald has caught this beautifully.

Then shall my heart behold thee everywhere.
The vision rises of a speechless thing
A perfectness of bliss beyond compare.
A time when I nor breathe nor think nor move.
But I do breathe and think and feel thy love.

That is it. We become part of the glory. Thus everything we do is a beholding of his glory. What a marvelous

fate awaits us!

Our Lord concludes his prayer with a prayer for the present intimacy of the church:

"O righteous Father the world has not known thee but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me. I made known to them thy name and I will make it known that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them and I in them." {John 17:25-26 RSV}

Intimacy with the living God is the key to vitality and fruitfulness. It begins with the recognition of Jesus as "sent from God." It develops as awareness grows of the Father's power and love, and finds its deepest expression in a growing consciousness of the presence within of Jesus himself. The saints of all time have borne witness to the reality of this. Thus, love is the hallmark of the true church. The church must be a loving community if it desires the world to believe that we have been with Jesus!

Let us pray that this wonderful prayer of Jesus will be fully experienced by each of us who claim to follow him.

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