

Reading: John 17:1-5

Theme: Jesus' High Priestly Prayer.

We are coming to start looking at this amazing chapter this morning. JC Ryle calls it *“one of the most wonderful chapters in the Bible... The most remarkable in the Bible. It stands alone, ...there is nothing like it.”*

How do we get to know someone well? We talk with and spend with time them, but sometimes we get to know them even better if we hear them talking, especially with family, or the person they love the most. There we see the ease of their relationships, their freedom to speak from the heart, the knowledge there is no danger of misunderstanding, the lack of fear in sharing secrets and all these make for a freedom of expression, of keeping nothing back. The same is true of knowledge of the Lord Jesus. In John 13-17 we get to know Him better as we overhear Him speaking to His “friends”. Yet here in John 17 we get to know Him best of all, because we overhear Him speaking to His Father in heaven.

This truly is “The Lord’s Prayer”. It is the longest prayer in the NT. From the time of the Reformation (late 1500s) this chapter has been known as Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer”. Yet John does not specifically describe Jesus here as a high priest and some avoid using that description. That said, the prayer follows a pattern that came to govern the ministry of the high priests on the annual Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:8-34; also 23:26-32; Numbers 29:7-11). The high priest could only enter the most holy place of the Tabernacle or Temple on this day and they went into the holy of holies - where the Ark of the covenant was kept, which was regarded as the throne room of God on earth and was a sacred space into which only the high priest could go to present the annual sacrifices for the sins of the people and to

pray for them. Various regulations were given and the high priest followed them to the letter as his life was in danger if he did not.

By the time of Jesus, the high priest's preparation for his ministry on the day of atonement was very carefully structured. He cleansed himself by ritual washing, He entered into an all-night vigil. Several men were appointed to help him stay awake through these hours of prayer – link that to Jesus wanting His disciples to stay awake and pray for and with Him there in the Garden of Gethsemane. At that time the high priest's praying was formed of 3 concentric circles: first, he prayed for himself and the ministry he was about to do; secondly, he made intercession for those who are consecrated with him to the Lord's service and thirdly, he prayed for all the people of God. Can we see those 3 parts in this chapter? Thankfully the NIV headings helpfully shows us: firstly, Jesus prays for Himself, then prays for His disciples and finally prays for all believers throughout time. He follows the high priestly pattern! The scope of Jesus' prayer here is breathtaking! It includes His own ministry during the hours ahead, it encompasses the ministry of the Apostles in the next generation, and then His intercession reaches forward as far as the church today as He catches us up in His prayer and brings us to His Father. Sinclair Ferguson writes *"This whole chapter is like a stethoscope through which we can hear the Saviour's heartbeat"*

I hope we are beginning to grasp why this chapter is something amazing, thrilling as it reveals to us so much of the Saviour's heart. Martin Luther wrote *"In proportion as the prayer sounds plain and simple; it is in reality, deep, rich and wide, that which none can fathom."* If one such as Luther, a deep-sea diver into God's word, could not fathom this passage, then ones like us,

who are still paddling in God's word, stand little chance! Yet the thoughts, meditation, preparations and sermons I will bring, will be much prayed over by myself and hopefully by you too. I pray the sermons from this passage, as from all passages of God's word, will bring glory to God and we would at least see some of the truths that lie plainly on the surface as well those from mining down to get out precious jewels and reveal their glorious splendour.

There is a sense this prayer serves as an example for us in our praying, for it teaches us that the glory of God should be our aim in life, in prayer and we can pray in this context for others as well as ourselves. Yet this prayer can never really be the model for our praying, because it is absolutely unique to Jesus. It is unique because it is the prayer of the incarnate Son of God to His Father, who is a fellow member of the triune Godhead. There will be so much we cannot really understand or grasp in this prayer - here is the Lord Jesus, God the Son in true humanity and flesh (*a mystery in itself*), yet He is in prayer to His Father (God the Father). Many things we will read in this cannot really be unpacked properly because we cannot fully grasp the wonder of prayer or the relationship between God the Son and God the Father.

As such, the Son uses the title 'Father' in its fullest and truest meaning. Jesus uses the term 'Father' 4 times in it - in v1 & 5 as "Father"; in v11 as Holy Father and in v25 as Righteous Father. They are in a unique relationship and this prayer is unique, as the only begotten eternal Son prays to the eternal Father. It has no confession of sin – as Jesus had none. We are instructed in what **we** call the Lord's prayer, to confess our sin, asking for forgiveness, but in this prayer the Lord Jesus is conscious of His perfect obedience to the will of His Father (v4).

It is also unique that the Son does not petition or ask anything of the Father, but requests, asks confidently of the One He was in complete harmony with. I cannot stress enough that this is a unique prayer.

As we work through this prayer, we will use the 3 parts it is divided into in the NIV. Some suggest that in many respects this prayer is a summary of this 4th gospel up to this point. The principal themes - the obedience of Christ to His Father; the glorification of the Father through Jesus' death and exaltation; the revelation of God in Christ Jesus; the choosing of the disciples out of the world; their mission to the world; their unity modelled on the unity of the Father and Son and their final destiny in the presence of the Father and the Son. Yet, even in saying this prayer is a summary, it also anticipates the accomplishing of that salvation as Jesus would be lifted up on the cross - these points us to the climax of His work to bring us back to God, by which Jesus Himself left the world and went back to God (c.f.16:5, 10, 17 & 28).

We've only been going around the edge of this chapter, but I hope we can begin to grasp something of the immenseness of it as a chapter and as a prayer. The description of it as Jesus' high priestly prayer is a good description, as He prays for others as a Mediator, but prays for Himself with the sacrifice in view He was going to make for the sin of the world. Yet "sacrifice" language is not dominant in this prayer He makes on this His betrayal night. Some have called this prayer "*The Prayer of Consecration*" as He sets Himself apart and is determined to go to the cross, to His death and glorification. We have been surveying its landscape and skimming over this glorious prayer of the Lord Jesus. Let's dip into it and see:

The timing of this prayer.

Remember this prayer is not said in isolation as a freestanding, unconnected prayer. It connects, links to the events previously that evening - as we see at the start of v1 “*After Jesus said this, He looked toward heaven and prayed:*” this prayer is organically, intimately connected to the things Jesus had said and done that evening. Although we have noted it is a summary of His ministry, yet also many things He said that evening, find their completion in this prayer. It points the disciples and all of us to the fact that all the grounds of our comfort, admonition and the predictions previously, are in heaven, for the promises, comforts etc. are linked to the throne of God, and are seen as sure, certain and take on a glorious aspect. Throughout this prayer there is not one conditional statement “if” or “then”. Even Jesus’ desire in v24 does not have an “if” about it as He desires, wants us to be with Him and to see His glory – but shows us His heart’s desire. All who love Him will be there in heaven - no conditions or uncertainties about such!

This prayer comes after Jesus had spoken great things to them, but that evening also was a time when the Lord’s Supper was instituted and they had joined in with that. It is important for us to pray after we have received God’s word and also after taking the Lord’s Supper, in order that the things we have learned and thought about, are fixed in our minds and hearts. As the Lord physically taught them, had given them the bread and wine, there needed to be this prayer. I feel we need to pray as individuals at the end of a meeting, also as we take the bread and the wine, as well as in the closing prayer or benediction to round off what we have been looking at in a service.

This prayer was His farewell or parting prayer, as they were all together. Yes, He prayed later in Gethsemane, but that prayer

was of a different character, with only 3 disciples nearby. Jesus knew He was going to His death and says His goodbyes with this prayer – that their parting should be sanctified and even possibly sweetened by prayer. It is good for us as we meet together in church, out of church, as friends, as brothers and sisters in Christ to part with prayer, to ask God’s blessing and care on us all and our loved ones.

Jesus prayed in the light of knowing He was on His way to the horrors of Calvary, the atoning death He would suffer and He prayed as the great high priest as He prepared to offer Himself as the one-and-only sacrifice for our sin. Because His sacrifice was accepted, our prayers are accepted - we come to the Father through Him in prayer. Some scholars say that this prayer is a specimen of His intercessory prayer that He ever lives to make in heaven for all believers like us throughout all ages while we are here on earth.

We will see in the future more of the enormous scope of this prayer as it is prayed in the company, the hearing of His disciples, yet He prays it in view of the cross - He prays for Himself, the disciples and the Church universal. We will note His concern was for the glory of God, the salvation of people through the ages and as such, this prayer is relevant to us personally.

The Lord Jesus Himself said of the timing of this prayer “*the time has come*” or “*the hour is come*”. The Lord Jesus had a divine consciousness and knowledge this was the time which had been eternally set in the great plan of salvation. Throughout the gospels, on a number of occasions, people wanted to harm or imprison Jesus, or get Him to work gloriously, but no one could do anything as His hour had not come. (John 2:4; 7:6, 8,

30; 8:20). Yet now, as His time, hour had come - He went to prayer, fully aware of what lay ahead.

Jesus knew that for every event in the mighty drama of the plan of salvation there was an appointed time in the eternal decrees. He knew here His appointed hour, time had come; yet it was not just His death He had in view. Read the prayer carefully again, for it is not merely set in the context of His death, but it is prayed in the clear sight of the completion of His entire ministry - His death and sufferings, also His resurrection, ascending to the Father, His coronation and His crowning in glory. This prayer is one of expectancy, of certain hope. The first words after Jesus had said His hour was come are “*Glorify your Son...*” and then by v5 we have arrived at the expectation of His glorification at His coronation - the risen ascended King.

Yes, Jesus knew the way by which He would be glorified, by which He would glorify His Father and enter into His great glory in heaven again - it lay through the way of the cross as He obeyed the Father’s will. This was a time, an hour of crisis. The Son of Man would end His life’s work by making the one-and-only acceptable atoning sacrifice for the sin of mankind. The time was coming when all OT prophecies, types and symbols would be fulfilled; when He would triumph over the devil, principalities and powers; the time to end the old and bring in the new; the time would soon come when the Holy Spirit could be poured out in fullness and the gospel spread the world over and God’s salvation message be told and brought to all mankind.

Conscious of all those things, Jesus prays this glorious prayer. The hour had come. On this hour rested the glory of the Father, the eternal destiny of all His people, including us. When the

eternal covenant between the Father and the Son would lead to its ultimate, yet horrific completion! Thankfully salvation was eternally secured for us. Do we know that Saviour and His salvation personally? We need to, because the time, the hour of our own death will occur and not one of us knows the time we will die! The Bible says all of us then have to meet God - we will all be judged and face either heaven or hell for all eternity, with no moving from hell over a period of time. The Bible doesn't mention anything such as Purgatory, only heaven or hell and certainly no coming back to try all over again! Are we prepared to meet God now, let alone at the moment of our death? None of us knows when we will die; we may have no chance to get right with God as our life could end in a flash. Jesus came to His known hour and way of death, but He did so in order to save and rescue people like us for all eternity, to welcome us to all the wonders of heaven.

This is why we need to make this amazing, wonderful and glorious Saviour our own Saviour. We are to go to Him to save us and He will save us. I know we have only taken a very brief introductory view of John 17 - this amazing prayer of the Lord Jesus, but I pray it would have encouraged us, challenged us and caused us to desire to know this Jesus more and to live for Him in greater ways that we've never known before.