

A Glorious Prayer

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 19th of March 2000. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled, A Glorious Prayer, and is from John chapter 17, verses 1 to 26.

Lord God, we thank you that the night before he died, Jesus prayed.

We thank you that he prayed with his disciples present, and that this prayer has been recorded for us. We thank you for the insight it is into the mind of Jesus, and indeed your own mind, our Heavenly Father.

And we pray that you will change our minds, bring them in line with yours, that we may glorify you in our lives, and one day be where Jesus now is.

[1 : 2 0] Amen. Amen. My father retired a week ago. And for the last couple of years, he's been counting down the months till his retirement.

In fact, he brought it forward a year because he was so keen to retire. And the job that he retired from, he'd had for, I think, about 10 years. And certainly the last few years, he's enjoyed it less and less.

Partly because the company seemed to be a bit of a mess, and partly because he didn't really have enough to do. And so he'd start late, finish early, have long lunches, and so on.

Except for last week. He worked until midnight Thursday a week ago, the day before he retired. Because jobs needed to be finished.

And I guess like many of us, his desk was strewn with half-finished jobs. There are plenty of people, it seems to me, whose lives are strewn with half-finished ideas and jobs and tasks and houses needing renovation and so on.

[2 : 4 0] So my father worked like crazy in the days before he retired to finish everything off. I guess it's a bit like father like son, because I know that the busiest week of my year is not the week before Christmas.

And it's not the week around Easter time. It's the week before I go on holidays. And that's because somehow in my psyche I need to finish everything off before I go away.

The in-tray needs to be empty. The house needs to be clean. Everything needs to be up to date. And that's the busiest week. So I'm already trying to plan it this year so that the second or third week of June is a quiet week so that I can finish everything off before I go on holidays.

The theme of Jesus' prayer the night before he died is finishing the job off. And that's prayer we're looking at tonight in John 17.

This is not an easy prayer to follow. I suggest that you have it open in front of you on page 879. In particular, Jesus is saying in this prayer that he has done his job.

[3 : 49] It's finished. He'll actually say those words in a few hours' time after this prayer as he hangs on the cross. But to all intents and purposes, it is now finished. But he's praying that the Father, the Heavenly Father, his Father, will finish off all that needs to be done to fulfill God's purposes.

And Jesus is in effect saying that or praying that in three parts. The first, in verses 1 to 5, is a prayer for glory.

But it is a prayer that God will finish the job. Let's see what he says. Jesus begins by saying, praying, that the Father will glorify the Son.

That is, that God, the Heavenly Father, will glorify Jesus Christ. In the events about to happen as Jesus goes to the cross to die. Now what does that mean?

What does it mean for the Father to glorify the Son and why does Jesus pray it here? Jesus acknowledges that the Father has promised to give him all authority.

[5 : 08] He says that in verse 2. But it's authority with a specific purpose. It is authority to give eternal life to those that God has given, the Father has given to the Son.

Jesus says then in verse 4 that he's done his job. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So he prays for the Father to glorify him as he dies.

That is, he's praying that his work which he himself has done will be made effective. That is, Jesus has done all he can.

His work is finished. He's praying that the Heavenly Father will make his work effective. Sometimes there are jobs that we do and we've done the job and it's finished.

But it may or may not be effective. Jesus is praying that his finished work will be effective. And he prays that in terms of being glorified and glorifying the Father.

[6 : 24] Now what does it mean to pray that his work will be effective? He's praying in effect that his death will actually bring the eternal life that he's promised from God the Father.

The Father has said to him, I'm giving you or I promise you all authority to give eternal life. And that eternal life comes about through an effective death on the cross.

Jesus is praying that that will be the case. That his work will actually bring people or give people eternal life.

Beyond that, if that is to happen, then Jesus' death will be acceptable to God. And Jesus will be raised by God to the glory of heaven where he was before he was born in Bethlehem.

That's what he prays in verse 5. So Jesus' task is finished. He indicates that in verse 4. He says it in a few hours time in chapter 19 verse 30.

[7 : 31] The purpose of Jesus' work is to bring eternal life to people. So his prayer is, make that effective. May those you've given me receive that eternal life.

Is in effect what he's praying. But now it's beyond Jesus' hands. So he's praying that God the Father will do that. He's not only praying that God the Father will glorify him.

But he's also praying that he will glorify the Father. The Father will glorify him by making his death effective and raising him to heaven.

Jesus will glorify the Father. Jesus will glorify the Father by having lived an obedient life and his death being acceptable to the Father. And people being the recipients of the benefits of that death.

Namely, receiving eternal life. All of that will happen only if Jesus' death is effective. That if his completed work is effective in God's eyes.

[8 : 37] I want to pause just to make a little comment here about what is eternal life. Because at the heart of that first paragraph in verse 3 comes a definition that is worth remembering.

And this is eternal life. Eternal life. That they may know you, the only true God. And Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

We sometimes think of eternal life as being life after death. Pie in the sky when you die. But eternal life is about a relationship.

It is about a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. And it is something that begins now. Not after death.

Indeed, eternal life is as much life before death as after death. Notice too that eternal life is not spiritual awareness. It's not religious practice.

[9 : 36] It's not being pious. It's not somehow practicing some spiritual disciplines. Eternal life is knowing God.

Not any old God. Not a human created God. But rather the only true God. That is the God who sent his son Jesus Christ.

If we know that God, we know his son whom he sent. There's no other option here for eternal life. So the first step to finishing off or fulfilling God's purposes is that Jesus' death will be effective.

That is, that God will raise him to glory and that his death will be the means of people receiving that eternal life. That's what Jesus is praying first up. That's his first point.

He's done his job. Now he's praying that God's purposes will be fulfilled. It's out of his hands, but he's praying that the Father will firstly make his death effective for that purpose. The second step is to pray for his disciples.

[10 : 46] That is, the 11 disciples who are left. Judas, you may remember, in recent weeks, left during the Last Supper. Earlier on in this evening, in the same room, he walked out, leaving 11 disciples with Jesus.

It is now for those 11 disciples that Jesus prays. In the first part of this section, this prayer for the disciples goes from verse 6 to 19, but the first few verses, 6 to 10, in a sense describes the disciples.

We might think that's an odd thing to do in a prayer, but it actually has a point. Remember that the disciples are listening to this. So the way Jesus describes the disciples is not for God the Father's benefit.

He knows the description. It's for the disciples' benefit. So what does he say about them? He describes the disciples in two ways.

From above and from below. That is, from God's perspective and from a human perspective. The two descriptions are actually two sides of the same coin.

[11 : 55] You could look at one side and see that's God's way of describing the disciples, so to speak. Or you could flip the coin over and say, well, that's actually a human way of describing the disciples.

From God's perspective, he describes the disciples as people who belong to God, whom the Father has given to the Son. That is, they are people who have somehow come under the initiative of God the Father.

They belong to him because he chose them. He's entrusted them to God the Son to look after them while Jesus was on earth. That is, they are gods.

It's his initiative that has established them as belonging to him. Not only that, but they are those to whom God has revealed himself.

That is, God gave Jesus words to say about God which Jesus has passed on to them. That is, God has revealed something of himself to the disciples.

[13 : 02] It's God's initiative to do that. They haven't gone on a sort of research topic quest to find out about God. It is God who's revealed himself to them. So that's the disciples from God's point of view.

Flip the coin over and what do we find? Not robots who are just under the beckoned call of God. God's chosen them so they're sort of like puppets on a string.

But rather we find that the disciples are those who know what has been told to them. They have received the words. They've kept the word, is the expression in verse 6.

They've received and believed what has been told to them in verse 8. That is, the disciples are people who've exercised their own individual responsibility to respond to what they've been told and what has been revealed to them.

Now the two flip sides of that same coin are important to grasp. On the one hand, God has acted. He's exercised his initiative.

[14 : 09] He's chosen them. They belong to him. He's entrusted them to Jesus. He's revealed himself to them. God, God, God, God has done all that. But on the other side, these are people who've responded, who've kept the word and believed and received it and so on.

Sometimes it's hard to put two sides of a coin together. How can God be so sovereign as to choose these disciples and yet the disciples be individuals who can respond with faith and believing and receiving?

But there's a sense in which if you've got a coin, you cannot look at both sides at once. In a sense, meld the two sides together. Same coin, but different perspective.

And it's the same with this idea as well. God is sovereign. He does choose. He does decide who will be his. But on the other side, it is true that those who are his have individually exerted their responsibility to believe, to keep God's word and to respond aright.

Both are true. Try and meld the two sides together and we end up with something that to our limited human minds is a bit of a philosophical nonsense. How can God be sovereign and yet we be accountable with some exercise of our own will?

[15 : 29] I'm not sure that in the end we can quite say how. But the point of it is this. Not a philosophical argument.

It's not to make clever people. But rather it's to make confident disciples. Because the thing that is important here, and it's why Jesus stresses this in his prayer out loud to his disciples, is to encourage them that fundamentally the bottom line is God has chosen them.

They belong to him. God's grasp on them is what matters. You see, the issue is not trying to reconcile all of this philosophically, but rather to be reassured that God has chosen them is much better basis for relationship than them choosing God.

You see, we are fickle. We fail to finish jobs that we start. We can choose God. We can choose to follow God.

But if that is the sum total of the basis of our relationship with God, then I would have little confidence that in 10, 20, 30 years' time I would still be a Christian.

[16 : 54] But what Jesus is encouraging his disciples to see in this prayer is that God has chosen them. And where I am fickle, God is faithful.

And if God has chosen them, then we can have the absolute confidence that in 10, 20, 30 years' time God will not have let go of us. God's grasp on me is what matters, not mine on him.

And his on me is much firmer than mine on him. And his grasp of me is a firm and solid basis for a relationship that will last for eternity.

So the reason why Jesus describes his disciples in this prayer is not for the Father's benefit, but for the disciples' wills and, because it's written down, for us.

We are people whom God has chosen. Yes, we've exercised our wills to choose him, to follow him, to receive him, to believe on him, to keep his word.

[17 : 55] But the basis of our relationship with God is that God has chosen us. And that ought not to be a philosophical conundrum that stifles our faith, but rather something that reassures us and gives us confidence in our faith that it will last for eternity.

Jesus is saying that he's done his job on earth. The disciples who belong to Jesus were entrusted to Jesus.

And at the end of Jesus' life, he can report back to God the Father that those whom God the Father gave to him are still belonging to God the Father. He's kept them all. Judas was not a mistake of Jesus.

He says that in verse 12. Judas's betrayal of Jesus was so that scripture would be fulfilled. Jesus has not in any way let down Judas or God the Father in what has just happened in this meal.

But the problem now is that Jesus is about to go back to God the Father through his death and resurrection. So what now for the disciples? Will they be left to fend for themselves in this wicked world?

[19 : 10] Jesus had the task of protecting them in this world. What now? So Jesus prays that the Father will protect them.

That's what he says in verse 11. Second half of verse 11. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me.

There's a sense in which Jesus' prayer here has some anguish about it. He's just spent three chapters, 14, 15 and 16 in John's Gospel telling them and preparing them for when he dies and goes to heaven.

And he's reassured them that he will not leave them as orphans. There is a sense of anguish here as though almost Jesus is the parent of these disciples.

And he's reassuring them that when he goes they will be looked after. I've met people who have died young with young children left. And their greatest fear and anguish is what will happen to and who will care for my children.

[20 : 21] Often there's one spouse left but there's still that anxiety for the children. Sometimes that's even expressed when old people die and the children are adult.

Jesus doesn't have that same anguish but he does have that same care. He's not really afraid of what will happen to his children because he knows.

But he's praying for their benefit to say to them that when he goes to heaven God the Father will keep up the job of protecting them.

Now notice why God will protect them at the end of verse 11. Holy Father protect them in your name that you've given me so that they may be safe they may be healthy they may have a comfortable Christian life.

No, the thing that Jesus prays for protection for is that they may be one as we Father and Son are one.

[21 : 27] That is the purpose of protection is unity of disciples. He makes explicit that he does not pray that they'll be taken from the world.

That is the world is a difficult place. He's not going to sort of come down with a great swoop and rescue them out of this wicked world and take them immediately to heaven. He says that in verse 14. I've given them you, verse 15, I'm not asking you to take them out of the world but I ask you to protect them.

There are many Christians or God's people at least over the years who've wished that God would somehow just take them out of the world. It's too hard. The prophets Jonah and Elijah were a bit like that.

Jeremiah at times perhaps. Maybe even Job. But the protection that God is offering here and that Jesus is praying for here is a protection in the world.

In the midst of a world which he says in verse 13 hates, verse 14 hates the disciples. It's protection in the midst of the work of the evil one in verse 15.

[22 : 37] That is, it's protection not so much from but protection in the midst of strife, hatred and the work of the evil one.

Now because he's prayed for protection for the purpose of unity, the implication is that the hatred of the world and the work of the evil one will seek to bring about disunity amongst Christian disciples and believers.

And that's true. It is the work of the evil one to bring about and promote and foster disunity through things like jealousy, strife, pride, factions, resentment, lack of forgiveness, arrogance, petty squabbles, through lies and deceit, through a breakdown of trust so that there is lack of trust, distrust, through selfishness and lovelessness.

They're the things that the devil promotes and encourages and fosters and seeks to nurture. That Jesus prays for his disciples for protection from such things indicates that without God's protection there is the vulnerability or inclination to disunity.

Unity doesn't come naturally even even for the disciples of Jesus Christ. And if Jesus prayed for his disciples for unity so ought we for each other as well.

[24 : 21] You see so often Christians give up being Christians because of the divisions within or among Christian people. So often it's the fights and the squabbles or the petty jealousies or the lack of forgiveness the things of disunity the work of the evil one that causes Christians to fall.

I've met Christians who've given up being Christians for the most ludicrously petty things but in essence they are things of some sort of disunity. One of the things I pray for often for church life is for unity.

unity. I know that often the devil will seek to divide the leadership of a parish or church. I pray for our ongoing unity.

Often the devil will use things like building extensions to divide a church and the thing that I guess I'm most fearful of in the next couple of years is that as we extend our buildings here as we so desperately need to do there will be every opportunity for division disunity and the work of the evil one.

Praying for unity ought to be a priority for us. It was for Jesus and our situation is no different from his disciples. Jesus is not praying here for institutional unity.

[25 : 50] That is that all the churches suddenly become one happy family church so that no longer we have Anglicans and Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox and so on. I don't think that's actually what Jesus is praying for here.

Though for some denominational divides it would be good to get rid of some of them. But Jesus is praying that Christians believers those who hold to his gospel will be unified and not divided.

Indeed the unity that Christians are to enjoy is as intimate as the unity of the father and son together. In human terms a marriage is meant to be the closest relationship a human being will experience.

The unity between the father and the son far exceeds even the happiest of marriages. That is the unity to which you and I are called together.

the other key thing Jesus prays for his disciples is in verse 17. Sanctify them in the truth.

[27 : 01] Now when I mention the word sanctify probably the things that you think of are being holy and pure and maybe a goody goody that sort of idea.

But the notion of sanctify in the Bible and especially here in this verse is not quite like that. Literally the idea of to be sanctified is to be set apart and not so much to be set apart from bad things though that's an implication of it but primarily to be set apart for God and God's purposes.

You could almost say that something that is sanctified for God belongs to God and in a sense the two are more or less synonymous ideas even here.

Jesus is praying that his disciples will be set apart for God. He prays that because they will be in the world but it's a world that hates God and therefore hates the disciples and he's praying that the distinction between the disciples and the world will be kept because the disciples do not belong to the world they belong to God they are sanctified for God now Jesus prayer is a wise one because I've met many Christians who've given up the Christian faith because they've basically been inundated by the values and desires of the world the world has taught them to love money to love their family above all other things to look after number one themselves above other people and so on and there are many Christians who have lost track of Christian faith and have absorbed the values of the world that is they're not set apart from the world they no longer belong to

God when Jesus prays sanctify them he's praying that they will be maintained as belonging to God now do you see how that fits in with what I've said about this prayer Jesus is praying that God's purposes will be fulfilled he said that he's done his job to this part now it's back to the father's turn the ongoing protection of his disciples who belong to him is now the father's work and that's what he's praying when he says sanctify them it's the same thing in effect as saying protect them that is keep them apart from a world of hatred and from the evil one they belong to you keep them as yours I've kept them to the end of my life Jesus is saying now you've got to keep them after I go back to heaven how will that happen how will a disciple maintain belonging to God by the word of truth Jesus says in verse 17 and 19 that is from a human point of view we maintain our status as belonging to

[30 : 09] God and being sanctified by God by holding fast to the word that is being given us the word of truth the gospel the scriptures Christian truth as we maintain keeping that word so the flip side is that God keeps us as well so Jesus prayer for the disciples is in effect the second stage of praying that God's purposes will be fulfilled he's prayed that his death will be effective that's the next step now he's praying that beyond that his disciples will be kept guarded protected and sanctified by God because Jesus will have gone back to heaven the third step and the final step in this prayer is looking towards those beyond the disciples because to this point in effect Jesus has prayed only for those 11 disciples who are in the room with him who are listening to this prayer that

John has written down for us and while some of the things about those disciples apply to us you and I get a mention in the last couple of paragraphs of this prayer for from verse 20 to the end Jesus prays now not for the 11 disciples but for those who will believe as a result of the work of the 11 disciples that is the second the third and the 153rd generation of Christians after Jesus Christ and that's us if we're Christian people and in effect Jesus prays the same sort of things I won't go into it in as much detail but he's praying in effect for the same sort of protection the same sort of belonging to God he says I ask not only on behalf of these 11 but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word that's us and their word is the New Testament that they may all be one it's the same prayer for unity therefore it's the same prayer for protection in this world not to be taken immediately from this world but in the midst of this world strife and hatred and the work of the evil one

God will protect us sanctify us and keep us as belonging to him even beyond that Jesus prayer for the Christians of subsequent generations has one other focus or purpose that is that other people will come to believe in Jesus Christ so at the end of verse 21 he's praying for unity for us so that the world may believe that you have sent me and the same thing at the end of verse 23 I in them and you in me that they may become completely one so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me God's purposes you see ultimately are for this world to believe through

Jesus through his eleven disciples and through Christians that believe after those eleven disciples and as a result of their word Jesus you see is praying here that the purposes of God will be fulfilled that will mean that his death is effective that his disciples are protected and that the believers as a result of those disciples workers themselves protected and unified and kept by God and so that the world of unbelievers may believe you see how big Jesus' prayer is the night before he died this is an unusual prayer we're often told that Jesus prayed we're not often told what he prayed often he prayed alone nobody was there to hear him apart of course from the heavenly father and so we're not told what he prayed and when we are it's fairly brief this is the exception a long public prayer that the disciples heard and was written down for us why is this prayer so different because

Jesus is still teaching through his prayer it's a good thing I think for Christians to pray out loud with each other in church in pastoral ministry because when we pray out loud the person with whom we are or for whom we're praying will be encouraged by hearing the words of our prayer and also may indeed learn from the words of prayer one of the ways new Christians I think grow in their relationship with God is by hearing other Christians pray so too Jesus his prayer was sincere it was directed to God and yet also was for the benefit of the disciples listening he wanted them to understand God's purposes better but more than that he wanted to reassure them that

[35 : 42] God would fulfill his purposes that these disciples would not be left to fend for themselves that the absence of Jesus would mean the presence of God's direct power protecting and sanctifying them when he had gone it was also for the disciples to understand the priorities of God the importance of unity and the things that keep the disciples separate from this world belonging together and belonging to God may we learn those same priorities and have the same reassurance that Jesus taught his disciples to have Amen