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John 17:1-19

Jesus's High Priestly Prayer, Pt. 1

Have you ever accidentally eavesdropped on people who were talking about you? We've probably all had those moments where you're minding your own business, and then accidentally overhear two people talking about you. It's very difficult to turn away and stop listening at that moment, isn't it? We definitely should; but a part of us wants to hear what they will say when we aren't around and they don't think we're listening. If we hear them gossiping about us, or making fun of us, we're deeply hurt, our trust is betrayed; we feel like we've now seen their true heart towards us, and it looks ugly. But what if they're saying *good* things about you? Imagine overhearing your parents talking, and they share with each other how proud they are of you, how much they love you. No doubt you would feel encouraged and loved. Your trust in your parents strengthened because you have greater assurance that their love is real, genuine, from the heart.

Now imagine you walk in and accidentally overhear one of your parents praying for you, hearing them pour out their heart to God with prayers for you, driven by love, care, and concern; as they pray for your health, your spiritual growth, your faith, joy, and peace, your future and well-being. Who wouldn't feel loved and encouraged by hearing that? Overhearing such an intimate, private prayer between a man and God alone reveals that man's heart. It eliminates social pressure, it guarantees there is no pretense; it's a prayer just before God, who knows all things anyways. It shows he really means what he's saying. What we pray about reveals our true heart, our innermost thoughts, concerns, loves, and desires. Hearing someone pray for you in that way is hearing their true heart towards you, their raw love on display. If you had any doubts before, and wondered, "Does my father really love me? Do they truly care?" overhearing their private conversation or prayer would put all doubts to rest and make you feel secure in their love.

But what if we have doubts about the love of God? What about those dark and difficult moments of life where you feel like a failure, far from God? Wouldn't it be nice if you could overhear God talk about you? If you could hear Him praying, specifically for you, and hear His raw heart on display, settling our doubts and giving us greater assurance?

Brothers and Sisters, that is *exactly* what we are given here in John 17, where we get to hear God pray for us and reveal His heart towards us. Here in our text, we're invited to eavesdrop in on a conversation between Jesus and His Father; we're allowed to hear Jesus pray

for us, where He reveals His heart for His disciples - all who believe in His name, and all who *will* believe in His name. This passage is commonly called Jesus's High Priestly Prayer, and for good reason, as we'll see: Jesus is interceding, as the true High Priest of His Covenant people, the night before He goes to offer atonement for our sins, laying down His own life as the fully sufficient sacrifice. He prays this prayer right after finishing the Farewell Discourse of chapters 13-16, His farewell address to His disciples right before His betrayal and arrest; this prayer is related, as the first verse implies, starting with the words, "After he had spoken these words..." This prayer is a climax to the Farewell Discourse. It's a powerful, emotional, significant prayer; in fact, I don't think it's an overstatement or exaggeration at all to say that it is the most profound and powerful prayer in all of Scripture and all of history itself. And so we shouldn't be surprised that it's chock full of a whole lot of content, much of which requires a lot of careful thought and reflection. That's why we're going to tackle this prayer in two sermons; we need to recognize that chapter 17 is one , cohesive literary unity and prayer; but we're going to focus on vv.1-19 today and vv.20-26 a couple weeks from now.

So today, as we focus on vv.1-19, we see that Jesus prays for His elect people as our Great High Priest, those for whom He died, so that we would behold His glorification on the cross and know God, be saved unto eternal life, and receive spiritual protection, joy, and sanctification. First, we see point number 1...

I. Jesus prays for His glorification because He wants His people to know God (17:1-5)

Jesus begins His prayer in v.1, saying, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over " It is commonly noted that Jesus is praying for Himself here in vv.1-5, for His own glory, and that's true; Jesus is God the Son, and He's praying that the Father would glorify the Son, Himself. But it's not *all* that He's praying for here. He's praying for the glory of the Triune God to be displayed in Him, that the Father would glorify Him *so that* He, the son, can glorify the Father. And we see this is not a selfish prayer, but one of love, since that Father has given him authority to grant eternal life, "to all whom [the Father] Has given Him." Jesus is saying that the time has come for God to reveal His glory by revealing the glory of the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah. And He's praying that the Father would do just that, and bring His mission and their purpose to completion.

But how is he going to do that? What's the means of Christ's glorification? What's the "hour" that Christ refers to in v.1?" He's talking about the cross, the agonizing death that awaits

him the very next day. All throughout the book of John, we've seen repeated references to Jesus's "hour," where he would commonly say that His "hour" had not yet come to fully show His glory. But right before the Farewell discourse, there was a shift, around Jesus's triumphal entry, and He started speaking more openly, as the hour drew near. And now, he says, the hour has come. And every time, the "hour" is pointing forward to the cross, when Jesus is lifted up in glory by being nailed to a piece of wood and lifted off the ground. Jesus, the Messiah of God, the promised King and Savior and Lord, would be glorified by God - by being publicly shamed, mocked, beaten, and crucified as a heretic and treasonous insurrectionist! That's not exactly what we think of as glory, is it? When we think of glory, we think of winning a prize, not being stripped and losing all possessions; we think of a crown of gold, not of thorns! How is being mocked and beaten and slandered and killed glorification? It's because Christ is fulfilling the mission of God; He's doing the most glorious thing imaginable, laying down His life - that of the perfect, spotless, blameless God-Man and King over all - for wretched, hopeless sinners like you and me. He's displaying the glory of God by showing just how far the love of God is willing to go. He glorifies the Father by showing that the law's demands for the penalty of death for sin are good and just, and will not be ignored or dismissed, and yet He fulfills them by His own blood, gloriously defeating Sin, Satan, and even Death through His own death! Then, the Father exalts the Son by raising Him from the grave on the third day, exalting Him in glory and vindicating Him before as the God-Man, the victorious King of Kings, the one and only Lord and Savior!

The Cross lies at the very heart of the exaltation and glorification of Christ Jesus - and therefore, of God. The cross of Christ is the chosen means of God to reveal His glory to the world! God the Father is glorified in the Son, as we see in v.4, as Jesus prays, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do." The Son glorifies the Father in his earthly life, ministry, and sacrificial death on the cross. And the Father exalts and glorifies the Son in His death, resurrection, and ascension. We see this in v.5: "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." This verse reaches back into eternity past; it reminds us of how this book began: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," John 1:1. Jesus is the Word of God become flesh. Before He was born a man, He existed eternally as God, God the Son, One with the Father. There is only one God, yet God exists eternally as three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. All three equal and One, inseparable yet distinct persons. But

the Son stepped down out of glory, came down into the world, to be born as a baby, being fully man while also remaining full God, living a real, human, yet perfectly innocent and righteous life. He gave up His glory for the life of a suffering servant. Why? To come and die. Yet He speaks of His dying, and then subsequent resurrection and ascension, as the means of Him being glorified, even in the very presence of God with the eternal glory of God, now in His human nature as well as His God nature. As the Father raises up and glorifies the Son, through the cross and resurrection, all three persons of God are glorified in and through the Son, Jesus Christ.

And this teaches us a very important lesson: it shows us that the primary purpose of Jesus's death on the cross was to glorify God. We say often that Jesus died on the cross to save sinners, and that's true. But it's not the *primary* purpose of why He did it. The first, main reason behind it all was for God to be glorified in Christ.¹ The cross of Christ is centered not on us, but on God's glory. And since the entire Bible centers around Christ, the gospel, and the Cross, this of course means the entire *Bible* is all about God glorifying Himself through the Son, Jesus Christ. And that's absolutely the case. But maybe that strikes you as odd, as not right, maybe offensive. Maybe you're thinking, "Wait a second, isn't it wrong to seek your own glory and show the world how great you are? Isn't it wrong, then for Jesus to pray for His glorification, for God to seek His own glory as the primary purpose?" We may feel this way because it is indeed wrong for *us* to seek *our own* glory. But it is not wrong for God; it is perfectly good and right and *necessary* for God to glorify His own name, for Jesus to pray for His glorification. But maybe you're thinking, "That feels unfair; how can that be true?" We can think about it this way: when we glorify something as the most glorious thing there is, we're making a claim about what we worship and put our hope and trust in. That's why it's wrong. If I told you, "Hey, make your life about glorifying me; look to me as the greatest thing in the world, your greatest source of joy; base your every hope on me," that would obviously be wrong; I'm not the greatest, not even close, and you would be horribly let down and devastatingly disappointed! But what if God says that? Well, that would make perfect sense! He *is* the greatest, worthy of all worship, all powerful, and the *only* one we can put all our hope and trust in. In fact, if God glorified someone or something else, and lifted that name higher than our own, it would mean that that thing is greater than God - and therefore *is* God. Therefore, God must *necessarily* glorify Himself. And that is

¹ For an excellent explanation of this concept, see Matthew Harmon, "For the Glory of the Father and the Salvation of His People," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, pp. 268-275.

what's truly best for us, too. If God *didn't* glorify His name, then how would we know whom to worship, whom to adore and love and delight in, whom to believe and trust in for salvation? When Jesus glorifies the Father, and the Father glorifies Jesus, it's showing who God is, and that Jesus is God, so that we can see His glory, believe, know God, and be saved! It's for our good!

We see this in verse 3, where Jesus prays for us to know God and the glory of Christ, which is eternal life: "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." God is life; to truly know God and enjoy His glory *is* true, unending life! Our salvation means getting to go and live with God in His glorious presence, knowing and enjoying Him perfectly, *forever!* But this means there is no eternal life without knowing God. And to know God is to know His glory. And the only way to know the glory of the Father is to know His Son, Jesus Christ. And the only way to know Jesus Christ is to believe in His glory as revealed on the Cross, in His death and resurrection. Therefore, to be a Christian is to believe in Jesus, to know God, to yearn to know and enjoy Him more, to be enthralled with His glory, and to seek to exalt the glory of Christ, He who glorified Himself by dying for us. And this is exactly what Jesus prays: for His own glorification, so that His disciples may know God and have eternal life. But that raises the question: who *is* Jesus praying for? Which brings us to...

II. Jesus prays as High Priest for His elect, covenant people, not for the world (17:6-10)

In verses 6-10, we see that Christ is praying specifically *for His disciples*, those who believe in Him. We also see here, very explicitly and clearly, that these disciples for whom He prays, those who do or will believe in Him, are those whom the Father has given to Him; the elect from every nation and throughout all time, including ours today. In v.6, Jesus makes it clear that He has "manifested" the name of the Father - that is, that He has revealed God's glory and made Himself known - to "the people whom you [the Father] gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word." He's talking about people that God has specifically chosen and given to the Son, and that this was revealed in the fact that they "kept God's Word" - that is, they believed in the Word of God Himself, Jesus Christ, and received the words that Jesus gave them, as Jesus makes clear in vv.7-8. Who's he talking about? He's talking about His disciples, believers, His chosen, New Covenant people. He specifies very clearly that He is praying for His disciples and *not for the world*. We see this in v.9: "I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours." This is a profound statement. When we pray, we usually don't specify whom we *are*

not praying for. Yet Jesus does; He makes it clear He's not praying for *the world*; that is, He isn't praying for those who do not belong to the Father and are not given to the Son, meaning they never will believe. He makes this clear for our sake, so that we will know He is praying specifically for His people.

First and foremost, He's praying for his current disciples at that time, in His earthly ministry, most notably the 11 who become the Apostles. He was praying for their sake at the time, as vv.11-19 will show us, too. But his prayer is not limited to just those early disciples, but to all who would (and will) later become disciples. This is where we need to jump down to v.20, to understand the context of what we're reading here. V.20 is very relevant for these verses, and for the entire prayer of ch.17: it shows that even as Jesus delineates between praying for His disciples and not "the world," He includes in this group *all disciples* who ever would be. He says, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word...." This includes all true Christians throughout time and space, including us today, and even including those who have not yet believed but will, because God has chosen and ordained them to believe at the proper time, as His elect children. And I don't think v.20 is just meant to apply to vv.20-26, the verses that come after it, but also the verses that come before it. After all, when we read v.9, we don't assume Jesus is only talking about who He is *about* to pray for, but we understand that He is also explaining for whom He *has been* praying all along: His disciples. I think v.10 implies this, as Jesus says, "*All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them.*" He specifies in v.9 that He's praying for His disciples, not the world, but clarifies in v.10 this includes all His people, throughout time and space. And so v.20 specifies that this includes the first disciples, but *also includes* those who will later believe through their Word, as the church is born and the gospel goes out through all the world, as it has through history since then. It specifies the group he's praying for throughout the whole prayer: His disciples, those who believe in Jesus and follow Him.

But vv.6-10 make it very clear, though, that this group He is praying for - not the world but His disciples, those who believe and all who *will* believe in the future - are a *specific* group of people, not a vague group of unknown persons; they are chosen, elect individuals that the Father has given to Christ as His own possession (as we saw in v.6), a people that Christ represents and intercedes for as priest. And we must not forget that He does so with the shadow of the cross looming over him. The context is vastly important here: Christ has been praying that

they would know God through believing in the glory of the Son shown in the cross and have eternal life. He's praying that not for the world but *for His disciples*. Christ is praying for the salvation not of the world but of His elect, His chosen, covenant people whom the Father has given to Him, interceding for them as priest the night before He goes to die for them as the substitutionary atoning sacrifice.

This might sound confusing and counter-intuitive, maybe even strange or shocking. But it makes more sense the better we understand the storyline of the Bible and the Old Testament context of the High Priest. That's the biblical, theological background of what's going on here: Christ is praying for His covenant people as our High Priest. So how did the High Priest work in the old testament? This started with Aaron, the first High Priest of Israel under the Old Covenant and Mosaic Law. As the High Priest, he was consecrated and set apart from the people, like all the other priests, to intercede on behalf of the people of Israel to God and make sacrifices. But the High Priest, in particular, was special; he represented the *entire* covenant people of God - and *only* the covenant people, namely, Israel, God's Old Covenant people. This is why the High Priest wore a breastplate with twelve stones, each one representing one of the twelve tribes of Israel, with the names written on each. He was the covenant representative of God's people; and that people was very specific: those who were part of Israel, Abraham's covenant family, marked by circumcision and observing the Law, given the promised land. Once a year, on the day of atonement, the High Priest would draw near, representing God's people before God, to make atonement for their sins.² He would consecrate himself first, making sacrifice for his own sins, and those of his fellow priests, and then atonement for the nation. He would put his hands on two goats, confessing the sins of the entire people of God as a symbol that those goats now bore the sins of the people; one was the scapegoat, but the other, he slaughtered, and took its blood into the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the temple, where the presence of God dwelled; it was a dangerous thing, a sinner entering into the presence of the Holy God! They tied a rope around his waist, in case he died in there, so they could pull him out. And then he poured the blood on the mercy seat of God, atoning for the sins of Israel as their covenant representative.

That's what we see Christ doing here. He does not have to atone for his own sins, for He is sinless and perfectly righteous; yet he sets himself aside, consecrating himself in the words of v.19, as a representative to bear the sins of His people, just like the sins were laid on the goat. He

² Lev. 16

comes and prays as High Priest, representing and interceding for all His elect, New Covenant people - that is, all who will believe because the Father predestined to give them to the Son. He does this right before offering an atoning sacrifice for their sins - namely, Himself, on the Cross, as a Penal Substitutionary Sacrifice. He prays now before His people, and then will go and pour out His own blood on the cross to secure the atonement for His people, laying down His life so we can be forgiven and reconciled to God, once and for all! He is interceding specifically for His elect people, those the Father has chosen to give to Him and ordained to believe. And so Christ prepares to go and die for His covenant people, to lay down His life and secure atonement for the elect, for all whom the Father has chosen to be His people and give to the Son. This isn't the first time we've seen this in the book of John. Back in ch.10, Jesus says that He is the good shepherd who lays down his life *for His sheep*, not the world. Yes, John 3:16 is gloriously true: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." Amen! Christ didn't just come to save the Jews but for all nations, for anyone who believes in Him, in all the earth! We see this back up in v.2: since the Father has given Jesus "authority over *all flesh*," not one nations, but all peoples in the earth! But authority for what? The rest of v.2 says, "to give eternal life *to all whom you have given Him*." That is, for the elect. As we saw in the last chapter, 16, we can only believe if God sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts, illuminating our minds and regenerating our hearts in faith to believe in Christ. Christ secured this regenerating work of the Spirit and every blessing of our salvation, through His atoning work on the cross. And He did so, Eph. 1 tells us, for those for whom God predestined before the foundation of the world. Or to use a different metaphor: in Eph. 5:25, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" Christ, the loving, loyal, faithful husband, laid down His life *for His beloved Bride*, the elect. As the old hymn, "The Church's One Foundation," puts it: "From Heaven He came and sought her, to be His holy Bride; with His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died." Christ died for His people, to secure our atonement, for His blood is effectual. It would be impossible for Christ to pray for someone's salvation, offer His blood as a sacrifice to atone for their sins, and then for that person to not be saved. Christ intercedes for His people, dies for us, and secures our salvation, guaranteeing that we will believe.

I want to acknowledge that this can be a hard pill to swallow. Some may say it's not fair. But let's remember the last point: the main point of the cross is to show God's glory. But let's ask: why would God want us to know this - namely, that Christ died *for His chosen, covenant*

people, and not the whole world? It's so that we would know just how much He loves us! His whole Church - and also each individual Christian. Brother, Sister, this shows you how much Jesus loves *you*! That He came down to earth, suffered greatly, and died on the cross *for you*, so that you can be saved! That the Father chose you and gave you to the son, that Christ prayed *for you* as your High Priest, the night before He died, thinking of you as He went to the cross! We should find great encouragement, assurance, comfort, and humbling gratitude in the fact that Jesus died specifically for *us* - for each individual Christian, by name, along with every elect individual to ever be born, even those who aren't yet Christians. We should also find great encouragement in evangelism because of this: as we keep sharing the gospel and praying for the salvation of non-Christians in our lives, we may be tempted to get discouraged and think that "so-and-so" will never get saved; but if God has chosen to save that person, then that means that individual *will* be saved, because Christ died for Him, securing His salvation, and will bring it about in His own way and in His own time. We don't know who the elect are, but God does, and He will save them through the proclamation of the gospel; we just need to be faithful in sharing, and trust God to save those whom the Father has given to the Son as His covenant people, those for whom Christ has died and secured atonement. And if you're not a Christian, this isn't a barrier to keep you out; it's an invitation to draw near. Do you want Jesus to be your high priest, and atone for your sins? Then put your faith in Him. Repent and believe, ask Him to wash away *your sins* by the blood of Christ and let you be part of His covenant people; trust in Him, and He will save you! For *all* who truly believe are chosen and redeemed. Christ's blood never goes to waste; it is surely effectual, every drop of it. Those for whom Christ died shall be redeemed.

And this assurance is what we see prayed for in our third and final point...

III. Jesus prays for His disciples' spiritual protection, joy, and sanctification (17:11-19)

In v.11, Jesus continues praying for His disciples, praying that even as He leaves them and returns to Heaven and leaves them in this world - the world of unbelief and sin that hates Jesus and hates His followers, too - He prays for His disciples on-going, continued spiritual care from God, namely, for their spiritual protection, joy, and sanctification. He prays that God would "keep them in your name" (v.11), holding them fast in the faith and not letting them go, even as He has guarded them spiritually while with His disciples in His earthly ministry (v.12). He is praying for their spiritual protection. He prays this so that they will be unified - we'll come back to that in our second sermon on John 17, where Jesus will pray a lot more for unity in the final

section. But for now, note the thread of prayer for spiritual protection, that we may have assurance. Just as Christ lost none of his disciples (for Judas didn't count, but was destined for perdition), so He will see each one of us, all His sheep, safely home to Heaven. We see this again, in vv.14-16, where He prays that His followers will be in the world, but not of the world, even as the world hates us like it did Jesus. But he doesn't pray that we would be removed from all danger by being taken out of the world; He prays that we would remain, but that we would be protected from Satan and would not fall away! Jesus is praying for our spiritual protection, that we would not fall away and become like the world, but that God would hold us fast, to be like Christ and persevere as light in the dark world. When Christ prays for us, His prayers are certainly most effectual: rest assured, Christ will hold you fast; he won't let go.

He prays for our joy to be fulfilled in the midst of this world in v.13. As we saw last week, He promised in ch. 16 that though the world hates and persecutes us, if we follow Christ, our sorrow will be turned joy! He prays that we will experience that joy even now, as we joyfully persevere and follow Christ's footsteps in this world, looking forward to the eternal joy that awaits us. Finally, He prays for our sanctification, in vv.17-19, that we would be sanctified in the truth, set apart to be like Him, even as He sanctify Himself, or consecrates Himself, being set apart to represent us, as our sinless savior. Yet we are not sinless; so He prays that we would be set apart, to be atoned and sanctified by His blood, forgiven and righteous through faith, yet also set apart as holy to the Lord, that we would become more like Christ, not the world.

Christ prays here for our spiritual protection, spiritual joy, and spiritual growth, our sanctification. This reveals His desire for us, but also grants us great assurance that He has *secured* our salvation for us as our High Priest and atoning sacrifice. Brothers and Sisters, trust in Christ, and He will hold you fast, sanctify you, and see you safely home.

And He has given us a visible reminder of this joyful hope and assurance we have in Him: the Lord's Supper. So let us proclaim our faith in Christ's atoning work on the cross for us and proclaim His glory. If you are a believer, have been baptized as a believer, and are in good standing with a gospel believing church, we invite you to the Table with us in just a moment. And if that doesn't describe you, we invite you to believe in Jesus Christ, trusting in His sacrificial death for *your* salvation, and then to profess your faith in baptism and show that you're part of His people. We'd love to speak with you after the service. Until then, let's have a moment of silence as we prepare to come to the Table.