

The Gospel of John

Lesson 22: The High Priestly Prayer -- John 17:1-26

We are about to be allowed to listen in on something almost too holy to overhear. Jesus has finished talking to His disciples. Now He lifts His eyes to heaven and begins to talk to His Father, and we are given the privilege of hearing the Son of God pray on the night before He dies. This is the longest recorded prayer of Jesus in all the Gospels, and it comes in the shadow of the cross. We might expect a man hours from crucifixion to pray for His own deliverance, for strength, for escape. Instead Jesus prays for His glory to be in the Father's glory, and then He prays, at length and with tender specificity, for us.

The prayer moves in widening circles. First Jesus prays for Himself, that the Father would glorify the Son so the Son may glorify the Father, and He looks back over a finished work: "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do." Then He prays for His disciples, the eleven who are with Him, that the Father would keep them, guard them from the evil one, and sanctify them in the truth. He is about to leave them in a hostile world, and so He commits them into the Father's keeping with a love that aches off the page.

And then the circle widens again, and it reaches us. "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word." Stop there for a moment. On the night before His death, Jesus prayed for you, for everyone who would ever come to believe in Him through the message the apostles would carry. And the great burden of His prayer for us is unity: "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." Our oneness, He says, is meant to be a witness to the world that the Father sent the Son.

The prayer ends with the deepest longing of His heart, which turns out to be the simplest thing imaginable: that we would be with Him. "Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory." The Son who is about to be lifted up on a cross looks past the agony to the homecoming, and what He wants is us, with Him, beholding His glory, loved by the Father with the very love the Father has for the Son. Read this prayer slowly and reverently. You are listening to the heart of Christ, and you are hearing yourself prayed for by name.

Group Discussion: On the night before His death, Jesus prayed not mainly for His own deliverance but for His disciples and for all who would believe, including us (vv. 9, 20). What does it tell us about Christ's heart that He spent His final hours praying for His people, and how does it affect you to know He prayed for you?

Personal Reflection: Jesus' deepest desire for His people is that they would "be with me where I am, to see my glory" (v. 24). How much is being with Christ the deepest desire of your own heart, and what would it look like to want Him more?

Read John 17:1–26

Study Questions

1. Jesus prayed, “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (v. 4), even before the cross. What does it teach us that Jesus could speak of His work as accomplished, and how does this shape our understanding of His mission?
2. Jesus defined eternal life as this: “that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (v. 3). How does defining eternal life as knowing God reshape what you are seeking in your own walk with Him?
3. Jesus prayed that the Father would “keep them in your name” and “keep them from the evil one” (vv. 11, 15). What does it mean that Jesus prays for the keeping and protection of His people, and how is this a comfort in a hostile world?
4. Jesus prayed not that we would be taken “out of the world” but kept “from the evil one” while sent “into the world” (vv. 15, 18). Where are you tempted either to withdraw from the world or to be conformed to it, and what would faithful presence in the world look like for you?
5. Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (v. 17). What is sanctification, and what role does God’s word play in making us holy?
6. Jesus prayed for our growth in holiness through His word (v. 17). Where do you most need God’s truth to sanctify you right now, and how can you give His word a greater place in that work?
7. Jesus prayed “that they may all be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (vv. 21–23). Why does Jesus tie the unity of His people to the world’s believing, and what does this teach about the importance of oneness among Christians?
8. Jesus prayed, “Father, I desire that they also... may be with me where I am, to see my glory” (v. 24). How does it move you that Christ’s deepest desire is simply to have you with Him, and how does this shape your hope?
9. This prayer reveals the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son: Jesus speaks of the glory He had with the Father “before the world existed” (v. 5) and the Father’s love for Him “before the foundation of the world” (v. 24). How do these statements affirm the eternal existence and deity of the Son, and how do they deepen our understanding of what it means that this eternal Son prayed for us and died for us?
10. Look back over this prayer, in which Christ prayed for you by name. What is one specific way Jesus is forming you to live as one who is kept, sanctified, united with His people, and destined to be with Him?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 7:24–25, Christ who always lives to intercede for us; Ephesians 4:1–6, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit; Romans 8:33–34, Christ at God's right hand interceding for us; 1 Thessalonians 4:3, the will of God being our sanctification; John 1:1–3, the Word who was with God in the beginning.