

The High Priestly Prayer

Part 1
John 17:1, 2

With Study Questions

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Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You,² as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him (John 17:1, 2).

Preface

Many years ago an elderly gentleman, who also happened to be an elder in the church, visited me in an effort to encourage me in the ministry and make sure things in my life were going well. Twenty-five years have come and gone and I still recall the wisdom and humility of his prayer – even though he would have no doubt agreed with Paul in that he did **“not know what we (he) should pray for as we (he) ought” (Romans 8:26).**

But here we have a prayer of Jesus – often referred to as the High Priestly Prayer – and Jesus knows exactly how to pray as He ought. And because the prayers of Christ always flow from a perfect unity with the Father (unlike the prayers from fallen humanity) Jesus can state **“Father, I thank You that You always have heard me. And I know that you always hear Me” (John 11:41, 42).** This, of course, means the prayers of Christ are answered in a manner consistent with the prayer itself.

This prayer is wedged between two accounts in the Gospel of John which should illuminate our minds to the intensity of the setting. Jesus has been foretelling His own crucifixion, much to the confusion of the Apostles. Toward the end of chapter sixteen He begins to speak more plainly and the disciples exhibit a little confidence.

His disciples said to Him, “See, now You are speaking plainly, and using no figure of speech!³⁰ Now we are sure that You know all things, and have no need that anyone should question You. By this we believe that You came forth from God (John 16:29, 30).

Perhaps perceiving the undo poise and self-assurance now exhibited by the disciples, Jesus prophesies of their pending failure and the need to continue to trust in Him as their source of hope and victory.

Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? ³² Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. ³³ These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world (John 16:31-33).”

On the other side of this prayer we find Jesus in the garden facing Roman troops and the cross. So it is between the proclamation Jesus makes of His own crucifixion and overcoming of the world and the Garden of Gethsemane that we are allowed to listen in on this prayer – this prayer on which the great reformer John Knox was said to have cast his first anchor while on his death bed – it being a source of supreme peace and communion with God.

Examining this prayer is like to listening in on negotiations affecting us greatly but in which we have little to say – like children spying on a conversation their parents are having on moving or purchasing a new house – or an orphan given access to the dialogue between the head of the orphanage and his/her prospective new parents.

In this prayer we come to realize that the assurance, peace and destiny of man – over and above flowing from human will and wisdom – is the product of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

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Up to Heaven

John does not often depict the expressions, gestures or physical features of Jesus; he does here. We are told that Jesus lifted up His eyes to

heaven. Though hell is expressed as a pit or down and heaven up, the idea of upward location should reveal more of a disposition than geography.

Sursum corda was used as a call to prayer – *Up with your hearts*. This because we know with confidence and uprightness of countenance that we serve a good and powerful God. The Psalmist expresses **“To You O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in You” (Psalm 25:1)**.

Jesus had instructed us to address God as a father and we see Jesus do the same. As if the head of every human household has, as its primary design, the instructive purpose of expressing an accurate understanding of what a father is – that we may know our Father in heaven with greater precision.

The Hour

Jesus speaks of **“the hour.”** Numerous times through John He had taught that the hour had not yet come (John 2:4; 7:6, 8, 30; 8:20), now the **“hour has come.”** Reference to this hour is no doubt reference to the cross and its attending passions or sufferings. It is the battle between good and evil, heaven and hell, life and death. It was for this hour that Jesus came into the world. And it would be in this hour that the souls of men and the honor of God would be either won or lost forever.

Prayer for Self-Glory

In the first portion of this prayer, we see Jesus praying for Himself. Some believe it is wrong to pray for yourself. But a prayer for self is only wrong if it is a selfish prayer. If the ultimate aim of our prayers is the glory of God then a prayer for self is very appropriate. I may pray for my own health with the motives of continuing in a life of sin or that I may continue to care for the well-being of my family in an effort to honor God. Both are prayers for self but one is a selfish prayer.

Jesus prays that the Father would glorify Him. The word glory *doxazo* – which means honor, praise, to invest with dignity, esteem, attribute high status is used eight times in this prayer and appears to be a central theme of it. There are things which continually draw our attention, affections and allegiance away from Christ.

When the grumbling Israelites persisted in their whining because of the discomforts of their freedom from bondage, it was God who sent **“fiery serpents among the people” (Numbers 21:4)**. He then instructed Moses to make a fiery serpent out of bronze and put it on a pole **“and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived” (Numbers 21:9)**.

One can imagine any number of methods the enemy of their souls might use to keep them distracted from that bronze serpent. I suspect that in the force of the moment the feeble distractions were set aside and people placed their eyes where God, through Moses, had instructed. Jesus, in this gospel, indicates that the serpent foreshadowed Him.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:14, 15).

As Jesus approaches the cross, where He will be lifted up in a physical sense, He prays that God will lift Him up in glorification. Through the gospels we see Jesus glorify the Father through His many deeds and miracles (John 11:4). Now we see the Father glorify the Son in the cross. Judas would soon acknowledge the innocence of Jesus (Matthew 24:7); the sun would be darkened the veil torn (Luke 23:45) and even a Roman centurion would confess **“Certainly this was a righteous Man” (Luke 23:47)**.

The glory of Christ would culminate with His resurrection and ascension to His Father. Afterward would follow a righteous judgment upon the very tribunal which had turned the holy councils of God into a kangaroo court.

And the high priest arose and said to Him, “Do You answer nothing? What *is it* these men testify against You?” ⁶³ But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, “I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!” ⁶⁴ Jesus said to him, “*It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven*” (Matthew 26:61-64).

The Father would answer this prayer of Jesus and at His ascension He would sit in this seat of power and authority. Jesus would now make the request anticipated by the Psalmist:

I will declare the decree: The Lord has said to Me, 'You *are* My Son, Today I have begotten You. ⁸ Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations *for* Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth *for* Your possession. ⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel' (Psalm 2:7-9).

The glory of Christ would begin to sprout at His death.

But Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. ²⁴ Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain (John 12:23, 24).

The death and resurrection of Christ would be like a holy virus going airborne – unstoppable in its breadth and width – even the gates of hell incapable of holding it at bay.

Glorifying God

When Jesus prays for His own glory He is praying that God would fulfill in Him His plan of redemption, hence the following, "**that Your Son also may glorify You.**" The glory of Christ is both honoring to the Father and redemptive to man. Hence we read that Jesus, when raised from the dead was seated at God's...

...right hand in the heavenly *places*, ²¹ far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. ²² And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church, ²³ which is

His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:20-23).

Verse 22 can be translated “...and Him He gave as Head over all things to the church.” We will come to understand in this prayer that we ought to see ourselves as a gift from the Father to the Son. But we are to also understand that the Son is a gift from the Father to us.

Let not the obvious escape our attention that Jesus understood His role – His chief end – as a righteous man to glorify His Father. When hundreds of theologians gathered for many years with Bibles in hand in the sixteen hundreds, they drew the conclusion that this is the chief end of man, to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.¹

...as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him (John 17:2).

Over All Flesh

The power and authority of Christ is accentuated in this portion of His prayer. The authority is not merely over souls or churches but over all flesh. Every last single person on earth, in whatever post or office they hold, should view themselves as under the authority of Christ. How glorious would that be for every institution!

People will often claim that the imposing of a Christian life and world view upon different venues in life is the church’s effort to hijack that particular venue – be it political, medical, economic, educational, etc. What we need to understand is that Christ is no usurper of the institutions of man. It is quite the opposite. His right to rule is incontestable.

We should expect rebels and insurgents to resist the Lordship of Christ over all – much to their own destruction, but the church of all people should know and proclaim the extent of Christ’s power over all flesh. Peter explains this is accomplished...

through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities

¹ *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 1

and powers having been made subject to Him (1 Peter 3:21, 22).

The extent of this authority over all flesh is again anticipated in the Old Testament:

For the kingdom is the Lord's, And He rules over the nations (Psalm 22:28).

He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth (Psalm 72:8).

Purpose of Authority

Jesus then reveals the purpose of this authority. It is very limited and unhealthy thinking to view the Christian faith as a mere tool to construct large churches, healthy households or effective governments. The purpose Jesus gives here of His authority over all flesh is that **“that He should give eternal life to as many as You (His Father has) have given Him.”**

It is as the totality of all creation has, as its design, the glory of the Father through the redemption of sinners. It is in reference to this that we read of the celestial praising of the Lamb...

**For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,
10 And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth (Revelation 5:9, 10).**

The authority and glory of Christ for the redemption of sinners to the glory of the Father may be the single most primary theme of all of Scripture and therefore of all creation.

The mission of Christ is a mission in which He has and will continue to succeed. The power of our advocate has no boundaries. He has all authority in heaven and on the earth (Matthew 28:18). It has therefore been said, **“whom he does not rule, he over-rules.”**²

²Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Jn 17:1). Peabody: Hendrickson.

The Father's Gift to the Son

Seven times in this prayer, Jesus states that believers are the Father's gift to the Son (John 17:2, 6, 9, 11-12, 24). So often, and with great dread, men view their status with God based upon their negotiations. "Am I good enough? Am I sincere enough? Am I faithful enough?" Those can be valuable questions. But the woeful answer to each should lead us away from confidence in self and full confidence in Christ.

Jesus is our advocate. It was Jesus who died for us and ever lives for us. It is Jesus, as our Priest, who prays for us and presents His own righteous blood for us. As the orphans we listen to the negotiations between the would-be parents and head of the orphanage and we hear the agreement of our adoption. And it is not because we're cute enough or smart enough (as if we were puppies). The adoption has no other cause save the love of the one adopting. It is in Him that we trust. And it is in Him that we have life eternal.

Questions for Study

1. How are the prayers of Jesus different than the prayers of others (page 2)?
2. What is the context of this High Priestly Prayer? What surrounds it (pages 2, 3)?
3. What did Jesus mean by “the hour” (page 4)?
4. Is it always wrong to pray for oneself? Explain (pages 4, 5).
5. Define ‘glory’ (page 4).
6. Why is it important that Jesus be glorified? Discuss His similarity to the serpent in the wilderness (page 5).
7. In what respects did/does the Father glorify Jesus (pages 5, 6)?
8. What does Jesus do in return for the Father glorifying Him (pages 6, 7)?
9. How is Jesus a gift to the church (page 7)?
10. Over what does Jesus have authority? Explain (pages 7, 8).
11. What is the objective or purpose of Christ having authority (page 8)?
12. Jesus is a gift the church. How is the church a gift (page 9)?