

GOING DEEPER

John 17 records what is often called the “High Priestly Prayer.” The gospel accounts frequently show Jesus withdrawing to commune with the Father. Here, Jesus speaks directly to the Father in a deeply personal appeal (17:1-5), intercedes for His closest disciples (17:6-19), and prays for all who will believe (17:20-26). On the brink of crucifixion, Jesus turns His heart toward the glory of God and the good of His church.

The prayer opens with a declaration: “the hour has come” (17:1a). The long-anticipated fulfillment of Jesus’ earthly mission has arrived. Jesus asks the Father, “Glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you” (17:1b). Throughout John’s gospel, the glory of God has been on display through the person and ministry of Jesus. Now, that glory will be revealed most fully in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Jesus speaks of His mission as complete. He has made the Father known and has opened the way to eternal life. In verse 3, Jesus defines eternal life saying, “...this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” He describes eternal life as more than a future heavenly destination; it is a present and ongoing relationship with God. It is communion with the Father through the Son.

Having prayed concerning His own mission, Jesus turns His attention to His disciples (17:6-19). With the cross approaching, His heart moves toward those He will soon leave behind. Indeed, His disciples, amidst confusion, will ultimately scatter. Before Jesus’ birth, the prophet Zechariah had foretold that the shepherd would be struck and the sheep scattered (Zech. 13:7).

Jesus does not pray for their removal from the world. Instead, He prays for His disciples’ protection within it. “Holy Father, keep them in Your name” (17:11b ESV). The world they inhabit is hostile and dark, but they are called to remain as witnesses within it. Their mission echoes Jesus’ own: as the Father sent Him, so He sends them to establish His church (17:18).

To fulfill that mission, they must be sanctified—set apart for God’s service. “Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth” (17:17). Jesus, the Light of the World, will shine through sanctified lives.

Finally, Jesus lifts His eyes to all who will believe through the apostles' message (17:20). The scope of His prayer even stretches across centuries to include future believers. On the eve of His death, what does He ask for His church? Not power, prestige, or worldly success, but unity.

"That they may all be one" (17:21a ESV). This unity is patterned after the relationship between Father and Son: "I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity" (17:23a). The unity of believers is meant to reflect the loving relationship between the Father and the Son.

The stakes are high. Jesus describes the impact of this unity saying, "Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (17:23b). The church's oneness serves as a visible testimony to the truth of Christ's mission. Francis Schaeffer once observed that, "Our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful—Christian community is the final apologetic."

The prayer closes with a breathtaking promise. Jesus desires that His people be with Him where He is, to see His glory (17:24). The end of salvation is not merely rescue from judgment, but everlasting fellowship with Jesus.

John 17 invites us to listen in to a deeply intimate conversation between Jesus and His Father. With the cross before Him, Jesus prays not to be spared but to be glorified. Not to stand alone, but to make His people one. Not just for His first disciples, but for every believer across the ages.

