

CHRIST PRAYS FOR YOU

by Ray C. Stedman

This is the great prayer Jesus prayed before he went to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus is leaving these disciples by means of the garden, the betrayal, the judgment seat of Pilate, and the cross, and to them it appeared that he was abandoning them. They felt frightened, helpless, alone, and unable to understand what was taking place. They could not see that our Lord was merely introducing a higher and a better relationship to them.

Do we not feel this way? God leads us to a place of change and we are frightened by it. We wonder if we are not losing everything we held dear in the past. We scarcely realize that God is but leading us to a higher, a newer, and greater relationship. Like these disciples, we are frightened and fearful.

As we come to these words my concern is how to convey to your hearts something of the gripping reality of these requests of Jesus, something of the intense practicality of what he is saying. I am so afraid that we will listen to these words, as to beautiful poetry or moving drama, and, entranced by their similarity and beauty, fail to realize that Jesus here is actually praying for us -- for what he prays for his disciples he prays for us. I am afraid that we will fail to see behind the beauty of these words to the terrible and glorious realities. This prayer ought to hit us like a punch in the jaw. Or, perhaps, like a hand that grabs us as we are going down for the third time. These words ought to both sober us and comfort us. These are not soft, beautiful words, prayed in a great cathedral. These are earthy, gutty words, uttered on a battlefield in which our Lord is coming to grips with life as it really is, and, as such, they ought to strike that note of reality with us.

The first thing that arrests us is the plea that Jesus utters for his disciples. "Holy Father," he says, "Keep them," {John 17:11b RSV}. Later he said, "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them," {John 17:15a RSV}. This is the theme of his prayer: That they might be kept.

Why? There are so many things that I would pray for if I were in his place (if any man could be in his place). They are the usual things we pray for one another. Why didn't Jesus pray, "Use them, or strengthen them, or teach them, or guide them?" This is what we would pray for each other. But when he comes to this place where he is leaving them and he wants to put into one brief phrase all that is his heart's urging and desire for them, he sums it up in those two little words: *keep them* .

As I thought this through, I found that this is what I pray when I am about to leave my family or am away from them. When I am with my loved ones I can pray more specifically for them, but when I am away I find I am continually praying, "Lord, keep them, keep them."

All of this simply points up the fact, highlighted for us here in this prayer of Jesus, that relationship is the supreme thing. Whom we are with is far more important than what we do. And our Lord, aware of that, gathers all of these requests together in this one word, "Keep them, Father, keep them." Whom you fellowship with determines what you are, so his prayer is that our relationship with the Father remain intact, for then all else he desires will come from that. So he prays, "Keep them."

This is uttered in view of the peril which he sees, set forth for us briefly in Verses 14 and 15:

"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." {John 17:14-15 RSV}

Our Lord saw very clearly into the nature of life as it is, the nature of reality. He realizes that Christians, believers, are facing a hostile world, behind which is a sinister being of incredible subtlety, whom we call the devil. We do not see the devil, it would be helpful if we did. He would be much more easily dealt with if he

would become visible, but unfortunately he does not. He keeps himself behind the scenes, and, as such, has created the myth that he does not even exist. But in the eyes of Jesus who saw things as they really were, the devil was a very real being. He realizes that, as human beings, we simply do not see the devil but what we see is the devil's front, which Jesus calls "the world."

Christians have struggled with this problem of "the world" all through the twenty centuries of this Christian age and wondered what this means.

- There are some who have made the mistake of thinking it is the world of nature and that Christians ought not to have anything to do with enjoyment of natural beauty, the glories of the mountains, and the sea, and the world of natural life. This is certainly not true.
- Others have wondered if it means the world of natural relationships, our family life, the joys of family living, of friends, of home, of mothers and fathers and children and their relationship together. No, this is not "the world" of which our Lord warns.
- The world, in the evil sense, in which this word is used here, is preeminently the basic assumptions that men and women make who live without God. In other words, the underlying philosophy of life that men make as they face life, this is the world.

It is rather difficult to spell it out in specific terms.

Some time ago I received an invitation to subscribe to a new magazine that was, I felt, extremely worldly. As I read the prospectus on it, it seemed to me that here would be a magazine that would speak forthrightly along the line of worldly philosophy. I subscribed to it for that reason, and my anticipations were fulfilled completely. (I am not going to give you the name of it as I do not want to increase its subscription list.) As I read it I discovered that here was worldliness, blatantly, boldly set forth -- worldliness unmasked! Actually the philosophies reflected in this publication are detectable in almost any popular magazine published today. The same ideas underlie most television programs, radio broadcasts, and other media of communication, but they are seldom as boldly stated as they were in this particular sheet. I read through two issues and jotted down a few statements to illustrate what I mean.

From one article these words were taken:

It is the moralists who are responsible for our present level of sex crime and state of affairs revealed in the Kinsey Report. The world is sick with morality.

That is the problem: morality, moralists.

From another article, these words:

The problems of poverty and racial injustice and political corruption and everything else are all branches of a single evil tree, and that tree is Authority. Obedience to authority is the one single principle that explains every evil in human history.

Here is another one:

The Freudian concepts of sex-motivation can adequately explain all human phenomena.

Organized religion is a tough old rooster which has traditionally been first in the American pecking-order. The press can peck the government, the government can peck industry, industry can peck labor, and labor can peck all three of them back, but nobody can peck the rooster and the rooster can always peck anyone else at any time with impunity.

The problem, they say, is the church. I gathered these to document what Jesus says: that the world hates his disciples because they are not of the world. The world in which we live is dominated by satanic philosophy, which is diametrically opposed to all that God stands for. We make a very serious mistake when we forget that

fact and try to settle down in this world and become comfortable in it, as though this were the proper place, the atmosphere, the climate in which we ought to feel at home.

Perhaps the most effective propaganda of the world is the satanic lie that we call *romanticism*. There are millions fooled by it. I am sure there are many among us today who are deeply affected by this, though it is nothing more than a lie. Certainly many of our young people are profoundly influenced by this idea. It is the illusion that life is intended to be all moonlight and roses, swashbuckling adventure or breathtaking journeys to faraway places. Look over the nearest magazine stand and you will see what I mean. Nearly all the magazines make their appeal along the lines of romance, of body building, adventure, and health, or of travel or excitement. There is the world in all its silken delusion, luring, beckoning with soft music and dim lights and exotic names and places; that is the world. It is rather easy to lose one's head and to sell out for "the good life," which unfortunately is never discovered. It is a bitter irony of our day, perhaps more than in any other age, that by giving ourselves all that our dreams have envisaged, we find our lives are still empty and purposeless, without meaning. It is because it is all a dream, a fantasy, a web of deceit, promising much but delivering nothing.

The Christian answer to romanticism is in Verse 13:

"I am coming to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves." {John 17:13 RSV}

There is where joy lies, and fulfillment, and meaning, and purpose, and blessing; not in pursuing the will-o'-the-wisp of romantic adventure, or in seeking satisfaction in material things, but in a life and heart that is committed to Jesus Christ, which knows him and fellowships with him. All who have tried have found it to be so and know there is an unexplainable joy that accompanies this that simply cannot be compared with anything else.

A man said recently, "I have had so much fun in my life I can hardly describe it. Life to me has been a continually exciting thing." Who was that? Was it someone who has given himself to the search for adventure? No. That man was Dr. Frank Laubach who, as a Christian, has lost himself in the cause of trying to teach people all over the world how to read in order that they might be able to read the words of life and truth in the Scripture. His own testimony is that it has been the most exciting life he could possibly find.

A young man said in my presence not long ago, "I am a radio physicist. I work on the frontiers of the exciting world of science, exploring the universe. But I must say that this exciting realm of science in which I work seems to be dull business indeed compared to the excitement that comes from knowing Jesus Christ."

From whence comes this power that keeps us straight when the world with its allurements and its pressure surrounds us as an ambient sea, when we are enveloped in a total climate of deceit? How can we keep our heads? How can we be kept? The only possible answer is the power that our Lord counts on here. He pinpoints it twice, "Keep them Father, in thy name," {John 17:11b RSV}. And later, "While I was with them, I kept them in thy name," {John 17:12a RSV}.

As we have already seen, the name of God stands for all the authority and resources of God. What Jesus is saying here is that the keeping of a believer from the allurements and the deceit of the world is a supernatural task. No man is smart enough to do it on his own. Nothing else is sufficient, only the power of God can keep us. This is reflected throughout the Epistles of the New Testament. Paul said, "I know whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to keep" {2 Tim 1:12b KJV}, and it does not make any difference whether you translate the next phrase, "that which I have committed unto him," or "that which he has committed unto me.". Either translation is possible, but, in any case, God is able to keep. Peter speaks of those "who are kept," he says, "by the power of God through faith unto salvation, ready to be revealed at the last time," {1 Pet 1:5 KJV}. And almost the last promise of Scripture is that word of Jude's, "Now to him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy," {cf, Jude 1:24 KJV}. Nothing else will suffice.

To highlight that, Jesus spotlights for us the one apparent exception. He says,

"I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture might be fulfilled." {John 17:12 RSV}

What a sobering, frightening possibility is revealed here in Judas. Here is a man who was one of the disciples, called by Jesus Christ, included in the intimate, inner circle of the twelve, a highly religious man, obviously so, a man who was dedicated to the cause of God as he saw it. He was a moral man in many ways, though he was not above a little pilfering from the bag now and then, a sincere, earnest man of strong convictions and powerful drives. But there was one thing wrong with Judas, only one: He thought he could keep himself by his own efforts! He thought he could do it on his own. He thought he could follow Christ in his own strength and use him for his own ends. He never had made that inner surrender of the heart by which he recognized his utter weakness and cast himself on Christ. He had never come to the place of saying, as we sing in that old hymn,

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling.

He had never come to that. He had never come to the place where he cast himself in helpless weakness upon Christ as the other disciples had: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life" {John 6:68 KJV}. Peter said, "You are a disturbing man to live with. Other teachers make their appeal to us, but Lord, to whom can we go? No one else can do what you can do."

Judas did not become the son of perdition when he betrayed Jesus, he was the son of perdition all along. He never was anything else. He never was in the Father's keeping power and so the Father could not keep him. But those who have learned not to trust themselves, who have, as Paul says, "no confidence in the flesh" {Phil 3:3}, those are kept by the Father's name, and nothing, Jesus says, nothing, nothing can separate them from the Father's love. "No man is able to take them out of my Father's hand," {cf, John 10:29}. He keeps them.

Perhaps some of you are saying, "Isn't there any part for us?" Yes, there is, and it is the easiest and the hardest thing in the world. Look at the program that he unfolds in Verses 17 through 19.

"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 [or *sanctify*, it is the same word] myself, that they also may be consecrated [*sanctified*] in truth." {John 17:17-19 RSV}

Now there is that troublesome word "sanctification, sanctify." What does it mean? I do not know any word in the Scripture that is so misunderstood as this, and of which people are more afraid. Many tend to regard sanctification as a sort of de-worming process, a kind of religious sheep-dip, necessary to make us usable. No, it simply means "to put to the proper use," that is all. I am sanctifying this microphone at this moment by using it to amplify my voice. I am sanctifying the pulpit, I was sanctifying the chair a moment ago; you are sanctifying the chairs you are sitting on. You are simply putting them to their proper use, that is all. When Jesus says to the Father, "Father, sanctify them," he is saying, "Lord, make these men and women fulfill the ideal that you have for them. Put them to their proper use. Let them find the reason they were born. Bring them to the place where they discover thy program for them, put them to their proper use." How? By the truth, and, "thy word is truth."

Now this brings us to our part. In all this mighty program of God, what is our part? It is simply to believe the truth; that is all. Believe the truth. Some of you are sighing to yourself, saying, "Oh, it is the same old stuff. That is what they say all the time." And that is true, that is what we say all the time, but it is evidently one of the most difficult things for human hearts to do, to simply believe that what God has written is the truth, regardless of what our feelings may be. For the brutal fact is that we much prefer to believe our feelings than the Word. That is where our problem lies. More than once of late, Christians have said to me, "I simply cannot take it any longer. I give up. Scripture does not seem to work for me. I try to fulfill the promises, I try to rely on the Lord, I try to appropriate Christ, I try to do all these things, but it does not work for me. It may work for you, but it does not work for me. I cannot take the pressures that come. I cannot take the testings that I am subjected to." And I quote to them that verse in First Corinthians where Paul says, "There has no testing taken

you but such as is common to man," {cf, 1 Cor 10:13}. I say, "Now do not get discouraged. You are not going through anything that others have not gone through." And almost inevitably the reaction is, "That cannot be. Nobody else has gone through what I am going through! I simply cannot believe that what I am going through is a common experience. The trouble is, you do not understand what I am going through, nobody understands, no one!"

Now what is that? Disguised unbelief! A refusal to take what God says as the truth. There is the problem. We say we believe, but we do not believe, because when it comes down to the actual application of it, we say, "God is a liar. My feelings are what is true! The way I feel, that is fact."

Supposing one of you should ask someone, "How do you go about traveling by an airplane? I have never flown before. Tell me how it is done." The person replies, "Well, it is very simple. You simply call the airline that goes to the destination you desire and make a reservation. Then you arrange to buy the ticket and you present that ticket at the proper time at the airport and you will be admitted to the plane. You then get aboard, sit down and fasten your seat belt, and the plane does all the rest!" You say, "Well, I am not sure that I understand what you mean. Write it out for me, will you?" So you write it down -- "Make a reservation; buy the ticket; present it at the proper time; get aboard the plane; that is all." A couple of days later you come around and say, "Well, I tried it but it does not work. I made the reservation, I bought the ticket, I went down to the airport and do you know what they told me? They said the plane left two hours ago! It does not work!" And the person says, "Wait a minute. Remember, I said in the instructions, present the ticket at the proper time. Did you do that?" "Oh, you say, I read that, but I did not think it had any particular importance. After all, one time is as good as any other time. I went when I was ready." And that person says, "Well, there is your trouble. If you are going to act on any of it, you must act on all of it. You cannot leave out any part of it. If you fail in one part it cancels out the whole of the program. You did not go at the proper time, therefore it did not work for you."

Now that simple analogy, crude though it may be, is a very accurate parallel to what frequently goes on in our Christian experience. We must believe that God has told us the truth. There is no value in Christian faith at all if we do not believe that. If this book is nothing more than another voice among the thousands that blare at us all week long giving advice and counsel, then it is utterly worthless, let us cast it aside. But here is the revelation of truth, of things as they are, regardless of how we feel. We shall never make any progress in our spiritual lives until we come to grips with the fact that what God says is true.

As Paul says, "Let God be true and every man a liar," {cf, Rom 3:4}. When we start believing what he says as truth, and acting upon it, we discover that all that he says is gloriously, marvelously confirmed.

It is true that God protects us and keeps us even when our faith fails. Thank God for that. He is the Author and the Finisher of faith, and our faith rests upon the foundation of his faithfulness. But it is also true that we will never go any farther than our faith takes us. God may awaken faith anew in us, but we can never make any progress, we can never lay hold of any truth, we can never appropriate any blessing that does not come through the door of a quiet, trustful belief in what God says. Therefore, Jesus' prayer is, "Sanctify them, put them to the proper use, let them discover what life is all about, by the truth; thy word is truth."

"On this basis," Jesus says, "I have myself been operating. As thou hast sent me into the world, to live by a continual appropriating of thy power available because I believe what thou hast said, so I have sent them into the world. I have given them an example. I have sanctified myself in front of their eyes, by this same process of believing the truth despite all the conflicting evidence of my senses. I have sanctified myself, that they also may be sanctified, consecrated in the truth."

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that the words that we have been reading here may not simply be words of beauty, but may we come to grips with them and see them as words of practical counsel, the most practical setting forth of the way to the experience we long for of victory and power and blessing in Jesus Christ our Lord. Lord, teach us to turn a deaf ear to the siren voice of the world about us which seeks to delude us, but may we open our ears fully, completely, to

this wonderful, truthful voice, this voice of reality from thy word that tells us what life is truly like. And as we step forth upon it we thank thee, Father, that the confirmation to our heart is one of incredible, unexplainable joy. For that we give thanks, in Christ's name, Amen.

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