

Reflections on John Chapter 17

Everything in the Bible is there by inspiration. It's all God's Word. Yet, some passages seem to be far greater in meaning than others, and this Chapter 17 in the Gospel of John is certainly one of them. The reason is, we have here a rare opportunity to know the mind of God, to see inside the thinking of the Persons of the Godhead. Just as the saints already in glory are thrilled to hear and know the Father and Son speak in their heavenly throne-room, we can do the same right here. This is an opportunity to treasure for a lifetime. Indeed, it's a life-changing text. Following is not a verse-by-verse exposition of the chapter, but miscellaneous thoughts as I reflect on what this passage reveals.

The One speaking is Jesus. Before we look at His prayer, we need to review briefly what we've learned about Jesus up to this point in the Gospel. Jesus is the obedient Son of God. Pre-existing His Advent, He was sent to earth by the Father to reveal God, and He spoke and did only what was the Father's will. He chose certain ones to follow Him, gave them commands, and is now about to leave them – except that He'll send the Holy Spirit to be with them in His physical absence. He offered eternal life to any and all who believe in Him, to those who keep His words. He has the authority of the Father to judge everyone. And He came to take away sin, the sins of the world. Intertwined all thru the text, the fact of the Trinity is unmistakably woven.

Jesus spoke this prayer aloud so that His disciples could hear it and know the ultimate purpose for which Jesus was sent and for which they were called. And John recorded it so we too can have the privilege of knowing it. Unbelievers have no idea how profound is this prayer and, sadly, I suspect neither do many Christians. OK. Let's begin.

Jesus prayed, **“Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you”** (v. 1). “Glorify”? What “glory” refers to is the infinite glory that belongs to God alone, and which alone pleases God. And it is to be *magnified* by the imminent work of Christ on the cross. God's glory is more than His majesty and radiant splendor. It's all the perfections of His Person, His glorious holy Being. The Son expresses the glory of the Father, and the Father's glory is that of the Son. And now Jesus is going to add (as if that's possible!) to God's glory by dying on a Roman cross. Huh? God's glory is made perfect by His humility. Only the Incarnation and submission to death on a cross would do that. And His glory is perfected by the unique, self-sacrificial love for others, for those manifestly unworthy of love but rather of condemnation, that put Him on the cross. God's glory is magnified by the unshakable trust the Son has in the Father, despite anticipating enduring His terrible judgment of sin. God's glory will be complete by the Son selflessly and obediently serving the Father to remove evil from Creation, to remove guilt from fallen creatures, and to remove the alienation of a fallen race. The Son can only do all that by enduring a humiliating and agonizing death, the wrath that all sin deserves, and by rising from the dead to ascend and rejoin the Father and to impart His resurrection life to others. Can we glorify God? Yes, the same way that Jesus did, by humbly and obediently sacrificing our lives for the sake of others.

“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (v.3). In the Garden, “to know” was to experience good or evil. That first couple would experience good if they'd obeyed God's voice, or experience evil by listening to the voice of the Serpent. In the Bible there and here, “to know,” is not something cognitive, it's *experiential*. So Jesus is saying here that the life He offers is an experiencing of God. We don't know of God – that He exists, for example – and we don't merely know information about God; rather, we live with Him in His presence and we experience Him. We are with His perfect Person, we are with His glory. Salvation isn't an insurance policy by which we escape hell. It's being for an eternity in the very presence of the infinite, holy, Creator God, so that we can be thrilled with His Perfections and experience the peace and joy and love of the Godhead. And that experience can occur proleptically in this life, by living out God's Word. “Eternal life” doesn't refer to duration, but to the fellowship of God with His beloved, adopted and glorified human creatures.

“I pray for them . . . for those you have given me, for they are yours” (v. 9). In these verses 6-11a, Jesus makes clear the fact of election. Believers are believers because the Father “dragged them” to Christ (see 6:44a; also Acts 13:48). We didn't freely choose to believe, as if we're super-wise and super-spiritual persons. No, we're just ordinary people, weak and prone to fail, but Jesus put His confidence in them (and in us) because His Father chose them (and us). And He will protect us; not protect us from persecution and martyrdom, but so that we end up in glory. Because of the Father's faithfulness to the Son, our eternal destiny couldn't be more secure.

“All I have is yours and all you have is mine” (v.10). In context, the “all” here refers to all those who believe in Jesus. But let's think deeper about this phrase. In His incarnation Jesus set aside His pre-existent glory and submitted to the will of

the Father. Theologians discourse on the “subordination of the Son,” but that subordination must be only for the work of redemption. The subordination cannot be eternal, for “all you have is mine.” There is, within the Trinity, nothing about the Son that He could not be the Father, nor vice versa. The Son is the same *ousia* as the Father, a term the early church fathers used to indicate the full deity of the Son. The Son is not the same Person as the Father, but He is the very same *kind* of Person. The authority the Father has over Creation, the Son has.

“[S]o that they may be one as we are one” (v.11b) and **“I in them and you in me”** (vv. 22b-23a). When Peter wrote that we are “partakers of the divine nature,” he may have been referring to what Jesus prayed here. We’re thinking now of something so lofty and exalted that words cannot explain all that it means. Just as the Persons of the Godhead are one, a perfect unity, so all believers are to be one AND we believers are to be participating somehow in (or with) the Persons of the Godhead! “One” means equal, bonded in love, at peace with one another, and enjoying each other in fellowship: that’s how the Godhead is and how we in the Church are to be. Paul’s doctrine of being “in Christ” derives from this. We’re in Him and He’s in us – or His Spirit indwells us. The denominations and doctrines that have the Church split into innumerable factions isn’t in view here; the unity here is a spiritual one. The Church is the Bride of Christ, to be united forever to Christ. This is important, so let’s dwell on it a bit more. Unity means there’s commonness of purpose, a common interest, a common life, and a common identity. It means our hearts are aligned as one. We can be in union with believers of different traditions, etc, because union doesn’t mean agreement on everything. It is possible because we have a common Savior and a common New Birth, a common authority (the Word), and a common mission.

“[T]hat they may have the full measure of my joy within them” (v.13). Jesus wasn’t despairing or fearful as He anticipated the cross. He was filled with joy! Why? Because He knew He was fulfilling what the Father willed. So His prayer includes the desire that we too be filled with joy while we’re serving God, regardless the risks or sacrifices or losses we suffer. Joy is possible because we know what’s waiting for us, glory inexpressible. But we need to ask, What if we’re not serving God – or not according to His will? Maybe that’s why so many Christians lead joyless lives. Let’s also recognize that Jesus’ joy is special. It’s not just being happy. So we only can experience it if He indwells us.

“They are not of the world, even as I am not of it” (v. 16). The “world” is an oppressively dark place. It’s dominated by the evil one and its ideals, values and beliefs are all opposed to God. In the very same way that Jesus was totally faithful to God, to His Word and to His will, so must we be. As Jesus humbly went to His death – a humiliating and agonizing death – in submission to Rome, so we may need to do that too. That is how we overcome the world. We defy the world. We defeat the world. We dare not compromise with it nor (a ghastly thought!) do we participate in or want to enjoy what the world puts on offer. Of course, we need to understand all that comprises the “world” in order not to be of it. That requires careful observation of our culture with the Word of God fully in mind.

“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth” (v. 17). God’s will is our sanctification. We’re to be holy, separate from the world, practicing righteousness and refusing to practice sin. The cross and resurrection are the basis of sanctification, and the gift of the Spirit enable us to be sanctified. But something more is needed. Jesus connects sanctification with the fact that God’s Word is truth. So obedience to God’s Word is necessary. By the enabling Spirit, God sanctifies us through the Word of God. Lots of other ways of being “sanctified” could be attempted, e.g., carrying out rituals, following liturgies, doing what we suppose are good works, pretending the Spirit alone leads us, etc, but we only can be certain that what’s truthful can sanctify us, and that’s God’s Word, because God cannot lie. Our sanctification in this life shows how much we treasure God’s holiness and our being with Him.

“As you have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (v.18). We too easily miss this exceedingly important verse. The Father’s will is for His beloved human creatures to be with Him for an eternity, and for that reason the Son was sent into the world, to make that possible. Now that very mission is ours. We’re to take the message of the Son to all the world, to our neighbors and to distant parts, so that the elect everywhere may be with God for an eternity. We’re here on mission. We’ve got purposeful lives to lead. We’re just as “sent” as was the Son. He obeyed. Do we?

“...that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them” (v. 26b). The chapter ends with this magnificent closing thought: it’s all about love. God’s love, a unique kind of selfless, giving love. That love that binds the Persons of the Trinity into a unity is for us too. It will bind us to the Persons of the Godhead. And it will bind all of us believers together into one Body, the Body of Christ. Jesus Himself, thru the Spirit, indwells us, empowers us, thrills us, and loves us. It doesn’t get any better.

What a Chapter! We have an unimaginably wonderful salvation and future waiting for us. Glory to God.